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PART 2

**Philosophical Dialogues between East Asia and Europe:
From Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond**

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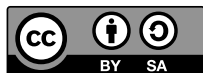
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Contents

SPECIAL ISSUE

TRANSCULTURAL (POST)COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY, PART 2

Philosophical Dialogues between East Asia and Europe: From Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond

Editor's Foreword

Introduction 7
 Jana S. ROŠKER, *Editor-in-chief*

Dialogues with Heidegger

Being Between: Comparative and Transcultural Philosophy 15
 Fabian HEUBEL 何乏筆

Martin Heidegger and Kitayama Junyū: Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Thing. 27
 Eric S. NELSON

Hut Existence or Urban Dwelling? Deprovincializing Heidegger from the East. 51
 Mario WENNING

Conversations with Plotinus

A Comparison of Nishida's *basho* from his Middle Period with Plato's *chóra* and the One of Plotinus 71
 Marko URŠIČ

Plotinus and Wang Yangming on the Structures of Consciousness and Reality: A Transversal Prospecion in View of the Affinities of Their Positions 91
 David BARTOSCH

Philosophical Comparison between European and Japanese Philosophy

Deleuze and the Kyoto School II: Ethico-aesthetics 139
 Jay HETRICK

Humean Elements in the Teachings of Itō Jinsai: A Study of Moral Motivation in Confucian Ethics 181
 Marko OGRIZEK

Heidegger and Watsuji on Community: A Philosophical Counterpoint of West and East 207
 HIROSHI Abe

Creative Interpretations: Comparison of Concepts and Categories

- Deconstruction of a Dialogue: Creative Interpretation in Comparative
Philosophy** 221
Steven BURIK
- Martin Buber and Daoism on Interhuman Philosophy** 245
David CHAI
- Gottlob Frege and Gongsun Long in Dialogue: An Exploration of Two Classical
Paradoxes from the East and West** 267
Nevia DOLCINI 杜雪雅, Carlo PENCO 槃卡络

Hermeneutical Problems

- The Gadamerian Discourse in China and the Fusion of Aesthetic Realms** 299
Jana S. ROŠKER
- Commensurability and Difference: A Hermeneutic-Deconstructive Engagement
with Chinese Philosophy** 317
Geir SIGURÐSSON
- Xu Fuguan's Methodology for Interpreting Chinese Intellectual History: An
Original Innovation or the Impact of Gadamerian Lines of Thought?** 335
Téa SERNELJ
- The Semantic Field of 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism: Engaging Chinese
Philosophy through Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics** 353
Jin QIAN

SPECIAL ISSUE

*TRANSCULTURAL (POST)COMPARATIVE
PHILOSOPHY, PART 2*

*Philosophical Dialogues between East Asia and
Europe: From Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond*

Editor's Foreword

Introduction

Jana S. ROŠKER, Editor-in-chief

This issue (Volume 11, Issue 1) of the journal *Asian Studies* is the second part of a special double issue on the problems of transcultural (post)comparative philosophy. This special double issue is entitled *Transcultural (Post)Comparative Philosophy*, Part 1 and Part 2, respectively, and the two interconnected parts address problems and developments in the methodologies and practices of various (post)comparative approaches to transcultural philosophical dialogue between Asia and Europe. The first part of the double issue was subtitled *Methods and Approaches*. It focused mainly on purely theoretical and methodological issues, but also proposed some innovative practical approaches. In this way, several innovative methods for the study of transcultural philosophy were proposed. The volume addressed several key problems or thematic areas which are reflected in its structure, consisting of three sections. The first section dealt with the relations between Asian and global philosophies and included studies by Robert A. Carleo III, Li Chenyang, Vytis Silius, and Jana S. Rošker.¹ The second part dealt with various problems of language and logical reasoning in a transcultural perspective. The authors who published their papers in this section were David Bartosch, Jaap van Brakel, Ma Lin, and Bo Mou.² The third section presented several new approaches that can be applied in the field of comparative and post-comparative philosophy. The authors of this section were Dimitra Amarantidou, Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Hans-Georg Moeller, Margus Ott, and Sašo Dolinšek.³ To place this special issue in a broader context of the conceptualization of *Asian Studies*, its editor concluded the volume with a review of earlier articles published in the same journal that addressed similar questions (Rošker 2022b).

The present volume (Volume 11, Issue 1) is the second part of this double issue and deals with more concrete examples or demonstrations of the theory presented in the first part of this double issue. The articles in this volume contrastively analyse philosophers, theories, methods, and exchanges between Asian and European philosophical discourses. The subtitle of the volume is therefore *Philosophical Dialogues between Asia and Europe: from Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond*.

1 See Carleo (2022); Chenyang (2022); Silius (2022); Rošker (2022a).

2 See Bartosch (2022); van Brakel and Ma (2022); Mou (2022).

3 See Amarantidou and D'Ambrosio (2022); Moeller (2022); Ott (2022); Dolinšek (2022).

It comprises five sections with different emphases. The articles published in the first section, entitled *Dialogs with Heidegger*, deal with various elements of the philosophical work of this German thinker that can be compared to (or enriched by) East Asian philosophy. The section contains three articles written by Fabian Heubel, Eric Nelson, and Mario Wenning. Each of them explores different elements in the philosophical interaction between Heidegger and East Asia: Heubel's contribution treats dialogs with Heidegger from the point of view of transcultural philosophical comparisons and argues that they are interdependent. The author demonstrates this thesis by analysing the relationship between comparative and transcultural philosophy through a connection between François Jullien's "comparative" and Martin Heidegger's "transcultural" understanding of "Being" (*Sein*) and "Between" (*Zwischen*). Eric Nelson, in turn, shows how Heidegger's reflections on nothingness and emptiness are interwoven cross-culturally with East Asian discourses by thoroughly examining the work of Kitayama Junyū, a neglected Japanese philosopher who was active in Germany and one of the earliest East Asian interpreters of Heidegger. The author of the final contribution in this section is Mario Wenning, who problematizes Heidegger's preoccupation with the importance of rootedness for his existentialism and shows how and why the transfer to East Asia allows for a deprovincialization of Heideggerian themes.

The second section continues to focus on the thought and possibilities of the cross-cultural analysis of a particular European philosopher, namely Plotinus. The section is entitled *Conversations with Plotinus*, and consists of two articles. The first was written by Marko Uršič and aims to explore the similarities and differences between Plotinus' idea of the One and Plato's *chóra*, on the one hand, and Nishida Kitarō's notion of *basho*, on the other. David Bartosch, the second author in this section, also examines Plotinus' philosophy, but from a different, more epistemological angle, namely by focusing on the problem of the relations between consciousness and reality and establishing a productive contrastive tension with the ideas of the Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming on the same topic.

The next section is entitled *Philosophical Comparison between European and Japanese Philosophy* and consists of three papers, all dealing with three different ways of comparing European and Japanese thought. The section begins with Jay Hetric's article on Deleuze and the philosophy of the Kyoto School, and the two discourses are compared in their ethical and aesthetic aspects. Marko Ogrizek's article then focuses on historically more distant philosophies. He compares the ideas of two philosophers from Japan and Europe who lived in the 17th and 18th centuries, respectively, Itō Jinsai on the one hand and David Hume on the other, focusing in particular on their views of the role and importance of moral motivation. The third author in this section, Abe Hiroshi, takes us back—once

again—to Heidegger, but this time in a very different way, exploring the Japanese philosopher Tetsurō Watsuji's idea of community as an alternative to Heidegger's somewhat dangerous notion of the "Volk". According to Hiroshi's interpretation, Watsuji's specific idea of nonduality between the self and the other can help us look at our primary coexistence in a different way to that offered by Heidegger.

The fourth part of the volume deals with creative comparisons of certain concepts and categories in the context of transcultural philosophy. While Steven Burik offers readers a new way of deconstructing transcultural dialogues, David Chai explores different ways of establishing interhuman philosophy through a creative comparison of the thought of Martin Buber and Daoism. The third article in this section is written by two authors, Nevia Dolcini and Carlo Penco. Their contribution deals with some issues related to different forms of logical thinking. They compare Frege's claim that "the concept horse is not a concept" with Gongsun Long's famous thesis that a "white horse is not a horse". The authors aim to show that, despite major differences in their historical and cultural backgrounds, both paradoxes can be seen as different manifestations of similar concerns about language and, in particular, about the difficulty of referring to concepts by means of language.

The last section deals with hermeneutical problems in transcultural philosophy. It opens with Jana S. Rošker's essay on the fusion of aesthetic realms (*jingjie*) as a new method aimed at resolving some inconsistencies in Gadamer's idea of the fusion of horizons. This contribution is followed by Geir Sigurðsson's article entitled "Commensurability and Difference: A Hermeneutic-Deconstructive Engagement with Chinese Philosophy", in which the author argues that three prominent hermeneutic theories from Europe (i.e., those of Ricoeur, Gadamer, and Derrida) can offer meaningful and interesting parallels to classical Confucian interpretive approaches. The third contribution in this section is Téa Sernelj's article on the hermeneutics of Xu Fuguan. Finding in it many similarities with the theories of Schleiermacher and Gadamer, the author examines whether Xu's hermeneutical system is truly original or built on the foundation of certain European ideas. This section (and also this special issue) concludes with the contribution of Jin Qian, who also undertakes a transcultural investigation of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic model, which serves him as an inspiration for a new and creative interpretation of the Chinese Neo-Confucian concept of *xing* 性.

Similar to the first part, the various contributions collected in this second part of our double special issue on "transcultural and postcomparative" problems do not stem from the traditionally prevailing methodological systems, but rather aim to offer readers different, fresh, and innovative views on philosophies that

have emerged in the developmental streams of different conceptual histories. What they have in common, however, is their desire to move beyond the traditional framing of comparative intercultural philosophy within one-dimensional or biased contexts. In this sense, they can nourish our common hope of finding a way to live together in a world of global polylogies that can overcome divergent ideologies, autocratic social structures, devastating wars, and ecological disasters. If this volume has taken even a tiny step in that direction, it will have achieved its central goal.

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SPECIAL ISSUE

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*Philosophical Dialogues between East Asia and
Europe: From Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond*

Dialogues with Heidegger

Being Between: Comparative and Transcultural Philosophy

Fabian HEUBEL 何乏筆*

Abstract

This essay argues that *comparative* and *transcultural* philosophy are interdependent, and so opting for only one of the two is an impossibility. The *comparative* approach persists as long as we distinguish identities and make differences. As long as people do not speak only one language, the need to move between different languages and to translate, and thus the need to relate and compare different possibilities of philosophical articulation, will remain. Any attempt to free oneself from the problem of cultural identity is doomed to failure, as it leads to further entrapment in the very same problem. *Comparative* philosophy works with more or less fixed identities, *transcultural* philosophy transforms them and thereby creates new identities. Those two approaches combined constitute what I call *intercultural* philosophy.

In this essay I try to explain the relation between comparative and transcultural philosophy by connecting François Jullien’s “comparative” and Martin Heidegger’s “transcultural” understanding of “Being” (*Sein*) and “Between” (*Zwischen*). In part 1 I argue that by turning *Between* and *Being* into opposing paradigms of Chinese and Greek thinking, respectively, Jullien causes both to become more or less fixed representatives of different cultural identities within a comparative framework: Greek thinking ossifies into traditional metaphysics, and Chinese thinking ossifies into the non-metaphysical thinking of immanence. Part 2 argues that Heidegger takes a decisively different direction. He explores the *Between* *in* *Being*, and even makes an attempt to think of *Being as* *Between*. Heidegger’s invocation of “Greekdom” is undoubtedly Eurocentric. But, ironically, Heidegger’s “Greek thinking” is less Eurocentric than Jullien’s “Chinese thinking”, because he discovers the “Chinese” *Between* in the midst of “Greek” *Being*. Part 3 touches upon the task of speaking about European philosophy in Chinese terms. While modern Chinese philosophers frequently speak about Chinese philosophy in European terms, Heidegger’s work points to the possibility of speaking about European philosophy in Chinese terms. Because Jullien and Heidegger both connect Greek and Chinese thought, it seems to me that the discussion of their different approaches is helpful in clarifying perspectives for intercultural philosophy between China and Europe.

Keywords: Being, Between, comparative, transcultural, intercultural, ontology, breath-energy (*qi* 氣), identity, Martin Heidegger, François Jullien

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Biti vmes: primerjalna in transkulturna filozofija

Izvleček

Pričujoči članek izhaja iz vzajemne odvisnosti *primerjalne* in *transkulturne* filozofije ter tako pokaže, da je nemogoče odločiti se zgolj za eno od obeh alternativ. *Primerjalna* izhodišča so uporabna samo, dokler priznavamo obstoj identitet in jih med seboj razločujemo. Potreba po prehajanju med različnimi jeziki, po prevajanju in upoštevanju ter vzajemnem primerjanju različnih možnosti filozofske artikulacije bo obstala tako dolgo, dokler ljudje govorimo več kot samo en jezik. Vsak poskus osvoboditve izpod jarma kulturne identitete se bo izjalovil, saj lahko privede kvečjemu do še hujsih zapletov v zgoraj opisani problem. *Primerjalna* filozofija obravnava bolj ali manj fiksne identitete, medtem ko jih *transkulturna* filozofija transformira in s tem ustvarja nove. Kombinacija obeh navedenih pristopov ustvarja to, čemur pravim *medkulturna* filozofija.

V članku poskušam razložiti odnos med primerjalno in transkulturno filozofijo na primeru povezave med Jullienovim in Heideggerjevim razumevanjem »Biti« in »Vmesnosti«, pri čemer uporablja prvi »primerjalni«, slednji pa »transkulturni« pristop. V prvem delu prikažem, da Jullien, s tem ko interpretira Vmesnost in Bit kot dve vzajemno nasprotujoči si paradigmi kitajske oziroma grške miselnosti, postavi obe paradigmi v vlogo bolj ali manj fiksnih predstavnikov različnih kulturnih identitet znotraj primerjalnega okvira. Grška miselnost okosteni v tradicionalno metafiziko, kitajska pa v nemetafizično miselnost imanence. V drugem delu prikažem, da je Heideggerjev pristop popolnoma drugačen. On namreč raziskuje Vmesnost *znotraj* Biti in poskuša celo misliti Bit kot Vmesnost. Heideggerjev poziv h »grškosti« je nedvomno evrocentričen. A pri tem je ironično dejstvo, da je Heideggerjeva »grška misel« manj evrocentrična od Jullienove »kitajske misli«, saj Jullien umešča »kitajsko« Vmesnost v samo središče »grške« Biti. Tretji del pa obravnava razumevanje evropske filozofije skozi kitajsko terminologijo. Ker oba, tako Jullien kot tudi Heidegger, povezujeta grško in kitajsko miselnost, menim, da je diskusija o njunih pristopih lahko koristna za razjasnitev določenih perspektiv v ustvarjanju kitajske in evropske medkulturne filozofije.

Ključne besede: Bit, Vmesnost, primerjalno, transkulturno, medkulturno, ontologija, dihalna energija (*qi* 氣), identiteta, Martin Heidegger, François Jullien

Being (Greece) or Between (China)

François Jullien sees himself as a philosopher, Hellenist, and Sinologist. To overcome the musealizing tendency of separating the modern world from classical antiquity, he initiates an intellectual movement *between* "Greek philosophy" and "Chinese thinking". He repeatedly notes that he began "to learn Chinese in order to be able to read Greek better" (Jullien 2012, 13). The title of one interview even reads: "A Greek's Detour through China" (Jullien 1998). He hopes to revive ancient Greek philosophy in contemporary Europe by going on a detour through ancient China, and by constructing a productive "gap" (*écart*) between the two

(Heubel 2021, 33–110). He thus wants to preclude unproductive and fruitless “comparison”. Jullien has persistently pursued this idea of gaining a new and better understanding of Greek philosophy via a “detour” through China, producing several related works.

What is striking about Jullien’s attitude is the strong affirmation of his “Greek” identity, and he obviously does not consider himself as “Chinese”. The gap between China and Europe, which Jullien introduces as an intercultural strategy, amounts to confirming and renewing the constitutive meaning of Plato and Aristotle for “us”, even though what this “us” denotes remains an open question. Jullien’s understanding of “dia-log”, which plays with the double meaning of the Greek *διά* as “apart, divided” and “through”, “through and through”, corresponds to intercultural betweenness. The emphasis is, however, on the first aspect; for the conversation *between* cultures to become possible, two cultures must first “split in two”, thereby creating a “gap” between them, so that the interpreter can then move freely between the two sides. I take this to be a one-sided understanding either of the Greek *διά* or of the Chinese *between* (*jiān* 間, 閒), which Jullien employs to redefine the concept of *inter*-culturality (Jullien 2012, 69). Instead, I propose taking the *comparative* and the *transcultural* combined as constitutive of the *intercultural*. Their relation can be conceived of as that between the river banks and the one flowing body of water that together constitute a river (the images of the “door” or of the “Way” are also applicable). The intercultural can be understood as a paradoxical *between* (inter-) that entails the comparative split in two *and* the transcultural creation of oneness. The river is, so to say, neither dualistic nor monistic, or both dualistic and monistic.

The philosophical significance of Jullien’s discourse on betweenness becomes more evident if one considers its relationship to “European philosophy”, especially to the “discourse on being” or “ontology”. Jullien writes:

For one sees why “European philosophy” has not concerned itself with the “between” [*l’entre*]: the between is that which necessarily—or fatefully—escapes the question of being from which philosophy has articulated itself since the Greeks. Because the “between” escapes the destiny that constitutes “being” and the question of one’s own and property, the between is thus beyond the reach of the “discourse on being”, that is, ontology. I say, “the between is that which ...”, but strictly speaking, the “between” is not “that which ...”, substantial, substantive, and already ontological. The “between” has no “*per se*”, cannot exist by itself; actually, the “between” “is” not. At least it is without qualities. So how can we talk about it? (Jullien 2012, 51)

The relation between Greek Being and Chinese Between is thus understood as a defining question of *inter*-cultural philosophy. And Jullien answers this question by unfolding a comparative framework that systematically splits and contrasts “Being” and “Between”.

According to Jullien, the Between “is” that which “necessarily”, even “fatefully”, escapes the question of Being. Strictly speaking, it is not even possible to say whether it “is” or whether it “is not”: the Between “is” neither Being (*Sein*) nor Nothing (*Nichts*), it cannot be an “ontological” concept. Consequently, a Greco-European philosophy of Being—which Jullien identifies with philosophy as such—and a Chinese thinking of Between are opposed to one another. While in Greece Being has been thought, in China—necessarily and fatefully—the Between has been thought. The use of “the between” (*l'entre*, *Zwischen*) as a noun testifies to how alien the Between still is as a concept in contemporary philosophy, although it can at least be traced back to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

Jullien argues that the thinking of the Between was developed in China through the awareness of “breathing” (Jullien 2012, 52), which found expression in a complex “doctrine of breath-energy” (*qìlùn* 氣論):

In Chinese thought, what we reify as the “real” is what we call “real” in words like breath, flow (flux) and breathing (*qì*: “energy” is still too Greek) and the “between” is—or rather “serves” as—that from/through which all emergence (*avènement*) takes place and unfolds. (ibid., 54)

Here Jullien considers “energy” to be “too Greek”, although elsewhere he translates *qì* 氣 as “breath-energy” (*souffle-énergie*) (Jullien 2003, 201). It is also worth noting that this translation is itself hybrid, because it combines the Chinese concept of “breath” (*qì*) and the word “energy” borrowed from Greek, but at the same time creates a distance between them with the use of a hyphen. Such a “gap” (*écart*) is already a promising approach to philosophically determine the Between, but one that Jullien prefers not to take. Instead, he sharply contrasts Being (Greece) and Between (China):

It is true that we cannot think the “between”. For the “between” has no “being”. That is the reason why this thought has eluded us for so long. Because the Greeks thought of “being” in the sense of being—that is, in the sense of destiny and quality (which is why they dreaded the un-determined), they were unable to think of the “between”, which is neither one nor the other, where each is covered by the other, removed from itself and its “peculiarity”. [...] For the “between”, which is neither one nor the

other, has no self, no essence, nothing of its own. More precisely: the “between” is not. (Jullien 2016, 39; 2017, 41)

From the perspective of Jullien’s contrast between European ontology and Chinese process thinking, the possibility of an ontology of the Between must appear absurd. In the context of an ontology that insists on the traditional division of being (Parmenides) and becoming (Heraclitus), such an “ontology” is indeed unthinkable. Nonetheless, one of the most important developments in 20th-century European philosophy consisted exactly in thinking the possibility of an ontology of the Between, an ontology that is neither one of being nor one of becoming. The possibility of an *ontology of the Between* (*Ontologie des Zwischen*) already heralds the possibility of an *ontology of breath-energy*, which is excluded from Jullien’s comparative framework. The emergence of an ontology of the Between makes the transition from a comparative to a transcultural approach necessary.

Being as Between

The extent to which 20th-century European philosophy has undermined the distinction between the (European) philosophy of Being and the (Chinese) thinking of the Between is evident in Martin Heidegger’s new way of conceiving ontology, in which the Between (*Zwischen*) emerges as a major philosophical concept. While for Jullien the Between remains irrevocably fixed in the realm of the “non-ontological” (Jullien 2012, 52; see also Jullien 2003, 135–36, 146), Heidegger’s way of thought links Being and Between, and thereby opens up the possibility of thinking the Between ontologically. Heidegger and Jullien both develop the Between within a discourse that connects antiquity and modernity, East and West. But while Jullien wants to keep Greek antiquity free of the thinking of the Between, and focuses on the question of why Greek philosophy ignored or even excluded its importance, Heidegger takes a decisively different direction: he explores the Between *in* Being and even makes an attempt to think of Being *as* Between. Most of the time he does this within the context of classical Greek literature, that is without explicitly referring to “Chinese” sources.

How Heidegger thinks Being as Between is a complicated question which I can only outline briefly here. As is well known, Heidegger’s approach to a pre-Socratic, pre-metaphysical understanding of Being revolves around the relation between “going up” (*Aufgehen*) and “going down” (*Untergehen*), ascending and descending, rising and setting, appearance and disappearance, concealment and unconcealment, lighting and darkening. He is mainly concerned with flowing transitions,

not with fixed states. Instead of emphasizing the sharp contrast between light and darkness or day and night, he is looking for a language that allows intermediate stages to be described, a language that turns its attention to transitional phases that are often hardly noticeable. He tries, so to speak, to think of Being from the transitional betweenness of sunrise and sunset, dawn and dusk. “Nature” lives in those transitions, breathes and changes as something that “rises” and “comes to light”. In his interpretations of a few selected pre-Socratic fragments, Heidegger sets himself the task of thinking Being by the way of “nature” understood in this way. In a 1936 lecture entitled “Europe and German Philosophy”, he already offers an outline of motifs which were then elaborated in detail and developed further in his major lectures on Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Anaximander during the 1940s: “The Greek basic word for Being is φύσις. We usually translate it as ‘nature’ [...] and that is why the first Greek thinkers are still called ‘natural philosophers’ today. This is all a misconception.” (Heidegger 1993, 35) He emphasizes how “for the Greeks, Being and truth (φύσις [*physis*] and ἀ-λήθεια [*alētheia*]) are one”, insofar as both carry within them the relationship of ascending into “appearing” and descending by “stepping back into concealment” (ibid., 36). In the 1942 lectures on Hölderlin’s hymn *Der Ister*, Heidegger also called this the “counter-turning of Being itself” (*Gegenwendigkeit des Seins selbst*) (Heidegger 1984, 95). The word that in the context of classical Chinese philosophy comes closest to this understanding of *physis* (φύσις) is *qi* 氣, the “natural” breath-energy.¹

Regardless of whether this way of thinking has been inspired or even influenced by Daoist thought, it reveals the *transcultural* potential of Heidegger’s work. Heidegger’s studies of pre-Socratic thinkers from the 1940s show that “deontologizing” the Greek discourse of Being does not necessitate a detour via the Chinese discourse of the Between. While Jullien’s justification for his philosophical detour through Chinese thought and culture is exactly that it opens up this kind of “deontologization” as a possibility of thinking, Heidegger unfolds the Between *within* the Greek “discourse on being”. He achieves this by introducing a cut between pre-Socratic and post-Socratic thinking and by distinguishing between the pre-Socratic “counter-turning of being itself” and the “metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche” (Heidegger 1979, 98). Thus Heidegger’s perspective is—counter-intuitively—more creative.

For Jullien, “Greek philosophy” is precisely defined by a mode of traditional metaphysics which Heidegger’s reflections on the “inception of Occidental thinking” try to overthrow. While Heidegger emphasizes the inner connectedness between

1 We might even suggest that Heidegger is not only not to blame for his “forgetfulness of air” (Irigaray 1983) but, on the contrary, has taken important steps towards a “philosophy of breath” that emerged in his reinterpretations of φύσις and ἀ-λήθεια.

pre-Socratic “vital [essential] thinking” (*wesentliches Denken*) and the metaphysical philosophy that developed in the wake of Plato and Aristotle, Jullien’s hermeneutics of contrast excludes the possibility to transculturally rethink an aspect of Heidegger’s “Greekdom” that is profoundly paradoxical. When he consciously enters into conversation with East Asia, his discourse remains strongly attached to comparative stereotypes. However, the more he tries to “think the Greeks in Greek terms”, the more “Chinese” his thinking becomes. In other words, when Heidegger tries to think more Greek than the Greeks, his way of thinking comes particularly close to a “Chinese thinking” expressed in the Daoist writings of Lǎozǐ and Zhuāngzǐ. Gadamer ironically describes one of Heidegger’s interpretations as “somewhat Chinese” (Gadamer 1987, 291). But this interpretation strangely ceases to sound incomprehensible and foreign as soon as it is really perceived and read as “Chinese”, that is, from the perspective of a “Chinese thinking” which in Jullien’s case is contrasted to “Greek thinking” in a comparative way.

Seen in this light, efforts to trace and prove the influence of East Asian, and especially Daoist sources on Heidegger’s thinking only scratch the surface, because they try to assign unambiguous identities, as if it were clear what “Chinese” or “Daoist” thinking is. It is through the *transcultural entanglement* of “Chinese” and ‘Greek’ sources that we arrive at a new, more fluid, although still comparative understanding of those two different paradigms of thinking. From this perspective we may ask the far-reaching and intriguing question of why Heidegger’s thinking becomes particularly “Chinese” when it wants to be particularly “Greek”? Why and how does Heidegger’s “Greek thinking” *turn* into “Chinese thinking”? This question opens up a way of transcultural thinking whose paradoxical “counter-turning” (*Gegenwendigkeit*) radically upsets and disturbs the ordinary perception of both Chinese and Greek thinking. Heidegger has always masterfully thought against himself. It is therefore perhaps quite appropriate to think in this counter-turning way with Heidegger against Heidegger. He suspected, more radically than other 20th-century philosophers, that the necessary conversation with “Asia” would be a long journey along winding and hardly accessible pathways.

Heidegger’s lecture entitled “Europe and German Philosophy” wraps his thoughts on “saving Europe” in a sometimes aggressive rhetoric in which Europe and Asia are strongly opposed to one another. In this context he speaks of “saving the European peoples from the Asian” (Heidegger 1993, 32). In his 1959 lecture entitled “Hölderlin’s Heaven and Earth”, however, he takes up Paul Valéry’s reflections on the European “crisis of the spirit”. When asked whether Europe will become “what it really is, that is, a small cape of the Asian continent”, Heidegger answers: “Perhaps Europe has already become what it is: a mere cape [...]”. And he asks further: “Does Europe, as this cape and brain, first have to become the land of an

evening [*Abendland*], from which another morning of world destiny prepares its rise?” (Heidegger 1981, 176–77)

Here we find again the language of going up and going down, of falling and rising, now in the horizon of great historical-philosophical speculations: Does Europe, as an “Occidental singularity”, first have to set and fall like the sun, disappearing in the evening, in order to rise again? Is it necessary to reflect on the “beginning of Occidental thinking” and to prepare an “other morning”, an “other beginning” in a way that assumes that Europe must first open itself up to “the few other great beginnings” in order to become Europe again? Does Europe first have to recognize that it is a “small cape of the Asian continent” in order to arrive at an identity that would be a *European non-identity*? Does Europe have to become “Asian” in order to become “European”? In any case, Heidegger, probably more than any other European philosopher of the 20th century, had a keen sense of the idea that Europe had (and has) to open itself towards the East in order to rediscover its own identity.

In his writings, Jullien does not refrain from historical-philosophical speculations about the relationship between China and Europe. These, however, take a distinctly anti-Heideggerian turn in their strong defence of Platonic metaphysics, thereby expressing a decisively *comparative* stance with regard to the relation of Being and Between that systematically excludes the possibility of their *transcultural* mixing or intercourse. Jullien claims: “The gap opens the between” (*l'écart ouvre l'entre*; Jullien 2012, 49). It is, however, clear that his understanding of the “gap” separating Being and Between actually excludes the philosophical potential of this conceptual relation. On the other hand, the “gap” that Heidegger opens between pre-Socratic and Platonic thought allows a creative tension between the two, which he made fruitful for the revolutionary transformation of his new ontology. Structurally, Heidegger’s gap, which is internal to Greek philosophy, is similar to the gap that Jullien has constructed between Greek philosophy and Chinese thought.

Heidegger’s attempts to link Being and Between are developed above all in his extensive and very detailed commentaries to a small number of selected pre-Socratic fragments. Hermeneutically, he moves in tiny steps, the respective weight of which is difficult to estimate. Jullien’s distinction between Being (Greece) and Between (China), however, unintentionally helps us understand how huge the step is that Heidegger takes by uncovering the traces of a pre-Socratic way of thinking in which Being was thought of as Between: Heidegger discovers the “Chinese” Between in the midst of “Greek” Being. Seen from this transcultural perspective, pre-Socratic thinking is closer to classical Chinese thinking than post-Socratic,

Platonic metaphysics. The paradigmatic turn from pre-Socratic thinking—which is “not yet metaphysical” as Heidegger puts it—to post-Socratic thinking thus corresponds to the relationship that Jullien describes between non-metaphysical Chinese and metaphysical Greek thinking. In any case, Heidegger’s studies on the “beginning of Occidental thinking” bring to light that “Chinese” Between and “Greek” Being do not have to be distant and foreign to each other, but can come close to one another, and very close indeed. From this perspective, it seems absurd to sharply juxtapose a Chinese thinking of Between and a Greek philosophy of Being, and even base a whole model of intercultural philosophy upon that distinction. Jullien’s *l’entre* can be read as an intercultural elaboration of Heidegger’s *Zwischen*. However, by turning Between and Being into opposing paradigms of Chinese and Greek thinking, respectively, Jullien causes both to become ossified: Greek thinking ossifies into traditional metaphysics, while Chinese thinking ossifies into the non-metaphysical thinking of immanence (Heubel 2021, 111–39).

These reflections offer a glimpse into the transcultural entanglement of Heidegger’s reinterpretation of pre-Socratic thought, which is still largely unexplored insofar as it connects Chinese, Greek, and German philosophical sources in a highly experimental and surprising way. Heidegger’s invocation of “Greeksdom” is certainly Eurocentric. Some of Heidegger’s statements undoubtedly support such a reading. But ironically Heidegger’s “Greece” is much less Eurocentric than Jullien’s, because Heidegger’s “Greek thinking” appears to be more Chinese than what Jullien calls “Chinese thinking”.

Speaking about European Philosophy in Chinese Terms

The potential of moving philosophically between China and Europe is connected with the mixing of Being and Between, with the possibility of *Being Between*. In contrast, Jullien’s identification of philosophy with the philosophy of Being in the metaphysical sense renders such a movement (*Be-wegung*) impossible. Moreover, to bind European philosophy to such an ontology is a conservative move, insofar as philosophy thus defined was challenged throughout the 20th-century. Jullien emphasizes the “gap” between European philosophy of Being and Chinese thinking of Between, but he is also well aware that it is precisely this tendency towards the “deontologization” of philosophy in Europe and the criticism of traditional metaphysics which makes the Chinese Between and the philosophy of breath-energy connected to it appealing in the European context. Jullien simultaneously attempts to take two positions, whose compatibility he cannot adequately explain. He seems at times to appear as a defender of a (European) philosophy of Being, and then

again as an advocate of a (Chinese) thinking of Between. Both perspectives are actually repeatedly mixed up in his writings. He refuses, however, to methodically and conceptually acknowledge this transcultural mixing. As he writes, “[...] the Greeks therefore had to neglect the in-between of flow (*l’entre-deux du flux*) and the indistinctness of transition [...]” (Jullien 2012, 57). Twentieth-century European philosophy has already paid due attention to these traditionally (supposedly) neglected aspects. While Jullien recognizes the importance of betweenness in modern European discourse, he remains fixed to his philosophical identity as a “Greek”. In this sense, Jullien’s philosophical practice tends to become *transcultural*, but his basic methodological assumptions remain fixed in a *comparative* framework. His philosophy is thus more creative than his comparative strategy can explain.

Because of the asymmetry of the modern philosophical communication between China and Europe, we often discuss the question of using “Western” terminology to interpret Chinese texts, or the demand to speak about Chinese philosophy in its own terms. But how about the possibility of using “Eastern” terminology to discuss classical European philosophy, or speaking about European philosophy in Chinese terms? I think this is exactly what Heidegger tried to do, although in a very preliminary and experimental way. While, on the Chinese side, we are familiar with various attempts at the Sinicization of Kantianism, Hegelianism, Marxism, or even Heideggerianism, Heidegger tried to reverse the direction and to do something that may be called the Germanification or Europeanization of Daoism. The Heideggerian response to *Sino-Marxism* is *Euro-Daoism*. While modern Chinese philosophers frequently speak about Chinese philosophy in European terms, Heidegger’s work points to the possibility of speaking about European philosophy in Chinese terms.

Although Heidegger stated that the main concern of his thinking is the “question of Being”, there are strong indications that he turned this question into the “question of the Way”. The “Way” (*der Weg*) is obviously one of the keywords of his “way of thought” (*Denkweg*) since the 1940s, and he famously chose the saying “Ways not works” (*Wege, nicht Werke*) as the motto for his collected writings. Heidegger’s paradoxical Europeanization of Daoism by the way of returning to pre-Socratic thought is driven by a philosophical movement (*Be-wegung*) that is deeply transcultural. He clearly goes beyond comparison and vigorously defies the logic of identity and difference which guides comparative philosophy. But at the same time, he follows along the lines of renewing contemporary German philosophy by rereading and returning to ancient Greek texts. Without his strong attachment to this tradition of identity formation and *Bildung*, Heidegger would not have been able to transform our understanding of ancient Greek philosophy in a revolutionary, “Chinese” way.

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Martin Heidegger and Kitayama Junyū: Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Thing

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Abstract

Heidegger's early philosophical project was identified with a nihilistic philosophy of nothingness after the 1927 publication of *Being and Time*—with its depiction of the radical existential anxiety of being-towards-death—and his 1929 lecture “What is Metaphysics?”—with its analysis of the loss of all orientation and comportment in the face of an impersonal self-nihilating nothingness. Heidegger's philosophy of nothingness would be contrasted in both Germany and Japan in the 1930s and 1940s with “Oriental nothingness” by authors such as Kitayama Junyū, a neglected Japanese philosopher active in Germany and an early interpreter of Heidegger and Nishida. In this contribution, I trace how Heidegger's reflections on nothingness and emptiness (which are distinct yet intertwined expressions) become interculturally entangled with East Asian discourses in the early reception of his thought, particularly in Kitayama and the introduction of Nishida's philosophy into Germany, and their significance in Heidegger's “A Dialogue on Language”.

Keywords: emptiness, Heidegger, modern Japanese philosophy, nothingness, things

Martin Heidegger in Kitayama Junyū: Nič, praznina in stvar

Izvilleček

Heideggerjev zgodnji filozofski projekt enačimo z nihilistično filozofijo ničā po objavi knjige *Bit in čas* leta 1927 – s prikazom radikalne eksistencialne tesnobe biti-k-smrti – in predavanja »Kaj je metafizika?« iz leta 1929 – z analizo izgube vsake orientacije in ravnanja spričo brezosebnega samoničnega ničā. Heideggerjevi filozofiji ničā so v tridesetih in štiridesetih letih 20. stoletja v Nemčiji in na Japonskem avtorji, kot je Kitayama Junyū, zapostavljeni japonski filozof, ki je deloval v Nemčiji in bil zgodnji interpret Heideggerja in Nishide, nasproti postavljali »orientalski nič«. V tem prispevku zasledujem, kako se Heideggerjeva razmišljanja o ničū in praznini (ki sta različna, a prepletena izraza) medkulturno prepletajo z vzhodnoazijskimi diskurzi v zgodnji recepciji njegove misli, zlasti pri Kitayami in uvajanju Nishidove filozofije v Nemčiji, ter njihov pomen v Heideggerjevem »Dialogu o jeziku«.

Ključne besede: praznina, Heidegger, sodobna japonska filozofija, nič, stvari

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Introduction: Heidegger and the Philosophy of Nothingness

How is it that Martin Heidegger became a philosopher identified with nihilism despite his frequent assertions to the contrary? Heidegger's *Being and Time* elucidated a primordial nullity at the heart of human existence as thrown into the world in being-towards-death: "The projection is not only determined as each time thrown by the nullity of its fundamental being, but as a projection it is itself essentially a nullity (*Nichtigkeit*)" (GA 2, 117¹). After the 1927 publication of *Being and Time*—with its analysis of existential anxiety (*Angst*) in one's ownmost being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*)—and his 1929 Freiburg inaugural lecture "What is Metaphysics?"—with its analysis of anxiety in the face of the impersonal self-nihilating nothingness (*das Nichts nichtet*), Heidegger's thinking was identified with the prioritization of nothingness. Several European and East Asian thinkers described his thought as a "philosophy of nothingness" (*Philosophie des Nichts* or *Nichts-Philosophie*), a negative ontology or meontology (Wahl 1957, 154), a variety of nihilism (Gürster 1938, 48; Meyer 1936, 86–89), and a European form of Buddhism (Anders 2001, 64). Günther Anders encapsulated these interpretative tendencies in a 1946 essay "Nihilism and Existence" in which he criticized Heidegger's thought as "in a certain sense" a modern European Buddhism that is simultaneously atheistic, skeptical, nihilistic as well as conservative, ritualistic, and melancholically longing for redemption (*ibid.*).

Heidegger's thinking of nothingness in *Being and Time* and "What is Metaphysics?" was critiqued as meaningless in positivism, as bourgeois fascistic irrationalism in Marxism (e.g., Lukács 1955), and for its depersonalizing impersonality in the name of the interpersonal other in Emmanuel Levinas and for the sake of radical subjectivity Jean-Paul Sartre (Levinas 1932; 1982; Sartre 1943).

Rudolf Carnap condemned Heidegger's *Nichts-Philosophie* as reifying negation (which is inherently derivative and secondary to assertion) into a meaningless pseudo-concept of nothingness and denied it even the expressive value of the poetic word (Carnap 1931, 241).² Although not yet present in his 1932 essay "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie", Levinas's 1935 work *De l'évasion (On Escape)* (1982) interrogated the impersonality of the "there is" (*il y a*) of being murmuring in the abyss of nothingness from which we are compelled to yet cannot escape. Sartre contested in his 1943 magnum opus *L'Être et le néant (Being and Nothingness)* the apparent impersonality of Heidegger's "nothing nothings" with the being

1 I cite the collected works of Heidegger (*Gesamtausgabe*), as GA plus volume and page numbers.

2 Carnap's verdict on Heidegger's nothing was shared by numerous positivists in the early 1930s: Oskar Krauss (1931, 140–46); David Hilbert (1931, 485–94); Otto Neurath (1933, 8); A. J. Ayer (1934, 55–58). On their divergent conceptions of the very question of nothingness, see Nelson (2013, 151–56).

(the for-itself of consciousness) that is self-nihilating in the face of the absurdity and superfluity (*de trop*) of being-in-itself (Sartre 1943).

The interpretation of Heidegger as a nihilistic philosopher of nothingness was contested by Heidegger himself as well as increasingly in his global postwar reception. Although the primary narrative is one of the “turn” (*die Kehre*) from *Dasein* to the priority of being, another narrative emerging after the conclusion of the Second World War confirmed the earlier line of interpretation in stating that Heidegger’s turn consisted of a turn away from a “philosophy of nothingness” to a “thinking of being itself” (*Sein selbst*) (Naber 1947). Heidegger himself maintained in his later postscript (1943) and introduction (1949) to “What is Metaphysics?” that he had been systematically misconstrued. His discourse of nothingness challenged rather than advocated nihilism, as it did not conclude with the priority of brute or radical nothingness. The nothingness encountered in attunements of radical anxiety and boredom is primarily a veil of and perspective on being. The transition through nothingness indicates being not only as abyssal (*abgründig*) but more fundamentally an illuminating shining forth of the clearing (*Lichtung*), openness (*Offenheit*), and a kind of emptiness (*die Leere*) of being.

The clearing is an opening lighting center beyond beings that encircles all that is akin to the barely known nothing (Heidegger 2002, 30; GA 5, 40). Nonetheless, Heidegger can still maintain in the 1943 postscript: “One of the essential sites of speechlessness is anxiety in the sense of the horror to which the abyss of the nothing attunes human beings” (Heidegger 1998, 238). Nothingness continues to carry a dimension of existential horror and anxiety in relation to the abyss, as explicitly stressed in his 1929 lecture and in the early reception of his thought (and not only in French existentialism). At the same time, Heidegger articulates elements of the abyss that is “neither empty nothingness nor a dark confusion, but the event.”³ There are dimensions of openness, associated in Kantian philosophy with the sublime, such as the emptying of the clearing and encountering being’s calm that encompasses inexhaustible expansiveness in releasement in, for example, the Japanese Buddhist expression *kū* 空 (“emptiness”) in “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache. Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden” (“A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer”) (written during 1953/54) or as disclosed in the self-veiling expansiveness of the Siberian wilderness to the two prisoners of war in the 1944/45 “Abendgespräch in einem Kriegsgefangenenlager in Rußland” (“Evening Conversation in a Prison Camp in Russia”) that offers a critique of German nationalism.⁴

3 GA 79, 128. On Heidegger’s notion of the appropriating or endowing event, see Nelson (2007, 97–115).

4 For the former, see Heidegger (GA 12, 80–146); for the latter, see Heidegger (GA 77, 204, 218, 230).

Heidegger's Intercultural Entanglements with East Asian Philosophy

How did Heidegger's thinking of nothingness become entangled with East Asian philosophies? The question of nothingness and emptiness in Heidegger is an intriguing one considered on its own. This question is also at play in Heidegger's reception in Japanese philosophy and the field of "comparative philosophy" and in Heidegger's reflections on the emptiness of the thing in "The Thing" (*Das Ding*) and language in "A Dialogue on Language" that are informed by Heidegger's intercultural entanglements.⁵

Heidegger had contacts with East Asian philosophy as early as 1919. He has been suspected of borrowing the expression "being-in-the-world" (*in-der-welt-sein*) from the 1919 German translation of Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三, *The Book of Tea* (*Cha no Hon* 茶の本), which he received as a gift in 1919 from Itō Kichinosuke 伊藤吉之助. The German translation remarks of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 that it indicates an "art of being-in-the-world" relating to ourselves in the present.⁶ Heidegger's discourse of being-in-the-world reflects no doubt Lutheran discourses of the fallenness, sinfulness, and suffering of "being in the world" ("in der Welt sein" without hyphens) and yet potentially—as suggested in this reading of the *Zhuangzi*—an art of immanently and responsively dwelling with and amidst things within the world.⁷

Heidegger repeatedly noted in the postwar period the special relationship between the discourse of nothingness in "What is Metaphysics?" and his dialogues with Japanese philosophers. Heidegger remarked in a 1969 *Dankansprache* that German and European philosophers had characterized this lecture as "nihilism", and its Japanese translator Yuasa Seinsoke 湯浅誠之助 was one of the few to comprehend what it meant to indicate (GA 16, 712). In reference to the Japanese translation of "What is Metaphysics?" in "A Dialogue on Language" Heidegger marks the shift in his thinking from an anxious existential nothingness to a mindfully attuned opening emptiness. In the 1930s, perhaps aware of the comparisons being made, he is concerned with differentiating his thinking of nothingness and

5 There is already a vast and diverse literature concerning Heidegger and comparative and intercultural philosophy, including (among numerous other works) Buchner (1989); Davis (2013); May (1996); Nelson (2017; 2019).

6 "Die chinesischen Historiker haben vom Taoismus stets als von der 'Kunst des In-der-Welt-Seins' geredet, denn er handelt von der Gegenwart, von uns selbst." (Okakura 1919, 31). Also see Imamichi (2004, 123); May (1996, 118); Davis (2013, 460–65).

7 As described in May (1996), there are various anecdotes of Heidegger reading and referring to the *Zhuangzi* in the 1920s and other apparent influences. Heidegger explicitly and implicitly discusses passages from the *Zhuangzi* in Heidegger (1989) and Heidegger (2010), as illustrated in Nelson (2019, 362–84). On Heidegger's notion of world and worldview, see Nelson (2011, 19–38).

non-being (as being's event) from any form of Buddhism. Heidegger declared in 1935 that his thinking of being was the opposite of Buddhism.⁸ This dismissive gesture of rejection is not evident in the 1953/1954 "A Dialogue on Language" or his 1963 dialogue with the Buddhist monk Bhikku Maha Mani. In a discussion concerning the Japanese understanding of *kū* (emptiness), he states that emptiness and nothingness are the same ("Die Leere ist dann dasselbe wie das Nichts") and the interlocutor responds that for the Japanese emptiness is the "highest word" for what Europeans mean to say with the word "Being".⁹

Heidegger was introduced into Japan as a philosopher of nothingness. The 1930 Japanese rendition of "What is Metaphysics?" was the earliest published translation in any language of a text authored by Heidegger. His early Japanese reception emphasized this lecture's encounter with nothingness. Yet, unlike his early European reception, the critical side of its Japanese reception stressed how this nothingness was still too beholden to being in contrast with Asian ("Oriental") conceptions and experiences of nothingness and emptiness; or, more precisely as will be seen below, an intertextually mediated discourse of the Western discourse of nothingness interpreted in relation to modern Japanese appropriations of Buddhist *sūnyatā*.

Daoist Nothingness and Buddhist Emptiness between East and West

Such an interpretive strategy is particularly evident in Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), the founding figure of the Kyōto school. He distinguished an "Oriental" philosophy and logic of nothingness from Occidental philosophy and its logic of being.¹⁰ The conception of "Oriental nothingness" has a complexly mediated relation with premodern interpretations of Daoist nothingness and Buddhist emptiness. Formed in response to the critiques of "Oriental nothingness" and nihilism in philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche, it was centered on the Japanese understanding of *kū* (Buddhist *sūnyatā*), and—in the discourses of Asian and comparative philosophy of this era—could be extended (arguably beyond Nishida's own intentions) in the geopolitics of Japanese Pan-Asianist discourses (as expressed by Kitayama and other thinkers) to integrate and rank Asian

8 "Kein Buddhismus! das Gegenteil." (GA 65, 171)

9 "Für uns ist die Leere der höchste Name für das, was Sie mit dem Wort 'Sein' sagen möchten." (GA 12, 103)

10 For an excellent overview of Nishida's philosophy of the nothingness in relation to Heidegger, see Krummel (2018, 239–68).

forms of spirit in a quasi-Hegelian form of historical development.¹¹ The notion of “Oriental nothingness” was ideologically extended to encompass and fuse a wide range of divergent and incompatible perspectives: South Asian Hindu and Buddhist forms of negativity (from the “*neti neti*” of the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* to the Buddha’s fourfold negation [*catuṣkoṭi*]), Daoist and mysterious learning (so called “Neo-Daoist”) *wu* 無, and the initial pole of nothingness (*wuji* 無極) in interplay with the great ultimate (*taiji* 太極) that emerged in *Yijing* 易經 commentarial transmissions and Neo-Confucian teachings. The ultimate teachings of nothingness were expressed in East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, culminating in its Japanese forms. As discussed below, no doubt in response to criticisms seen in European thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche, Japanese expressions of negativity and nothingness were interpreted as primarily world- and life-affirmative.

In the context of Japanese–German relations in the early 1940s, Nishida’s thought was introduced to German audiences with the 1943 translation *Die intelligible Welt: Drei philosophische Abhandlungen* (*The Intelligible World: Three Philosophical Treatises*). Robert Schinzinger, a student of Ernst Cassirer (PhD in 1922) who helped introduce Nishida to Germany in the early 1940s with his introduction to this translation and in other writings, distinguished Nishida and Heidegger at length in the introduction. He articulated Nishida’s recognition of how being becomes manifest in *Dasein*’s being held into nothingness in Heidegger and the extent to which Heidegger remained captured in the Western metaphysical paradigm of the supremacy of being and its logic (Nishida 1943, 30–33).

Another figure addressed the significant affinities and differences regarding nothingness between Nishida and Heidegger during this period. Kitayama Junyū 北山淳友 (1902–1962) lived in Germany from 1925 to 1944. He initially studied with Edmund Husserl in Freiburg before completing his dissertation with Karl Jaspers on Vasubandhu’s metaphysics in Heidelberg in 1929. In this book *Metaphysik des Buddhismus* (*Metaphysics of Buddhism*), published in 1934, he was one of the first to deploy the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger to interpret Yogācāra Buddhism (Kitayama 1934).¹² A 1935 issue of *Kant-Studien* noted that

11 On “Oriental nothingness” and nihilism in German philosophy, see Nelson (2022, 83–96). Pan-Asianism was, to briefly summarize, typically “anti-colonial” in contesting Eurocentrism and Western colonialism and nationalist in construing Japan as the inheritor, restorer, and culmination of “Oriental” culture and spirit that could defend Asia against Occidental encroachment. Kitayama and Kanokogi Kazunobu 鹿子木貞信 were among the most active pan-Asianist intellectuals in Germany. Kanokogi wrote his dissertation with Rudolf Eucken in Jena in 1912 on “The Religious” and appears much more willing to directly advocate fascist ideology as director of the Japan Institut in Berlin and subsequently in Japan; on Kanokogi, see Szpilman (2013, 233–80).

12 Published in 1934 as Kitayama’s *Metaphysik des Buddhismus: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation der Lehre Vasubandhus und seiner Schule*. Kitayama was among a number of rightwing

this dissertation attempted “to interpret and reveal Vasubandhu teachings in the language of contemporary German metaphysical theorists (Scheler, Husserl, and Heidegger)” (Brightwell 2015, 450).

Kitayama was familiar with Heidegger’s thought from his time in Freiburg, thanking him in the preface to his dissertation, and extensively referring to his works (including “What is Metaphysics?”) and utilizing them to phenomenologically interpret Vasubandhu’s philosophy as an elucidation of karmic and samsaric *Dasein*. In his 1934 book, *Yogācāra Buddhism* does not offer a psychologistic philosophy of consciousness but rather an existential “analytic of *Dasein*” of karmically thrown *Dasein* and its constitution and structures of being and the possibility of redemption in “absolute nothingness” exemplified by the path of the Buddha. In suffering, finitude, and mortality, *Dasein* is a question to itself threatened by death and thrown and lost in terrifying nothingness (Kitayama 1934, 78). In the existential emptiness of thirst (*tanhā*) and in encountering the disorienting questionability of relative nothingness, absolute nothingness (*sūnyatā*) is disclosed. It is construed in Heideggerian language as *Dasein* annihilates itself in relation to its own fundamental groundlessness in the illumination of absolute nothingness (ibid., 194–95). In such absolute nothingness, in the radical unknowing of the Buddha, freedom and creative life are disclosed as immanent ways of *Dasein*’s attunement and comportment within this samsaric world. Buddhism was not otherworldly and nihilistic for him but a way of affirming life. Kitayama subsequently stressed in the 1940s the tragic and heroic affirmative moment in Buddhist and Japanese nothingness that confronted this karmic samsaric order by emptying and dismantling the constraints of the individual self for a greater collective self and purpose.

The return from radical nothingness to everyday karmic life is also found in his subsequent interpretations of Dōgen Zenji 道元禪師 (Kitayama 1940, 1–15) and Laozi 老子 (Kitayama 1942) in the early 1940s. As discussed below, Kitayama attributed Heidegger’s expression “the nothing nothings” (“*das Nichts nichtet*”) to Laozi in his 1942 work *West-östliche Begegnung: Japans Kultur und Tradition* (*West-East Encounter: Japan’s Culture and Tradition*). Kitayama’s altered relation to Heidegger is more explicitly stated in a 1943 article on Nishida published

Japanese intellectuals such as Kanokogi who studied in Germany, were active in Germany, and in German-Japanese relations during the National Socialist period. On his relations with German rightwing discourses and National Socialism, see Brightwell (2015, 431–53). On the intermixture of phenomenological and *völkisch* (racial and nationalist) geopolitical and georeligious tendencies in Kitayama’s philosophy of religion, see Kubota (2008, 613–33). Wolfgang Harich, an East German communist philosopher after the Second World War who had helped Kitayama edit his German publications during the first half of the 1940s, describes Heidegger’s influence on Kitayama and his activities in Germany, in Harich (2016).

in *Kant-Studien*. Kitayama maintained there that “Occidental spirit”, including Heidegger, is anthropomorphic, intellectualist and representational, fixating subject and object and prioritizing the positivity of being (Kitayama 1943b, 268–69). “Oriental spirit” is in contrast cosmic, intuitive, and naturalistic. Taking natural and inter-human relations as its guide, it prioritizes absolute nothingness as encompassing the fullness of all things and discovers reality in “absolute contradiction”. Nishida comprehends the reality of the world in its groundless nothingness through the unity of opposites in the self-identity of absolute contradiction.¹³ This explication of the relational interpenetration of all particular things draws on the logic of *Huayan* 華嚴, and the idea of heightening contradictoriness and paradoxicality into the “great doubt” (C. *dayi*, J. *taigi* 大疑) accords with the Zen Buddhist practice of meditating on the *kōan* (*gong’an* 公案).

In their writings on Nishida and contemporary Japanese philosophy, Schinzingler and Lüth warn against a nihilistic interpretation of absolute nothingness and an overly radical reading of absolute contradictoriness in Nishida. They potentially limit its boldness and distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* Western philosophical discourses of nothingness. They construe Nishida’s nothingness as concretion, fullness, and determinacy, differentiating a vacant abstract nothingness defined through negation from the genuine nothingness of the fullness and completion of reality itself (*dharmakāya*) and its Buddha-nature that cannot be restricted to or conditioned by being (Lüth 1944, 99–101; Nishida 1943, 30–32). But this approach is misleading, if such concepts are conceived as positing positive objects or subjects, since Nishida maintains that nothingness is a predicate that cannot be in any way reified into a subject (Schinzingler 1940, 31; Taketi 1940, 283–85; Imamichi 2004, 46). While Carnap warned of reifying negation, because it is derivative to and presupposes assertions about objects, Nishida’s predicate of nothingness indicates the true emptiness of things in which they have—without the fixations of essence, self, or substance—their own self-determination and concrete specificity (Taketi 1940, 285). Nothingness is determinate and has its own specificity without relying on a logic of determinate negation that is ultimately affirmative.

Nishida’s genuine thinking emerges, according to Kitayama, as a genuine philosophy of nothingness that reconceives Oriental nothingness through its confrontation with Occidental being and liberates us from the limitations of Western conceptions of being, including that of Heidegger:

13 See Nishida (1943, 140). On the early German-language reception of Nishida’s philosophy of nothingness: Kitayama (1943b, 274); Lüth (1944, 99–101); Schinzingler (1940, 38), and Schinzingler’s introduction in Nishida (1943, 30–32).

That is why we call it “philosophy of nothingness” in contrast to the philosophy of being of the Occident from Plato to Heidegger. The nothingness that Nishida has reached as the ultimate of all being and of thought is the ancient inheritance of East Asian spirit. It occurs as a problem in both Buddhism and Daoism.¹⁴

The distinctiveness of Occidental and Oriental nothingness is a key theme in the intercultural philosophy of figures related to the Kyōto School. In a 1940 German article by Taketi, no doubt with Nietzsche’s accusation of life-denying passive nihilism in mind, the radical nihilism of “Oriental nothingness” affirms life, world, and the act from the abyss of the present rather than denying the present as in Christianity and European nihilism (Taketi 1940, 278–79). In the classic account of Hisamatsu Shinichi 久松真一, “Oriental Nothingness” is irreducible to both logical negation and existential nothingness. As self-emptying, it is prior to the existential negativity and logical negation that, respectively, existentialism and positivism deploy to explain or discard nothingness.¹⁵ Hisamatsu elucidated awakening as a return to the moments of ordinary daily life in which (adopting an expression from the iconoclastic Tang dynasty Chan master Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄, which is in turn drawn from the *Zhuangzi*) the genuine person without positionality or rank (*wuwei zhenren* 無位真人) abides in non-abiding, dwelling without fixation (Hisamatsu 2002, 29–33).

Kyōto school and other Japanese philosophers such as Kitayama deployed an interculturally reshaped Buddhist notion of emptiness as nothingness (linked with the European discourse of nothingness and Chan-Zen Buddhist uses of *wu/mu* 無) to demonstrate the insufficiency of nothingness in Occidental thinking and Heidegger. Nishida and Kitayama appreciated the impersonality (in contrast to the critical readings of Levinas and Sartre that stressed the person and subjectivity) and verbal event character of nothingness in Heidegger. Still, Heidegger’s thinking of nothingness as the way of encountering being (*Sein*) is in so doing restricted just as negative mysticism and theology condition and relativize nothingness by using it as a tool to reveal God. Heidegger’s nothingness is therefore

14 “Deshalb nennen wir sie ‘Die Philosophie des Nichts’ im Gegensatz zur Seinsphilosophie des Abendlandes von Platon bis Heidegger. Das Nichts, das Nishida als das Letzte alles Seienden und des Denkens erreicht hat, ist das alte Erbgut des ostasiatischen Geistes. Es tritt als Problem sowohl im Buddhismus als auch im Taoismus auf.” Kitayama remarked further: “Nishida überwindet diese Krise, indem er auf seinen Ausgangspunkt zurückgreift und im Jenseits von Subjekt und Objekt nicht das Sein, sondern das nur durch das Denken unerfaßbare Nichts sieht. Mit der Philosophie des Nichts beginnt die selbständige Philosophie Nishidas und befreit sich von jeglichem Einflusse abendländischer Philosophen” (Kitayama 1943b, 269).

15 A paradigmatic analysis of “Oriental Nothingness” is found in Hisamatsu 1960, 65–97.

limited in the light of “absolute nothingness” (*zettaimu* 絶対無), which is the self-emptying locus or place (*basho* 場所) of all perspectives and positions, insofar as it still refers to and is bound to being and its implicit yet all too representational subject/object modeling of reality. Heidegger fails to adequately address the absolute nothingness beyond God and being. Far from being pessimistic or nihilistic, the absolute nothingness at the heart of Oriental culture is, according to Nishida, the genuine locus of encountering concrete phenomena just as they are in their suchness and is accordingly world-affirmation (Nishida 1939, 10–11). In absolute nothingness, the mountain is precisely the mountain, water is water, and beings are just what they are (Nishida 1943, 119). Nishida is here referring to the *kōan* attributed to Qingyuan Weixin 青原惟信, a Tang Dynasty Linji Chan Master, which appears in Dōgen’s *Mountains and Waters Sutra* (*Sansui Kyō* 山水經).

After the early entanglements between Heidegger and Chinese and Japanese philosophy from the 1920s to 1940s, Heidegger’s nihilating nothingness was increasingly perceived as a touchstone in the emerging field of comparative philosophy not only in Germany and Japan but in international scholarship in the emerging field of comparative philosophy. Much of this literature was more willing than Kitayama, Lüth, and Schinzingler to accentuate the affinities between Heidegger’s and Nishida’s nothingness.

Takeuchi Yoshinori 武内義範 stated: “A way of thinking akin to Nishida’s is found in the recent development of Heidegger’s philosophy, although there was no direct influence either way” (Takeuchi 2004, 203). Relying on Nishida’s notion of nothingness as identity in complete contradiction, he notes: “Heidegger’s philosophy of Being meets with a philosophy of Nothingness—because Being and Nothingness are identical in their contradiction” (ibid., 204). Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan noted in 1952 how Heidegger gave nothingness “an active function (*das Nichts nichtet*), which influences our being. He even makes it one with absolute being. One is reminded here of the Buddhistic conception of the void (*śūnya*)” (Radhakrishnan 1952, 430). Swan Liat Kwee remarked in 1953 how “the Void” has an active creative function in Heidegger’s “*das Nichts nichtet*” (Kwee 1953, 184). Both statements concerning self-nihilating nothingness show how it is active, creative, and world-generative in Buddhist *śūnyatā* as much as with early Daoist *wu* 無 despite the radical differences between these two concepts.

Heidegger himself did not directly or explicitly attribute generative or creative qualities to nihilating nothingness in his 1929 “What is Metaphysics?” In that context, encountering nothingness in radical anguish and boredom places beings and the being of *Dasein* itself radically into question. Freedom and transcendence into the world are disclosed in this existential questionability and uncanniness.

Heidegger's thinking, which appears to evoke Daoist nothingness (the empty earth, vessel, and thing) and at times Buddhist emptiness (empty form and sky), became interculturally entangled in comparative philosophy with generative interpretations of nothingness. This is not without sources in Heidegger's own path of thinking that shifts from a focus on existential nothingness to nothingness as the potentially generative emptiness of the between and the clearing.

Heidegger and Kitayama: Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Spacing of Things

Several anecdotes by Heidegger and others testify that Heidegger engaged in conversations about Japanese thought and Zen Buddhism with visiting students and scholars from 1919 to near the end of his life. Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 reported that he and Heidegger had extensive discussions about Zen Buddhism during his time at the University of Freiburg from 1937 to 1939. Heidegger is reported to have said after reading a book by Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki 鈴木大拙 that: "If I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings."¹⁶

Echoing a Zen Buddhist teaching, Heidegger's Japanese interlocutor in "A Dialogue on Language" states that in emptiness, the mountain appears. The entire conversation and its questions center on emptiness and gathering. How are nothingness and emptiness "the same" (*dasselbe*) and "other than all presence and absence" ("das Andere zu allem An-und Abwesenden") as stated in the questioner's reply (GA 12, 103)? What is the emptiness in respectful distancing and withdrawal (*Entziehen*) and in the stillness and silence (*die Stille*) that calls and in which one can listen?

The two interlocutors delineate and enact a kind of emptiness in which words and memories arise, gather, and disperse. Emptiness is seen as informing ostensibly "elemental" Japanese expressions such as *iki* 粋, which became familiar to Heidegger through Kuki Shūzō 九鬼周造 (GA 12, 80–86).¹⁷ In the Noh theatre, the empty stage allows gathering to occur (GA 12, 101). Deploying well-known Buddhist imagery, *kū* is described as the limitless expansiveness like that of the sky (GA 12, 129) and as the open and emptiness of the sky (GA 12, 136). The clear transparent sky is the classic Buddhist image for *sūnya*, and clouds are images of arising and disappearing colors, forms, or phenomena. Note that clouds

16 Compare Buchner (1989, 169–72), Davis (2013, 460–65), and May (1996, 109).

17 On Kiki's aesthetics, see Nara (2004).

indicate “colors” in this conversation, as color or form (C. *se*, J. *iro* 色) is the translation of *rūpa* (form) in Sanskrit. The emptiness of hearing allows the gathering of words in language, and the dialogue concludes with the gathering of that which endures (Kuki, the long-departed friend) in conversation and remembrance (GA 12, 143, 146).

Given Heidegger’s phenomenology of the thing in his early and middle works, how can emptiness be the gathering and place of the thing in the 1949 *Bremen Lectures* and in the 1950 essay “The Thing”? Is there an emptiness, as Heidegger pursued in the 1935 *Contributions to Philosophy* (GA 65, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*), that signifies something else than the failure of anticipation and expectation or the empty intentionality, which may or may not be fulfilled, of classical phenomenology (GA 65, 381–82)? Is there a more specific relation between the nothingness depicted in 1929 and the emptiness of language and the thing in his postwar writings that helps illuminate his statement that they are the same?

One contextual clue is found in Kitayama’s works, which were widely cited in German discussions of Japanese thought during the National Socialist era, including by the geopolitical theorist Karl Haushofer and Paul Lüth whose 1944 book *Die japanische Philosophie* relies on Kitayama’s delineation of Nishida’s philosophy of nothingness (Lüth 1944, 97–108). Kitayama’s 1940/1942 book *West-östliche Begegnung: Japans Kultur und Tradition* (*West-Eastern Encounter: Japan’s Culture and Tradition*) was first published in 1940 and substantially revised in a second edition printed in 1942.¹⁸ Kitayama elucidates an East Asian philosophy of nothingness that is inspired not only by Buddhist emptiness but also by Daoist nothingness (*wu* 無), the primordial ground of being, of Laozi (Kitayama 1942, 40). Nishida in his 1939 article had critiqued the fixation and radicalization of nothingness in Daoism, contending that the teaching of absolute nothingness is only adequately achieved in Mahāyāna Buddhism (Nishida 1939, 17).¹⁹ Kitayama shares this prioritization of Mahāyāna teachings (Kitayama 1943a, 3). He is, however, more willing to embrace Daoist teachings of nothingness and the thing, as he depicts them as shaping the formation of East Asian and Zen Buddhist thought and culture.

The *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* texts expressed a variety of naturalism for early twentieth-century Japanese interpreters—such as in Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1915), Okakura (1919), and Kitayama (1942)—who emphasized its constitutive role in Chan Buddhism and the East Asian aesthetic that embraces naturalness

18 Kitayama’s *West-Östliche Begegnung: Japans Kultur und Tradition* was first published in 1940 and revised and expanded in 1942.

19 On the “Nishida circle’s”, as it was earlier designated, understanding of being and nothingness in early Chinese thought, compare Imamichi (1958, 54–64).

through emptiness. Anesaki construes Daoism as a harmonizing repose in nature and the great primordial mood of the way (Anesaki 1915, 55–56). Okakura interpreted it as a naturalistic this-worldly relativism and an art of adoptively “being-in-the-world” (Okakura 1919, 27–32). Kitayama defines it as a “naturalistic nihilism” in which freedom is intuited in nothingness in a comportment of stillness and non-acting action (Kitayama 1942, 40–41). Nothingness is the generative beginning of heaven and earth, and being the womb of the myriad things (ibid., 174). This nothingness is the ground of all entities, silent and wordless, unspeakable and unconceptualizable, and approached only through a practice of becoming empty and clear (ibid., 24, 38–41). Speaking of the Tang dynasty painter and poet Wang Wei 王維, Kitayama delineates how in the emptiness of solitude and silence, real space can be encountered and the fullness and self-being (*ziran* 自然) of things speaks to the poet and appears to the painter: “We translate this explication of space with the words of Laozi: ‘The nothing nothings’” (ibid., 160). It is space that is emptying through things, which evokes and yet is very distinct from how Heidegger elucidates the same eleventh chapter of the *Daodejing* and the “emptying” of the thing as will be considered below.

Kitayama contends that nothingness (*Nichts*) and the non-self (*Nicht-Ich*) form the essence and unity of Far Eastern culture (Kitayama 1942, 183). East Asian philosophical and aesthetic-poetic sensibilities reflect in his account the insight that: “The nihilation of the nothing (*das Nichten des Nichts*) is the activity of space that, from the human perspective, is given as form or appearance.” Each reality is the appearing of a shadow in light and each thing, such as the mountain or the stone, is a throw (*Wurf*) through the nihilation of space (ibid., 161). The expression “the nothing nothings”, attributed to Laozi apparently in reference to *Daodejing* 11, is a characteristic of the spatiality in which the thing appears as shadow and throw as a nihilation of the nothing. The nihilating activity of the nothing is construed by Kitayama as a primordial spatiality in which things arise. The expression *wuwu* 無無, which he seems to have in mind here, could be construed as “the nothing nothings” or the functioning of/arising from nothingness in the *Daodejing* commentary of Wang Bi 王弼.²⁰ This expression is not found in the transmitted text of the *Daodejing* but only in subsequent Daoist and in East Asian Buddhist sources, in which it is entangled with the emptiness of emptiness (*kongkong* 空空).

In classical Indian Theravāda and Mādhyamika teachings, emptiness means to be empty of substantial selfhood (*ātman*), self-nature (*svabhāva*), and form (*rūpa*) in dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Emptiness operates as a world-constituting primordially in dharmadhatu, tathāgatagarbha, and Vajrayāna teachings, in

20 On Wang Bi’s philosophy of generative nothingness, see Nelson (2020, 287–300).

which it is given a generativity and creativity that continues to resonate in Kitayama who clarifies the “absolute” self-nihilating nothingness in the very different contexts of Laozi and Nishida. Notwithstanding his father being a Pure Land Buddhist priest and his early studies of Yogācāra Buddhist philosophy, teachings in which *sūnyatā* does not play as all-pervasive a role as in Mādhyamika, “Buddhist nothingness” (as an interculturally mediated concept informed by Buddhist and German philosophy) assumes a fundamental cultural and social-political orientation in his German writings of the 1930s and 1940s on Buddhism, Daoism, and—as with other Japanese nationalist intellectuals of this era—Shintōism and the “way of the warrior” (*bushidō* 武士道).

There are abundant instances of the problematic social-political character of the philosophy of nothingness in Kitayama’s works. We mention two of them here. First, in Kitayama’s 1943a booklet *Heiligung des Staates und Verklärung des Menschen: Buddhismus und Japan (Sanctification of the State and Human Transfiguration: Buddhism and Japan)*, Mahāyāna Buddhism occupies a crucial role for him in providing the Japanese people a universal geopolitical and georeligious teaching of compassionate world-redemption that justifies their global mission (Kitayama 1943a; Kubota 2008, 622). It is specifically the Mahāyāna teaching of nirvāṇa (nothingness as sublime infinite generative source) that sanctifies and is embodied in the Japanese imperial state led by a heavenly Emperor that transfigures and emancipates humanity through its world-historical role (Kitayama 1943a, 31–32). In this modern Japanese nationalist context, nothingness is constructed to imply the Emperor, evoking but moving beyond traditional Buddhist political theologies, akin to how nothingness ultimately signifies God in negative theology.

Second, a “heroic ethos” of nothingness is unfolded in his 1944 book *Heroisches Ethos (Heroic Ethos)*.²¹ As typical of a number of Japanese thinkers during this era, Japanese Buddhism and Zen become forms of heroic self and world affirmation in contrast to Indian Buddhism. In his interpretation of the concluding fifth book on emptiness of *The Book of Five Rings (Gorin no Sho 五輪書)* by Miyamoto Musashi 宮本武蔵, an ethos without principles or norms emerges in the spirit of this “real nullity” (*wirkliche Nichtigkeit*), in which there is nothing at all, no knowing, and no evil but only the functioning of the good. Whereas “relative nullity” counters the seduction of the false and illusory, real nullity is articulated—assimilating a long series of images of perfectly attuned action from the *Zhuangzi*’s Butcher Ding nourishing life in cutting up the ox through Zen Buddhism to this heroic ethos—as a

21 The relationship between nationalist politics and the idea of nothingness in the Kyōto School is a highly contested one. On Kitayama’s political context and tendencies, see Brightwell (2015, 431–53); Kubota (2008, 613–633). On the social-political problems of the Japanese discourse of “absolute nothingness”, see Ives (2009).

spontaneous and detached comportment and ethos that transcends the boundaries of skill and technique (Kitayama 1944, 110–11). Absolute nothingness is the unobstructed good. Kitayama’s philosophy of nothingness is problematic given its historical and social-political positionality—in the intersections of Japanese-German intellectual and ideological exchanges in the 1930s and 1940s—and due to its commitment to the priority of an ethos of detachment and indifference rather than an ethics of responsive compassion to others and things through nothingness.²²

The Emptiness of Words and Things

Questions of nothingness and emptiness are at play in Heidegger’s various discussions of the emptiness of the thing that, depending on the text, explicitly or implicitly refer to the empty vessel of *Daodejing* 11. As in the German edition of Okakura’s *Book of Tea*, Heidegger calls the vessel a jug (*Krug*; the English translation has pitcher). Although Heidegger extensively engaged with the two Daoist classics in different German translations, one must wonder about the reoccurring themes from Okakura’s book that he received as a gift in 1919.

It is uncertain to what extent Heidegger is cognizant of the specificity of Japanese arguments and debates concerning his conception of nothingness beyond the general acknowledgement and appreciate that he noted in 1953/1954 and 1969 (as described previously above). Heidegger was aware of Carnap’s positivist and Sartre’s existentialist responses to it, denying their appropriateness while—due to shifts in his own thinking—transitioning from the existential nothingness of the late 1920s (which Kitayama categorized as relative) to nothingness as the generative clearing and emptiness of the “in-between” of beings (*Seiende*) and being (*Sein*). Heidegger’s mature thought evokes yet has an unclear relation to Daoist nothingness, Buddhist emptiness, and Japanese discourses of absolute nothingness. For instance, Kitayama construed being as the womb of things arising from nothingness in his analysis of the *Daodejing*; Heidegger posited nothingness as the middle term between being and things. He stated in the late 1930s that nothingness is a saying of being more primordial than somethingness. Nothingness signifies for Heidegger not “not-beings” but Being. It is an originary saying of Being and its immeasurable answerless yet ontological event.²³

22 There is a rich literature on the intersections between German and Japanese thought, and Japanese philosophy and politics, during this era, including Brightwell (2015); Kubota (2008); Ives (2009).

23 Heidegger states: “das Nichts anfänglicher und wesender (ursprünglich das Seyn er-eignender) als das ‘Etwas’? ... Nichts hier besagt: überhaupt nicht ein Seiendes, sondern: Sein ... Das Nichts entspringt nicht aus der Ab-sage an das Seiende, sondern ist anfängliches Sagen des Seyns, Sagen der Neinung in der Er-eignung.” (GA 74, 24)

Heidegger himself repositions his argumentation in “What is Metaphysics?” as a confrontation with and moment toward the potential overcoming the “philosophy of nothingness” and the nihilism that he locates at the core of modernity. Nothingness is increasingly linked with the “not” of beings (*Seiende*) in Being (*Sein*), which is not merely negative or negational in the sense of a *nihil negativum*, and with the ontological difference: “The nothing is the ‘not’ of beings, and is thus being, experienced from the perspective of beings” (Heidegger 1998, 97). To the degree that being (even as the Being that is not beings in the ontological difference) remains the epicenter of his thought, Heidegger remains beholden to the Occidental paradigm of being and has not yet arrived near the vicinity of Nishida’s genuine locus of nothingness (as interpreted in Kitayama, Schinzinger, and Nishitani, among others).²⁴ Nothingness remains for Heidegger a perspective on being; nothingness and emptiness are “the same”; and yet, at the same time, emptiness is potentially (since it is spoken by his fictionalized Japanese interlocutor) the highest name for being (GA 12, 103). While Heidegger could comprehend the interlocutor’s claim in his own discourse, as he too has thematized a kind of emptiness of being, the questioner responds by expressing hesitation, reserve, and stepping back from the identification of the emptiness of *kū* and *Sein*. Heidegger’s expression of reticence is appropriate given the continuing distances between nothingness in his own and Buddhist and Japanese discourses.

Heidegger’s “A Dialogue on Language” centers on the untranslatability of a language, as the questioner repeatedly withdraws and holds back from describing *iki* in the Occidental philosophical language of aesthetics, *kū* in the Western language of being, or *kotoba* 言葉 as language (*Sprache*). Such hesitation and reserve have been interpreted as an arrogance standing against crosscultural communication and as humility and modesty toward the other. It is presented in this dialogue as enacting an emptying and stillness that allows for a listening and entering the other’s saying instead of a mere speaking about language and communication (GA 12, 147–49). The encounter transpires through the emptiness of language, which undoes fixations, and yet not without language to the extent that there can be no openness of beings, of that which is not a being (*Nichtseienden*), or of emptiness without language (Heidegger 2002, 46; GA 5, 61).

In what sense then can one attribute emptiness to being in Heidegger’s postwar thinking? He maintained in the 1951 version of “Overcoming Metaphysics” that the emptiness of beings (*Seiende*) is the distance and forgetting of being (*Sein*), while the emptiness of being in which beings arise can never be filled up with the

24 Note the discussions of Heidegger’s nothingness in Nishitani (1989; 1983).

fullness of beings (GA 7, 94). Heidegger states in several iterations of his philosophy of the thing that emptiness not only allows the gathering of a plurality of things, which constitute a lingering moment and a local region or place, but the gathering (*Versammlung*) of the singular thing that allows it to be as the specific thing that it is.

Heidegger's later elucidation of the empty thing is repeatedly meditated by his reading of the empty vessel of the *Daodejing*. It is distinctive from the hermeneutics of the emptiness and self-nihilation of space that Kitayama attributed to Laozi. Whereas Kitayama construes the thing in response to Heidegger as a temporary transient throw, a shadow, and a fold arising through the activity of self-nihilating spatiality, Heidegger addresses emptiness as the gathering of elements, and the fourfold (*Geviert*) of sky and earth, mortals and immortals that allows the thing to be as what it is. Hisamatsu noted in a conversation with Heidegger on May 18, 1958 that the Occident conceives the origin as being and Zen as empty formlessness in which there is freedom without restriction. Heidegger concurs in his response that emptiness is not a negative nothingness nor is it a lack. Spatial emptiness, which does not exhaust emptiness, is a clearing as granting (*das Einräumende*) the gathering of things (GA 16, 555).

The empty jug receives, gathers, and offers wine (fusing imagery from Hölderlin and the *Daodejing*) precisely in its emptiness. What then is the relationship between Heidegger and the *Daodejing*? It is the most frequently mentioned non-western text in his works and it is evoked through indirect references. It is well-known that Heidegger extensively engaged with the *Daodejing* in the early 1940s, even attempting a translation of the text with Paul Shih-yi Hsiao (Xiao Shiyi 蕭師毅). Heidegger initiates his reflections on the emptiness of the thing in relation to *Daodejing* 11 in the conclusion of the 1943 essay “The Uniqueness of the Poet” (GA 75, 43–44). Emptiness is portrayed there as “in-between” (*Inzwischen*) which he elsewhere described as “the openness” (*die Offenheit*) of being and the spacing of “the between heaven and earth” (*das Zwischen von Himmel und Erde*).

In a series of reflections from the 1940s and 1950s, Heidegger engages the image of emptiness and the “empty vessel” (expressed in *Daodejing* 4 and 11, and reimagined by Heidegger as an empty jug) more powerfully evoking the *Daodejing* than in his 1943 essay while no longer directly naming Laozi. In the first dialogue of the 1944/1945 *Country Path Conversations* (GA 77), the first 1949 Bremen lecture (GA 79), and the 1950 essay “The Thing”, emptiness proves to be the condition of gathering of the elemental and of materiality itself in the thing. As gathering: “The thing things world” (“Das Ding dingt Welt”) (Heidegger 1971, 178; GA 7, 182). The thing no longer requires the artwork and creation to mediate it, as in the

mid-1930s; the thing itself can disclose and open a world such that without the thing there can be no disclosure and openness (GA 5, 54).²⁵

Heidegger described in “The Thing” how when we fill the jug or pitcher, the liquid flows into and from its emptiness as it retains and gives. The emptiness is not a mere container. It is what conditions and contains the materiality of the container. This emptiness, as a nothingness belonging to the pitcher and making it what it is, is what the pitcher, as a containing container, is. This means that: “The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the emptiness that holds” (Heidegger 1971, 167; GA 7, 171). This emptiness is its own emptiness or self-emptying, not the voidness of generalized physical space, which we must allow to be in its encounter and “let the jug’s emptiness be its own emptiness” (Heidegger 1971, 168; GA 7, 173).

The emptiness, or the void as *die Leere* is translated by Albert Hofstadter, is what constitutes the vessel’s holding. The empty space, this nothingness of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel. Yet as the holding is enacted by the jug’s emptiness, the potter who shapes and forms the vessel on the potter’s wheel does not create, make, or produce the vessel, but shapes the materiality and emptiness in which the artisan works. Things are shaped rather than fabricated by human practices and techniques. In not only shaping the material clay, but its very emptiness, the potter participates in the forming and shaping of emptiness into form. It is in the specificity of this emptiness that the vessel’s thingliness genuinely lies.

Two Readings of Emptiness

As we have seen, Heidegger should not be considered a thinker of emptiness as a static or spatial voidness but instead of the illuminating clearing and emptying that unfixes, clears, and frees the way. Emptying plays a twofold role in his writings of the 1950s that calls back to the methodological emptying of “formal indication” (*formale Anzeige*) in the 1920s that destructs reifying abstractions and fixations and allows encountering things in their myriad concrete ways of being. In the conclusion to “The Thing”, Heidegger reflects on both the emptying that constitutes the thing and the emptying comportment that allows the thing to address us as the thing that it is in its own way of being in emptiness. There is accordingly: (1) the emptying that is the gathering of the thing, and (2) the

25 Much more should be said (than can be said here) about the complicated relationship between “work” and “thing” in the 1934/1935 “The Origin of the Work of Art” (GA 5) and the 1950 “The Thing” (GA 7).

emptying that allows the (no longer only worldless as in 1929/1930) thing as world-gathering and disclosing to be encountered.

Emptying is an undoing of fixations and the preparation of a pathway and the clearing of the thing is its self-emptying that requires a respectful and reverent (if arguably inadequately responsive) distance and reserve that avoids absorption and consumption. Japanese aesthetics (as interpreted by Kuki) understands respectful reserve in the encounter as detachment (compare Nara 2004). In Heidegger's step back (*Schritt zurück*), in allowing distance and the genuine between (*das Zwischen*, which the modern loss of distances and uniformity of space has disrupted) to reappear with the thing, one is called by the thing as thing, and then perhaps can begin hear and more appropriately listen and respond.

The distinctive yet overlapping notions of emptiness and nothingness operate in Heidegger as the highest expressions for being. These notions are entangled with his understanding of Daoism and Zen Buddhism and with his philosophy's East Asian reception. In the emptiness of being, the thing and its sense are not annihilated, but rather it can be as the thing in the fullness of its own way of being. Heidegger once again appears to echo East Asian discourses, as in the sentence from the kōan attributed to Qingyuan Weixin and mentioned by Nishida: in the awakening of emptiness, mountains are directly mountains, and waters are directly waters (Nishida 1943, 119).

Kitayama's 1940 German translation and commentary on Dōgen's *Genjō Kōan* 現成公按 clarifies the movement from things to nothingness back to things through the forgetting and falling away of the self and its constructs that divides it from things. This is the self-illumination of a holistic relational selflessness in which each thing is singularly itself just as the slightest dewdrop can reflect the entirety of the moon (Kitayama 1940, 4, 10–11). Yet this does not imply a static abstract harmony. The logic of the *kōan* that confronts the self is antinomian. It leads the meditator into a dead-end (*Sackgasse*) without any recourse that is fractured in a breakthrough in which the obstructing duality of being and knowing, object and subject, falls away (Kitayama 1940, 15).

According to Kitayama's 1943a Nishida article, with its critique of Occidental spirit and its fixation on being, Heidegger's thinking of being still thinks the nothing in an Occidental manner and precludes the illumination of absolute nothingness that is unrestricted by and otherwise than being no matter how radically it might be thought (Kitayama 1943b, 268–69). This is not the decay of difference into an "empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another", of which Heidegger warned in his analysis of the essential relational strife of earth and world (Heidegger 2002, 26; GA 5, 35). Kitayama portrays Nishida's absolute

nothingness as indicating/an accord in complete contradiction—that is to say, a self-determination and self-identity encountered in the intensification of cacophony, contradictoriness, and multiplicity of singular phenomena—and reality itself.

Heidegger and Kitayama are not cultural purists, perhaps despite their own intentions, insofar as they offer highly mediated, interculturally, and intertextually entangled conceptions of nothingness, emptiness, and the thing. Engaging Kitayama's philosophy of nothingness, which draws on Heidegger, Nishida, and classic East Asian sources, resituates and contextualizes the formation of an increasingly intercultural discourse of nothingness. In this contribution, I have presented an historical overview of the relationship between nothingness and emptiness in Heidegger in relation to aspects of his interactions and entanglements with Chinese and Japanese philosophy. Heidegger's interests in and entanglements with Chinese and Japanese philosophy emerged in 1919 and the early 1920s and continued throughout his life.

Conclusions

Early Daoism and Zen Buddhism fascinated Heidegger to the degree that scholars accused him of plagiarizing from their sources (Imamichi 2004; May 1996). The *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* were texts to which he recurrently returned in the context of communication and exchange with East Asian students and intellectuals and their German interlocutors. His direct and indirect references to the two Daoist classics of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, which fascinated the younger and mature Heidegger, focus on a threefold configuration of questions that are operative in the center of his own thought and his broader engagement with Chinese and Japanese philosophy: nothingness/emptiness, thingliness, and the way.

In this interculturally mediated context, Heidegger's encounters and entanglements with Daoist and Japanese thought can be said to be neither a fleeting and accidental curiosity (to be dismissed as done by Eurocentric readings of Heidegger) nor can they be appropriately understood as constituting a far-reaching "Daoist" or "East Asian" reorientation in his philosophical journey (as in overly optimistic comparative and intercultural interpretations). Due to limits of space, I will examine elsewhere questions concerning whether radical nothingness necessarily entails or is a consequence of nationalist politics, if the phenomenological and political aspects of Heidegger and Kitayama can be disentangled, and whether the philosophy of nothingness can have a critical emancipatory potential in dismantling reified structures and disclosing freer relations and possibilities. While the partial deployment of nothingness empties and dismantles the individual,

who is left vulnerable to a reified collective identity, a more persistent practice of emptiness would also contest such fixating collective identities.

The present restricted study of a distinctive era in the intercultural history of the philosophy of nothingness leaves additional questions that can only be further addressed elsewhere. These concerns include the politics of nothingness and “Oriental nothingness” in German and Japanese discourses and, to step beyond that history, the ethical and philosophical adequacy of a critical philosophy and ethos of nothingness. First, the latter would not only empty the fixations of the individual self but contest and empty fixating collective identities. Second, the distinctiveness and radicality of Daoist generative nothingness and Buddhist self-emptiness is obscured in Hegel’s dismissive analysis of “Oriental nothingness” and in twentieth-century justifications of it that remain beholden to Hegel’s logic of identity and affirmation. Third, given the ongoing ideological functions of universalism and multiculturalism, a more adequate conception and practice of intercultural critique is needed that contests the misuses of both.

In the different yet interconnected cases of Heidegger and Kitayama, one can repose Levinas’s concerns about Heidegger formulated in the 1930s and the interrogation of the politics of Buddhist nothingness in imperial Japan by critical Buddhist scholars such as Ichikawa Hakugen 市川白弦 (Levinas 1932; 1982; Ives 2009). One can well question if Heidegger and Kitayama, respectively, attained an appropriate ethics and politics of the other. If they express the “perfection of wisdom” in emptiness given how *śūnyatā* is not only a tranquil attunement with and a letting releasement of things but intrinsically intertwined with an ethics and responsive practice of compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*maitrī*), and generosity (*dāna*) toward the suffering world as evident in classic teachings of the bodhisattva-path such as Śāntideva’s *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* and that Schopenhauer recognized, albeit in the language of an ethics of sympathy (*Mitleid*), in his interpretation of the Buddhist dharma.²⁶

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26 These points about Buddhism and Schopenhauer are developed in Nelson (2022, 83–96).

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Hut Existence or Urban Dwelling? Deprovincializing Heidegger from the East

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Abstract

Heidegger's "Creative Landscapes: Why do we remain in the provinces?" and "Dialogue on Language" reveal the importance of rootedness for his existentialism. The article engages with the provinciality of Heidegger's thought by juxtaposing his solitary "hut existence" to Buddhist compassion and the urban aesthetics of Kuki Shūzō. Turning to the East allows for a deprovincialization of Heideggerian themes. The rich philosophical legacy of reflecting on intercultural modernization and urbanization processes in East Asian philosophical traditions presents a genuine opportunity to rethink what it means to dwell today.

Keywords: Heidegger, Kuki, Buddhism, provincialism, urbanism

Obstoj kočé ali bivanje v mestu? Deprovincializacija Heideggerja z Vzhoda

Izvleček

Heideggerjeve »Ustvarjalne pokrajine: Zakaj ostajamo v provinci?« in »Dialog o jeziku« razkrivajo pomen ukoreninjenosti za njegov eksistencializem. Članek se ukvarja s provincialnostjo Heideggerjeve misli tako, da njegov samotarski »obstoj kočé« primerja z budističnim sočutjem in urbano estetiko Kukija Shūzōja. Obračanje na Vzhod omogoča deprovincializacijo Heideggerjevih tem. Bogata filozofska zapuščina razmišljanja o medkulturni modernizaciji in urbanizacijskih procesih v vzhodnoazijskih filozofskih tradicijah predstavlja pravo priložnost za ponoven razmislek o tem, kaj pomeni bivati danes.

Ključne besede: Heidegger, Kuki, budizem, provincializem, urbanizem

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小隱隱於野，
大隱隱於市。

*Small time hermits hide in the mountains,
real ones preserve their world downtown.*

Chinese Idiom

Introduction: Heidegger's Hut Existence

It is well known that Heidegger was drawn to East Asia, even if he ultimately dismissed the possibility of an intercultural dialogue with non-European philosophical traditions.¹ His close friend Heinrich Wiegand Petzet recounts Heidegger's visit to the collection of East Asian art in the apartment of the collector Preetorius in Munich: "Most of these pieces came from China and Japan; there were some riches from Korea as well. Heidegger was profoundly impressed by what he saw and asked many questions" (Petzet 1993, 170). In particular, Heidegger seems to have felt an aesthetic and existential resonance with the depiction of Laozi as a solitary recluse. He was particularly fond of Bertolt Brecht's poem "Legend of the origin of the book Tao Te Ching on Lao-Tzu's road into exile" (1938). Petzet recounts that when Heidegger was sitting in front of his hut he was "like one of those sages painted on one of the Chinese folding screens in the Museum of Ethnology in Bremen, which had inspired Heidegger's great admiration. Each of the sages is sitting in front of his hut, meditating and writing" (ibid., 216–17). In a study of the architecture of Heidegger's hut and its relationship to his thinking, Adam Sharr remarks "Many bourgeois Germans then and now have kept country retreats of some kind", while adding that

a canonical "tradition" of huts as situations for poetic or philosophical reflection can also be traced back over three thousand years to the Far East. In later life, Heidegger was aware of the work of 17th-century Japanese haiku poet Matsuo Basho who worked in a hut like the ones Petzet described. (Sharr 2006, 76)

Heidegger's hut has become a symbol for his philosophy. It stands for, depending on one's interpretive perspective, the profound rootedness of Heideggerian existentialism or the philosopher's provincialism. This article will closely interpret and

1 The literature on Heidegger's relationship to East Asia is extensive. It includes, among others, Buchner (1989), Davis (2013), May (1996), Parkes (1987), Ma (2008), and Heubel (2020).

reveal the limitations of Heidegger's idealization of hut existence and hut philosophy from an intercultural perspective. It argues that the rich tradition of philosophically reflecting on urban culture in East Asia provides interpretive potentials for the task of urbanizing the Heideggerian province. Such a re-orientation *via* an urbanization will include a reflection on the place of thinking and the place of dwelling in modern societies.²

In his brief radio talk “Schöpferische Landschaft: Warum Bleiben wir in der Provinz?”, Martin Heidegger explains, as the title suggests, why he remains in the province (Heidegger 1983a, 1994). This short essay from 1933 paints a pastoral image of the philosopher's Black Forest hut located on the steep hill of a wide valley. The reader is informed that the hut has three rooms dedicated to living, sleeping and studying. Heidegger emphasizes the proximity between his work world (*Arbeitswelt*) and that of the peasants dwelling and working nearby. He stages his hut existence (*Hüttendasein*) in contrast to that of the visitors from the city. Whereas the city dweller merely observes the province in “forced moments of ‘aesthetic’ immersion or artificial empathy”, by “being stimulated” (*angeregt*) or searching release from urban stress, Heidegger proclaims to not even perceive the landscape while being fully immersed in his work, just as the peasant is immersed in his labour. Philosophical creation is integrated into the mountainous landscape. It serves as an act of philosophical resistance against urban uprootedness (*Entwurzellung*): “working through each thought can only be hard and sharp. The effort of linguistic impregnation is like the resistance of the pines standing against the storm” (Heidegger 1983a, 10). While the pines resist the storm, Heidegger presents his solitary hut existence as an act of resistance against the superficial temptations of urban life. Instead of engaging in groundless idle talk and publicity that was analysed in paragraph 35 of *Being and Time* as characteristic of the “uprooted understanding of *Dasein*” (*entwurzelten Daseinsverständnisses*) (Heidegger 1967, 170), Heidegger is also careful to distinguish himself from “the aloof studies of some eccentric”. The peasant philosopher depicts his philosophical hut existence as an act of being *bodenständig*, grounded. He remains loyal to his provincial roots: “The inner relationship of my own work to the Black Forest and its people comes from a centuries-long and irreplaceable rootedness in the Alemannian-Swabian soil” (Heidegger 1983a).³ The atmosphere of this short but

2 Watsuji Tetsurō has pointed to the lack of taking climate and place seriously (1988). For a related attempt at a spatial turn in post-Heideggerian philosophy see Casey (2009).

3 In this talk as well as at other occasions, including his talk on “*Gelassenheit*”, equanimity or releasement, Heidegger interprets his rootedness in an unbroken earth-bound tradition as a form of resistance against modern uprootedness. See also Robert Metcalf (2012). During his later years, Heidegger was far less rooted in the provinces than his self-description suggests. While he lived in his suburban Freiburg home that is rarely mentioned in his work, he was also engaged in extensive

dense text from the period of Heidegger's *Keibre* is that of a pastoral idyll. Heidegger presents himself in a romantic tone of voice as a solitary peasant philosopher who remains remote from the superficial and hectic existential stress of modern cities and engages in a solitary, profound and labour-intensive conversation with perennial Being.



Figure 1. Heidegger's Hut. (Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heidegger-rundweg0009.JPG>)

Buddhist Compassion and Being-With

Heidegger's celebration of rural life does have a transcultural appeal. Everyone comes from some province, after all. To take one example, the depiction of rural life resonates with the Korean scholar Choong-su Han (2004). In his inquiry into "Heideggers Denken und sein Ort", Han perceives a resonance between

travelling. In addition to brief trips to Greece, Italy and France, he also frequently travelled in Germany, as documented in the correspondence with his wife (Heidegger 2009).

Heidegger's evocation of his grounded Black Forest and Han's own memories of the communal spirit in the Korean village of his childhood. Han's grandparents lived in this village in a way similar to that of the peasants portrayed in Heidegger's essay. Han also illustrates the basic mood of Heidegger's nostalgic image of living in the countryside by turning to an example of Buddhist religious architecture in the city of Gyeongju, the former capital of the Silla Kingdom, which existed in the South-East of the Korean peninsula until the 10th century. The Silla culture is, among other achievements, known for the flourishing of Buddhist religious art. More specifically, Han discusses two Buddhist temples by the name of Bulguk and Seokbul, which are located in the ancient Silla capital Gyeongju.⁴ He writes:

even though they belong together, they also stand in contrast to each other. The temple Bulguk stands at the foot of a mountain while the temple Seokbul stands on the peak of the same mountain. The temple Bulguk has a very wide courtyard with many staircases, doors, bridges, halls, towers, walls, art works and Buddha statues. The temple Seokbul, in contrast, only has one hall, which was originally open. In it there is also just one statue of Buddha who looks tenderly with a look of compassion to the other temple and also to the people in the city. (Han 2004, 14)

According to Han's interpretation, the Buddha in the temple on top of the mountain expresses nostalgia in a double sense: he has left the earthly life of the city but, as Boddhisattva, has also returned from his celestial existence out of compassion for other living and suffering beings. If I understand Han's interpretation correctly, the Buddha represented in the statue in the mountain temple looks to the twin temple below and to the city with a sense of compassion while also recalling celestial Enlightenment. His existence on the mountain Tohamsan can thus be considered as a suspension: the Boddhisattva remains bound to both the often painful and complex life on earth and the blissful release from suffering. He has remained calm and withstood the tests of time, even if his perseverance and solitude have been severely challenged by the rise of mass tourism after the monument was included in the list of documents recognized by UNESCO as part of world cultural heritage. In contrast to Heidegger's cold resistance against the temptations of the city in his lonely hut, the Buddha's stone existence expresses compassion, serenity and calmness.

4 Based on Han's description, the reference is likely to the Seokguram grotto in Gyeongju and not to the Seokbul temple, which is located in Busan.



Figure 2. Buddha at Seokguram in South Korea, World Heritage Organization. (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seokguram_Buddha2.jpg)

While feeling a sense of resonance with Han's depiction of this remarkable work of Buddhist spiritual culture, there also seems to be a dissonance between this sympathetic image of the Buddha's compassionate look towards the complex life in the city and Heidegger's self-depiction as a solitary thinker sitting in his hut while brooding over Western metaphysics and rejecting the uprootedness of modern urban existence. Heidegger, in a deeply condescending tone of voice, criticizes visitors from the city for their "forced moments of 'aesthetic' immersion or artificial empathy", while refusing to reveal what an unforced form of aesthetic experience or authentic empathy among people might be. Whereas the Heidegger of *Being and Time* still gestured towards the possibility of authentic social existence when analysing being-with (*Mitsein*) and hinted at the possibility of empathy in

the Zolikon seminars, solitude is identified as the philosophically privileged form of relationship with the world in his later works.⁵ Such solitude can only be discovered in remote huts and the lives of peasants, and remains an enigma to those who live in cities and towns:

City people are often surprised about the long, monotonous being alone among the peasants between the mountains. But it is not loneliness, but solitude. In the big cities humans can easily be as alone as almost nowhere else. But he can never be solitary there. (Heidegger 1983a, 11)

While one does not need to agree with Theodor W. Adorno's polemical critique of Heidegger's text as "German petit-bourgeois kitsch" (Adorno 1973, 55), its appeal does stem from the effective combination of cultural critique and a romanticized idealization of being rooted and cultivating the solitary existence of a profound thinker. While Heidegger's creative solitude may have put him in touch with "the vast nearness of the essence of all things", it put him out of touch with the social world and that of the city. In contrast to Heidegger's self-image as a contemplative recluse, the Buddha in the hermitage Seokbul expresses compassion with the life in the city. At the same time, he—or she—is reminiscent of the celestial existence beyond the mountain grotto and thus inhabits a mediating position between the troubled existence of humans and celestial peace.

Heidegger on the Radio

Before returning to the image of the compassionate Buddha, let us dwell on Heidegger's brief, but also dense radio address. In particular, an interpretation of the text from a media-philosophical perspective exposes a contradiction of Heidegger's self-proclaimed solitude and anti-urbanism. The text was written and delivered in the form of a radio broadcast to address citizens in Berlin and inform them of Heidegger's reasons for turning down an invitation to take up a professorship at Berlin University. Heidegger engages in the paradoxical task of using the urban stage and one of its guiding media, the radio, to declare that he is existentially opposed to city life and the tendency of modern technology to de-distance and accelerate human existence.⁶ Notably, in spite of Heidegger's critique of modern

5 A noteworthy attempt to enrich Heidegger's notion of *Mitsein*, or being-with, by turning to the Buddhist ethos of compassion has been presented by Ryosuke Ohashi (2018).

6 In section 23 ("The Spatiality of Being-in-the-World") of *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes "An essential tendency toward nearness lies in *Dasein*. All kinds of increasing speed which we are compelled to go along with today push for overcoming distance. With the 'radio', for example, *Da-sein*

life and technology, a radio was one of the communication devices he kept in his mountain hut.

According to Heidegger's self-description, he belongs far away from any urban setting in his remote mountain retreat, his hut existence, with life here transformed by the peasant-philosopher from something lacking into a deliberate choice. By making effective use as a broadcaster on and listener of the radio, Heidegger rejects modernity by modern means. While proclaiming that "we do not yet hear, we whose hearing and seeing are perishing through radio and film under the rule of technology" (Heidegger 1977, 48), Heidegger not only highlights that he has been offered a prestigious academic position in the capital, but also announces and justifies his decision to remain in the familiar province. In addition to the use of the radio, the form of his transmission is also modern, since it expresses a conscious choice, one of the pillars of what it means to be an autonomous modern subject. The radio broadcast celebrates the right to exercise this choice to listeners in the capital who are nevertheless, according to Heidegger, unable to truly listen and see. The radio talk closes with a depiction of Heidegger's 75-year-old peasant friend who "read about the call from Berlin in the newspapers" and responded with "a sure gaze of his clear eyes (...) keeping his mouth tightly shut". The friend's shaking of his head is translated by Heidegger into an "absolutely no" (Heidegger 1983a, 13). The tone characteristic of resolute decisions does not allow for further deliberation and second thoughts. Rather than being a form of effective resistance, the text "Creative Landscape: Why do we remain in the Provinces?" thus reveals a stubbornness and an unwillingness to even consider leaving the provincial comfort zone behind to expose himself to the challenges of alterity that are common to urban life under the conditions of modernity. Instead of engaging with the difficult complexities of living in a city, Heidegger preferred to dig himself into a cloistered hut existence. Rather than entering into dialogue with the people below, he broadcasts his indictment and resolute rejection from up high in a solitary mountain hut.

As it becomes clear in the text "... Poetically Man Dwells ...", for Heidegger modern ways of living do not allow for authentic dwelling but "merely the occupying of a lodging" (Heidegger 2001, 213). In "Building Dwelling Thinking", Heidegger refines this claim and argues that that the "reference to the Black Forest farm in no way means that we should or could go back to building such houses" and acknowledges the very real existence of a "housing shortage" (ibid., 158). However, he relativizes this calamity: "the state of dwelling in our precarious age" (ibid., 159) is marked by the fact that "the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of

is bringing about today de-distancing of the 'world' which is unforeseeable in its meaning for *Dasein*, by way of expanding and destroying the everyday surrounding world." (Heidegger 1996, 98)

houses”, but in the fact “that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell” and that “as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer” but “the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling” (ibid.). This shifting of registers from a merely ontic level (how to get by in light of the severe housing shortage) to an ontological one (the dwelling of mortals) is characteristic of fundamental ontology. Reminding a homeless person who is struggling with skyrocketing real estate prices in urban areas about the existential task of the dwelling of mortals reveals Heidegger’s lack of empathy. It documents a flight from confronting concrete socio-economic and ultimately existential problems to seemingly more profound philosophical concerns. Heidegger’s publicly broadcasted choice to remain outside of the world of public discourse and the city carries more weight than a merely contingent biographical fact. This choice for the province and against the city reflects a radical rejection of urban forms of existence by modern means.

Re-orienting Heidegger: Urban Dwelling

It is no surprise then that the Heideggerian tropes of affirmed provincialism and rejected urbanism have become prominent reference points in the reception of the philosopher himself, as the following three paradigmatic examples serve to illustrate. Jürgen Habermas famously praised Heidegger’s student Gadamer because his hermeneutic philosophy achieved what his teacher was incapable or unwilling of doing, an “urbanization of the Heideggerian provinces” (Habermas 1981). By exploring the dialogical dimension of hermeneutics, Gadamer has overcome the reduction of dialogical deliberation to idle chatter and elaborated a dialogical conception of *Mitsein*. Secondly, Habermas’ successor at the University of Frankfurt, Axel Honneth, praised the “superb formulation” of the “urbanizing the Heideggerian province”, but suggests that one should not think of hermeneutics as an urbanization, but as an “*Urbarmachung*”, a cultivation or reclamation, when he writes:

“urbanization” is understood sociologically as the emergence of civilized forms of life, “reclamation” since ancient times designates that arduous and time-consuming process through which economically useless land is changed into fruitful “firm” ground, be it field, meadow, or forest. Applied to the situation here, we would have in the first case a civilizing of the motives of Heidegger’s philosophy, transforming them into a cosmopolitan openness to the world; in the second case, by contrast, Gadamer would be making them fruitful on their own terrain, i.e., would be unfolding the productivity of what was originally meant. (Honneth 2003, 5–6)

Like Habermas and Honneth, Peter Sloterdijk draws on the juxtaposition of urbanism and provincialism in his philosophical character sketch of the Black Forest hut philosopher:

in Heidegger there is something that did not relocate, that runed away from the world, that harbored a rage for remaining where it was. One can enumerate what his old *Da* (here/there) consists in: the silhouettes of the village and the alleys of the small town, meadows, forests, hills and chapels, classrooms, school hallways, book spines, the banners of the *Kirchweih*, and bells tolling in the evening. (Sloterdijk 2016, 27)

The critical interpretations presented by Habermas, Honneth and Sloterdijk attempt to reinterpret Heideggerian insights by way of an urbanization, a reclamation and a mobilization. This raises the question of whether and how the intercultural dialogue with Heidegger could contribute to this critical engagement. In the context of exploring East Asian “oriental” perspectives on Heidegger’s work, one may speak of the task of a “re-orientation” of Heideggerian themes. If one considers Heidegger’s interlocutors in the East not only as recipients and interpreters of the master’s work, the question arises as to what contribution can be made to a de-provincialization by way of a re-orientation. Heidegger’s receptive history in East Asia, most notably by the Kyoto School, could play an important role in this task, especially if the critique from the East manages to not enter the trap of repeating the call for cultural rootedness, solitude and a narrow sense of communal living that has been the touchstone of the mentioned Western critiques of Heidegger.

In an essay on Franco-German “Ways towards an Open Dialogue” (1937), Heidegger sees the task of intercultural exchange as providing a “justification of one’s own and one’s own future history” for the sake of a “recognition of one’s own” and a “true pride of peoples” (Heidegger 1983a, 16). This understanding hardly does justice to a true “reciprocal calling-oneself-into-question” (ibid., 17). Ultimately, for Heidegger, mutual “engagement situates everybody in what they truly are (...) if it endures while confronting the threat of the uprootedness of the occident” (ibid., 20). The classical Greeks whose “uniqueness and greatness” Heidegger emphasizes “did not become what they are perennially by way of an encapsulation (*Verkapselung*) within their ‘space’”, but by virtue of the “sharpest yet creative engagement with what is the most foreign and difficult for them: the Asiatic” (ibid., 21).

To advance a radical critique of Heidegger’s self-assertive provincialism that reduces intercultural engagement to self-aggrandizement it is first necessary to come to terms with Heidegger’s provincialism. This is revealed in what is his most explicit attempt at an intercultural dialogue, only to reaffirm the greatness of his

own cultural identity. In “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache: Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden” (Heidegger 1985), the European interlocutor, a staged version of Heidegger, is unwilling to engage with the Japanese visitor on equal terms. The conversation, the text states, “emerged as if a free play in our house” (*ein freies Spiel in unserem Hause*) (Heidegger 1985, 84). But isn’t this retreat to one’s house as the privileged site of intercultural conversation precisely the encapsulation Heidegger is critical of? The sense of the ultimate futility of intercultural dialogue is further refined by characterizing the conversations in terms of the danger (*Gefahr*) characteristic of translation. Heidegger both upgrades and downplays the status of the conversation. It is free, but also merely a play that shies away from a genuine dialogue on substantive issues. It is a play in a distinctive and confined setting, this time not Heidegger’s hut, but his house, in which he receives without, however, crossing his threshold to engage with what is being received. He refuses to leave his familiar comfort zone and presents himself as the generous host who receives solicitors from afar.

Just as the communication with the peasant cited in the previously mentioned radio broadcast was reduced to the man shaking his head when being prompted, the Japanese visitor is reduced to silence when it comes to the moment of engaging in intercultural exchange. The dialogue instrumentalizes the visitor to reveal the impossibility of genuine intercultural—and, by extension interlinguistic—communication beyond the confines of the narrow orbit of testing the limits of European metaphysics from within. A true conversation between cultural others who are nevertheless connected in dialogue remains blocked due to the alleged gap between key terms and the irreconcilable and unbridgeable differences between the linguistic spirits of European and East Asian languages. According to Heidegger, the conceptual richness that allegedly only characterizes the European linguistic spirit necessarily creates a temptation to downgrade what is talked about to something indeterminate and fluid. The Heideggerian interlocutor increasingly reveals himself as an inquisitor who insists on and celebrates untranslatability, while the nameless Japanese visitor remains silent or is put into the role of being a messenger who gives reports to Europeans about Japanese aesthetic traditions. As previous interpreters have pointed out, in Heidegger’s dialogue there is a sense of it not being a real open encounter, but a staged interplay on unequal terms where the host sets the rules unilaterally (Gumbrecht 2000, May 1996). Heidegger’s knowledge of the aesthetics of “*iki*” that represents Asian aesthetics and ontology in his staged dialogue, as well as his conception of Japanese culture, is based on Oscar Benl’s work “Seami Motokiyo und der Geist des Nō Schauspiels” (1952). Heidegger’s relying exclusively on a German reconstruction of Asian themes underscores his unwillingness to engage with Asian sources directly. The visitor from Japan

is depicted by Heidegger as someone from East Asia who combines a sense of submissive politeness and the frenzy of a modern urban tourist, as opposed to the grounded interlocutor. The interlocutor reminds his Japanese visitor that the time for their conversation is limited, by pointing out that the guest wishes to continue his brief trip through Europe by visiting the city of Florence the next day. When the Japanese man responds that he is determined to stay one more day “if you permit me to visit your house one more time” (Heidegger 1985, 126), he granted the honour by the generous host representing Heidegger without, however, pursuing the possibility of an in-depth intellectual exchange any further. Moreover, Heidegger incorrectly remembers their mutual acquaintance Shūzō Kuki as a visiting student. In fact, Kuki visited Europe as an advanced lecturer in the years 1922 to 1929, as was well versed in Japanese, French and German literature.

If Heidegger had studied Kuki’s *Reflections on Japanese Taste: The Structure of Iki (Iki no kozō)*, he could not only have learned about the simultaneous revealing as well as concealing aesthetics of urban geishas, but, more importantly, witnessed a genuinely transcultural attempt to modernize a tradition without thereby abandoning its cultural roots (Kuki 2011). Kuki rescues the conception of *iki* from the Edo era both by way of carefully positioning it with regard to the French and the German linguistic and cultural registers and practices, but also by marking out a space between traditional rural and modern urban Japan. Kuki’s concept of *iki* can be traced back to Matsuo Bashō’s concept of “*karumi*”, which means “lightness”. This existential aesthetics of an urban vagabonding lightness is at odds with the search for existential rootedness we find in Heidegger. While the former historically emerged as a creative and subversive form of resistance by common town folks against the overly ritualized aristocratic ruling class of the rural Samurai, Heidegger’s insistence on rootedness does not have any emancipatory or subversive dimensions (Pincus 1996, 132).

As Ryosuke Ohashi states, Kuki, who grew up in modern Tokyo, was rather amused about Heidegger’s “astonishment” when he first visited Berlin as a young man (Ohashi 1989, 99). Rather than seeing Kuki as a student whose thought developed under Heidegger’s influence, it may thus serve him better to uncouple or delink the two and underscore Kuki’s original contributions and philosophically productive differences to Heidegger (Mikkelsen 2004). Kuki’s reconstruction of *iki* undermines the very juxtaposition between urbanism and provincialism and the corresponding valorizations of being either overly refined in order to display one’s status and wealth, or being vulgar and provincial. *Iki* is presented as an intermediary between these binaries. The feeling of *iki* is characterized as an awareness of differentiation by an elegant connoisseur who remains detached from the world, especially the world of confining conventions and provincial mindsets. In

order to illustrate the structure of *iki*, Kuki emphasizes the modern and distinctively urban literary tradition of the “*ninjō*”, a genre of licentious fiction, since it emphasizes the interplay of seduction and renunciation that is characteristic of the distinctively modern structure of *iki*. The peasant (*yabu*) is juxtaposed with the connoisseur. Kuki reveals the interplay of the sophisticated but unassuming man of taste and judgement and the pride of being authentic that is being proclaimed by aristocrats as well as “vulgar” people who identify with their seemingly superior provinces. The specifically urban dialectics of attraction and detachment as expressed in *iki* are reflected in its combination of a suspension of judgment and playfulness: “*Iki* rejects a cheap thesis about reality and puts into parenthesis real life and breathes a neutral air and puts into play an autonomy without intention and without interest.” (Kuki 2011, 73) Kuki has anticipated the concept of a suspension of judgment in practical terms. He presents *iki* as an essentially modern notion with practical consequences not only in the realm of aesthetics, but also in ethics. As a spiritual form of detachment *iki* allows for a playful and often subversive engagement with established conventions.

Kuki’s aesthetics can be situated within Japanese modernization processes that attempt to free urban life from a one-dimensional focus on utility and to rediscover the existential as well as aesthetic potentials of emancipated citizens. It is mirrored in the construction of interior spaces in the Taishō writing of Satō and Uno (Gerbert 1998). They draw on the representation of cultural otherness in the midst of urban spaces that have become characteristic of Japanese modernity and its capacity for blending Eastern and Western, rural and urban influences. They represent an attempt to cultivate a distinctively modern sense of dwelling that engages with tradition and cultural alterity in creative ways. Kuki’s aesthetic modernism is thus at odds with Japanese agrarian utopian movements that rejected the “city fever” and invented Japanese tradition as a site of longing before the ambivalences of modernity. They conceived of farming as the authentic expression of the Japanese national spirit, and identified the city with a force of evil. Yamakawa Tokio, for example, refers to the city as “a monstrous three-legged idol, stained crimson with the blood of farmers” (Vlastos 1998, 89).

When arguing that a deprovincialization of Heideggerian themes can be achieved by drawing on the cosmopolitan, urban aspects of Kuki’s aesthetic intervention, it is important to also remain aware that Kuki’s cosmopolitanism is connected to a nationalist project of advancing “Japanism” (*nihonshugi*). For Kuki, as well as for other members of the Kyoto School, the search for “ethnic authenticity” (Nara 2004, 115) was not opposed to but included the capacity of intercultural learning processes. Among many Japanese intellectuals, there was a sense of pride in the rapid urbanization that resulted from the Meiji reforms, and Kuki was no exception. Japan had

engaged in modern urbanization processes since the Meiji Reforms. For Kuki, the category of a normatively superior Japanese culture and ethnic group, *minzoku*, remained immune to critical questioning. His phenomenological attempt at rescuing a specifically modern Japanese aesthetics does reveal its own blindspots, but these are, as I attempted to demonstrate in this paper, different ones from those revealed by Heidegger's provincialism. While Kuki presents a vision of a modern cosmopolitan Japan, Heidegger dreamed the anti-modern dream of remaining faithful to his Alemanian Black Forest hut. If one wanted to compare Heidegger's normative appreciation of rootedness and traditional peasant-life, it would make more sense to look elsewhere. Indeed, there are surprising parallels between Heidegger's philosophy of rootedness in the provinces and Mao Zedong, who legitimated his authority by way of intimate knowledge of Chinese village life. The leader of the Cultural Revolution, Mao forcefully relocated the urban elite to the countryside in an attempt to overcome perceived urban pathologies and learn from the peasants.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has departed from Heidegger's attempt to claim the derogatory term "province" as enabling and intimately linked with his work and thought. This has contributed to his critics attempts at urbanization, reclamation and relocation. Heidegger's emphasis on provincial solitude abandons his earlier search for being-with and compassion. Moreover, it is contradictory since it relies on modern technology and experiences to criticize modernity. It's somewhat ironic that the traditional small-scale farming and craftsmanship that is typical of the Black Forest region, and that Heidegger seems to have favoured, is now sustained by a complex system of subsidies as well as ecotourism by environmentally conscious tourists from the cities.

There is a danger of idealizing either pastoral nostalgia or an uncritical urbanism rather than to confront the task of conceptualizing the complex and interrelated entanglement of rural and urban modes of life within modernity, including their distinctive existential pathologies and potentials. This task cannot be performed by painting an idyllic image of the solitary existence in a mountain hut or a free play within one's house, as Heidegger envisioned. Rather, it would require a complex interdisciplinary as well as intercultural research project that would benefit from involving different disciplines and cultural traditions and experiences of what it means to be modern.

From an East Asian perspective, this task of a re-orientation of an existential analytic that is sensitive to the dimensions and existential, aesthetic economic and social

challenges and potentials of urban life can be performed in a rich and rewarding manner for at least two reasons. First, the radical urbanization processes that are characteristic of Chinese, Japanese or Korean modernization provide ample examples of processes of intercultural exchange. Modern cities in Asia serve as laboratories of the imagination. While influenced during the 19th century by European ideals of urban spaces, Asian cities have unique developmental trajectories that often surpass processes of urban modernization in the “West” (Stapleton 2022). Compared to many cities in Asia, cities like Berlin or Madrid seem like remote villages. Max Weber was still able, without having set foot outside of Europe, to develop a sophisticated theory demonstrating why Asian cities lacked the rational organization and progressive dynamism considered unique to Western cities (Sunar 2019). Today, any visitor from the old “West” to the new “East” feels that Asian cities anticipate the challenges of global urban futures. Moreover, some of the experiences in East Asian societies’ rapid processes of modernization *via* urbanization have left traces in philosophical conceptions such as that of *iki* that, as I have argued, outplay the very dichotomy of urban and provincial, traditional and modern, dichotomies that are essential for Heidegger’s philosophy and its tendency to reproduce conceptual and existential binaries while claiming to overcome them.

Heidegger was not completely unaware of the potentials and significance of Asian cities. In his copy of Ernst Jünger’s “The Worker: Dominion and Form”, he highlighted the following passage:

Many experiences, which we still need to confront, have already been made in China—for example the harmonious planning of cities with millions of people and entire landscapes, the highest use of agriculture and gardening, the typical and high-quality manufacturing, the intensity and completion of small-scale economy. (Heidegger 2004, 406–07)

Heidegger underlined the specification “which still await us” (*die uns noch bevorstehen*) and thereby—at least implicitly—acknowledged that China and, by extension, other Asian nations with megacities, had already anticipated modernization processes that Europe still needed to deal with in the future. No doubt the expression “*uns bevorstehen*” has a fatalist, even apocalyptic, tone to it, at least when interpreted from a Heideggerian anti-modern perspective.⁷

7 Jünger’s reference to Chinese cities is more optimistic in context. He identifies the aesthetic practice of longing for China as the refined cultural other known as “Chinoiserie” during the 18th century European style of Rococo as a sign of “developed and completed formation processes, which entail the possibility of a long duration” (Jünger 1981, 299). Following the earlier examples of Sinophile authors such as Leibniz and Wolff, Jünger also articulates the need to increase the presence of a professional academic focus on China in German academia.

Rather than using Heidegger in order to construct new forms of existential provincialism that are presented as a longing for rootedness in a harmonious small-scale community where being-in-the-world is still authentic, there is a need to rethink modernization from an intercultural perspective in order to address some of the most pressing tasks today: the integration of increasingly diverse urban populations within economically, environmentally, culturally and politically sustainable cities. These cities need to provide the conditions of possibility for human flourishing. Some city dwellers will no doubt seek to escape the buzz of urban spaces. They may hike to Heidegger's Black Forest hut or the Korean temple of the solitary Buddha statue. And while one can imagine Heidegger turning in his grave at the sight of uprooted tourists, the Buddha welcomes such visitors with compassionate delight.

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SPECIAL ISSUE

*TRANSCULTURAL (POST)COMPARATIVE
PHILOSOPHY, PART 2*

*Philosophical Dialogues between East Asia and
Europe: From Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond*

Conversations with Plotinus

A Comparison of Nishida's *basho* from his Middle Period with Plato's *chóra* and the One of Plotinus

Marko URŠIČ*

Abstract

In this paper, the principal question is the following: How and to what extent can Nishida's *basho* ("place"), as it is outlined in his famous treatise *Basho* (1926), taken together with the "adjoining" essay *The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness* (1927), be understood and interpreted from Plato's and/or Plotinus' (i.e. Neoplatonic) philosophical viewpoint—and, possibly, also *vice versa*? What do Nishida's conception (or rather intuition) of *basho* on the one hand, and Plato's quite "vague" concept of *chóra* in *Timaeus* and/or Plotinus' first *hypóstasis* "the One" on the other, have in common? The main formal similarity between *basho* and "the One" is that they cannot be "predicated" (in the Aristotelian sense) by anything else—or, to put it in Platonic terms, both are absolutely transcendent. However, there are also several important differences, mainly because of the different frames of thought, which are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Nishida Kitarō, Plato, Plotinus, *basho*, *chóra*, the One, comparative philosophy

Primerjava med Nishidovim pojmom *basho* v njegovem srednjem obdobju s Platonovo *chóra* in Enim pri Plotinu

Izvleček

Osrednje vprašanje v tem prispevku je naslednje: Kako in v kolikšni meri lahko razumemo in interpretiramo Nishidov pojem *basho* (»prostor«) – kakor ga je japonski filozof razvil v svoji znani razpravi *Basho* (1926) in pridruženem besedilu *Nerešeno vprašanje zavesti* (1927) – s Platonovega in/ali Plotinovega (tj. novoplatonskega) filozofskega stališča ter, morda, tudi obratno? Kaj imata skupnega Nishidov pojem (ali prej intuicija) *basho* na eni strani ter Platonov dokaj »nejasen« pojem *chóra* v *Timaju* in/ali Plotinova prva hipostaza, tj. Eno, na drugi? Glavna formalna podobnost med *bashom* in »Enim« je v tem, da ne moreta biti opredeljena (»predicirana« v aristotelskem pomenu) z ničimer drugim – oziroma, če se izrazimo v platonski terminologiji, oba sta absolutno transcendentna. Vendar pa je med njima tudi več pomembnih razlik, ker sta nastala v različnih miselnih okvirih, o katerih razmišljamo v tem prispevku.

Ključne besede: Kitarō Nishida, Platon, Plotin, *basho*, *chóra*, Eno, primerjalna filozofija

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The comparative philosophy between East and West has always been and still is a hard task. Those times when the Eastern philosophical and/or religious systems were modified by Western interpreters in order to fit into some Europocentric referential scheme have passed, fortunately, long ago. In my younger days, the opposite tendency was quite strong, mostly influenced by French (post)structuralism¹, namely the opinion that we Westerners should study and understand all Eastern philosophies (Indian, Chinese, Japanese etc.) just “by themselves”, i.e. not “contaminated” by our notions and theoretical “prejudices”. However, one of the main and methodologically justified principles in the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer is the acknowledgement that there is no real cognition without some kind of productive “prejudice”, or rather that there is no mutual understanding of different cultures or historical epochs without what he terms the “merging of horizons”. Following and developing this view, I am convinced that at the end of the day all human knowledge and experiences converge, because they are in the deepest (or highest) sense the same for all of us. Therefore, in spite of the unavoidable fact that some or even many nuances happen to be “lost in translation”, we can understand each other in the basic strata of our human *Dasein*. As Heraclitus said at the dawn of the Western wisdom: “*Logos* is common to all”. Nevertheless, after the fall of the Tower of Babel, our deeply common *lógos* requires translations of our different languages, in order to *compare* our ways of thought in their similarities and differences, and thus to understand others and thereby also ourselves.

For a Western philosopher like me, a comparative approach also proves itself quite difficult—maybe contrary to expectations—in the research into the greatest Japanese modern philosopher, Nishida Kitarō, in spite of the fact that he was very receptive and creative in his studies of Western philosophies. There are several reasons why this comparison is difficult. *First*, Nishida is a very deep and complex thinker, and can be compared with his greatest European contemporaries (Husserl, Heidegger, Cassirer, Bergson, et al.). *Secondly*, Nishida endeavoured to construct a most comprehensive philosophical system, a synthesis extending from the classical Greek philosophers (especially Aristotle) to many Western philosophers of the Modern Age, from Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz to Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, Schopenhauer and Lotze, Emil Lask and others. We might note here that in Western philosophy the last attempt at such a comprehensive philosophical synthesis, as Nishida tried to develop, was the great system of Hegel. It is surely an extremely hard task to think “together” and include in a single consistent system so many different philosophical paradigms, and at the same time to remain sensitive to all subtle differences among them.

1 In this tendency, Jacques Derrida's concept of *differance* has been particularly influential (see David A. Dilworth 1993, 136–40).

The *third* reason why Nishida is difficult for a comparative philosopher, especially for a Westerner, are the deep and important foundations of Nishida's philosophy in the tradition of the Buddhist spirituality, especially in Zen and the Madhyamaka School of Mahayana Buddhism (needless to say, I appreciate and like this background to Nishida's thought very much). Here I have in mind particularly the Buddhist "origin" of Nishida's key concept (or, better, of his intellectual "intuition") of *mu no basho*, the "place of nothing", as well as his basic idea of the "ungroundedness" of the will. In this context, I would like to express my opinion that every pristine philosophical thought has and indeed must have its spiritual, "experiential" background, both personal and cultural, whereby I guess that we can more easily recognize the background of a philosophical system that is rooted in *another* cultural frame, more or less different from our own.

Due to the general difficulties of the comparative philosophy between East and West, and also because of some particular features of Nishida's philosophy, as stated above, I have decided to apply two thematic reductions in the present paper: 1) The first reduction is obvious from the very title of this (broader) research project: in the focus of the comparison, there will be the relations between Nishida's and Plotinus' philosophies. Of course, this does not mean to put completely aside all other philosophers, which were important for the development of Nishida's thought, but rather just to limit this project thematically, in order not to miss the leading thread in a too large labyrinth. 2) The second reduction applies only to my present contribution in this paper, where I limit myself to the issue of *basho* in Nishida's "middle period", particularly developed in his treatises *Basho* (2012a [1926]) and the "adjoining" paper *The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness* (2012b [1927]). I have divided the topics discussed here into three sections: 1. Nishida's *basho* and Plato's *chóra*; 2. Some differences between Plato and Plotinus' Neoplatonism; 3. Nishida's *basho* in comparison with the One of Plotinus, particularly concerning their relation to the "place of ideas" in the Intellect. In short, the main task of the present paper is to analyse and understand the triangle of three important philosophical concepts: *basho* – *chóra* – the One.

Nishida's *basho* and Plato's *chóra*

In Nishida's treatise *Basho*, we cannot find a unique and exhaustive definition of the key concept *basho*—such a definition indeed cannot be expected, since *basho* is considered as the highest "transcendent predicate" and therefore not positively definable. But, of course, we find several outlining "descriptions" of *basho* and its different epistemic levels, from *basho* as the physical space of material objects, *basho* as the

“place” of various mental acts and entities, up to the “highest” (or “deepest”) “*basho* of nothing” (*mu no basho*). Still, interpreters of Nishida have tried to formulate a more comprehensive definition of *basho*, among them we may quote here John W. M. Krummel, one of the principal English translators and Western commentators of Nishida’s works: “So what then is *basho*? [...] It would be a ‘place’ enveloping and encompassing all mental acts and their objects, all perspectival horizons of intentionality that constitute the world of objects” (Krummel in Nishida 2012a, 9). Of course, this is only a preliminary and non-compulsive “definition” of Nishida’s “middle period” *basho*—nevertheless, it is enough adequate for our present investigation.²

Notwithstanding the sophisticated development of Nishida’s concept(s) of *basho*(s), his *original* idea of the universal “place” where all differences are “implaced” was unique (and, of course, also his “deepest” intuition of *mu no basho*)—as we can see already from the first page of his treatise:

... in order for objects to relate to one another, [to] constitute a single system, and maintain themselves, we ought to consider not only what maintains the system but also what establishes the system within itself and wherein the system is implaced. That which *is* must be implaced in something. Otherwise the distinction between *is* and *is not* cannot be made. Logically it should be possible to distinguish between the terms of relationship and the relationship itself, and also between that which unifies the relationship and that wherein the relationship is implaced. Even if we attempt to think in regard to acts, taking the I as a pure unity of acts, insofar as the I is conceived in opposition to the not-I, there must be that which envelops the opposition between I and non-I within itself and makes the establishment of the so-called phenomena of consciousness possible within itself. Following the words of Plato’s *Timaeus*, I shall call the receptacle of the *ideas* in this sense, *basho* [place; *chóra*]. Needless to say, I am not suggesting that what I call *basho* is the same as Plato’s “space” or “receptacle place”. (Nishida 2012a, 49–50)

In spite of the fact that Nishida’s original concept of *basho* was inspired by Plato’s *chóra*, we have to state that the latter is quite far from the former, as already

2 We may supplement this “definition” of *basho* with Krummel’s further explications, for example: *basho* is the “pre-objective environing background for determining acts and determined content, the plane of potentials (predicates) allowing for the foreground emergence of beings *qua* objects or *qua* grammatical subjects” (Krummel in Nishida 2012a, 16)—or, in short, *basho* is “the place of implacement” (ibid.) of (all) existing entities and/or acts; it is “behind all objectifying or determining acts” (ibid., 12); *basho* is “the un-objectifiable, the indeterminate, the non-differentiated, i.e. ‘nothing’ (*mu*)” (ibid.) etc.

Nishida himself pointed out in the last sentence of the quoted passage—but, unfortunately, he has not articulated this distinction clearly enough. Later, in the “adjoining” paper *The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness*, he repeated the above quoted formulation of *basho* as “the receptacle of the *ideas*”. We read at the beginning of this paper: “In the *Timaeus* Plato regarded the *hypodoché* [i.e. *chóra*] to be the receptacle of the *ideas*. But this was nothing but a material principle called space” and so on (Nishida 2012b, 51). At the end of the same paper, he sketches (rather casually) his critique of Plato’s conception of *chóra*: “In Greek philosophy, the Platonist school arrived at the idea of ‘the place of *ideas*’. But having conceived the forms as through and through *being*, Greek philosophy ultimately failed to render any logical independence to place. It conceived place as matter *vis-à-vis* being” (ibid., 56). (Obviously, Nishida had in mind here also Aristotle, not only Plato.) In his notes to Nishida’s paper, Krummel adds the following explanation: “See Plato *Timaeus* 52a. Nishida has in mind here Plato’s notion of *chóra*, which he touched upon above as the receptacle of the *ideas*” (ibid., 59, note 26). In the introduction to this paper, Krummel also speaks of Plato’s *chóra* as the inspiration for Nishida’s concept of *basho*: “Nishida states how he was inspired by Plato’s notion of *chóra* in the *Timaeus* and took it as a clue in developing his own concept of *basho* or ‘place’” (ibid., 45). I think that it is important to bear in mind that Nishida’s *basho* is actually his own concept, which is a much more refined and enhanced concept of “place” than Plato’s *chóra* was, so we may ascertain that the latter was only a preliminary motivation for Nishida. In the following, we shall look into some important aspects of this comparison.

First we have to agree that Plato’s *chóra*, like Nishida’s *basho*, is conceived as an *empty* “place”, i.e. as a formless “receptacle” (*hypodoché*), in which all *sensory* objects as the “images” or “impressions” of Platonic ideas (“the Forms”) are “implaced” (if we use Nishida’s term). In this “definition” of the indefinable *chóra* (following *Timaeus*), I have emphasized the word “sensory”, since *chóra* does not “implace” ideas themselves, but only sensory (physical) things as the “impressions” of ideas.³ Let us consider carefully the famous passage from *Timaeus* (50b...52b):

... And the same argument (*lógos*) applies to the universal nature which receives all bodies—that must be always called the same, for, inasmuch as she [!] always receives all things, she never departs at all from her own nature, and never, in any way or at any time, assumes a form (*morphé*)

3 The literal meaning of the Greek term *ekmageion*, which occurs in *Timaeus* (in our quoted passage), and also in a rather different, epistemological sense in Plato’s *Theaetetus* (194d), is the “impression” of a form in some matter/material, for example in wax (cf. also the famous “wax analogy” of Descartes in his second meditation).

like that of any of the things which enter into her; she is the natural recipient of all impressions (*ekmageion*), and is stirred and informed by them, and appears different from time to time by reason of them. But the forms which enter into and go out of her are the likenesses of eternal realities modelled after their patterns in a wonderful and mysterious manner, which we will hereafter investigate. [...] Wherefore the mother and receptacle (*hypodochê*) of all created and visible and in any way sensible things is not to be termed earth or air or fire or water, or any of their compounds, or any of the elements from which these are derived, but is an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible. [... that is /next to the Forms and the sensory world/] a third nature, which is space (*chóra*) and is eternal, and admits not of destruction and provides a home for all created things, and is apprehended, when all sense is absent (*anaisthesía*), by a kind of spurious reason (*logismós nóthos*), and is hardly real—which we, beholding as in a dream, say of all existence that it must of necessity be in some place (*tópos*) and occupy a space (*chóra*), but that what is neither in heaven nor in earth has no existence. (Plato 1985, *Timaeus*, 50b...52b)

As we may see from the last sentence of this passage, Plato would probably agree with Nishida's statement: "That which *is* must be implaced in something" (see the quotation from Nishida 2012a, above). However, *chóra* as the Platonic primordial place where the demiurge creates and therefore "implaces" sensory things as *éidola* of the paradigmatic Forms (i.e. as their "impressions" which "enter into and go out of" *chóra*) does *not* "implace" ideas themselves in the sense as Nishida's *basho* implaces (also) ideal entities and/or cognitive acts. Nishida was, of course, conscious of this difference when he remarked: "Needless to say, I am not suggesting that what I call *basho* is the same as Plato's 'space' or 'receptacle place'" (ibid.). However, in order to be clearer about Plato's *chóra*, it would be better to refer to this "receptacle" as the place *for* ideas to be "impressed" in it (or in Her, i.e. in the cosmic "Mother"), not to denote it as the place *of* ideas, since in Plato's philosophy the place *of* ideas is considered as the transcendent *tópos hyperouraníos*, mentioned in *Phaedrus* (Plato 1985, 247c), which is surely *not* the same with *chóra* in *Timaeus*. Moreover, Plato in his dialogues does not explicitly (i.e. with theoretical concepts) define a *place* of ideas, except in the very abstract sense of their conceptual *tópoi*, for example in *Parmenides* or in *The Sophist*. Only in the later development of Platonism, especially in the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and his followers, is the Intellect (*nous*) explicitly considered and much discussed in the sense of the *place* of ideas (and/or of intellectual acts), as we shall point out more clearly in the next section.

Secondly, I would like to mention here another difference between *chóra* and *basho*: Nishida, when speaking about *basho* as the “place of ideas”, states that “there must be that which envelops the opposition between I and non-I within itself and makes the establishment of the so-called phenomena of consciousness possible” (see again the quoted passage from the *Basho* treatise, above). In this sense, the conscious phenomena, made possible by the opposition of I and non-I, are often presented by Nishida with the metaphor of mirroring, for example in the following passage, where he speaks of the *basho* that includes everything: “And at its bottom it would have to be a plane that endlessly extends with nothing there, like a formless space that mirrors what has form” (Nishida 2012a, 89). However, if we follow our comparative study, Plato does not use the metaphor of mirroring in the context of *chóra*. The mirror-metaphor is often present later, in Neoplatonism, particularly in Plotinus who compares matter to an empty (or even false) mirror.⁴ But in Plotinus matter is considered as the ultimate “privation” (*stéresis*) of being, as the complete absence of any form (which it neither “enfolds” implicitly), therefore it cannot “alternate”, and even less “generate alternations” in the sense that Nishida conceives of *basho* in the following passage: “We then come to think that space without form or sound is a universal containing everything and that form and sound are generated through the alternations of space” (Nishida 2012a, 78).

Nishida distinguishes several levels of space, especially the following three, as presented in Krummel’s note 180 to the *Basho* treatise: “Again we see here a three-tiered sequence of deepening but in terms of space: (1) perceptual space or the *basho* of beings; (2) *a priori* space in the *basho* of consciousness (or oppositional nothing); and (3) true nothing [i.e. *mu no basho*]” (Krummel in Nishida 2012a, 206).⁵ It is evident that Nishida’s *basho* is not only the space of sensory beings, equivalent to Plato’s *chóra* or Descartes’s *res extensa*, it is much more (or paradoxically, “less”, namely as the ultimate *mu no basho*). Nevertheless, the notions of “space” (i.e. *chóra* in Plato and/or *tópos* in Aristotle⁶) and “place” (in the sense of Nishida’s *basho*) are closely intertwined, as we can see also in the following passage, where Nishida distinguishes three levels of *basho* in relation to the levels of being, and each of these levels is “implaced” in its own (level of) *basho*:

4 Plotinus (1967, *Enneads*, III 6(26).7.25–42 and 9.17–19). In this and the following references to the *Enneads* of Plotinus, the numbers in brackets—here 26—denote the chronological order of his 54 treatises.

5 Nishida’s passage to which this Krummel’s note refers is the following: “The perceptual space that we see is not immediately *a priori* space. But it is implaced within a *priori* space. Accordingly there would have to be true nothing behind a *priori* space” (Nishida 2012a, 80).

6 In the Greek philosophy, generally speaking, there is not a sharp distinction between *tópos* and *chóra*, e.g. also in the last sentence of the above quoted passage from *Timaeus*.

We see things that are merely at work in the *basho* of determinate beings, we see the so-called acts of consciousness in the *basho* of oppositional nothing [i.e. the cognitive space which enables the subject-predicate propositions and their truth-values], and we see true free will in the *basho* of absolute nothing. (Nishida 2012a, 65; see also Krummel's note 116)

Following this threefold scheme, we may state that Plato's *chóra* corresponds only to the *first* level of Nishida's *basho*, being the "receptacle" of the sensory, physical objects as the "impressions" (or, metaphorically, "shadows") of the ideas.

Other than the above quoted passage, in the treatise *Basho* Nishida explicitly refers to Plato only once more. At the end of the first section of this treatise, he states:

In Plato's philosophy, the universal was conceived to be objective reality. But this did not lead to the idea that the universal that truly envelops all things would have to be a place (*basho*) that establishes them. For this reason place [*basho*, namely as *chóra*, see Krummel's note 75] was instead thought of as unreal and as nothing. But there would have to be such a place (*basho*) even in the depths of the intuition of the *ideas* themselves. (Nishida 2012a, 59)

On this point, namely that there must be a *basho* of ideas themselves, we can surely agree with Nishida, and this is also in line with the Neo-Platonic point of view. However, in order to consider explicitly the "place" of the Intellect (of *nous* in Greek) we have to pass from Plato to Plotinus. I suppose that Nishida—at least in the treatises of his we are discussing—did not consider carefully enough some relevant distinctions between Plato and Plotinus, and therefore he did not realize that the Intellect as the "place of ideas" in Plotinus was much closer to his own philosophy of *basho* than the concept of *chóra* in Plato's *Timaeus*.⁷ But before going into more details on this crucial point of the present comparative study, we should first remember some important differences between Plato and Plotinus themselves.

7 On the other hand, it is evident from some casual references to Plotinus in Nishida's earlier works that he knew the mystical flavour of Plotinus' philosophy, and consequently that he was conscious of the difference between Plotinus and Plato. For example, in his book *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* (1987 [1917]), Nishida wrote: "In terms of a theory of stages of reality, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena show that God transcends all categories, that absolute free will which entirely eludes reflection is the most concrete, primary reality" (Nishida 1987, 155).

Some Differences between Plato and Plotinus' Neoplatonism

We may state that the *chóra* of *Timaeus* has a rather unfortunate role in Plato's foundation of philosophical idealism, especially from the ontological point of view, because it introduces into his system a kind of (at least implicit) dualism, although that was not Plato's own intention. If we follow the traditional (especially Christian) understanding of Platonism, it *seems* that it is just Plato, with his distinction between “the world of senses” and “the world of ideas”, who is the principal founder of ontological dualism in the Greek philosophy. However, this is not entirely correct, since a really dualistic metaphysics was not established until Aristotle, with his distinction between form and matter. As is well known, Plato endeavoured to explain the relation between sensory objects and ideas with the concept of “participation” (*méthexis*) of the former in the latter⁸—and we might assume that Plato's main motive for introducing the relation of participation was to preserve, in spite of the “separation line” (*chorismós*), ontological *monism*, albeit in a rather “dualistic” variant. Plato's primarily monistic ontology (ideas as the only real beings) was also the main reason why he was confronted with serious troubles when he tried to define the nature of *chóra* in *Timaeus*. Therefore, it is probably not a coincidence that *chóra* only features in this dialogue of Plato's, and nowhere else. The whole discourse of *Timaeus* is introduced to the reader as a kind of cosmological *mythos*, not as a theoretical (dialectic) dialogue in the proper philosophical sense. From this point of view, it is also understandable that Plato mythologically refers to *chóra* as the cosmic Mother. Last but not least, we have to remark that Aristotle's theoretical concept of the “first matter” (*próte hýle*) is essentially different from Plato's “indefinable” *chóra*—we may say that the former is quite well defined as the “pure potentiality”—whereas Plotinus' concept of matter as complete “privation” of being is different from both, although it seems to be closer to Aristotle's concept of the first matter as pure potentiality than to Plato's *chóra*.

Plotinus mentions *chóra* in some of his treatises, but mostly just as a reference to his great master Plato, not as a theoretical concept of his own system, which is

8 Nishida was, of course, very well aware of the importance of *méthexis* in Plato's philosophical system—however, he was not satisfied with Plato's solution. At the beginning of the treatise *The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness*, he wrote: “Toward the end of *Phaedo* Plato conceives the nature of things as depending upon their participation in the ideas. He thinks that the beautiful is beautiful, the large is large, the small is small, et cetera, by means of participation in the *idea* of beauty, the *idea* of largeness, the *idea* of smallness, et cetera. [...] But how can the *ideas* join individual things when they remain eternally unchanged without any association with the opposing nature?” (Nishida 2012b, 51) Nishida assumed that in Platonism *chóra* was a medium for joining things, but this assumption is valid only for physical things, since *chóra* as the “receptacle” (*hypodochê*) “was nothing but a material principle called space” (ibid.). In order to join together higher entities too, like thoughts and acts, Nishida “upgraded” Platonic *chóra* to his concept of *basho* ...

radically monistic. Plotinus does not need *chóra*, since his ontology strictly applies the concept of *méthexis* (or *metálepsis*), which he has taken over from his master. In Plotinus' monism, *all* beings “participate” in the “one-many” reality of three primordial “hypostases”: the Soul (*psychè*), the Intellect (or Spirit, *noús*), and the One (*tò hén*). We have to point out again that matter (*hylè*) is considered by Plotinus as the complete “privation” (*stéresis*) of any form (*eídos*), as the ultimate absence of the Light of being, of the One or the Good (*tò agáthon*). Plotinus does not even need the figure of a demiurge, since the process of “emanation” (the term itself was coined later) replaces him in the evolution of the world from three hypostases.

For our context, it is especially important to understand properly how Plotinus conceived of the *place* of ideas, in order to establish its correspondence with Nishida's *basho* of consciousness. Following Plotinus, ideas are “implaced” in the Intellect itself. The Intellect as the second hypostasis—after the One that “reflects” itself in the Intellect (by the internal division into *nóesis* and *noéma*, which are dual even in the Intellect's own pure self-reflection)—is conceived by Plotinus as the transcendent “world of ideas” (and further on, by emanation of the world Soul, ideas as *lógoi* are immanent in the world, which is a unique cosmos). Concerning the true “place” of ideas, Plotinus' principal point is that they are *not* outside the Intellect (as it might be argued from some passages of *Timaeus* about ideas as paradigmatic “archetypes” for Plato's demiurge), since they constitute, as spiritual “living beings”, the Intellect's own “one-many” structure. Let me emphasize again: Plotinus' ideas are *within* the Intellect, not somewhere “high up”, in some distant “heaven”. Let us look at a relevant passage from the treatise *That the intelligibles are not outside the Intellect, and on the Good*:

One must not, then, look for the intelligibles [i.e. ideas] outside, or say that they are impressions of the real beings in Intellect [... but] we must attribute all (real existences) to the true Intellect [itself]. For in this way it will also know them, and know them truly and will not forget them or go round looking for them, and the truth will be in it and it will be the foundation of all realities and they will live and think. (Plotinus 1984, *Enneads*, V 5(32).2.1 and 9–13)

At the end of this passage, it is particularly fascinating that the ideas (“intelligibles”), which are “implaced” (using Nishida's term, again) *in* the inner “place” of the Intellect, are themselves—as well as the Intellect as a whole—living and thinking beings. We have to understand them not only as intelligible “objective” entities, i.e. as archetypal paradigms, but also as intelligent “subjective” *acts* of the eternally living Intellect itself. Of course, the “living eternity” is a paradox, but

philosophy has to accept paradoxes as “contradictory identities”, if we use Nishida’s term from his late writings. However, we shall leave these fine metaphysical enigmas of Plotinus for some other discussion, lest we turn too far away from the main topic of the present paper.

Now let us look at another famous passage from Plotinus’ tractate *On the intelligible beauty* (1984, *Enneads*, V 8(31).4), where it is evident that the Intellect, which “implaces” in itself the ideas (or the “intelligibles”) as living entities and/or acts, is not only a transcendently real “place”, but it is also a very beautiful, sublime *tópos*, the Platonic *tópos hyperouraníos*, shining in the supreme Light of the One or the Good. The apex of this Plotinus’ vision is the overall reflecting or “mirroring” world of shining entities, of “true realities”, which can be visualized also as immortal “gods” (or later, in the Christian Platonism, as angels).⁹ In the context of our comparative study, the vision of mirroring also has an important role in Nishida’s philosophy, particularly in considering the *basho* of consciousness. Beside that, the following passage from the treatise *On the intelligible beauty* is also very interesting because it is reminiscent of “Indra’s net”, a famous metaphor from the Mahāyāna Buddhist *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, which is also mentioned in some interpretations of Nishida’s philosophy (see Krummel in Nishida 2012a, 208, note 203). As I have already said, Plotinus speaks in this passage about the “true realities” (i.e. ideas) as gods who “are gods because of their intellect [... since] their thinking is always right in the calm and stability and purity of Intellect [...as] they continually contemplate” (Plotinus 1984, *Enneads*, V 8(31).3ff.). In the next chapter of this treatise, we come to the metaphor of the resplendent light in which each being is transparent to every other, “and each star is the sun and all the others”:

For it is “the easy life” [i.e. a Homeric phrase for the gods] there, and truth is their mother and nurse and being and food—and they see all things, not those to which coming to be, but those to which real being belongs, and they see themselves in other things; for all things there [in the Intellect] are transparent, and there is nothing dark or opaque; everything

9 Concerning the transcendent “world of ideas”, the question can be raised as to what kind of *matter* this “place” and its “implaced” entities (“intelligible realities”) are constituted of. Does something like “intelligible matter” exist, independently of the ideal entities themselves, but also quite different from the “dark” matter as the complete “privation” (*stéresis*) of being? Plotinus discusses this question in two treatises: *On (the two kinds of) matter* (1966, *Enneads*, II 4(12)) and *On the impassibility of things without body* (1967, *Enneads*, III 6(26)), but does not come to a definite conclusion. (The question of the “heavenly matter” was later extensively discussed in Christian scholasticism.) Here I just add my opinion that the problem of the “intelligible matter” and the issue of the “place of ideas” are in spite of their metaphysical connection two different questions, or to put it another way, if we assume the existence of the “place of ideas”, this assumption does not necessarily imply the existence of some other kind of *matter*, at least not such which would be akin to the sensory matter.

and all things are clear to the inmost part to everything; for light is transparent to light. Each there has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, so that all are everywhere and each and every one is all and the glory is unbounded; for each of them is great, because even the small is great; the sun there is all the stars (*hēlios ekeî pánta ástra*), and each star is the sun and all the others. A different kind of being stands out in each, but in each all are manifest. (Plotinus 1984, *Enneads*, V 8(31).4.1–12)

Let me return to the main point of this section: as we can see in both quoted passages from *Enneads*, we may attribute to the (Neo)Platonic “world of ideas” a *noetic* “place” *within* the Intellect—which Nishida might call the “*basho* of cognition”. However, for Plotinus it would not be appropriate to attribute a *place* to the One itself, since the One is neither “implaced” nor “implacing” the Intellect (nor the Soul, etc.). The One is absolutely “dimensionless”, whereas every place must have some dimension(s), although quite abstract and possibly infinite. (If I venture a question: Could we say that Nishida’s “place of nothing” is also dimensionless? Could any *place* be dimensionless?) To stress again, the One of Plotinus is *not* a place, not even a place of/for philosophical intuition (or ecstatic contemplation), if we understand the term “place” *per analogiam* with the cognitive place in/of the Intellect, let alone with the geometric space of sensory objects. But if we nevertheless try to preserve geometrical metaphors, which are also liked by Plotinus (and later even more so by Cusanus), we might rather say that the One is like a “point” in(to) which all beings/realities “converge”. More accurately, it is like a *transcending* central point of the series of concentric circles (i.e. of beings), which tend to converge with their radii in(to) the limit that is not one of the members of the series itself. Just as the Sun is not one of its infinite radius.¹⁰ If we have in mind the comparison between Plotinus and Nishida, we might also say that the One is the “null” point of the entire series of concentric circles that constitute the “predicate-plain” of/for all possible cognition.

Plotinus repeatedly emphasizes in his treatises¹¹ that the One itself is *not a being*, not even the “highest” (or the “first”) Being—that is namely the Intellect, not the One, although it is named “the first hypostasis”. The One is, we may say, the most “inner point” of the Intellect, and thereby of the Soul, and consequently of the whole world of emanated beings. But even if the One does *not exist* as other beings (ideas, sensory objects, their shadows etc.), it is *not* nothing, not even the “true nothing” (*shin no mu*) in Nishida’s sense. In Plotinus, the One is “beyond” being *and* nothing. In order to comprehend this “transcendence” of transcendence,

10 See Plotinus, *Enneads* (1984, IV 3(27).17.9–13; 1988, VI 5(23).5; VI 9(9).8.10–24, and elsewhere).

11 *Enneads* (1967, III 8(30); 1984, V 1(10); V 3(49); V 6(24); 1988, VI 7(38); VI 9(9) et al).

we have to bear in mind Plato's famous phrase that the Good is "beyond all substances/essences" (*epékeina tēs ousías*, Plato 1985, *Republic*, VI, 509b9): that means that the Good (or the One, in Plotinus) is not just an idea (a substance/essence) among other ideas, not even the "highest" Idea, but it might be metaphorically visualized as the all-present Light which illuminates all beings, all ideas and all the sensory objects which "participate" in their reality (in Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave", the Good is likened to the Sun, although perhaps more accurately to the all-present "Sunshine"). Therefore, the supreme Light has two transcending "names" in Platonism: "the One or the Good", whereby the "meaning" of these two "names" indicates the absolute identity: the One = the Good. Both "names" evoke the same absolutely "transcendent predicate" (as Nishida would say), but do not predicate each other. The Platonic "the One or the Good"—like Nishida's *basho*—cannot be in the position of the Aristotelian grammatical "subject" (*hypokeímenon*), since it is not a substance. And here we are already at the topic of the third section of the present paper.

Nishida's *basho* in Comparison with the One of Plotinus

We return now to two Nishida's treatises from his middle period, to *Basho* (2012a [1926]) and its "adjoining" paper *The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness* (2012b [1927]). First, I have to point out that Nishida's "logic of *basho*" is much closer to Plato (and even more to Plotinus) than to Aristotle, in spite of the fact that there are in both treatises (and in Nishida's works in general) more references to Aristotle than to Plato and Plotinus—the main reason for this is Nishida's polemical point towards Aristotle's conception of "primary substances" (*prótai ousíai*, see *Categories* 2a35), which are individual entities, and "secondary substances" (*deúterai ousíai*), which are universals (ibid., 2a11–a18). In Aristotle's logic, this distinction corresponds to the subject-predicate structure of propositions. As every student of philosophy knows, Aristotle criticized the doctrine of his philosophical teacher Plato that ideas (or the Forms) had transcendent ontological reality, or otherwise stated, Aristotle's position was that the ideas in Platonism were just "hypostatized" predicates, considered by himself only as "secondary substances". (Needless to add, one of the greatest and longest disputes in the history of the Western philosophy followed: the so-called "problem of universals".) Nishida, in contrast to Aristotle, has developed his doctrine of *basho* on the "predicate-plane", not on the substantial "subject-plane". The "*basho* of nothing" (*mu no basho*) is not and cannot be a substance, since it is the supreme "transcendent predicate", i.e. the *last* in the sequence of predicates (universals), which cannot be itself predicated by anything else—and (also) in this sense, the deepest *basho* "is" *nothing*. Something

similar, *mutatis mutandis*, can be stated about Plato's "the Good" and/or Plotinus' "the One". From the logical point of view (needless to say, we take here the term "logic" in a broad sense, like Nishida), the emphasis on the "predicate-plane" is common to both Nishida and Platonism—and later, of course, to Kant, but we do not enter here into the very complicated relations between Nishida and Kant—whereas the "predicate-plane" is *not* Aristotle's approach in ontology.¹² Let us look at several important details by considering some passages from Nishida.

In the treatise *Basho*, Nishida writes: "This predicate-plane is what we may conceive to be the world of our consciousness. To be that what I am conscious of means to be implaced in such a predicate-plane. The object of thought is implaced in it as well and so is the object of perception" (Nishida 2012a, 96). However, *basho* itself as the "transcendent predicate" can never become neither the object of thought nor of perception, at the utmost it might be present-in-absence in the philosophical *intuition*.¹³ For if we tried to approach "*basho* of true nothing" (*shin no mu no basho*) from the merely logical (i.e. cognitive in the Aristotelian sense) point of view, Nishida would teach us the following: "By driving forward in the direction of the predicate of judgement towards its culmination, that is, by continually transcending predicated in the predicate-direction, we see the mirror that simply mirrors. Upon it is mirrored the world of infinite possibilities as well as the world of meanings" (ibid., 90). Krummel adds the following note to this passage:

12 In this context, we can also state that the concept of "the good" in Nishida's first and seminal book *An Inquiry into the Good* (1990 [1911]) is closer to Plato's ontological conceiving of "the Good" than to Aristotle's concept of the good in *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere—although Nishida's concept of the good is still considerably different from Plato's *tò agáthon*. In a quite exposed point of his *Inquiry*, in Chapter 23, Nishida assumes in a rather Platonic manner that "from a certain angle, the concept of the good coincides with the concept of reality" (Nishida 1990, 125–26) and that "in concrete reality existence and value are fundamentally one", while at the end of this chapter he resumes: "The above ideas [of the good] are fundamental to Plato's stance (that the idea of the good is the foundation of reality) in Greece and to the *Upanishads* in India. And in medieval philosophy we encounter the expression, 'All reality is good' (*omne ens est bonum*). I think such ideas constitute the most profound notion of the good." (Nishida 1990, 126)

13 In the introduction to his English translation of *An Inquiry into the Good*, Masao Abe, an eminent professor of the "Kyoto School", raises the following question: "How did Nishida develop the standpoint of self-consciousness into the standpoint of *basho*, place? With the notion of place Nishida moved from voluntarism to a sort of intuitionism" (Abe in Nishida 1990, xxii). As a part of his answer to this question, Abe refers to Nishida's statement from the preface to *From the Acting to the Seeing* [1927]: "Since [the book] *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness* [1917] I have considered the intuition at the base of the will. I have had an idea, like Plotinus' idea, that to act is to see. For this reason I have regarded the absolute will as the ultimate" (ibid.). It seems to me important that Nishida mentioned Plotinus in this context; compare, for example, Plotinus' treatise *On Nature and Contemplation and the One* (1967, *Enneads*, III 8(30)). See also Nishida's preface to the third edition (1936) of *An Inquiry into the Good* (Nishida 1990, xxxii). Obviously, Nishida's reading of Plotinus was important for the formation of his "intuitionistic" logic of *basho*.

“I.e., what Nishida elsewhere calls the transcendent predicate or the *basho* of absolute or true nothing” (ibid., 211, note 241). And Nishida continues on the same page: “In the foregoing, I have explained that breaking through the *basho* of being enclosed by universal concepts, there is the *basho* of nothing, which we may regard as a mirror that simply mirrors and which we can see the will in the relationships of that *basho* to the *basho* of being. [...] At the *basho* of true nothing, the will itself must be negated as well (ibid., 90). On the last page of the treatise *Basho*, Nishida resumes his main point(s):

... for the predicate-plane to see itself in the subject-plane means that the predicate-plane itself becomes the *basho* of true nothing. It means that the will destroys itself and that everything implaced in it becomes intuition. As the predicate-plane becomes infinitely expansive, *basho* itself becomes truly nothing and what is implaced in it simply becomes an intuition of the self. That the universal predicate reaches its extremity means that the particular subject reaches its extremity and become itself. (Nishida 2012a, 102)¹⁴

And just at the end of the treatise, Nishida humbly acknowledges: “I regret that after many repetitions in the foregoing discussion ultimately I could not adequately express what I was thinking ...” (ibid., 102). This is indeed a noble confession from a great thinker! In our highest aspirations, we always feel that words are not enough to express our deepest intuitions. Nevertheless, as we have already stated, a year later Nishida returned to the topics raised of *Basho* in his “adjoining” paper *The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness*, explaining again his critical position towards Aristotle’s “subject-plane” ontology of substance:

... Aristotle, however, once defined substance (*ousia*) as that which becomes the grammatical subject of judgement but not the predicate [in *Metaphysics* 1028b36–37, see Krummel’s note 19]. As a definition of substance I find this sufficient [...] however, can we not conceive of what is in a still deeper sense by putting this in reverse as that which becomes the predicate but not the grammatical subject. Aristotle sought the transcendent basis of judgement merely in the direction of the grammatical subject. The transcendent that truly founds judgement, however, is not in the direction of the grammatical subject but instead in the direction of the predicate. [...] As we conceive the predicate to be completely

14 Krummel adds to this passage the following note: “We may say that this refers to the experience of emptiness in the Buddhist significance. [...] This is Nishida’s rendering, in modern philosophical terminology, of the middle standpoint of Mahāyāna Buddhism.” (ibid., 217–18, note 315)

transcendent in the above sense, it must be something that cannot be stated to be a being [i.e. a substance] in the sense of a grammatical subject. As opposed to a being qua grammatical subject, it must be completely nothing. (Nishida 2012b, 54–55)

When reading these and similar passages of Nishida, it seems rather surprising (at least to me) that Nishida himself did not refer in his works more to Plotinus (and also to Plato), because the similarities between his concept of *basho* and the concept of the Intellect as “the place of ideas” in Plotinus is (rather) clear, in spite of some important differences to which we will come later. Of course, there is a large historic (and not only cultural) distance between Plotinus and Nishida, and it is understandable that Nishida directed his philosophical “dialogues” more to the modern than to the ancient Western philosophers, however, this is not the whole explanation of Nishida relative “silence” about Plotinus, especially if we have in mind that both philosophers strived for *philosophia perennis*. It is even more surprising that in those few passages from Nishida’s middle period, where he mentions Plotinus, he does not mention this late Greek sage with as much respect as he actually deserved—almost the opposite, in fact. For example, in *Basho* Nishida mentions Plotinus only once, as he expresses the following quite sharp judgement: “The Greeks with their intellectualism, even with Plotinus’ ‘the One’ (*tò hén*), were unable to thoroughly exhaust this significance of true nothing” (Nishida 2012a, 94). In spite of the fact that we surely could discuss to what extent or if at all Nishida’s judgement of “the Greeks” concerning the understanding of “true nothing” is justified (but I will not go here into this direction), it is at least rather odd that Nishida also placed Plotinus into Greek “intellectualism”, as if “the One” in Plotinus were something only conceptual and abstract, as it was in the debates of Sophists, or even in the discussion about the one and many and so on in Plato’s dialogues *Parmenides* and/or *Sophist*. Nevertheless, I think that Nishida knew perfectly well that “the One” of Plotinus was much more than just an “intellectualist” idea.

A similar opinion about Plotinus to that expressed in *Basho*, although more moderate and explained in a little more detail, can be found in Nishida’s “adjoining” paper *The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness*, in the context of the discussion about Plato’s *chóra*:

The One in Plotinus is conceived as what transcends *nous* and furthermore envelopes it within. And yet it still tends in the direction of the father in Plato’s *Timaeus* and not in the direction of the mother. Pure matter, without form, is conceived simply as that which mirrors, as [in itself] nothing. Greek philosophy failed to discover the deep and true significance of nothing. (Nishida 2012b, 51)

A point of contention in this quite general judgement is the fact that “mirroring” is not even mentioned by Plato in the context of *chóra*, while the “pure matter” in Plotinus is not *something* that mirrors, but at the utmost the “privation” of being is *like* a “false mirror”. In the last paragraph of the same text, Nishida repeats his, we may say, premature judgements about Plotinus and Greek philosophy in general:

In Greek philosophy, the Platonist school arrived at the idea of the “place of *ideas*”. But having conceived the forms as through and through being, Greek philosophy ultimately failed to render any logical independence to place. It conceived place as matter vis-à-vis the forms and as nothing vis-à-vis being. Even the One of Plotinus was nothing but what transcends in the direction of the *ideas*, and the issue of matter remained unresolved. [...] The true One must be the place of absolute nothing, something that absolutely cannot be determined as being. (Nishida 2012b, 56)

I surmise that the principal problem of this interpretation of the Plotinus’ One comes from Nishida’s questionable understanding of Plato’s *chóra* as the “place of *ideas*”, which I have already discussed in the first section of this paper. From this starting point, Nishida jumps to the One in Plotinus, attributing to it a “place” that should be “the place of absolute nothing”—thereby subsuming Plotinus’ philosophy under his own “logic of *basho*”?—and finally saying (in this latter case, Plotinus would probably agree) that “the true One must be [...] something that absolutely cannot be determined as being”. Indeed, Plotinus “first hypostasis”, the One or the Good, is “beyond” (*epékeina*) all beings (or “substances”), also “beyond” all transcendent ideas (i.e. Platonic Forms), and even “beyond” the Intellect (*nous*) as a whole, the “second hypostasis”, which “implaces” the ideas *within* itself as “subject-object”, as “one-many”. (I have put the word “beyond” in quotation marks, because here it is *not* meant in the ordinary spatial sense, i.e. beyond all visible celestial spheres, although it might be considered as a kind of “ideal” *tópos*, a transcendent “place”, or if we use the traditional Platonic term, the “world of ideas”.)

From Nishida’s cursory references to Plotinus (at least in the two treatises that we discuss in this essay), it seems that he considered Plotinus mainly as an interpreter of Plato—like many important Western philosophers of the Modern Age, following the enormous influence of Hegel’s history of philosophy. However, today we know (again, after many centuries) that Plotinus was not only a very lucid interpreter of Plato’s philosophy, but that his “Neoplatonism” was indeed a new, enhanced variant of Greek idealism, which was based, of course, on the perennial philosophical insights of the “divine” Plato himself. In the last few decades, a new Plotinus “renaissance” has been going on. We may guess that these historical

turns in evaluations of the history of philosophy and the shifts concerning the importance of its principal representatives are probably the main reason for Nishida's "overlooking" the deep similarities between his own philosophy and Plotinus. One of the main motives for our present comparative project is also to correct this "lapse" and to fill the gap between two historically and culturally distant, yet in their very depths much related philosophical systems and/or ways.

Let me resume the analysis of the relations among Nishida, Aristotle and (Neo)Platonism, following the longer passage about Aristotle from Nishida's paper *The Unsolved Issue of Consciousness*, quoted above. In his "reversal" of Aristotle's metaphysics, Nishida passes from the ontological "subject-plane" to the "predicate-plane"—we might say that this is his step "back" from Aristotle to Plato.¹⁵ Nishida's way to transcendence points in the same "direction" as the (Neo)Platonic way, to the limiting point where "the predicate-plane becomes infinitely expansive" (see above), however, the limit itself is different: for Nishida the limit of the expansion of the predicate-plane is *basho* that is "true nothing", while for Plato/Plotinus the limit of the ascend to transcendence is "the Good" or "the One". Nevertheless, from the epistemological point of view, the way "upward" is very similar in both cases: going "up" to the transcendence through the ascending hierarchy of more and more "pure" predicates. And even on the level of the Intellect (i.e. *nóus* in Plotinus, *basho* of consciousness or "oppositional nothing" in Nishida) there are striking similarities, particularly in the comprehension that the supreme wisdom is not attainable by intellect alone, but by *intuition* which transcends the duality of intellectual cognition.

Here I would like to emphasize again my conviction that the deep similarities between Nishida and Plotinus are greater and much more important for the comparative philosophical investigations than the differences between them—and this is also my main motive in this research project: the highest (or the deepest)

15 Nishida's closeness to the "(Neo)Platonic Way" in philosophy is evident also in his last treatise *Nothingness and the Religious Worldview* (1993 [1945]). In the first chapter of this treatise, where Nishida endeavoured to develop further his "logic of *basho*" in the direction of the historical-cultural (Buddhist) "background", he returned to the explanation of the "logic of the predicate", especially to the difference between Aristotle's "objective" ontology and Kant's (later also Husserl's) "subjective", i.e. transcendental method. In this essay, he states again that "in contrast to Aristotle's subject that cannot be predicate, the conscious self has its being as predicate that cannot be subject", and adds "I think I can grasp the true meaning of Kant's contribution to philosophy from the perspective of my logic of the predicate" (Nishida 1993, 59). For our present context, it is especially relevant that Nishida in his last treatise explicitly assigns the "logic of the predicate" to Plato as well, when he remarks that "Plato's 'essences' [i.e. ideas, the Forms] would seem to pertain to this latter assumption" (ibid., 57), namely to the predicate-plane philosophy, in contrast to the Aristotelian "objective" ontology of the grammatical subject (*hypokeimenon*). This view would apply even more to Plotinus, (cf. the above quoted passage from the 1984, *Enneads*, V 5(32), titled *That the intelligibles are not outside the Intellect, and on the Good*).

points of Western and Eastern philosophies converge, since we are all members of the same global human “family”. In addition, I have to remark that my aim in this comparative study is absolutely not to “correct” Nishida’s understanding of (Neo)Platonism, since every philosopher, especially such a great thinker as Nishida, has the right to understand and develop the philosophies of his predecessors in his own way (like Aristotle in his understanding of Plato, Hegel towards Kant, Heidegger towards Husserl etc.)—maybe these “misunderstandings” are in fact essential for the historical development of philosophy—and that is why my principal intention in the present comparative project is just to analyse and elucidate similarities as well as differences between two great thinkers, Plotinus and Nishida, not to judge which of their ways is “better”.

Following this line of thought, I must finally say at least a few words about the main difference between Nishida and Plotinus, which I notice as a seeking wanderer in their vast philosophical “landscapes” at the very top (or bottom) of their ways: the final goal of Nishida’s philosophical meditation is to attain the “*basho* of true nothing”, while the highest summit of Plotinus’ philosophical contemplation is the ecstatic “experience” of the One or the Good, beyond every duality, even beyond the highest cognitive duality of the Intellect. This difference is reflected also in the “topological” distinction between the deepest “place” (*basho*) of the “true nothing” in Nishida and the transcendent “point” of the One, as conceived of by Plotinus. The One of Plotinus is not even the highest “Self”, since the latter is attained (already and/or only) in the Intellect as the “self-reflected” One—while in Nishida this point is not quite clear (at least for me), since he often speaks of the “*basho* of nothing” as a kind of source (?) of the will and/or of the intellect. However, to be honest, we also have to add that in the philosophy of Plotinus it is not quite clear how and why the process of *emanation* “starts” from the One to the cognitive duality of the Intellect, to the multiplicity of ideas within it, and then “downwards” to souls and things. The question “Why there is anything at all, rather than nothing?” remains the great philosophical enigma. Concerning Nishida’s concept of *basho*, I think that it is probably helpful to “comprehend” it against the background of Zen’s *mu* (in Sanskrit *sūnyatā*).

At the end of this paper, and as my contribution to the comparison between Nishida in Plotinus, I venture to ask a question which seems essential to me, but is surely too difficult for a finite human mind to answer: Is the “true” *nothing* of Nishida (and, in several “variants” of philosophical and/or religious formulations, also of the whole Buddhist spiritual tradition) indeed so much different from “the One” in the ancient Greek wisdom? Or, if I ask otherwise: Is the “pure” *being* different from the “pure” *nothing*? (Not only in the abstract sense of Hegel’s dialectical logic, but also in the “experiential” sense of great mystics of East and

West.) Or, if I ask the same question inside the ancient Indian (and consequently overall Asian) religious wisdom: Is Buddha's *nibbana* indeed different from the Upanishadic *moksha*? Or, put in terms of the great Christian mystics Dionysus the Areopagite and/or Master Eckhart: Is the deepest divine Gloom different from the supreme Light? Of course, I cannot answer to any variant of this "final" question. However, we philosophers must raise such questions that cannot hope to be answered, at least not "here", not "yet", and the issue of *nothing* vs. *being* is surely one of the most basic philosophical questions.

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Plotinus and Wang Yangming on the Structures of Consciousness and Reality: A Transversal Prospecion in View of the Affinities of Their Positions

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Abstract

In this paper, particular key aspects of the philosophies of Plotinus and Wang Yangming have been analysed comparatively on the basis of important passages of their works. The method used for this investigation can be defined as that of transversal comparative induction, in which the focus is more on working out the details of affinities and similarities. As this means a first step in an encompassing systematic context, differences will be introduced more briefly. The present investigation aims to provide a foundation for a more differentiating and therefore complementing second part, which will consider other contents and topics in both philosophies. The present analysis is performed in three systematic steps and with regard to three basic philosophical ideas: (1) the idea that human consciousness is a central medium in the universal process and interrelatedness of (biological) life as a whole; (2) the idea that the self-unfoldment of reality represents a meta-cognitive process beyond the limits of subjectivity and finite consciousness; and (3) the idea that it is our major task to perfect and know ourselves by means of a “return” to the highest underlying foundation of this universal process. In their own ways, Plotinus and Wang Yangming both show that by enfolding human reflexivity toward the ineffable source of all reality in thought, feeling, human activity, and natural processes, namely by actively pursuing the path of moral and intellectual perfection, we become fulfilled mediators of a universal process and of that which all of it represents.

Keywords: Plotinus, Wang Yangming, transcultural philosophy, transversal analysis, consciousness

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Plotin in Wang Yangming o strukturah zavesti in stvarnosti: transverzalen pogled z vidika sorodnosti njihovih stališč

Izvleček

V prispevku je zajeta komparativna analiza ključnih vidikov Plotinove in Wang Yangmingove filozofije na osnovi pomembnih odlomkov iz njihovih del. Metodo za to raziskavo lahko opredelimo kot metodo transverzalne komparativne indukcije, pri kateri je poudarek na iskanju podrobnih sorodnosti in podobnosti. Ker je to prvi korak v vseobsegajočem sistematičnem kontekstu, bodo najprej na kratko predstavljene razlike. Namen te raziskave je torej zagotoviti osnovo za bolj diferenciran in zato dopolnjujoč drugi del, ki bo obravnaval druge vsebine in teme obeh filozofij. Pričujoča analiza je izvedena v treh sistematičnih korakih v povezavi s tremi temeljnimi filozofskimi idejami: 1) idejo o človeški zavesti kot o osrednjem mediju v univerzalnem procesu in medsebojni povezanosti (biološkega) življenja kot celote; 2) idejo, da samorazkritje resničnosti predstavlja metakognitivni proces onkraj meja subjektivnosti in končne zavesti; in 3) idejo, da je naša ključna naloga, da se kultiviramo in spoznamo s pomočjo »povratka« k najvišjemu dejanskemu temelju tega univerzalnega procesa. Plotin in Wang Yangming sta pokazala, da postanemo z razvojem našega reflektiranja neopisljivega vira vse resničnosti v svojih mislih, občutkih, dejavnostih in naravnih procesih, torej z aktivnim sledenjem poti, ki vodi do moralne in intelektualne popolnosti, izpolnjeni posredniki univerzalnega procesa in vsega, kar le-ta predstavlja.

Ključne besede: Plotin, Wang Yangming, transkulturna filozofija, transverzalna analiza, zavest

Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of particular aspects of two “paths of thinking” (German: *Denkwege*),¹ the respective pioneers of which differ greatly in historical positions and geographical locations: Plotinus (Πλωτῖνος, c. 205–270) and Wang Yangming (王陽明, also: Wang Shouren 王守仁, 1472–1529). Neither share any traditional backgrounds or cultural-historical contexts in philosophy, and the current systematic analysis mainly relates to the contents of their thinking, which are collected in a more inductive and therefore also more detail-oriented fashion on this occasion.

In this sense, the present investigation is to be understood as a systematic *transversal* reflection (Bartosch 2022a) in transcultural comparative philosophy (also Bartosch 2015b). The term “transversal” was first introduced into this field under the following premise: “Today, and in terms of plurality, we regard reason precisely as a capacity for connection and transition between forms of rationality. No longer cosmic, but earthly, no longer global, but linking functions shape its

1 Heidegger’s word has been used in comparative contexts before, e.g. Elberfeld et al. (1998).

image” (Welsch 2008, 295, tr. DB). To track these “linking functions” between particular problems, thoughts, and concepts of the philosophies of Plotinus and Wang Yangming in methodologically reduced scopes of particular topics is the major task of this article.

The philosophical use of the adjective “transversal” derives from the metaphor of a transversal in geometry, that is, a line that passes through two other lines at one distinct point of each of these, thereby making it possible to define their relationship by measuring the angles at each point. Transversal comparison in transcultural philosophy conjoins and attempts to systematically determine the contentual relationship of philosophical lore that neither stands in one and the same historical cultural space nor can be viewed as being related across cultures and civilizations due to being part of a particular history of reception or shared history of concepts in the more general sense.² The working terminology, and thus the concepts that are the focus of these transversal comparisons, is developed in a rather *inductive* fashion, that is, rather context-related from *particular* point-for-point perspectives and from the comparative textual milieus themselves. In these more inductive contexts of transversal analysis, one is to avoid *unmediated* applications of existing (in these cases often overtly general, overtly vague comparative) categories, like, for example, “metaphysics”, “Idealism”, “Materialism”. Their rather deductive application can be considered as unmediated if they are used without the preceding methodological reflection and in the sense of exterior “imports” to categorize any pre-existing simplifications³ of the philosophies in question⁴ and to “box” these materials into pre-fabricated frameworks and synopses, which lack detail.

In contrast to this approach, transversal induction has the advantage that it is easier to avoid the loss of possible detailed insights. Point-for-point inductions, provided in the form of detailed transversal prospections like the present one, allow for new insights and the development of more secure foundations for the transcultural dialogue of traditions of thought. It is, of course, not the only possible method in the context of transcultural philosophy, and it can also be complemented by others (e.g. Kwee 1953; Smid 2009). Transversal analytics starts (1) directly from the

2 Like, for example, in the case of the Central Asian thinker Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037), who wrote most of his works in Arabic, and Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464), who published most of his texts in Latin. Cusanus was influenced by some of Avicenna’s thoughts.

3 For example, in the sense of the German term “*Vulgärplatonismus*”.

4 Such necessary preceding consideration would have to include a solution to the problem that the scope of the application of these philosophy-historical categories has mostly been restricted to Western Eurasian traditions of thought, and that in many cases prior attempts to extend their scope, such as, for example, toward the Chinese horizon, have not been based on a thorough background analysis of the more basic differences of certain concepts in their historical developments on both sides.

correlating, parallel discussion of *particular* source passages and in view of their related, *more narrowly* encircled topics as well as by the correlating application of methodologically restricted inductive approaches. Thus, the working terminology of transversal comparison is *developed in the context of the transversal analysis itself* to measure the particular scopes of the chosen topical frameworks.⁵ Therefore the inductive approaches with regard to the three particular topics that are a focus in the present article are *not to be misunderstood* as attempts to provide a whole-scale comparison of the thought of Plotinus and Yangming. Such a “holistic” attempt would either imply a to-be-avoided, “quasi-deductive” approach, which would be unmediated—it would not have resulted from an actual present process of philosophizing itself (and its categories would be merely implemented)—or it would necessitate an investigation and an account that would bring together, *in a mutually complementary fashion*, several more transversal-comparative reflections on particular comparable aspects in the philosophies of Plotinus and Yangming than is the case in this investigation. The first attempt would have to be declined for philosophical reasons, while the second could not be realized sufficiently here due to the space constraints which the limited form of the academic article entails.⁶

This presents us with a certain restriction of the transversal method—a self-imposed restriction which is an advantage in the long run: by working inductively and “point-for-point”, we have to put certain aspects that we might already know or anticipate “into brackets” (to use Husserl’s terminology in the transferred sense here). To avoid premature conclusions, one has to accept that every content “has its time”. This relates to the question of what the present article should and can accomplish—and what is not intended, and thus what is kept pending on the present occasion for methodological reasons. First of all, the present article is *to be read within the specific parameters* which have been set for it. For the abovementioned reasons, the author decided for a more detailed, more induction-based, yet at the same also more restricted, partial framework, namely in terms of topical and methodological scope. A further criterion was that this perspective should provide a foundation to add future *complementary* outcome in a systematic fashion (see “Conclusion and Outlook”). The aim is to provide a first—foundational—“building block”, that is, a component or “module” which, in view of the nevertheless more comprehensive scope that is possible, could and should be complemented further in terms of both content and research focus.

5 Cf. also the methodological considerations in Bartosch (2015b, 18–22).

6 The author of the present paper has already delivered a valid example for such a transversal, respectively, transcultural comparison in view of the philosophies of Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464) and Wang Yangming. However, to fulfill this task of a more holistic and yet also detailed study in an adequate way, a book format was required (Bartosch 2015b).

This brings us to the following questions: (1) Which kind of possible (sub-)method of transversal reasoning should be emphasized here? And (2), which of several possible comparable topics in the thought of Plotinus and Yangming are the most feasible ones in correlation to that? Then again, these questions are related to problem (3), how to set this framework for the present investigation in such a way that it also provides a complementary base in relation to further possible comparable topical fields and methods of transversal investigation, and thus so its results can be added to the present perspective and help create a whole-scale *transversal* picture in the aforementioned sense.

With regard to point (1), it is worthwhile to start from questions related to the criterion of comparability (German: *Vergleichsfähigkeit*). One of these questions is that of the third of the comparison (Latin: *tertium comparationis*), that is, the binding element that allows systematic transversal comparison in the first place. And the term “comparability” has to be clarified itself (which then also relates to points (2) and (3), mentioned above): to be able to compare something should not be confused with the meaning of “leveling existing differences” (Bartosch 2010, 7). “Comparability” (in general: “the possibility to compare something”) is given, if we can find particular *permeable* “problem horizons”, shared basic problems and topics which then not only enable us to search for possible affinities of positions (despite different linguistic and conceptual or concept-historical contexts, etc.) but to possibly analyse content-related differences as well. That is to say, comparability in the sense of certain shared problems (as starting points) can also lead to the discovery of very different solutions to these problems in the philosophies that are analysed in this way.

As for the sub-question of the *tertium comparationis*, I have already provided a detailed explanation in a recent article. It can also be applied in view of a transversal analysis of aspects of the philosophies of Plotinus and Yangming (Bartosch 2022a). In short: both thinkers have reached a level of formal understanding which represents the conditions of the possibility of all reasoning itself. I have referred to the expression of this most basic level of “meta-reason” (*ibid.*, 110, 112–16, 118–22) as “implicate logic” (*ibid.*, the whole article), in earlier works also as “*Grundlogik*” (Bartosch 2015b, 14–15 et al.) or “foundational logic” (Bartosch 2021, 130, 134–35, 139). To understand what is meant here, one has to grasp the “metaparadoxical type of” (Gloy 2001, 170) self-reflective *intellection* which is expressed by the term “unity of unity and difference” (e.g. Bartosch 2015b, 14, 16, 19; 2021, 134, 139; 2022a, 110 et al.), which (so much in passing) means the cognitive precondition of dialectical logic and two-valued Aristotelian logic (Bartosch 2022a, 113, 115, 119). All structured thinking in the form of (finite) concepts and logical progressions unfolds from this foundation of (transversal) meta-reason.

The author has already exhaustively shown on several occasions that Yangming has expressed the implicate logical formal insight throughout all of his philosophy, such as in the more content-specific reflection of a “unity of knowing and (the related process of) actively passing through (something)” (*zhi-xing he yi*), or in the sense of his view that the “heart-mind’s root-system of vitality” (*xin zhi bentu*) and “Heaven’s self-organizing principle” (*tianli*) seem to be distinct (subjective vs. objective sides) but spring forth from the same *undivided* origin, the “true self” (*zhen ji*) (for a very systematic and extensive approach: Bartosch 2015b, see also here, chapters 2 and 3), or in the context of a model of consciousness, which is also briefly discussed here (chapter 1). In this article, the *formal* understanding of such a “unity *through* difference” (to use an alternative expression to “unity of unity and difference”) is also discovered and explored in view of the “theoretical apex” of the “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis νοήσεως νόησις*) in Plotinus’s philosophy, where thinker and thoughts, subject-object, coincide in a unity which is not a unit besides another unit (that is, non-countably unity), namely *by integrating the difference* which, as a constant cognitive emergence of this (non-conceptualizable) unity, enables us to differentiate, to think, at all (Bartosch 2015b; 2021; 2022a).

As this will also be discussed in the main part of the article, I would like to return to the methodological question under point (1) here: I have already said that “comparability” refers to the shared basic problem horizons which are “permeable” in the sense that they allow us to determine possible affinities or possible differences in the solutions in view of the related problem fields or philosophical topics. As for the present investigation, I would like *to put emphasis on the task of determining certain correspondences and congruences of particular ideas in both philosophies*.

This, of course, is not to neglect existing differences, which there certainly are and which will also be examined (to a lesser extent) here, but to develop a methodologically supported foundation to put more emphasis on these differences in future (complementary) attempts. So, the task is to provide one side of a complementary approach, which, as a whole, will represent the affinities and the differences⁷ in those major aspects of the philosophies of Plotinus and Yangming that are comparable with regard to the topics they cover. From here, the earlier-mentioned questions (2) and (3) can be approached: we have to find those (comparable) topics and views in both philosophies, which have been solved in a way that at least partial “resonances” and affinities in the points of views can be traced.

The general direction of this paper is also expressed in the subtitle “A Transversal Prospection in View of the Affinities of [Plotinus’s and Wang Yangming’s]

7 For comments on this, see the end of this segment and the last segment “Conclusion and Outlook”.

Positions”. The term “prospection” alludes to the fact that while the systematic, methodological perspective as well as the scope of both philosophies’ investigated contents had to *be narrowed down to particular restricted approaches as well as topical “encirclements”*, other possible topics had to be “put into brackets”, namely to stay pending in view of the complementary analyses mentioned earlier. On the other hand, and as the important aspect of contentual differences cannot be neglected even from the perspective of the present emphasis, some differences have also been already problematized in the present paper. These are also to be read as a basic preparation for the above-mentioned complementary second step.

Regarding the second question—which particular permeable problem horizon or general topic to focus on—I would like to start from Plotinus’s work *Ennead* 3.8. It presents us with the philosopher’s views “On Nature, Contemplation, and the One”.⁸; ⁹ In my view, this chapter of Porphyry’s (Πορφύριος, c.234–c.305) edition of his master’s works is one of the most promising parts to initiate a systematic transversal reflection perspective—especially in view of Wang Yang-ming. It presents us with the main aspects of Plotinus’s philosophy of nature, his views on the role of consciousness in relation to the structure of life and reality, on the particular and eminent position or function of human consciousness as well as his reflection on an indivisible foundation of human consciousness, life, and the cosmos itself. I will introduce and discuss some key points of Plotinus’s thoughts in this text, complement these with passages of other books from the *Enneads* (*Enneádes* Ἐννεάδες), and then intertwine this in a transversal fashion with comparable reflections by Wang Yangming, mostly from his magnum opus *Chuanxilu* (傳習錄, *Records of the Transmission of the Practice*), as well as a few other texts.

Under the background of the binding element of the “implicate logic” (see further above, also Bartosch 2022a), the method of this article is to be understood as a sort of superimposition of “encirclements” of respective basic positions that both philosophers have developed toward an ineffable “blind spot” of absolute originality, which they both respectively viewed as the source of all thoughts and (conscious) deeds. On the whole, various advances are made, as it were, from different directions, which, in their encirclement of that which is to be shown, exhibit the central point of the underlying affinities in three different topical segments of the comparison. The three chapters form a sort of ascending transversal path toward the aforementioned major philosophical motivation of both thinkers:

8 Source text: “Περὶ φύσεως καὶ θεωρίας καὶ τοῦ ἑνός” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] ἡ’ [8]).

9 I have to thank Wolfgang Christian Schneider for directing my attention to this chapter of the third *Ennead*, cf. also Bartosch (2022b).

The first segment “The Role of Human Reflective Consciousness and the Levels of Universal Life” starts from the shared and permeable problem horizon of Plotinus and Yangming, how human (self-)consciousness relates to non-human life and the natural environment. It will become clear that both philosophers have developed a comparable and often partly resonating understanding, namely in the sense that non-human life forms are participating in the structure that is expressing itself in the most self-reflective way in the form of human consciousness, and that the self-knowledge of the latter fulfils a kind of “mediating” function in the whole of life and its universal context. In the context of transcultural or transversal working categories like “consciousness” or “empathy”, I will discuss key-terms in both philosophies, like “contemplation” (*theōria*), “nature” (*phýsis*), “spiritual brightness” (*lingming*), “inter-humaneness” (*ren*), etc. From a transversal angle in view of Plotinus’s understanding of “intellect” (*noûs*), the *tertium comparationis* of the implicate logic (Bartosch 2022a) is shown as being the inherent foundation of an implicit Yangmingian model of the structures of consciousness.

The second segment “The Self-Unfoldment of Reality as a Meta-Cognitive Process toward Self-Knowledge” provides a more general and foundational background for the prior findings in the first chapter. The philosophical foundations of Plotinus’s concept of “contemplation” in the sense of a universal process of the unfoldment of reality itself are analysed in the context of his views on “intellect” (*noûs*), “soul” (*psychē*), “nature” (*phýsis*), the later Neo-Platonic conceptuality of *monē*, *próodos*, and *epistrophē*, and more. These contexts are systematically interwoven with Wang Yangming’s reflections on the self-realization of “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wanwu*) and his views on “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), the “unity of knowing and (the related process of) actively passing through (something)” (*zhi-xing he yi*), the “heart-mind’s root-system of vitality” (*xin zhi bentí*), “Heaven’s self-organizing principle” (*tianli*), “true self” (*zhen ji*), and so on. The major thesis is that, *mutatis mutandis*, both thinkers have understood reality as a self-unfolding meta-cognitive process toward human self-knowledge.

The third and last segment, “Oneness and Goodness as the Core-Insight of True Humanity”, develops a final transversal reflection in view of Plotinus’s and Wang Yangming’s related approaches to human moral self-perfection and self-knowledge toward an absolute origin, the philosophical problems of good and evil, and, very importantly, that of ineffability in this respect as well. Terms, like “Good” (*agathón*), “One” (*hén*), “Way” (*dao* 道), “root-system of the vitality of good-knowing” (*liangzhi bentí*), etc. are discussed as important (cataphatic) terms in this regard.

I have made use of the following sources: (1) Lloyd P. Gerson’s 2018 English edition of *The Enneads*, translated by George Boys-Stones, John M. Dillon, Lloyd

P. Gerson, Richard A. H. King, Andrew Smith, and James Wilberding (hereafter: Plotinus 2018), (2) an electronic version of the source text (after the edition by P. Henry/H.-R. Schwyzer, Leiden 1951, hereafter: Plotinos n.d.), and, occasionally, (3) Arthur H. Armstrong's (1909–1997) translation from 1967 (reprinted in 1980, hereafter: Plotinus 1980). With regard to Wang Yangming, I have chosen to refer to the Chinese edition of *Chuanxilu* 傳習錄 and some other texts in the 1933 complete edition by Wang Yunwu (王雲五) (hereafter: Wang Shouren 1933a–e), which I prefer over more recent editions.

The Role of Human Reflective Consciousness and the Levels of Universal Life

For both Plotinus and Yangming, what is thought of as the “human being” (*án-thrōpos* ἄνθρωπος, (*mutatis mutandis*) *ren* 人) fulfils a kind of *mediator-function* between the levels of non-human (animal and plant) life and that which is reflected as the inherent spiritual and all-encompassing creative foundation of the “world” (*kósmos* κόσμος, *tian-di wanwu* 天地萬物¹⁰) as a whole.

Because of this mediator-function, and although “the heavenly bodies are still more honorable, as they are in the universe [...] [and] because they provide order and ornament” (Plotinus 2018, 2.9.13, 226–27), “human beings occupy an honorable rank in comparison to other living beings” (ibid., 226).¹¹ Humans have the ability of reasoning in correlation with their manual or technological capabilities, and can reflect the (higher-valued) *contemplative-effective* mode of nature in transference from there (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.2, 357). And they have insight into the workings of “nature” (*phýsis* φύσις), because “thinking in the intelligible world is different in human beings and in other animals”¹² (ibid., 6.7.9, 813), and the former can actualize self-reflection and infer from themselves to “nature” (*phýsis*):

And my contemplating produces an object of contemplation, just as geometricians draw lines as they contemplate. But without my drawing [because nature is “the power that produces not by means of hands” (see

10 Literal translation: “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things”. The term “things” (*wu* 物) might include living beings, objects, and situations, occurrences. Cf. also the reflections on the origin of the term “*wu*” in Bartosch (2018b, 363–68).

11 Source text for both quotes (with context): “Εἰ δ’ ἄνθρωποι τίμιόν τι παρ’ ἄλλα ζῶια, πολλ[ῶ] μᾶλλον τὰῦτα οὐ τυραννίδος ἔνεκα ἐν τῷ παντὶ ὄντα, ἀλλὰ κόσμον καὶ τάξιν παρέχοντα” (Plotinos n.d., B’ [2] θ’ [9], brackets DB).

12 Source text: “Ἡ διαφόρου ὄντος ἐκεῖ τοῦ νοεῖν ἐν τε ἀνθρώπ[ῳ] καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ζῴοις, [...]” (Plotinos n.d., C’ [6] ζ’ [7]).

the quote at the beginning of chapter 2)], while I contemplate, the lines of bodies come to exist as though falling out of me. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.4, 358–59, insertion in brackets DB)¹³

From the perspective of this *elevated* correlation of the “human being” (*ánthrōpos*) and “nature” (*phýsis*) (in the sense of a possibility which has to be actualized by means of philosophizing), the term “contemplation” (*theōria* θεωρία) attains a universal meaning for Plotinus, because

[...] all things aim at contemplation [*theōria*] and look to this goal, not only rational but also *non-rational animals and nature in plants and the earth which produces them*, and that all things achieve it as far as they can in their natural state, but contemplate and achieve it in different ways, and some in a genuine manner, others by acquiring an imitation and image of it [...]. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.1, 356, italics, insertion in brackets DB)¹⁴

According to this, all life actualizes subordinate forms of processes *in the image of the self-referential, intention-based, and self-iterating patterns of human consciousness and self-knowledge*,¹⁵ namely in the sense of “contemplation” (*theōria*), to use Plotinus’s term (see chapter 2 in addition to this). Plotinus clearly envisions this self-evocative, reality-unfolding *theōria* of our world-experience in the form of a *hierarchy of life-forms*. There is even a lower form of organic *theōria* that plant-life and non-rational animals are receiving and *expressing in their forms of striving and growing and even feeling*; these forms of life are thus absorbed and uplifted in their lower non-rational (*álogos áλογος*) manifestation of the cosmic principle of “contemplation” by the higher-ranking, self-unfolding *theōria* of human rational and, what’s more, *self-knowing thinking*.¹⁶ The *levels of living organisms* are distinguished in relation to their “distance” from this highest form of contemplation:

Whenever, then, [the World-] Soul [*psychē* ψυχή] comes to be in a plant,

13 Source text: “Καὶ τὸ θεωροῦν μου θεώρημα ποιεῖ, ὥσπερ οἱ γεωμέτρα θεωροῦντες γράφουσιν· ἀλλ’ ἐμοῦ μὴ γραφούσης, θεωρούσης δέ, ὑφίστανται αἱ τῶν σωμάτων γραμμαὶ ὥσπερ ἐκπίπτουσαι” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

14 Source text: “[...] πάντα θεωρίας ἐφίεσθαι καὶ εἰς τέλος τοῦτο βλέπειν, οὐ μόνον ἔλλογα ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄλογα ζῶα καὶ τὴν ἐν φυτοῖς φύσιν καὶ τὴν ταῦτα γεννώσαν γῆν, καὶ πάντα τυγχάνειν καθ’ ὅσον οἶόν τε αὐτοῖς κατὰ φύσιν ἔχοντα, ἀλλὰ δὲ ἄλλως καὶ θεωρεῖν καὶ τυγχάνειν καὶ τὰ μὲν ἀληθῶς, τὰ δὲ μίμησιν καὶ εἰκόνα τούτου λαμβάνοντα [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

15 A methodological remark: I am using the expressions “consciousness” and “self-knowledge” as overarching transversal/comparative working categories of the reflection from here.

16 If he were alive today, Plotinus might refer to the astonishing scientific observation that “[i]ngenious, perceptive and intelligent behaviour is apparent in a single living cell” (Ford 2017, 282) in addition.

it is like another part of it, a part that is most audacious and unintelligent [...]. And, then, whenever Soul comes to be in a non-rational animal, the power of sense-perception becomes dominant and brings it there. But whenever Soul comes to be in a human being, Soul's motion is either entirely in the faculty of calculative reasoning, or it comes from Intellect, since an *individual* soul has its own intellect and a will of its own to think or, generally, to move itself. (Plotinus 2018, 5.2.2, 550, italics and insertion in brackets DB)¹⁷

From his own perspective, and being situated in a completely unrelated historical discourse and Chinese context, Yangming has taken into consideration the same basic topics: Like Plotinus, he sees the important, “all-mediating” function of what he thinks of as human self-reflexivity in the reality of the world, that is, “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wan wu*) as a whole. Much like Plotinus, Yangming has pointed out the *limited* character of the special status and did not overestimate the general capabilities of the “human being” (*ren*):

Heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things originally form “one system of vitality” (*yiti* 一體) all together with the human being. The location of its most extreme and strongest emergence and self-unfolding is the “little bit of spiritual brightness” (*yi dian lingming* 一點靈明) of the human “heart-mind” (*xin* 心). (Wang Shouren 1933c, 17, tr., italics DB)¹⁸

Unlike Plotinus, Yangming does not refer to technological (crafts) or geometrical practices to infer to the mode of natural self-production in the sense of the abstract conceptual form of “contemplation” (*theōria*). However, the “levels of the organic”—fellow humans, animals and plants (and even stones) are directly and intuitively included in the aforementioned human “little bit of spiritual brightness” (*yi dian lingming*) as well. This presents us with a certain transversal contentual analogy to Plotinus's views noted above. By applying the term “consciousness” in the sense of a “customized” transversal “comparative category” (Neville 2009, 37–38; Bartosch 2015b, 18) here,¹⁹ we can say that also in Yangming's view, animals, plants and even stones participate in the structure of human consciousness.

17 Source text: “Όταν οὖν ψυχὴ ἐν φυτῶι γίνηται, ἄλλο ἐστὶν οἷον μέρος τὸ ἐν φυτῶι τὸ τολμηρότατον καὶ ἀφρονέστατον καὶ προεληλυθὸς μέχρι τοσοῦτον· ὅταν δ' ἐν ἀλόγωι, ἢ τοῦ αἰσθάνεσθαι δύναμις κρατήσασα ἦγαγεν· ὅταν δὲ εἰς ἄνθρωπον, ἢ ὅλως ἐν λογικῶι ἢ κίνησις, ἢ ἀπὸ νοῦ ὡς νοῦν οἰκεῖον ἐχούσης καὶ παρ' αὐτῆς βούλησιν τοῦ νοεῖν ἢ ὅλως κινεῖσθαι” (Plotinos n.d., E' [5] β' [2]).

18 Source text: “蓋天地萬物.與人原是一體.其發竅之最精處.是人心一點靈明.”

19 For a more extended and diversified application of this comparative category see also the use of the terms “*Bewusstheit*”, “*Bewussthaben*”, and “*Bewusstsein*” in Bartosch (2015b, 123–90, 301–424).

Actually, there are *two* aspects to compare here, and *the first one* is rather close to Plotinus's meaning of "contemplation" (*theōria*) in *Enneads* 3.8. Here, after his student's following question, Wang Yangming makes a highly relevant statement:

"The human being possesses an 'empty [that is, undetermined/free] spirit' (*xu ling* 虛靈), (and) thereby has 'good-knowing' (*liangzhi* 良知). Do trees and grass, bricks, stones, etc. also have good-knowing?" The gentleman [Yangming] replied, "The good-knowing of humans is exactly the good-knowing of grass and trees, bricks and stones, inasmuch as grass and trees, bricks and stones *cannot enter into existence*²⁰ as grass and trees, bricks and stones without the human being's good-knowing." (Wang Shouren 1933c, 17, tr., italics, and insertions in brackets DB)²¹

In view of Plotinus's understanding of higher "contemplation" (*theōria*), it is important to note here that the *self-referential form* of this statement by Yangming itself presents a *more or less implicit example* of the *implicate logical form* of the same self-knowledge that Plotinus's understanding of "thinking of thinking" (*noēseōs nóēsis* νοήσεως νόησις) represents in a somewhat more explicit, more direct way (and in a totally different concept-historical context, of course). This *same* implicate-logical (*meta-*)*form of an all-including unity of unity and difference of the (subjective) knower and the (objectively) known* (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.6, 361), which Plotinus has made explicit in the sense of the *conditio sine qua non* to enter the highest stage of self-knowledge on the plane of "intellect" (*noūs* νοῦς), is at least implicitly represented in a model of the structures of consciousness by Wang Yangming.

In a sort of underlying allusion, this model implicitly inherits the implicate-logical unity of unity and difference of *yin-yang* 陰陽 (which Yangming also alludes to by the term "*li* 理" in the focal passage) as well as an additional hidden

20 In this regard, one can also think of the following, very famous passage: "先生遊南鎮。一友指巖中花樹問曰。天下無心外之物。如此花樹。在深山中自開自落。於我心亦何相關。先生曰。你未看此花時。此花與汝心同歸於寂。你來看此花時。則此花顏色一時明白起來。便知此花不在你的心外" (Wang Shouren 1933c, 18). ["While the teacher [Yangming] was strolling in Nanzhen, a friend pointed at a blossoming tree, asking: 'Under heaven there are no things outside of the heart-mind (*xin*). But how does the blossoming tree, opening up its blossoms in the midst of the deep mountains all by itself relate to my heart-mind?' The teacher said: 'When you haven't yet seen these blossoms, these blossoms in the same way (as the heart-mind in itself) relate to a stillness of your heart-mind. When you come along and see these blossoms—this is when the colours of the blossoms (suddenly) appear clearly [enter actual existence]. Therefore you have to understand that these blossoms are not outside of your heart-mind.'" (tr., additions in brackets DB)]

21 Source text: "人有虛靈。方有良知。若草木瓦石之類。亦有良知否。先生曰。人的良知。就是草木瓦石的良知。若草木瓦石無人的良知。不可以為草木瓦石矣。"

indication of the aspect-systematic functional structure of the five agents (*wu xing* 五行). The model has already been introduced and discussed in great detail and at length by the present author (for a very detailed analysis and interpretation cf. Bartosch (2015b, 390–424); for a shorter explanation in English cf. Bartosch (2021, 137–40)).

According to this, the “knowing” (*zhi* 知) is a central aspect in the unbound efficacy of the “(self-)organizing principle” (*li* 理).²² As such, “knowing” (*zhi*) is the conversion or crossing of two more “subjective” aspects, amongst which one exerts a more active influence than the other, in correlation with two more “objective” aspects—one of which can be interpreted as taking a more passive function than the other. Knowing (a process of self-reflective awareness) thereby permanently results from “perceiving and responding” (*gan-ying* 感應) to a (respective situational) “thing” (*wu* 物), while the “clear awareness” (*mingjue* 明覺) of the knowing is *at the same time* also the permanent (processual) foundation of the (subjective) “heart-mind’s” (*xin*) “(self-)mastering” (*zhuzai* 主宰) of the “will(ing)’s” (意) “emitting-moving” (*fadong* 發動)—which, in turn, is “becoming apparent/manifesting” (*ningju* 凝聚) by way of the unfolding “character(izing)” (*xing* 性) in the (ever-present) formation of the aforementioned (situational) “thing” (*wu*) (for the initial quote cf. Wang Shouren (1933b, 70–71),²³ see also the references to my works in the last paragraph).

In analogy to Plotinus’s elucidation on pure “contemplation” (*theōria*) as the (1) unity of the (2) knower (more active, subjective side) and (3) the known (more passive, objective side)—which includes the roots of all experience, all lower non-human beings (see the quote further above), and of all things—the (1) “knowing” (*zhi*) mirrors the *unity of the unity and difference* of (2) the intention-emitting and formation-motivating (more active, subjectively self-experiencing) heart-mind and its intentionality (willing) and, on the other hand, (3) the (more passively receiving) formation process of the “character(izing)” (*xing*) (from formless *qi* 氣) of the “thing” (*wu* 物, in the sense of a situation or a person, living being, or an object “in respective focus”) in its (permanent circular) resonance (“perceiving and responding”, *gan-ying* 感應) again with the (1) “knowing” (*zhi*) (in and of itself, if I may say so). As the “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs noēsis* νοήσεως νόησις) is a *permanent processual form* in which both aspects can only be distinct, because they form a unity and *vice versa*, so is the circular relatedness of the five functions of (1) knowing (clear awareness), (2) heart-mind (controlling), (3) willing

22 In an implicit analogy to the five agents (*wu xing* 五行)-schematic diagram, one could say that it takes a functional position in analogy to the effective agent “earth” (*tu* 土).

23 Source text: “理一而已。以其理之凝聚而言。則謂之性。以其凝聚之主宰而言。則謂之心。以其主宰之發動而言。則謂之意。以其發動之明覺而言。則謂之知。以其明覺之感應而言。則謂之物。”

(intention-emitting), (4) characterizing (manifesting), (5) thing (resonating, being perceived). In this context, the knowing (1) represents the *coincidence* of two related, more active aspects (2, 3) and two related, more passive aspects (4, 5); it represents that which goes through all of the other 4 aspects and that which makes the “heart-mind” (*xin*) as the subjective manifestation of the objective “(self-)organizing principle” (*li*) of “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wanwu*) an identical aspect of the latter in an implicate-logical sense.²⁴

Under the background of this transversal implicate-logical, *formal* “resonance” in this particular respect, the last indented quote by Wang Yangming can be re-read and compared to a further statement by Plotinus: in parallel to the “clear awareness” (*mingjue*) of “human” (*ren*) “knowing” (*zhi*), Plotinus identified the implicate-logical self-knowledge of the philosopher (as the unity of unity and difference of knower and the known) in the sense that “every animal and plant and anything that appears to be soulless²⁵ are within me”²⁶ (Plotinus 2018, 3.2.3, 255).

On the one side, we can view the content of this statement in its general original context of a *cosmological* meaning of *theōria* in Plotinus’s philosophy (see the first three indented quotes of this chapter). At the same time, it is also to be considered from the transversal perspective of the implicate-logical foundation of the (*self-*) *reflective* reality-emerging level of Yangming’s “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), which “is exactly the good-knowing of [other humans, animals] grass and trees” (see the indented quote above, insertions in brackets DB). In the sense of Yangming’s understanding in the mature phase of his philosophy (Bartosch 2015b, 69–70, fn. 141 et al.), it does not just mean an intuitive moral conscience; “*liangzhi*” became a term for an all-encompassing transformational origin of all reality and experience in extension.

The “knowing”, respectively, “good-knowing”—or, to use another and later alternative term: “root-system of the vitality of the good-knowing” (*liangzhi benti* 良知本體)—is to be viewed as the convergence of all functions of consciousness in the sense of (to stay with our earlier example) “clear awareness” (*mingjue*) of all

24 Again, for more details cf. Bartosch (2015b, 390–424).

25 “A distinction between inanimate things which depend entirely on the soul of the universe or cosmos and things with their own souls (including plants and animals)” Plotinus (2018, 4.4.32, 452, fn. 94) is provided in the following statement: “And those that partake only of this soul [of the universe] are parts in all respects, but those that have a share in another soul thereby also have the status of not being altogether parts [...]” (ibid., 4.4.32, 452). Source text: “καὶ τὰ μὲν μόνης ταύτης μετέχοντα κατὰ πᾶν ἔστι μέρη, ὅσα δὲ καὶ ἄλλης ταύτ[η] ἔχει τὸ μὴ μέρη πάντη εἶναι [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Δ’ [4] δ’ [4])

26 Source text: “[...] ὅτι πάντα ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ φυτὰ καὶ ζῶια καὶ συμπάντων τῶν γενητῶν φύσις [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] β’ [2]).

“knowing” (*zhi*) and thereby as nothing short of a *conditio sine qua non* for grass and trees (and animals, societies, heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things)²⁷ to appear as what they are to us in an “anthropocosmic” (Tu 1973, 202) universe, which is carried through and constantly elevated into (self-)reflective forms in the process of human existence.

The shared implicate-logical foundation (Bartosch 2022a) of all “under-standing”, namely (to activate the etymology of “under-”) as a logical “inter-standing”, a “standing-in-between”, that is, dividing and thereby connecting *at the same time*,²⁸ does not contradict the fact that Yangming somehow put more emphasis on the aspect of a sort of empathizing or sympathizing responsiveness of (holistic) awareness.

Wang Yangming emphasizes that when we see a child in danger,²⁹ we naturally find ourselves in the state of a “fearfully alert, compassionate heart-mind” (*chu ti ce yin zhi xin* 怵惕惻隱之心), because we are related to the child in the context of “one (and the same meta-)system of vitality” (*yiti*) and in the sense of the related inborn “inter-humaneness” (*ren* 仁). However, according to Yangming, we do not only feel this kind of compassion with beings who, like the human child, are “of the same kind” (*tong lei* 同類), as the fear and suffering of animals naturally evoke our compassion, and our “inter-humaneness” (*ren*) is thus effective.³⁰ Like Plotinus, Yangming emphasizes that we share consciousness and sense perception with the animals. Furthermore, he also stresses that our compassionate “inter-humaneness” is even activated when we see the destruction of plant-life. According to Yangming, we share *the same urge to live* with plants. Therefore, we are in empathic resonance even with plants, and their destruction and death results in a “compassionately empathizing heart-mind” (*minxu zhi xin* 憫恤之心). For Yangming, even natural rock formations and stones are within the scope of the possible actuality of our inter-humaneness,³¹ compassion, and the one (meta-)system of vitality

27 Cf. also the quotes toward the end of chapter 2!

28 Cf. Bartosch (2021, 127–32) my analysis of the “original metaphor of ‘understanding’”, including the respective etymological background and also with comparative remarks in view of ancient Chinese thought.

29 This is related to Mengzi’s (Mencius 372–289 BCE) famous image of the situation faced by someone who sees a little child falling into a well.

30 A good example is provided by Mengzi: “[...] he is drawing the picture of a ruler who sees an innocent cow being led to a sacrificial site, and who, overcome by his compassion for the animal, is then faced with the dilemma of not being able to abolish the state-supporting rites involving animal sacrifices (which are his duties as a ruler) and of wanting to save the animal’s life at the same time” (Bartosch 2015a, 453, tr. DB). Cf. also Mengzi (n.d., chapter “Lian Hui Wang I”).

31 Stones and minerals are included, because they are an aspect of the “one (indivisible) fluidum in circulation” (*yiqi liutong* 一氣流通). It constitutes the solid, liquid, or gaseous “forms” (*xing* 形) of

that we form with other humans, animals, and plants (Wang Shouren 1933d, 36, tr. DB; cf. also Bartosch 2015b, 694–95).³² (All of this includes the possibility and thus the “freedom” to ignore or suppress the empathic self-evidence, which is declared as “evil” (*e* 惡) by Yangming.)

The idea of an *empathic resonance* between human consciousness and other forms of life is at least implicitly present in Plotinus’s point of view, as well. It is *as* implicitly present as the aforementioned implicate-logical *form* of the unity of unity and difference marks the implicit foundation in Yangming’s model of self-conscious *yin-yang*-like subject-objectivity (also in the sense of a general implicate-logical *tertium comparationis*, see introduction) as well as in his philosophy as a whole (Bartosch 2015b).

Put simply: Plotinus, too, was not simply a hard-hearted “theoretician”. As a human being striving for the “(highest) Good” (*agathón* ἀγαθόν) (see chapter 3), Plotinus himself showed great empathy with animals as well.³³ “He would not agree to take medicines derived from wild animals [...] [or] to derive nourishment from the bodies even of domesticated animals” (Porphyry of Tyre 2018, § 1, 17). Plotinus developed a strong argument that it is fair “*to endow with happiness* even the basest living beings, and plants, too, since they are themselves alive, that is, they have a life that also unfolds in the direction of a goal”³⁴ (Plotinus 2018, 1.4.1, 71). In passing, it might be noted in advance (for more, following 2) that *both* Yangming and Plotinus thereby understood life as a processual unfolding. However, Plotinus’s explicit reflection of an inherent goal-driven nature is

all appearing living beings and objects. Wang Yangming points to the fact that medicinal minerals (*yaoshi* 藥石) can only heal illness, because the “matter-energy” (Joseph Needham’s translation for “*qi* 氣”) of the stone and our bodies represent “this same one (and only) fluidum” (*tong ci yiqi* 同此一氣) (Wang Shouren 1933c, 17).

- 32 Source text to this paraphrased passage in the present and the second to the last paragraphs: “是故見孺子之入井.而必有怵惕惻隱之心焉.是其仁之與孺子而爲一體也.孺子猶同類者也.見鳥獸之哀鳴鰥鯀.而必有不忍之心焉.是其仁之與鳥獸而爲一體也.鳥獸猶有知覺者也.見草木之摧折而必有憫恤之心焉.是其仁之與草木而爲一體也.草木猶有生意者也.見瓦石之毀壞而必有顧惜之心焉.是其仁之與瓦石而爲一體也.是其一體之仁也.” Cf. also Bartosch (2015b, 694–95).
- 33 Apart from “the assignment of evils to men of opposite kinds, the good being poor, the wicked rich, and the bad having more of those things that those who are human beings ought to have and being in power and in charge of nations and cities” (Plotinus 2018, 3.2.7, 260), Plotinus states that the “(highest) Good” (*agathón*) “also reaches the earth is attested by the expressed principle of the other things that come about. For animals and plants both share in this expressed principle, and in soul and life” (ibid.). Source text: “Ἀλλὰ τῶν ἄλλων γινομένων λόγ[ω] μαρτύριον τοῦτο καὶ μέχρι γῆς ἰέναι· καὶ γὰρ ζῶια καὶ φυτὰ καὶ λόγου καὶ ψυχῆς καὶ ζωῆς μεταλαμβάνει” (Plotinos n.d., Γ´ [3] β´ [2]).
- 34 Source text: “[...] τὸ τῆς εὐδαιμονίας καταφέρειν εἰς τὰ ζῶια τὰ ἄλλα – οὕτω γὰρ ἂν καὶ τοῖς ἀτιμοτάτοις αὐτῶν μεταδώσειν· μεταδώσειν δὲ καὶ τοῖς φυτοῖς ζῶσι καὶ αὐτοῖς καὶ ζῶην ἔξειλιπτομένην εἰς τέλος ἔχουσι – [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Α´ [1] δ´ [4]).

mirrored rather *implicitly* in Yangming’s line of thought: it has to be remembered that Yangming said that we share *an urge to live* (which implies an immanent goal) with plants (see above, second last paragraph).

From a more differentiating angle, it can be added that Yangming didn’t make a distinction comparable to that between “rational” (*logikós λογικός*) and “non-rational” (*álogos άλογος*) animals. This difference can be viewed as an implicit manifestation of the *general* differences between a Neo-Platonic (implicate, Bartosch 2022a) “logic of theoretical knowledge and insight” and Yangming’s (implicate) “logic of situational cognition and insight”, which the author has analysed extensively and very much in detail, albeit by referring to Nicolaus Cusanus instead of Plotinus (Bartosch 2015b, 425–590). At this point, I would only like to say that while the same implicate logic can be detected in Yangming’s model of consciousness, he doesn’t actually understand the aspects of thoughts and feelings as separate dimensions that would exist in a hierarchical order. From the (Neo-)Platonic perspective of Plotinus, the self-knowing evidence of the implicate logic (self-enfolding “meta-reason”, Bartosch (2022b, 110)) and also the descending or deriving faculty of concept formation (unfolding reason, “downstream” of thinking, *ibid.*) are reflected as superordinate to sense perception and feelings (for example, the happiness of plants). In the case of Plotinus, the anthropocentric hierarchy that has already been introduced at the beginning of this chapter is established on the basis of the finite representation of the exceptional human capability for intellection, and thus the actualization of pure “contemplation” (*theōria*)—a self-evidence which actually cannot be mediated in a conceptualizing manner (see also the last main segment of chapter 3 on ineffability).

In the case of Yangming’s (Neo-Confucian) anthropocentrism, an implicit hierarchy of the living is established in another way, that is, on the foundation of the aspect of “inter-humaneness” (*ren*). For Yangming, this aspect counts as the manifestation of the empathizing responsiveness which is at the root of the unity of the system of vitality of my heart-mind with heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things (see an exact quote with source text in chapter 2).

On the one hand, *ren* 仁 also represents the implicate-logical (meta-)form of the *unity of unity and difference* of “you” (*er* 爾) and “I” (*wo* 我) (Wang Shouren 1933d, 35; also quoted in Bartosch 2015b, 692) as the basic manifestation of universal love (Wang Shouren 1933d, 36–37; also quoted in Bartosch 2015b, 736–37), which is originating from the “caring love between father and son” (*fu-zi zhi ai* 父子之愛) (*ibid.*, 729–42).

In view of Plotinus, we have already seen that the same underlying implicate-*logical* (meta-)form (Bartosch 2022a, 110, 118) is also represented in the sense of

the *unity of unity and difference* of the knower and the known in the sense of the notion of “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis*). It comes with the *exclusion* of feelings and sensations on the related onto-hierarchical, highest level of human existence of the Plotinian “intellect” (*noûs*). In view of the other side of the “transverse”, it might not be all too surprising that the *inclusion* of feelings and sensations in the Yangmingian “heart-mind” (*xin*) has led to a more down-to-earth, alternative representation of a hierarchical superordination of (empathic) human consciousness. Because of the origin of all “inter-humaneness” (*ren*) in one’s family context, Yangming envisioned a hierarchy of empathy, love, and care as a core aspect of reality. It is manifested by the (organic) necessity of having to eat or to provide one’s family with food (to sustain their lives) in the following sense:

Animals and plants are both equally loved. Plants are used to feed animals. This can still be tolerated. People and animals are both equally loved. Slaughtering animals to feed the next of kin [when plant-based food sources are not sufficient] [...]: the heart-mind can just about bear this. (Wang Shouren 1933c, 18, tr., insertions in brackets DB)³⁵

Plotinus, on the other hand, is very well aware of the same dilemma. Although he seems to have followed a vegetarian way of life to minimize the suffering of animals in this regard, he does not explicitly relate the problem to the question of human consciousness, and he did not come up with the idea of an anthropocentric hierarchy of empathy and care. In his case, the hierarchy of living beings is related to the ability to engage in the abstraction of thought and the explicit self-application of the principle of thinking (*theōria*) to oneself/itself. With regard to the situation of a self-consumption of life on the animal plane, he stated that

th[e] eating of each other is necessary. These transformations from one animal to another come about because they would be unable to continue on in existence the way they are, even if no one were to kill them. And if at the time when they leave the world, they leave it in such a way that others find some use from them, why must we begrudge that? What does it matter if they are consumed to be born as other living beings? (Plotinus 2018, 3.2.15, 267)³⁶

35 Source text: “禽獸與草木同是愛的。把草木去養禽獸。又忍得。人與禽獸同是愛的。宰禽獸以養親[...].心又忍得。”

36 Source text: “Ἡ ἀλληλοφαγία μὲν ἀναγκαῖα, ἀμοιβαί ζώων οὔσαι οὐ δυναμένων, οὐδ’ εἴ τις μὴ κτιννοῖ αὐτά, οὕτω μένειν εἰς αἰεῖ. Εἰ δὲ ἐν ᾧ χρόν[ω] δεῖ ἀπελθεῖν οὕτως ἀπελθεῖν ἔδει, ὡς ἄλλοις γενέσθαι χρειαῖα παρ’ αὐτῶν, τί φθονεῖν ἔδει; Τί δ’ εἰ βρωθέντα ἄλλα ἐφύετο” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] β’ [2]).

More generally speaking, and despite the differences that have just been outlined, we can say that in both philosophies the elevated status of what is conceptualized as a “human being” (*ánthrōpos, ren* 人) results from the ascription of a much higher qualitative level of human self-knowledge, that is, the highest intellectual form of “contemplation” (*theōria*), as well as the exclusive features of the “spiritual brightness” (*lingming*) and “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), which are expressions of the self-reflective actualities of human consciousness. We have already seen that these central terms are not confined to subjective cognitive processes, but that they suggest that the human being is participating in that which these terms allude to in the sense of being a central cosmological agent.

The Self-Unfoldment of Reality as a Meta-Cognitive Process toward Self-Knowledge

In this segment, the last-mentioned similarity will be further explored: in both philosophies the respective understanding of the “human being” (*ánthrōpos, ren*) characterizes the latter as an eminent or central being. Both ascribe human consciousness a central role in the *self-unfoldment of reality as an all-encompassing meta-cognitive process*. The reason is, generally and comparatively speaking, the feature of *self-knowledge*.³⁷ The implicate-logical *reflection of the reflection* (which implies the synthetic absorption in the unitive relationship of subject and object of the reflection that has already been indicated in view of both philosophies)³⁸ enables the human being to fully integrate itself into the whole of everything there is, to relate to the overall process(es) of universal life by means of cognition and feeling, and to empathize with it to an extent that the whole is viewed *as an expression of an all-encompassing, universal goodness*. In the sense of the respective implicate-logical self-knowledge (as a foundation), the human mind (in the sense of the Plotinian *noûs* and, as we have seen, *mutatis mutandis*, also of the Yangmingian model of consciousness) is itself *geared toward this integration*: it can reflect back onto itself in a way so that it can fully be absorbed in the self-evident insights that to realize absolute unity (and therefore absolute freedom), *difference as such cannot be excluded, because otherwise one would just have mistaken non-countable boundless unity for a mere unit which still is distinct from something else*.³⁹ In the following, we have to explore how both philosophers have envisioned the realization of this integration.

37 This term means an overarching comparative/transversal working category of the reflection here.

38 In passing, it might also be noted that it has also been expressed by way of comparable (in the sense of the possibility to compare) *mirror metaphors* in both cases (Bartosch 2015b, 651–56 et al.; 2018, 94).

39 This is not just a “remote” or “lofty” theoretical problem of philosophical contemplation or academic “ivory towers”. On the contrary, it is actually the root cause of what Hegel has called “negative freedom” (*negative Freiheit*) (Hegel 2003, §5, 38).

Plotinus's "nature" (*phýsis*) means an "expressed principle"⁴⁰ (*lógos* λόγος) (e.g. Plotinus 2018, 3.8.3) that produces animals and plants, which then themselves express the same principle (*lógos*) in a derived, "lower" sense, that is in the particular forms of their psychophysical generativity. The *form* of the "expressed principle" (*lógos*) that descends in declining qualitative steps from the (world-) "intellect" (*noús*) and thereby connects the (world-) "soul" (*psychē*) with "nature" (*phýsis*) in such a (descending) fashion is that of "contemplation" (*theōria*), because

all the power that produces not by means of hands must remain and remain entire. For there is, indeed, no need for it [power] to have some parts that remain and others that are in motion, for matter is what is in motion, but nothing in power is in motion; otherwise, it [power] will not be the prime mover, nor will nature be this [the prime mover], but that which is unmoved in the whole [of nature]. (ibid., 3.8.2, 357)⁴¹

For Plotinus, everything that is effective and part of the world-process means an appearance of a *meta-cognitive principle*: "nature" (*phýsis*) is deriving "entirely from contemplation [*theōria*]"⁴² (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.3, 358, insertion in brackets DB) and "every life is intellection [*nóēsis* νόησις] of a sort, but one kind more obscure than another, just as life is, too" (ibid., 3.8.8, 363, insertion in brackets DB).⁴³ How does the obscurity come into play? Here, we have to discern between "pure" "contemplation" (*theōria*) and its lowering "copies" or steps toward the realm of (physical) "matter" (*hýle* ὕλη).⁴⁴ The former only takes place in the realm of

40 This translation term is used in Plotinus (2018). A. H. Armstrong's translation in Plotinus (1980) is more nuanced: he is translating "*logos*" as "principle", "forming principle", and "rational principle" even in one and the same paragraph (8.3.3, 367).

41 Source text: "ὡς μένειν δεῖ καὶ ἐνταῦθα τὴν δύναμιν τὴν οὐ διὰ χειρῶν ποιοῦσαν καὶ πᾶσαν μένειν. Οὐ γὰρ δὴ δεῖται τῶν μὲν ὡς μενόντων, τῶν δὲ ὡς κινουμένων – ἢ γὰρ ὕλη τὸ κινούμενον, αὐτῆς δὲ οὐδὲν κινούμενον – ἢ ἐκεῖνο οὐκ ἔσται τὸ κινοῦν πρότως, οὐδὲ ἡ φύσις τοῦτο, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἀκίνητον τὸ ἐν τ[ῷ] ὄλ[φῳ]" (Plotinos n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8]).

42 Source text: "Πάντως μὲν ἐκ θεωρίας" (Plotinos, n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8]).

43 Source text: "Καὶ πᾶσα ζωὴ νόησις τις, ἀλλὰ ἄλλη ἄλλης ἀμυδροτέρα, ὥσπερ καὶ ζωὴ" (Plotinos n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8]).

44 In passing, I would like to mention that we have to discern between two forms of matter in the case of Plotinus, who "[...] turned the Platonic μὴ ὄν into τὸ κακόν, that is, evil par excellence. This is more than an ascetic determination, as it did not occur up until then, and as it also had been lifted a hitherto merely 'disturbing' aspect in matter into the realm of the devilish, the inferno" (Bloch (1972, 149, tr. DB). However, "with Plotinus, the full Tohu wa-bohu is and remains only in the invisible abyss of the lower darkneses, which, due to original evil, have not conceived the light. But strangely enough, Plotinus not only inserts matter in this abyss but in the heights as well, albeit a completely different one, certainly, but nevertheless one that shares the name with the 'matter—Satan' (*Stoff—Satan*): he called it ὕλη νοητή, *intelligible matter*" (ibid., 150, tr. DB; cf. also Plotinus 2018, 2.4, 164–83).

“intellect” (*noûs*), that is, by way of an absolutely self-reflective “thinking of thinking” (*noûseôs nóësis*).⁴⁵ On this level of *intellective contemplation*, in which the absolute source of the “(highest) Good” (*agathón*), respectively, the “One” (*hén év*) is “shining through” the intellective form of a unity through the difference of the knowing and the known (see chapter 3), the human being is able to self-*knowingly* reflect the cosmic life principle of (self-)“contemplation” (*theōria*) as being *effective* in non-rational animals, plants, and the earth in the form of (partly unconscious) after-images as reflections of reflections of reflections and so on—namely in the myriads of *ways* of sustaining life, of growing, of regenerating it in the form of offspring (ibid., 3.8.5, 360: “generation is contemplation”⁴⁶). In this sense, one can also say that nothing which is derived from *theōria* can be disconnected from the “intellect” (*noûs*) (ibid., 3.8.8, 363–64), because the lower manifestations still participate the former (see also the last indented quote in this chapter). Like in the case of two parallel mirrors, which reflect each other ad infinitum *in mere theory* but become increasingly fainter reflections in reality,⁴⁷ the forms of the unfoldment of life of non-rational animals and plants are fainter after-images of the perfect *theōria*, that is, the perfect immaterial reflection of that which cannot be thought of as an image but only as an absolute origin.

The word “contemplation” is the term that has been used to render the Greek “*theōria*” in both English translations of the *Enneads* (Plotinus 1980; 2018).⁴⁸ It is important to note that although our modern word “theory” is derived from it, Plotinus’s understanding of the term cannot be confused with concepts of modern scientific theories, which are finite semantic frameworks superimposed on selected sets of aspects of an infinite reality and can be validated/verified or falsified by experiments in relation to data.⁴⁹

In my opinion, the translation term “contemplation” can also be misleading on occasion, because the word might possibly shroud the implications *of the processual nature, the inherent motivation or intentional moments, and the related emergences, which are also implied* in Plotinus’s original use of the Greek term “*theōria*”: in

45 Cf. also the detailed overview by Mazur (2021, 26–62).

46 Source text (with context): “Ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν φύσεως εἰπόντες ὃν τρόπον θεωρία ἢ γένεσις, [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Γ´ [3] ἡ´ [8]).

47 “[I]n reality, the images [of the mirrors] would become increasingly fainter and would no longer be recognizable from a certain image onwards.” (Geiger und Scheel, 1927, 67, tr., insertion in brackets DB)

48 We will see that the word “contemplation” (which has been used in both Plotinus (1980) and (2018)) might not have been the absolute best choice to translate “*theōria* θεωρία” in this context. Maybe it is better not to translate it at all?

49 Cf. also Bartosch (2019, 47–50) on scientific belief-structures versus religious belief.

the initial pre-philosophical context, “*theōria*” signified a completion of a process of becoming aware of divine principles in a sanctuary *to which one had to journey beforehand from another city and as a chosen ceremonial envoy in this regard* (Rausch 1982, 70–71; Bartosch 2015b, 494). The “encounter” of the mortal (human) envoy with the “immortals”, that is, with the mathematical proportions, geometric-harmonic principles of temples and sculptures of gods, actually were meant as a conscious return, as a reminiscent awakening in view of the very principles that were behind the motions of the celestial bodies and even of the beauty of human bodies, etc.⁵⁰ In this sense, again, *the travel to the sanctuary*, that is, the *intentional movement toward the divine principles*—in other words: the effort to move toward *the source*—had its own symbolic meaning, namely that of a “return” to the highest principles that the gods represented.

The later *philosophical* rendering of the term “*theōria*” conveys the meaning of (self-)reflection in the sense of what Plotinus’s follower Proclus (Προκλος Διαδοχος, 412–484) conceptualized as “*epistrophē* ἐπιστροφή”—the *active (path of a) return to the one and indivisible source of all thinking and world-experiences (including their sense-perception-conveyed “things”)*.⁵¹ The origin of the English philosophical term “reflection” still hints at this original (Platonic) meaning of “*theōria*” (which, as mentioned, also finds a transversal counterpart in Neo-Confucian mirror metaphors). It is derived from the Latin “*reflectere*” in the sense of “bending back (on itself/oneself)”. Furthermore, *theōria* thereby not only includes the vision⁵² but—please note—also the *active process* of realization and an inherent “source-relatedness” (Bartosch 2022a: 114, 119): Plotinian “*theōria*” therefore also conveys the meaning of an *inherent “motivation”/“intentionality”*—(self-)organizing *directionality*—and a related *process of movement or transformation* in relation

50 Cf. also Kayser (1950).

51 *Mutatis mutandis*, one can think of Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s (1762–1814) “seeing (of) seeing” (*sehendes Sehen*), or Nicolaus Cusanus’s (1401–1464) “*visio intellectualis*”.

52 The word “*theōria*” has also been translated into Latin “*visio*” (vision). “*Theōria*” is related to the “*theōros* θεωρός”, the “spectator”. The word “*theōria*” is also the precursor of philosophical meanings of “speculation”. The latter is deriving from Latin “*speculari*” (to peer around from an observation point, *specula*) and, alternatively, from “*speculum*” (mirror) (Ebbesmeyer 1995, 1355). In the latter sense, it is related to the philosophical mirror-metaphor which has been unfolding since the times of Plato, has been intensely cultivated by Plotinus, and finds its counterpart in the Chinese traditions since Zhuangzi (莊子, 3rd cent. BCE) and especially in the thought of Wang Yangming as well (Bartosch 2015b; 2017); it also forms the background for the conceptual history of “(self-) reflection” (Zahn 1992, 396). “*Speculatio*” has been used to translate “θεωρία” in the Aristotelian sense, that is, “as an opposite term to ‘practice’, and it is as such relevant for the classification of the sciences as well as for the distinction of the cognitive faculties” (Ebbesmeyer 1995, 1355, tr. DB) and in the sense of “a specific form of cognition as reflection, in which the subject of reflection [...] and the object of reflection [...] are posited in a mutually clarifying relation” (ibid.).

to a particular “final goal” (*télos τέλος*): “for all things their starting point is their goal” (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.7, 363).

The process of unfoldment toward the inherent goal is the central aspect of *theōria*, because “all of it is contemplation”⁵³ (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.5, 360), possibly leading to its own inherent “apex-event”,⁵⁴ that is, a fully self-reflective realization of an indivisible, boundless unity in the highest actuality of *epistrophē*. The latter is to be understood as a circular return: it means the “event”, when A and Ω of the process of cosmic life (via human intellection) “in an un-reaching way touch”⁵⁵ (Bartosch 2015b, 285) the One (*hén*)—of which the whole process of the cosmos is the appearance, which is the indivisible root of all cosmic forms of becoming (as the One’s manifestations) while they exist (logically)—and which is preceding all number, even “substantial number”⁵⁶ (Plotinus 2018, 5.5.4, 587–588). The One cannot be “touched” by separation from finiteness but *through* finiteness.⁵⁷

Proclus’s concept of *epistrophē* has to be understood in the context of three inseparable steps: *monē* μονή, *próodos* πρόοδος, *epistrophē* ἐπιστροφή. This means the third and final, the all-including, all-elevating (ab)solution of the finite state of existence. The term “*próodos*” is made up of the prefix “*pro-* προ-” and “*hodós* ὁδός”. While the former can mean “forth” or “un-” (in the sense of “unfolding”), the latter means “way” or “path”. (One might already anticipate the potential for discussion in regard to the Chinese term “*dao* 道” at this point.) In German, “*próodos*” can be rendered quite literally as “*Hervorgang*” (Bartosch 2015b, 319). “*Próodos*” means the “way” in which things are proceeding forth, the process of an emanation of consciousness in finite perspectives, aspects, and situations. All of these processes are unknowingly springing forth from their origin,⁵⁸ that is, their

53 Source text (with context): “ἦκει δὲ ἡ ἐνέργεια ἐκ θεωρίας ἢ πράξεως, πράξις δὲ οὕτω ἦν—οὐ γὰρ οἶόν τε πρὸ θεωρίας – ἀνάγκη ἀσθενεστέραν μὲν ἕτεραν ἕτερας εἶναι, πᾶσαν δὲ θεωρίαν.” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

54 This term alludes to Nicolaus Cusanus’ term “*apex theoriae*” (Nicolai de Cusa 1982).

55 With Nicolai de Cusa (1944, 8.30, 18): “Since this is an insight above all human cognition, it is not being touched in human cognition other than negatively.” Source text: “Quae quoniam supra hominis cognitionem est cognitio, non nisi negative in humaniter cognitio attrahatur.”

56 Plotinos (n.d., E [5] ε’ [5]): “οὐσιώδης ἀριθμὸς”.

57 It would also be fruitful to explore Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s term “*Durch*” from a transcultural perspective.

58 To generate an image, one can also think of the ancient city-environment that the ceremonial envoy is leaving, without the latter knowing about the fact, the place that he is leaving is expressing “immortal” cosmic principles, for example, in the form of underlying mathematical proportions of its temples, or its grid, etc. (The history of this understanding reaches back to the Mycenaean era, cf. Sparavigna and Baldi (2016), and to early phases of cultural exchange with the Mesopotamian region and Egypt.)

original “dwelling” or “abode” (*monē*),⁵⁹ and turn into self-knowledge in the sense of an *epistrophē*, that is, as the conscious, knowing, and uncovering return to the hidden principles of the *monē*.

In later Latin terminology, “*monē*” has been translated as “*principium*” (principle), “*próodos*” as “*medium*” (medium), and “*epistrophē*” as “*finis*” (end/goal). The Neo-Platonic thinker Nicolaus Cusanus, who was directly influenced by Proclus (and in a roundabout way by Plotinus), has provided the image of a spoon-carver, who is *in the process* of polishing his creation, and who—by actively going through this phase with his intention in mind—creates a “mirror spoon” (*coctear specularē*). The process itself means the emergence of a *symbol* for his mirror-spoon-creating “mind” (*mens*) to attain *self-knowledge* (Bartosch 2015b, 317–19). Due to his creation proceeding forth in this way (*próodos*), the craftsman attains the “epistrophic” (Schäfer 2006, 111) wisdom of self-reflexivity.⁶⁰ In accordance with this image of “self-production”, Cusanus derives the term for “deity”, “god” (*theós* θεός), which is also directly related to “*theōria*”,

from “*theoro*” [θεωρώ], that is, “*I see*” and “*I walk/move fast*” Consequently, *the seeker must walk/move fast by means of (mental) vision*, so that he may be able to reach out toward the all-seeing *theon* [θεόν, accusative singular of “θεός”]. Thus, the vision shows a *likeness of the way*, on which the seeker *must walk* along (to get) closer. (Nicolai de Cusa, 1959, 15, tr., insertions in brackets, italics, tr. DB)⁶¹

Proclus’s metaphor of the “processional *path*” (*próodos*) or Cusanus’s of the “*way/road*” (*via*) provide the opportunity of a transversal reflection. The finite processes in the sense of *próodos* are the *medium* of returning to the source. They correlate to Laozi’s “*name-bearing*” (*you ming*) “*ways*” (*dao* 道) (those which can be communicated) in view of their “*ineffable*” (*wu ming* 無名) origin and end: *Dao* 道 (here *with a capital “D” to discern the function* of this expression from the former) (also Bartosch, 2022a).⁶²

59 Hence the word “monastery”.

60 From a further comparative perspective, the figure of the god Krishna in Indian spirituality, represented in the literature and in forms of sculptures and paintings, is likewise to be understood as a symbolic *projection*, which is supposed to “mirror” and therefore to “awaken” its own creative origin in the sense of *self-knowledge*.

61 Source text: “Theos dicitur a theoro, quod est video et curro. Currere igitur debet quaerens per visum, ut ad omnia videntem theon pertingere possit. Gerit igitur visio similitudinem viae, per quam quaerens incedere debet.”

62 Cf. also the source text to this paraphrase in *Daodejing*: “無名天地之始;有名萬物之母。”(n.d., § 1)

Taken in *the most general comparative sense* here, we can reflect upon that semantic “pointing rod” (*Zeigestab*) (Scheler 1921, 546) “Way” (*Dao* 道) in the transverse, namely in view of the *ineffable* “One” (*hén*), in terms of the (*ineffable*) “(highest) Good” (*agathón*) (or together as the “the One-Good” (Aubry 2020, 211)) (as well as with Proclus’s self-reflection of the “*monē*”, in the sense of its revealing self-knowledge as “*epistrophē*”). I hasten to say that this finding around the philosophical metaphors of “way” or “path” (Proclus’s “*próodos*”, Cusanus’s “*via*”, and—*mutatis mutandis!*—*dao/Dao*) itself provides a “path” for further transversal references. In the present paper, this can only be followed through to a certain extent. At this point, I would like to go only this far as to not transgress the scope of the topical field of the present chapter:⁶³

For Yangming, the “Way” (*Dao*), the “heart-mind” (*xin*) (primarily expressing the “little bit of spiritual brightness” (*yi dian lingming*) of humanity), and “Heaven”⁶⁴ (*tian*) are aspects of *one and the same meta-cognitive process*: “The heart-mind is the Way; the Way is Heaven. *To know the heart-mind is the measure to know the Way and to know Heaven*” (Wang Shouren 1933a, 20, tr., italics DB).⁶⁵

On the one hand, the “heart-mind” (*xin*) carries (out) the subjective, unique, finite, respectively, “mortal” experience of each living human individual: “Now consider a deceased human: his ‘spiritual agent’ (*jingling*) ‘drifting and scattered’ (*you san le*). Where should his heaven, (his) earth, (his) spirits, (his) gods (and his) ten thousand things still exist?”⁶⁶ (Wang Shouren 1933c, 33, tr. DB). However, this subjective/finite “surface level” must not obscure the fact that, on the other hand, the “heart-mind” (*xin*) bears a certain comparability to the *objective* dimension of the (world-) “soul” (*psychē*) in Plotinus’s philosophy. *Mutatis mutandis*, both terms refer to the idea of a universal/cosmic dimension in which everything, to borrow Hegel’s expression, is “translated” into existence: in this sense *also the heart-mind is “throughout all ages one [human] inhaling-exhaling”* (*yi xu-xi* 一嘯吸)⁶⁷ (Wang Shouren 1933e 47, tr., italics DB). And as Plotinus’s

63 Many possible points of interest must be kept pending. They will be addressed in a contentually and methodologically complementing attempt (as mentioned in the introduction).

64 I am not using *tian* in the sense of “heaven and earth” (*tian-di*) but in the sense of the other possible meaning of the “whole of everything”. Hence the capitalization of the translation term on these occasions.

65 Source text: “心即道。道即天。知心則知道知天。”

66 Source text: “今看死的人。他這些精靈游散了。他的天地鬼神萬物尚在何處。”

67 Source text with context: “此心還此理。寧論己與人。千古一嘯吸。誰為嘆離群。浩浩天地內。何物非同春。相思輒奮勵。無為俗所分。但使心無間。萬里如相親。不見宴游交。微逐胥以淪。”

nature-evoking “contemplation [*theōria*] does not have a limit nor does the object of contemplation” (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.5, 361),⁶⁸ so “there are [also] no things outside of the heart-mind under heaven”⁶⁹ (Wang Shouren 1933c, 18, tr., insertion DB). Not even “heaven and earth” (*tian-di*) could manifest without the “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*) (ibid., 17),⁷⁰ *permanently realizing itself through the human heart-mind*, that is, in a self-processing meta-collective network of all finite perspectives of all individual human life past and present (as a sort of integrated “monads” of life-experiences, if I may say so).⁷¹

In this context, it is highly interesting to compare Wang Yangming’s notion of the “unity of knowing and (the related process of) actively passing through (something)” (*zhi-xing he yi* 知行合一) with Plotinus’s notions of “contemplation” (*theōria*) and its “expressed principle” (*lógos*).

Like in Plotinus’s active *process* of the expression of the principle (*lógos*), for Wang Yangming the understanding that *permanently realizes* the “good knowing” (*liangzhi*) (as the self-reflective manifestation of the “(self-)organizing principle” (*li*)) is not confined to individual perspectives. It can rather be understood as a complementing objective characteristic of the self-unfoldment of reality (here: heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things (*tian-di wanwu*)) as a *meta-cognitive, transpersonal, universal process*. In analogy to the aforesaid immanent intentionality of the “processional path” (*próodos*) or, in Latin Neo-Platonic terminology, the *medium* in the self-unfoldment of all finite human perspectives of the (world-) “soul” (*psychē*), the “heart-mind” (*xin*) is inherently driven by an intention to know (at least situation-wise) and understand; and it demands having “a heart-mind, which is eager to actively pass through (all experiences). Only after that one knows the road. This

68 Source text: “Καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἔχει πέρας ἡ θεωρία οὐδὲ τὸ θεώρημα” (Plotinus n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]). For the background of this thought in the philosophy of Plato as well as for an overview of the following development in the European Neo-Platonic tradition of the Middle Ages see the overview in Bartosch (2015b, 64–65, fn. 126). In Plotinus’s sense, *theōria* is the direct effective form of that which encompasses all beings. According to Plato’s *Timaios* Τίμαιος, “[...] that which comprises all conceivable beings *could never exist as a second next to another*, because in this case there would have to be another being again which comprises those two, of which those two would be parts [...]” (Platon 2003, 31a, 43, italics DB). Source text: “τὸ γὰρ περιέχον πάντα ὅποσα νοητὰ ζῶα μεθ’ ἑτέρου δεύτερον οὐκ ἂν ποτ’ εἴη· πάλιν γὰρ ἂν ἕτερον εἶναι τὸ περὶ ἐκείνων δέοι ζῶον, οὗ μέρος ἂν εἴτην ἐκείνῳ [...]” (ibid., 42).

69 Source text: “天下無心外之物。”

70 Source text: “豈惟草木瓦石為然。天地無人的良知。亦不可為天地矣。蓋天地萬物。與人原是一體。”

71 The reader should also keep in mind the Yangmingian model of subjective consciousness presented in ch. 1. Here, the “heart-mind” (*xin*) is rooted in and being nurtured by the all-encompassing “knowing” (*zhi*) which represents the implicate-logical unity of the unity and difference of all functions of experience and at the same time also the connection with the *objective*, all-unifying “(self-)organizing principle” (*li*) of “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things” (*tian-di wanwu*). For more on this, see also further below in the present chapter.

is (called) the ‘intentionality/will(ing)’ (*yi* 意); this is already the beginning of ‘actively passing through’ (*xing* 行)” (Wang Shouren 1933b, 38, tr. DB).⁷²

This does not only address the manifestation of subjective dispositions but, in inseparable correlation with the former and in the sense of an existential realism, the *objective process* of the emergence of all things (through the centre of the heart-mind, through our “little bit of spiritual brightness” (*yi dian lingming*):⁷³

This inference is confirmed by [Wang Yangming’s] famous analysis of the [“unity of knowing and (the related process of) actively passing through” (*zhi-xing he yi* 知行合一)]. When I see a beautiful color, I do not first see it with my eyes (a kind of “knowing”), with liking it (a kind of “action”) coming afterwards as the result of a mental decision to like it. My perception of a thing [in the sense of Wang Yangming] as having visible and value qualities [which are known in the sense of an “immediate reflexivity” (Aubrey 2020, 212)] is *total and unitary*. As Husserl might say, it seems to be one unitary “constituting” intentional act of consciousness—just as when I look at a tree, I see not only a shape but a solid extended object with a front and a back side, so here I “see” an object with a visible and a “value side”. (Nivison 1973, 132, insertions in brackets, italics DB)

The immediacy of knowing “along the Way” or *through the act itself* (which represents a universally *creative principle of implicate-logical meta-cognition at the same time*) at least partly resembles the Plotinian understanding how an “expressed principle” (*lógos*) is self-unfolding the cosmic principle of “contemplation” (*theōria*). The function of Plotinus’s “expressed principle” on the levels of “soul” (*psychē*) and “nature” (*phýsis*) is at least partly resonant with what Wang Yangming viewed as the “heart-mind” (*xin*) activating the “characterizing nature” (*xing*) by means of “intentionality/will(ing)” (*yi*). *The only major functional difference* is that Yangming did not contemplate the correlation of these terms in analogy to Plotinus’s *hierarchy* of qualitative dimensions of reality (nature “below” soul etc.). We have seen (see chapter 1) that intentionality/will(ing) and the characterizing nature appear to be juxtaposed aspects of *one and the same “level-free” dimension of a meta-cognitive subject-objectivity* (also analysed in Bartosch (2015b, 390–424)).

Besides, the aforesaid also includes the reason why I am refusing to translate “*xing* 行” as “action”.⁷⁴ To show the inseparability with the “knowing” (*zhi* 知), it is better

72 Source text: “必有欲行之心.然後知路.即是意.即是行之始矣.” Cf. also Bartosch (2015b, 586).

73 Cf. also the detailed analyses in Bartosch (2015b, 184–90, 390–424).

74 Unfortunately, the expression “*zhi-xing he yi*” is often translated as “unity of knowledge and action” in English. In my opinion, this unrefined mode of expression obstructs access to the subtlety of

to translate “*xing*” (in a more pronounced way) as “actively passing through”. This also helps to show transversal correspondences with Plotinus’s understanding of the unity of “contemplation” (*theōria*) and its “expressed principle” (*lógos*) in the active process of the self-realization or unfoldment of everything. Also in Plotinus’s view, the knowing (implicit or explicit *theōria*) is inseparable from its “actively passing through”, namely in the sense of a self-expressing principle which is at the core of all life:

How, then, while the expressed principle [*lógos*] produces that is, produces in this way, could it attain to any kind of contemplation? In fact, if it produces while remaining, that is, both remaining in itself and an expressed principle, it would itself be contemplation. For action [*práxis* *πραξις*] would occur in accordance with an expressed principle being clearly different from it; but the expressed principle, which accompanies action and looks after it, would not be action. Then, if it is not action but an expressed principle, it is contemplation. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.3, 358)⁷⁵

Also in the sense of Wang Yangming, “*xing* 行” cannot of course merely be viewed as “action” in contrast to cognitive processes. On the contrary, the “integrated activity” (another possible translation term for “*xing*”) is expressing the “knowing” (*zhi* 知, see also chapter 1) in the form of “actively passing through” (*xing*) “things” (*wu*) (to be taken as situations and processual affairs which might or might not include (processual) objects)—without being “exterior” to, respectively, without ever being apart from the knowing. As in the process of a master-calligrapher at work, the knowledge and its realization perpetually coincide in the act. While, to explicitly think in the transverse here, the calligrapher and his knowing (as the condition of the possibility of his performance) represent the aspect of (1) “*monē*” (the “dwelling”⁷⁶) or “*principium*” (principle), (2) the integrated realization or actualization of (1) represents the “*próodos*” (processional path) as the *medium*—which nurtures the self-knowledge of the calligrapher in the act, namely in the sense of the “return” (*epistrophē*), respectively, as the “*finis*” (end/goal), which is, to switch back to Chinese terminology, permanently reached *as long as one is in touch with the deepest core of the “self”* (*ji* 己). From this transversal angle, one might also add that the implicate-logical unity of knowing and the known (Plotinus: thinking of

Wang Yangming’s understanding in this context. The German translation of “*xing* 行” as “*tätiges Durchlaufen*” (Bartosch 2015b, 529) provides an example of a better solution.

75 Source text: “Πῶς οὖν ποιῶν καὶ οὕτω ποιῶν θεωρίας τινὸς ἂν ἐφάπτοίτο; Ἡ, εἰ μένων ποιεῖ καὶ ἐν αὐτ[ῷ] μένων καὶ ἐστὶ λόγος, εἴη ἂν αὐτὸς θεωρία. Ἡ μὲν γὰρ πράξις γένοιτ’ ἂν κατὰ λόγον ἑτέρα οὕσα δηλονότι τοῦ λόγου· ὁ μὲντοι λόγος καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ συνὼν τῇ πράξει καὶ ἐπιστατῶν οὐκ ἂν εἴη πράξις. Εἰ οὖν μὴ πράξις ἀλλὰ λόγος, θεωρία.” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] ἢ [8], brackets DB).

76 In this context, Heidegger’s remarks on “the dwelling” also come to mind.

thinking) comes about more “colourful”, practical, and less abstract on the Chinese side. The body is more involved.

This leads us to the following question: If the “heart-mind” (*xin*) and its world-emerging meta-cognitive productivity can be compared to the dimension of “soul” (*psychē*), what could then be viewed as the “functional equivalent” to the more “pre-somatic” “intellect” (*noûs*) and the “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs noēsis*)? In my opinion, we can draw insight from the following passage in this regard:

This “heart-mind’s root-system of vitality” (*zhe xin zhi bentì*) is the (undivided) “source of Heaven’s self-organizing principle” (*yuan zhi shì ge tianlì*)—(it presents) an *origin* which is never without appropriateness. This indeed is your “true self” (*zhen jì*). This true self is the master of the [living and mortal] body-shell. If there were no true self, indeed there would be no body-shell. True is this: to have it means to be alive, to be without means death. (Wang 1933a, 34, tr., italics, insertions in brackets DB)⁷⁷

In contrast to the aforementioned “surface-level” of finite experience, which is constantly being actualized by the heart-mind (*xin*) in the sense of a subjective mode of reflexivity, the term “Heaven’s self-organizing principle” (*tianlì*) illustrates its objective aspects, for example, manifesting itself as the movement of the celestial bodies or in the sense of seasonal changes (e.g. Wang Shouren 1933b, 59–60). It is well known that Wang Yangming’s opponent Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) had separated those two aspects. In short: he had subordinated that which he confined as a purely subjective element of the “human heart-mind” (*renxin* 人心) to the objective process(es) of the “self-organizing principle(s)” (*lì*) in all things and situations (Bartosch 2015b, 164–73).

For Wang Yangming, the “root-system of vitality” (*bentì*) of each *subjective* “window” of the “heart-mind” (*xin*) (as an unfolding process) and the “source” (*yuan* 原) of the *objective noumenon*⁷⁸ of an all-pervading “self-organizing principle of Heaven” (*tianlì*) are *identical* (see the first sentence of the passage). Wang Yangming has also put this in the more commonly known following short formula: “The heart-mind is exactly the self-organizing principle (*xin jì lì*)” (Wang Shouren 1933a, 2, tr. DB).⁷⁹

77 Source text: “這心之本體。原只是箇天理。原無非禮。這箇便是汝之真己。這箇真己。是軀殼的主宰。若無真己。便無軀殼。真是有之即生。無之即死。”

78 Wang Yangming also defines the reality of *lì* 理 as the appearance of an all-pervading unity in the self-organizing process of consciousness and world-experience (as a particular structure of subject-objectivity): “理一而已。以其理之凝聚而言。則謂之性。以其凝聚之主宰而言。則謂之心。以其主宰之發動而言。則謂之意。以其發動之明覺而言。則謂之知。以其明覺之感應而言。則謂之物” (Wang Shouren 1933b, 70–71; also Bartosch 2015b, 390–424).

79 Source text: “心即理也。”

As already stated in view of Yangming's model of consciousness in the preceding chapter, this expresses the same implicate-logical form as the Plotinian "thinking of thinking" (*noēseōs nóēsis*). As in Plotinus's reference to intellection, the subject and the object in the unity, the knowing/the knower and the known, are *self-reflected* as *identical*: the mere objectivizing reflection of the difference between the two aspects turns into the more profound self-reflection of the underlying uniting connection that enables the reflection of difference. The foundational level ("root-system of vitality" (*benti*)) of the *thinking and perceiving subject* ("heart-mind" (*xin*)) and the "source" (*yuan*) of the respective *object* of the finite, personal perspective on the "surface"⁸⁰ of the heart-mind (which is perceived and known as a representation of its "self-organizing principle" (*li*)) are intuited as *identical through their difference*: the self-reflecting consciousness is elevated into its original state — subject-objectivity. In the sense of Plotinus, this means perfect *epistrophic* "contemplation" (*theōria*).

Historically speaking, Wang Yangming had a first insight of this⁸¹ during one historical moment of the year 1508. This happened during a phase of his life when he was forced to live in a remote place in Guizhou province in southwest China. This existential "aha-experience" is known as his *wu Dao* 悟道, his "finding of the Way"-moment, as *the original unity of the unity and difference* of the subjective and the objective, *xin* and *li*, knower and known (situation, process).

In the last quote further above, Yangming also referred to this same foundation of heart-mind and (self-)organizing principle as the "true self" (*zhen ji*), and he has identified it as *the life-providing origin* per se. From our perspective this is important. In a transversal view of Plotinus, this universally life-bearing "true self" provides an exact *functional* equivalent to the highest form of pure "contemplation" (*theōria*) of the (transpersonal/cosmic) "intellect" (*noús*). As it is indirectly receiving the One, the (cosmic) "intellect" is not only viewed as the *conditio sine qua non* of all living processes, "[b]ut [as] [...] a contemplation that is alive, not an object of contemplation like that in another" (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.8, 363, italics, insertions in brackets DB).⁸²

This life [...] is more clear and is the primary Life and primary Intellect, and these are one. And so the first life is intellection [*nóēsis*], and the

80 I have discussed this topic in Bartosch (2015b, 88–91). One can also infer the two major levels or dimensions of the "heart-mind" (*xin*) from the expression "*xin zhi bent* 心之本體".

81 This moment could also be explained "translatively" as a self-manifestation of the same implicate-logical (meta-)form that underlies the Plotinian "thinking of thinking" (*noēseōs nóēsis*). In Yangming's case, it is of course displayed in the form of Neo-Confucian terminology.

82 Source text: "τοῦτο δὲ ἐστὶ θεωρία ζῶσα, οὐ θεώρημα, οἷον τὸ ἐν ἀλλ[φ]" (Plotinos n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8], insertion in brackets DB).

second life is a second kind of intellection, and the last life is a final form of intellection. And so all life is of this kind and is intellection. People might perhaps say that there are different kinds of life, though they do not say these are different kinds of intellection, but rather that some are instances of intellection, others not intellection at all, doing this because they do not investigate what life in general is. But we really must point out the following, that our argument demonstrates once again that all beings are a by-product of contemplation [*theōria*]. So, if the truest life is life with intellection, and this is identical with the truest intellection, then the truest intellection is alive, *and contemplation and the object of the highest kind of contemplation are alive and are life, and the two are together one.* (Ibid., 3.8.8, 364, insertion in brackets and italics DB)⁸³

The “true self” (*zhen ji*) is identical with the “root-system of vitality of the heart-mind” (*xin zhi benti* 心之本體)—which is identical with the “source” (*yuan* 原) of all (living and non-living) forms, things, and situations brought forth in the omnipresent transformations of the “(self-)organizing principle of Heaven” (*tianli*). Therefore, it is the general life principle.

While the “heart-mind” (*xin*) is the “master of the body” (*shen zhi zhu* 身之主) in the sense of our own respective body and our subjective perspective on it (Wang Shouren 1933b, 44, tr. DB),⁸⁴ the “true self” is the master of the “body-shell” (*quqiao* 軀殼) in the most universal (subject-object-related) sense. In this regard, the mastery of the true self (as the implicate-logical unity of unity and difference of the subjective, respectively, objective “surfaces” of the heart-mind and the (self-)organizing principle of Heaven) over the living processes resembles that of the highest form of intellection (*noēsis*). The *subordinate* mastery of the heart-mind over the individual’s “body” (*shen*), respectively, all living “things” (*wu*) implies a certain “vicinity” to the functional status of the Plotinian “soul” (*psychē*), at least in this life-bestowing perspective.⁸⁵

83 Source text: “Ἡ δὲ ἐναργεσττέρα· αὐτὴ καὶ πρώτη ζωὴ καὶ πρώτος νοῦς εἷς. Νόησις οὖν ἡ πρώτη ζωὴ καὶ ζωὴ δευτέρα νόησις δευτέρα καὶ ἡ ἐσχάτη ζωὴ ἐσχάτη νόησις. Πᾶσα οὖν ζωὴ τοῦ γένους τούτου καὶ νόησις. Ἀλλὰ ζωῆς μὲν ἴσως διαφορὰς τάχ' ἂν λέγοιεν ἄνθρωποι, νοήσεων δὲ οὐ λέγουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὰς μὲν, τὰς δ' ὅλως οὐ νοήσεις, ὅτι ὅλως τὴν ζωὴν ὃ τι ποτὲ ἐστὶν οὐ ζητοῦσιν. Ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνό γε ἐπισημαντέον, ὅτι πάλιν αὖ ὁ λόγος πάρεργον ἐνδείκνυται θεωρίας τὰ πάντα ὄντα. Εἰ τοίνυν ἡ ζωὴ ἡ ἀληθεστάτη νοήσει ζωὴ ἐστὶν, αὐτὴ δὲ ταῦτόν τῃ ἀληθεστάτῃ νοήσει, ἡ ἀληθεστάτη νόησις ζῆι καὶ ἡ θεωρία καὶ τὸ θεώρημα τὸ τοιοῦτο ζῶν καὶ ζωὴ καὶ ἐν ὁμοῦ τὰ δύο.” (Plotinos n.d., Γ' [3] η' [8])

84 Source text: “心者·身之主也。”

85 I am putting the transversal problem horizon of subjectivity into brackets here, it is part of another, upcoming investigation.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Wang Yangming chose the term “*ji* 己”, because, in view of ancient sources, “the *ji* [己] self is one of the least somatic aspects of a person’s identity, and it is far less material than, for example, the *xing* 形 form, which is the physical frame, shape, or mass of the body” (Sommer 2012, 19).

At least in view of basic differences, it is important to note that Yangming is *not* an “Idealist” in the (Neo-)Platonic sense: what takes the place of the *explanatory function* of the “matter” (*hylē*) of existing things and objects here, that is, *mutatis mutandis*, “fluidum”/“matter-energy” (*qi* 氣) is thought of as the *inseparable* “inverse” or “carrying flux” of organized thought (the two aspects being thought of as *two sides*, two opposite ends of a spectrum of *the same*)⁸⁶ and not as an evil “reverse”, which is not reached by thought, light, and therefore by the extensions of the “One-Good” (*agathón*) (in its hierarchical emanations of *theōria* declining in purity), as in the case of Plotinus’s views of physical matter.⁸⁷

On the other hand, however, one also has to take notice that the “good-knowing” (*liang zhi*), which matches the level of the “true self”, is defined as an “empty spirit” (*xu ling*) (see the respective quote in chapter 1). From our transversal angle, this leads us to a further, more “resonant” aspect:

“Good-knowing” (*liangzhi*) is the spiritual agent (*jingling*) of (an all-encompassing process of) “creative transformation” (*zaohua*). This spiritual agent brings forth heaven, gives birth to the earth, generates (earthly) “spirits” (*gui*), and is the cause of (heavenly) “deities” (*di*). Everything emanates from that: truly related to (all) things, but with no counterpart. (Wang Shouren 1933c, 15, tr. DB)⁸⁸

Although the “good-knowing” (*liang zhi*) is effective within everything, it is (in a logical sense) *before any experience*. In this sense, it stands in a certain *partial*⁸⁹ functional parallel to the explanatory function of the pure “contemplative dimension” of the Plotinian “intellect” (*noús*). Like the latter, the former has no limit and nothing besides itself, because it includes the possibility of all perfect developments. Even the “heart-mind” (*xin*) as a whole is still characterized by “[...] ‘emptiness’ (*xu*), [it is] ‘spiritual, bright, (self-)conscious’ (*lingming jue*). This is what is called the ‘root-condition’ (*benran* 本然) of its ‘good-knowing’ (*liangzhi*)” (Wang

86 For the background in the history of Chinese philosophy during the Song dynasty cf. also Bartosch (2015b, 182–83).

87 Regarding these, see fn. 44.

88 Source text: “良知是造化的精靈。這些精靈。生天生地。成鬼成帝。皆從此出。真是與物無對。”

89 I am putting the aforesaid difference into brackets here, of course.

Shouren 1933b, 44, tr. DB),⁹⁰ and “at [this] (very) root, heaven, earth, then ten thousand things and myself are one (meta-) system of vitality (*tian-di wan wu ben wu yi ti*)” (Wang Shouren 1933b, 76, tr. insertion in brackets DB).⁹¹

The non-manifest is the driving agent within all transformation. Apart from the aforesaid difference that Wang Yangming does not think in terms of an onto-noetic hierarchy (intellect, soul, nature, physical matter) and a related value-based vertical circle of self-realization (Proclus: *monē, pródos, epistrophē*), but (implicitly) in the sense of circularly coordinated model of consciousness (see chapter 1), there is another partial resonance of meanings: As “nature” (*phýsis*) (as an emergence of cosmic *theōria*) produces “not by hands and must therefore remain entire” (see the first quote in this chapter), so is the “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), or with an alternative term, our “spiritual brightness” (*lingming*) actual *within that* which springs forth from it. “(If) heaven, earth, spirits, gods (and) the ten thousand things were to split apart (and) to withdraw from my spiritual brightness (*lingming*), there would be no more heaven, earth, spirits, gods, ten thousand things”⁹² (Wang Shouren 1933c, 33, tr. DB).

In this sense of the eminent function that consciousness plays in Yangming’s philosophy for the manifestation of all world-experience as such, the following passage therefore also transcends the realm of a mere “phenomenological” allusion to the problem of moral responsiveness.⁹³

The centre of (that which is) “not yet emerging” (*wei fa*)—this is the “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*): “no before (and no) after, (no) inside (and no) outside” (*wu qianhou neiwai*) “and thereby indivisibly representing one (meta-)system of vitality” (*er hunranyiti*)—[...] That (which is) not yet emerging “exists in the centre of that (which is) already emerging” (*zai yi fa zhi zhong*); and in the centre of that which is “already emerging” (*yi fa*), that which is not yet emerging never exists in distinction from it. That (which is) already emerging exists in the centre of that (which is) not yet emerging; and in the centre of that which is not yet emerging, that which is already emerging never exists in distinction from it: never being without movement and stillness and yet non-distinguishable in terms of movement and stillness. (Wang Shouren 1933b, 59, tr. DB)⁹⁴

90 Source text: “而心之虛靈明覺。即所謂本然之良知也。”

91 Source text (with context): “夫人者。天地之心。天地萬物本吾一體者也。”

92 Source text: “天地鬼神萬物離卻我的靈明。便沒有天地鬼神萬物了。”

93 Cf. also my comparative investigation on Yangming’s foundational, respectively, “implicate logic” (Bartosch 2022a) of a transformational creativity in Bartosch (2015b, 68–114).

94 Source text: “未發之中。即良知也。無前後內外。而渾然一體者也。[...]未發在已發之中。而已發

We can also say that least in a partial *functional* (transversal) resonance⁹⁵ with Plotinus's view,⁹⁶ Yangming also expresses the higher reality of an enlightened self-knowledge, which is unfolding, experiencing, while actively “bending itself back” (the original meaning of “reflexion”) to a universal source, the “true self” (*zhen ji*), at the same time:

The “emptiness of good-knowing” (*liangzhi zhi xu*) is precisely the “great void of Heaven” (*tian zhi taixu*). The “formlessness” (*wu*) of the good-knowing is exactly the “formless appearance” (*wu xing*) of the great void. Sun, moon, wind, thunder, mountains, rivers, peoples, the (the living and non-living) entities: all have appearance, form, shape, colour and all remain in the formlessness of the great void, emerging from its centre—effective, flowing, operating—never causing disruptions (or) blockages of the sky. (Wang Shouren 1933c, 16, tr. DB)⁹⁷

The philosophical enigma of the same “emptiness” (*xu* 虛) as the foundation of “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), which is also inherently present in *subjective* experience in an eminent way, and the unlimited, all-emanating *objective* “great void of Heaven” (*tian zhi taixu*) points towards the logical form of the *identity* of subject-object. Plotinus somehow alludes to this in his own affine way as well: “Intellect is not the intellect of one particular thing, but Intellect as a whole. And being Intellect as a whole, it is the Intellect of everything. And so since it is all Beings and belongs to all Beings even its part must possess all Beings” (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.8, 364).⁹⁸ And *vice versa*,

[...] there is nowhere where it is not, for those able to partake of it. For wherever you place that which is able to possess what is omnipresent, it is from there that you possess it. Just as when a voice fills an *empty space* or human beings, too, as well as the *space*, in *whatever part of the empty space*⁹⁹ [*erēmīā ēρημία*] *you place your ear you will receive the*

之中。未嘗別有未發者在。已發在未發之中。而未發之中。未嘗別有已發者存。是未嘗無動靜。而不可以動靜分者也。”

95 That is, with the above-stated general difference remaining.

96 Namely that of a superordinate non-materiality of “contemplation” in the sense of the subject-objective, intellectual “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs noēsis*).

97 Source text: “良知之虛。便是天之太虛。良知之無。便是太虛之無形。日月風雷。山川民物。凡有貌象形色。皆在太虛無形中發用流行。未嘗作得天的障礙。”

98 Source text: “Καὶ ἄλλως δὲ ὁ νοῦς οὐχ ἑνός τινος νοῦς, ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶς· πᾶς δὲ ὄν καὶ πάντων. Δεῖ οὖν αὐτὸν πάντα ὄντα καὶ πάντων καὶ τὸ μέρος αὐτοῦ ἔχειν πᾶν καὶ πάντα: [...]” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] ἡ’ [8]).

99 I agree to the decision of the translators of Plotinus (2018) to use the expression “empty space” in

voice as a whole and yet not all of it. (ibid., 3.8.9, 365, italics, insertion in brackets DB)¹⁰⁰

Wang Yangming’s identification of the “emptiness of good-knowing” (*liangzhi zhi xu*) and the “great void of Heaven” (*tian zhi taixu*) allude to the same *ineffable sameness* that Plotinus’s philosophical image of “empty space” (*erēmía*) is alluding to on this occasion—namely the very foundation of everything: an infinite unity *that is effective in all distinctions*,¹⁰¹ because it is the connection of all possible distinction at the same time, and because the *distinction is in itself without any distinction*: “*The line or boundary which draws all individual forms is in itself without any limit; it is in [itself] undivided*” (Bartosch 2021, 136, insertion DB).

This “implicate logic” (Bartosch, 2022a) of “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis*), namely the application of the distinction to itself, or, “containing itself” (Luhmann 2001, 245), which can also be formulated as the “unity of unity and difference” (Bartosch 2015b, e.g. 19), is implicitly hinting even beyond the logical position of Plotinus’s “intellect” (*noūs*)—it is alluding to the same foundational dimension, *the same boundless sameness*, here expressed in the (implicitly negating) meaning of an “emptiness of good-knowing” (*liangzhi zhi xu*) and (the *implicit* negation) in the term “great void of Heaven” (*tian zhi taixu*). This is because, with regard to grasping a further implication of Wang Yangming in this context, we have to think one step further: an emptiness within a great void is an “empty” opposition (of subject-object). It therefore only alludes toward an *absolute* sameness, that is, a highest foundation, which, as it is to be conceived of as boundless, all-encompassing, cannot be reached by means of mere conceptual (finalizing, definition-based) thinking.—Plotinus alludes to “this” *same* ineffable foundation in an absolute sameness by using the terms “*hén*” (the One) or “*agathón*” (the (highest) Good).

this particular philosophical context. More literal translations wouldn’t make any sense here.

100 Source text: “ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν, ὅπου μὴ ἔστιν, οἷς ἔστι μετέχειν αὐτοῦ. Τὸ γὰρ πανταχοῦ παρὸν στήσας ὅπου οὖν τὸ δυνάμενον ἔχειν ἔχεις ἐκείθεν· ὥσπερ εἰ φωνῆς κατεχούσης ἐρημίαν ἢ καὶ μετὰ τῆς ἐρημίας καὶ ἀνθρώπους ἐν ὅτι οὖν τοῦ ἐρήμου στήσας οἷς τὴν φωνὴν κομπεῖ πᾶσαν καὶ αὐτὸ οὐ πᾶσαν” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

101 Cf. also the following statement by Niklas Luhmann: “[The form] ‘is’ in any case *not only the boundary, it also contains the two sides that are separated by it*. It has, one could say, an open world reference, and perhaps this is underlying the enigmatic phrase ‘distinction is perfect continence’” (Luhmann 2001, 245, insertions, italics DB); cf. also Bartosch (2022a).

Oneness and Goodness as the Core-Insight of True Humanity

Another topical field to explore in a transversal-analytical perspective with regard to Plotinus and Wang Yangming is that of an absolute oneness in relation to morality in the sense of human self-perfection and the related self-knowledge. In comparison to earlier Greek thought, Plotinus's views on self-knowledge are rather special. Also under this background, they provide a great entrance point for transversal analysis of his and Yangming's thought. As Gwenaëlle Aubry has stated, earlier Platonic thinking and ancient Greek philosophy in general had nurtured the notion of a "self [which] was to be found not as much in the dimension of interiority and self-consciousness as in that of exteriority and manifestation" (Aubry 2020, 210).¹⁰² Plotinus, on the other hand, represents, as stressed by Aubry, a "singular position [...] in this context (ibid., 211)", because for him, "the precondition of self-knowledge is the conversion to [a form of] interiority[, which] [...] is not 'subjective', much less, 'intimate' [but] bears or contains the very principles of reality, from the One-Good to Nature" (ibid., 211, insertions in brackets DB). Furthermore, "Plotinus *does accept an immediate reflexivity*" (ibid., 212, italics DB).

Mutatis mutandis, very similar words can be used to describe Wang Yangming's general understanding of the foundations of self-knowledge. Recall the short passage that was quoted earlier, where the heart-mind is identified with *Dao* 道 as well as an entrance point "to know Heaven" (*zhi tian* 知天) (see footnote 65). And in one of the passages cited in the last chapter, we saw that the conversion to a form of interiority (the subjective "surface-level" of the heart-mind) is a precondition to establish and practice an insight, in which subjective *and* objective aspects of the "self" (*ji*) permanently coincide. For Wang Yangming, this "true self" (*zhen ji*) is not only the foundation for a higher experience of the world in the sense of a sort of self-processing subject-objectivity—*but of life* and of the related whole of "heaven and earth" (*tian-di*) itself.

The term "*zhen ji*" reflects the truth of a "known-and-practiced"¹⁰³ sameness and unison of "I" (*wu* 我, *wu* 吾) with "heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things" (*tian-di wan wu*) (see footnote 91). "To know Heaven" (*zhi tian*) in this sense can be understood in parallel to Plotinus's description of the "contemplation" (*theōria*) of the "intellect" (*noûs*), that is, as a form of true self-knowledge, namely, to say it again, as "*a contemplation that is alive*, not an object of contemplation like that in another" (see footnote 82). Plotinus emphasized that "[...] one should not be

102 Christopher Gill therefore characterized "the ancient [Greek] self as 'objective-participant' rather than 'subjective-individualist'" (quoted in Aubrey 2020, 211, insertion in brackets DB). One might also think of the famous analysis of ancient Greek literature by Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) in this regard.

103 In the sense of "*zhi-xing he yi*". See further above.

focused on one's heart's [selfish] desires but on the whole universe. Such a man gives other individuals the honour due to them and always strives for that object towards which all things capable of striving are directed [...]" (Plotinus 2018, 2.9.9, 222).¹⁰⁴

In parallel to this understanding of the possible self-perfection of consciousness that is mediated via the "intellect" (*nous*), we have seen that the "origin is never without appropriateness (*yuan wu fei li*)" (see the quote in chapter 2). If the "willing/intentionality" (*yi*) that is emitted by or radiating (*fadong*) from the heart-mind (see chapter 1) is congruent with *the immediate and intuitive directionality of its inherent and innate "good-knowing" (liangzhi)*, it is expressing its "root-system of vitality" (*benti*), respectively, the origin of the "self-organizing principle of Heaven" (*tianli*), and therefore: the universal "true self" (*zhen ji*). This is affine to the aforementioned "immediate reflexivity" (Aubrey 2020, 212) that Plotinus is emphasizing, when he says that the "Good" (*agathón*) is to be attained "by knowing it through immediate contact with it"¹⁰⁵ (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.10, 367). If the "willing/intentionality" (*yi*) is not congruent with the "good-knowing" (*liangzhi*) that all other life forms are participating as well, that is, if we are getting lost in "selfish desires" (*zisizili* 自私自利), our willing/intentionality is evoking "evil" (*e* 惡) (Bartosch 2015b, 679–706).¹⁰⁶

A comparable distinction with regard to the problem of good and evil can be made with regard to Plotinus's "soul" (*psychē*). It has already been compared to Wang Yangming's notion of the "heart-mind" (*xin*) further above. At this point, it can be added that Plotinus's "soul" is divided in an "upper" and "lower" part (Plotinus 2018, 2.9.2, 210–11).¹⁰⁷ The latter is related to the typical "entanglements" of human life, and it also includes the possibilities and actualities of immoral or evil human deeds. To become a better and happier human being (ibid., 1.4), one has to actively retreat to, that is, to focus one's consciousness in the "upper" echelons

104 Source text: "οὐ γὰρ πρὸς τὸ ἐκάστ[ω] καταθύμιον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸ πᾶν δεῖ βλέπειν· τιμῶν δὲ ἐκάστους κατ' ἄξια, σπεύδον δ' αἰεὶ οὐ πάντα σπεύδει τὰ δυνάμενα [...]" (Plotinos n.d., B' [2] θ' [9], brackets DB). Armstrong translates this passage as follows: "For one must not look at what is agreeable to the individual but to the All. A man who does this values individuals according to their worth, but presses on always to that goal to which all press on that can [...]" (Plotinus 1980, 263).

105 Source text: see fn. 81.

106 For an extended source passage in this regard cf. Wang Shouren (1933c, 7–8: "問. 先生嘗謂善惡只是一物. 善惡兩端. 如冰炭相反. 如何謂只一物. 先生曰. 至善者. 心之本體. 本體上才過當些子. 便是惡了. 不是有一箇善. 卻又有一箇惡來相對也. 故善惡只是一物. 直 因聞先生之說. 則知程子所謂善固性也. 惡亦不可不謂之性. 又曰. 善惡皆 天理. 謂之惡者. 本非惡. 但於本性上過與不及之間耳. 其說皆無可疑."

107 I am working on a further article to compare this with Wang Yangming's understanding of the terms "*daren* 大人" and "*xiaoren* 小人".

of the “soul” (*psychē*). Here one is able to “mirror” (Bartosch 2018a, 94) the higher constitutive principle of the “intellect” (*noûs*), which is, so to say, filtering and mediating the absolute goodness of the “One” (*hén*) (or the “One-Good”, to use Aubrey’s term).

Plotinus’s encouragement to “[c]ast yourself towards [the One] and [to] encounter it taking rest within it[, to] unite your thought with it more and more [...] by beholding its greatness through what comes after it and is caused by it”¹⁰⁸ (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.10, 367, insertions in brackets DB)—which, please note, doesn’t mean to retreat from one’s social environment and social activities here—sounds like a perfect supplement for Wang Yangming’s description of the practice of the “extension of good-knowing” (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知): “The phrase ‘to always be involved in a situation’ means to ‘gather sincerity’ (*ji yi* 集義); ‘gathering sincerity’ means the ‘extension of good-knowing’ (*zhi liangzhi*)” (Wang Shouren 1933b, 76, tr. DB).¹⁰⁹ (The good-knowing is thereby at the same time also to be understood in the sense that has been analysed in the last section of the second chapter.)

It is highly important to note that Plotinus’s use of the two terms “Good” (*agathón*) and “One” (*hén*) resonates with the later Wang Yangming’s understanding of the “root-system of the vitality of good-knowing” (*liangzhi bentí* 良知本體) not only as the source of all good events and activities of human beings, *but also as the foundation of the unity of the universe itself*. Thereby, “the root-system of vitality of the good-knowing is without movement and without stillness”¹¹⁰ (Wang Shouren 1933c, 15, tr. DB). In this trans-rational, “metaparadoxical” (Gloy 2001) *imply-licate-logical* (Bartosch 2022a) sense, the source of “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*) cannot be thought of by means of a simple either-or-distinction between “good” (*shan* 善) and “evil” (*e* 惡). Like Plotinus’s “Good” (*agathón*) (Plotinus 2018, 5.5.13, 596), Yangming’s “good-knowing” is good in a supra-ethical way (Schweitzer 2002, 274).¹¹¹ While the “Good” (*agathón*) or, as it is possible to speak interchangeably in this particular respect, the “root-system of the vitality of good-knowing” (*liangzhi bentí*), is always providing the *same absolutely good directionality*—and like the Neo-Platonists, Yangming has made use of the metaphor of sunlight in this regard! (Bartosch 2015b, 336, 339)—the *distinction* between “good” (*shan*) and “evil” (*e*) comes into play only *in a derived (and different) sense here*, namely as soon as

108 Source text: “Καὶ βαλὼν πρὸς αὐτὸ καὶ τυχὼν ἐντὸς αὐτοῦ ἀναπαυσάμενος συννοεῖ μᾶλλον τῆι προσβολῇ συνείης, συνορῶν δὲ τὸ μέγα αὐτοῦ τοῖς μετ’ αὐτὸ δι’ αὐτὸ οὖσιν” (Plotinus n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8]).

109 Source text: “夫必有事焉。只是集義。集義只是致良知。”

110 Source text: “良知本體。原是無動無靜的。”

111 One might also think of the characterization of the “heart-mind’s system of vitality” (*xin zhi ti* 心之體) as without goodness and without evil in Wang Yangming’s famous Four-Sentence-Teaching: “無善無惡。是心之體” (Wang Shouren 1933c, 26).

that directionality of *liangzhi* is not actualized by the “will(ing)” (*yi*) in the earlier-mentioned sense (see chapter 1 on Yangming’s model of consciousness and the third last paragraph here). In that case, “evil” (*e*) is present in the sense of a selfish aberration from the “Way” (*dao*).

In the context of their uses of the words “Good” (*agathón*) or “One” (*hén*), respectively, “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*), “Way” (*Dao*), and so on, both thinkers are faced with the transversal (permeable) problem horizon of ineffability, which marks our last point to discuss here:

In the case of the virtuous person’s soul, that which is known approaches becoming identical with the substrate which contemplates, inasmuch as it hastens to Intellect. In Intellect, it is clear that the two are already one not by appropriation, as in the case of the best soul, but in Substantiality because “thinking and Being are *identical*”. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.8, 363, italics DB)¹¹²

To point at this identity in the *unity of the unity and difference* of the knower and the known, of subject-object in the self-knowing state of “thinking of thinking” (*noēseōs nóēsis*), Plotinus is using his semantic “pointing rods” (*Zeigestäbe*) (Scheler 1921, 546, tr. DB) “*agathón*” and “*hén*”. Like the terms “Way” (*Dao*) and (when used in a universal sense) “Heaven” (*tian*) in Wang Yangming’s thought, they are both to be viewed as *cataphatic*¹¹³ philosophical terms, that is, as “performative act[s] of the ineffable” (Bartosch 2015b, 276, tr. DB). The adjective “cataphatic” means that both actually allude to the same unsurmountable inexpressibility of that which is to be revealed not by means of explicit negation but by using a particular expression in a supra-conceptual fashion, that is, in the sense of *implicit* infinite negation (ibid., 275):

For this reason, when you have uttered [the word] “the Good”, don’t make any mental additions. For if you add anything, you will make that to which you have added something deficient. For this reason, *don’t, then, even add thinking so as not to make it into something else and make it two* [...]. (Plotinus 2018, 3.8.11, 367, italics, insertion in brackets DB)

Wang Yangming’s use of the term “good-knowing” (*liangzhi*) in the following passage presents itself in a very similar form of a “logic of ineffability” (Bartosch 2015b, 233–300, “*Logik der Ineffabilität*”); at least in certain passages like these,

112 Source text: “ἐπὶ τῆς σπουδαίας ψυχῆς πρὸς τὸ αὐτὸ τῷ ὑποκειμέν[ω] ἰόντων τῶν ἐγνωσμένων ἄτε εἰς νοῦν σπευδόντων, ἐπὶ τούτου δηλονότι ἤδη ἐν ἄμφο οὐκ οικειώσει, ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τῆς ψυχῆς τῆς ἀρίστης, ἀλλ’ οὐσία καὶ τ[ῶ] ταῦτὸν τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὸ νοεῖν εἶναι” (Plotinos n.d., Γ’ [3] η’ [8], insertions in brackets DB).

113 Regarding the use of this term as a comparative category cf. Bartosch (2015b, 273).

Wang Yangming's word use can be defined as cataphatic in the above-mentioned sense (*ibid.*, 255, 296–300):

Once there was a “master of Chan” (*chanshi* 禪師). People came to ask for the method (of the Buddha). In response, he just lifted a feather duster. One day, his students hid his feather duster. They were curious in what way he would demonstrate the method (of the Buddha). The Chan master was looking for his feather duster, but could not find it, so he raised his empty hand. My (remarks on) “good-knowing” (*liang zhi*) (can be compared to) the demonstration of the method by means of the feather duster. What else could I raise besides this (expression)? (Wang Shouren 1933c, 19, tr. DB)¹¹⁴

From the perspective of oneness and goodness as the foundations of true humanity, the *expressed ineffability* in both cases of Plotinus and Wang Yangming implies that we have to direct all of our efforts towards our shared “blind spot” (Jahraus 2001, 321) of absolute *sameness*—which is not only present throughout all distinction but is the foundation of every distinction and every “thing”: as the blind spot of all expressibility, it is supposed to be *self*-reflected as the foundation of the origin of unity in the “intellect” (*noûs*) as well as its origin of a directionality for good-doing (as its derived manifestation). Like the “source” (*yuan*) of the “true self” (*zhen ji*), which is identical with the “Way” (*Dao*) that cannot be properly expressed in words¹¹⁵ (Wang Shouren 1933b, 60, tr. DB), this sameness is then actualized by way of reflecting the principle of the intellect from the (subordinate) highest part of the “soul” (*psychê*)—which, again, stands in parallel to the “extension of the good-knowing” (*zhi liangzhi*) as the most important task of the human “heart-mind” (*xin*). Rather indirectly, Plotinus's thought—and with it, from a transversal systematic perspective Wang Yangming's as well—can be related to Nicolaus Cusanus's (1401–1464) statement that to realize divine goodness one should always unfold one's path of action through “the middle of sameness (*aequalitatis medio*)” (Nicolai de Cusa 1972, 182, tr. DB): “But you see that in this equality that has already been mentioned all virtue itself is enfolded and that no virtue can come to be except through the participation in this [absolute] *sameness*”¹¹⁶ (*ibid.*, tr., insertion in brackets DB).¹¹⁷

114 Source text: “昔有禪師·人來問法·只把塵尾提起·一日·其徒將其塵尾藏過·試他如何設法·禪師尋塵尾不見·又只空手提起·我這箇良知就是設法的塵尾·舍了這箇·有何可提得。”

115 Source text (with context): “在知道者默而識之·非可以言語窮也。”

116 Source text: “Vides autem in ea ipsa aequalitate iam dicta omnem moralem complicari virtutem nec virtutem esse posse, nisi in huius aequalitatis participatione existat.”

117 With Goethe, one might also put it as follows: “[...] *il faut croire à la simplicité!* In German: one has

Conclusion and Outlook

The present investigation has uncovered central aspects of Plotinus's and Wang Yangming's philosophies, which at least partly resonate with each other from a transversal perspective. These "resonances" also exist because both thinkers started from comparable problems and from there, in certain respects, also developed comparable¹¹⁸ solutions in view of the respective general topics. This is remarkable, because both thinkers were not influenced by the other's historical traditions of philosophy. There are no historical correlations. Nevertheless, we find certain similarities when analysing the two philosophies transversally. These commonalities, which have been introduced here, provide a necessary foundation for the development of a further, complementing train of thought that will allow us to put more emphasis on particular contentual differences. Thus, I plan to explore the differences with regard to Plotinus's views on "matter" (*hylē*) and Wang Yangming's understanding of "fluidum/matter-energy" (*qi*) as well as both thinkers' "extended" views on subjectivity and transpersonal connection or, if I may say so, the "We in I" in a future investigation from here.¹¹⁹ Last not least, I believe that reflections like the ones in the present paper can serve as inspirations for the future development of more sophisticated East-West perspectives, for example, in the field of modern process philosophy. They provide further hints and also historical foundations for a modern process cosmology with a global outlook under a transversal background of as many historical roots and useful, to-be-further-developed ideas as possible. It is an important and urgent task *to work on a global philosophy of nature and sustainability*, which includes the best and most useful perspectives of as many ancient wisdom traditions of mankind as possible.

to believe in simplicity, the most simple, (one has to) believe in that which is 'the most ancient and ever-lasting agent of (all) productivity' (*das urständig Productive*), if one wants to acquire the right way. But not everybody is given this (chance to realize this); we are born into an artificial state (of existence) and it is indeed easier 'to make it more and more artificial in more complex ways' (*diesen immer mehr zu bekünsteln*) than to return to the simple (way)" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe quoted in Bartosch 2019, 58, tr., italics DB).

118 In the sense of the possibility to compare similarities and, as we have seen, differences too.

119 We have already seen that the subjective or finite personal perspective of the heart-mind is grounded in the intersubjective foundation of "ren 仁", respectively, "fu-zi zhi ai" (see ch. 1). In a different, yet therefore comparable way (in the sense of comparability), Plotinus has reflected on the problem of the correlation of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in the context of his philosophy.

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SPECIAL ISSUE

*TRANSCULTURAL (POST)COMPARATIVE
PHILOSOPHY, PART 2*

*Philosophical Dialogues between East Asia and
Europe: From Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond*

*Philosophical Comparison between European
and Japanese Philosophy*

Deleuze and the Kyoto School II: Ethico-aesthetics

Jay HETRICK*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to bring Gilles Deleuze and the Kyoto School into an imaginary conversation around the idea of philosophy as a way of life, or what I call ethico-aesthetics. I first show how ethico-aesthetics in the Kyoto School modernizes the traditional notion of *geidō*, or ways of art, through the language of continental philosophy. Even though the discourse they construct in this respect remains less rigorous than that of the other domains of philosophy with which they engage, the ethico-aesthetic concepts of Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, and Ōhashi Ryōsuke provide a starting point from which we might begin to piece together Deleuze's seemingly random, but persistent and ultimately significant references to East Asian art and philosophy. I argue that Deleuze's references to the Zen sage and poet-painter—in addition to his uses of the Stoics, Spinoza, and Nietzsche—are necessary to fully understand the immanent goal of his ethico-aesthetics. I conclude by demonstrating that, although there is no evidence that Deleuze was familiar with the Kyoto School, he unwittingly offers more complete and contemporary solutions to the ethico-aesthetic issues presented by some of its key thinkers.

Keywords: Gilles Deleuze, Kyoto School, ethics, aesthetics, comparative philosophy

Deleuze in kjotska šola II: etična estetika

Izveček

Namen tega prispevka je pripeljati Gillesa Deleuza in kjotsko šolo v namišljen pogovor o ideji filozofije kot načina življenja oziroma tega, kar avtor članka imenuje etična estetika. Avtor najprej pokaže, kako je etična estetika v kjotski šoli modernizirala tradicionalni pojem *geidō*, ki pomeni pot umetnosti, skozi jezik kontinentalne filozofije. Čeprav diskurz, ki ga kjotska šola konstruira v tem pogledu, ostaja manj temeljit kot diskurz o drugih področjih filozofije, s katerimi se je ta ukvarjala, pa etičnoestetski koncepti, ki so jih vpeljali Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji in Ōhashi Ryōsuke, ponujajo izhodišče, iz katerega je mogoče izpeljati Deleuzove na videz naključne, a stalne in nazadnje pomembne reference na vzhodnoazijsko umetnost in filozofijo. Avtor članka zagovarja stališče, da so Deleuzove reference na koncept zenovskega modreca in pesnika-slikarja, poleg njegove

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vključitve stoikov, Spinoze in Nietzscheja, potrebne za celovito razumevanje imanentnega cilja njegove etične estetike. V zaključku članka avtor pokaže, da čeprav ni dokazov, da je bil Deleuze seznanjen s kjotsko šolo, le-ta nehoti ponuja bolj dovršene in sodobnejše rešitve za etičnoestetska vprašanja, ki so jih predstavili nekateri njeni ključni misleci.

Ključne besede: Gilles Deleuze, kjotska šola, etika, estetika, primerjalna filozofija

Introduction

This paper presents a comparative analysis—between Gilles Deleuze and the Kyoto School—of Pierre Hadot’s notion that philosophy is fundamentally a “way of life”, albeit one that is “intimately linked to philosophical discourse” (Hadot 2002, 4). For the Kyoto School, this involves a self-reflective “investigation of the self” from the standpoint of Zen (Nishitani 1984, 1) in which speculation is grounded upon methods of cultivation (ibid., 22) that are largely based on Japanese aesthetic practices (*geidō*, ways of art), especially painting, poetry, and calligraphy. Similarly, for Deleuze, ethics—a set of rules for facilitating “new possibilities of life”—entails existing no longer as “a subject but as a work of art”, and “presents thought as artistry” (Deleuze 1995, 95). I follow Félix Guattari, Deleuze’s collaborator, in calling this intimate intertwining ethico-aesthetics (Guattari 1995). Although it is well known that Deleuze builds his non-normative ethics from particular readings of the Stoics, Spinoza, and Nietzsche, I argue that the Zen master (Deleuze 1990, 248), specifically as a poet-painter (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 280), provides an equally important—and indeed more concrete—example for what his ethico-aesthetics might mean in practice. Furthermore, there is a way in which Deleuze privileges East Asian art and philosophy for the construction of his ethico-aesthetics, since his writings are full of curious and, as yet, unanalysed statements such as:

Cross the wall, the Chinese perhaps, but at what price? At the price of becoming-animal, becoming-flower or rock, and beyond that a strange becoming-imperceptible. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 187)¹

While this sounds naive and superficial, I show that an understanding of becoming-imperceptible—the immanent aim of his ethico-aesthetics—depends upon an idiosyncratic use of East Asian thought. Even though there is no evidence that

1 Although such references have been noted, they have been largely overlooked. “It would be interesting to study the terminological links and also the philosophical implications of [Deleuze and Guattari’s] thought with Mahāyāna Buddhism.” (Berardi 2008, 99) Elsewhere, I provide a methodological framework for thinking about Deleuze and the Kyoto School (Hetrick 2023).

Deleuze was familiar with the Kyoto School, they do share a certain philosophical lineage including Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and William James.² Nonetheless, it is remarkable that—from these seemingly tenuous connections—Deleuze unwittingly offers more complete and contemporary solutions to the ethico-aesthetic issues presented by Nishida Kitarō: the relation between *muga* (no-self) and the poet-painter’s brush stroke; Nishitani Keiji: the expression of *kū* (emptiness), life, and death through art; and Ōhashi Ryōsuke: the concept of *kire* (cut), which brings these issues together. Unfortunately, we do not yet have a comprehensive analysis of Kyoto School aesthetics that traces the connections between these concepts without falling into a version of Romanticism. This is what I attempt to sketch out in the first section of the paper.

Ethico-aesthetics in the Kyoto School

Like many of the post-Kantian philosophers that Nishida Kitarō admired, he was himself interested in art as a necessary supplement, or even a corrective, to the project of philosophy. In his “mature, detailed work” on aesthetics (Viglielmo 1971, 556)—*Art and Morality*—Nishida states that “just as art demands philosophy, so, too, does philosophy demand art” (Nishida 1973, 97). Indeed, some critics have argued that his thinking about art bears striking resemblances to that of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Schlegel, and Novalis (Wilkinson 2007; Marra 2010). This commitment to art and aesthetics spans Nishida’s entire career, and he frequently returned to concrete artistic examples in order to bolster the nuances of his theories at key moments. That is, although he does not develop a philosophy of art as such, a deep concern for art and aesthetics is “intertwined with his entire philosophical project” (Iwaki 2001, 260). Furthermore, just as he developed a meditation practice early on, Nishida developed his own calligraphic practice in order to empirically ground the more speculative side of his philosophy. However, he held that artistic practice could more adequately embody his idea of pure experience than meditation. “Although Nishida’s ‘pure experience’ originates in Zen it could not be clarified by Zen. . . . Nishida searched for a way out in art. This is what he meant by the expression ‘a delicate stroke of the artist’s brush shows the true meaning of the whole’” (ibid., 267). Ultimately, for Nishida, the space of art is seen as a privileged site for the expression of his concept of absolute nothingness, in which pure experience eradicates the distinction between subject and object. This is, in part, due to the fact that in Nishida’s aesthetics, *aisthesis* is highlighted

2 For excellent introductions to the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and the Kyoto School see Hallward (2006) and Heisig (2001), respectively.

as a specific capacity of cognition on par with, or even superseding, that of reason. But artistic sensation is not fundamentally different from everyday sensation. “Pure feeling, pure consciousness, is always aesthetic” (Nishida 1973, 15). This attitude is not unique to Nishida but can be traced to the Japanese appropriation of the science of aesthetics in the late 19th century in which the concept of *koko-ro*—“thinking inside the heart”—functioned as an important heuristic. “When it comes to Japanese discussions of knowledge and perception, it may be more accurate to begin from the motto *sentio, ergo sum* (I feel, therefore I am)” (Marra 2011, 1168). However, unlike Nishida’s mature metaphysical thought, his appeal to art ultimately lacks a critical edge and sometimes even dips into the worst type of Romanticism:

The artist becomes nature itself. If we consider that the visual act itself is the flow of one great *élan vital*, then art is the overflow of the surge of that greater life that cannot flourish completely within the channels of the ordinary eye. (Nishida 1973, 27)

Here, with his appeal to the concept of *élan vital*, we find Nishida incorrectly employing Henri Bergson to articulate a vision of oceanic oneness with nature. The main issue to contend with is that, while Nishida tried to express his key concepts of absolute nothingness in staunchly post-Kantian language, it is curious why he would choose such weak Romanticism to articulate the experience of art, even as he elevates it to the highest level of truth.

Furthermore, while the experience of absolute nothingness becomes increasingly clothed in Nishida’s use of Western philosophical terms—especially those of Hegel³—he clearly prefers Japanese art and aesthetics to its Western counterpart, since the former is more adequate to the Mahāyāna concept of *śūnyatā*: “the distinctive quality of Japanese aesthetics, but also that of all Eastern aesthetics, is grounded in the idea of nothingness” (Nishida 1970, 249). Therefore beyond his metaphysics, and in terms of his ethico-aesthetics, Nishida relied not on the practices of Zen nor that of Western art, but rather the East Asian ways of art—particularly painting, drawing, and calligraphy—in order to ground his philosophy in “Eastern experience”.

So long as Nishida remained in the realm of Western thought, there was no way for him to return to Eastern experience. Eastern art, and the language surrounding it, helped Nishida steer clear of this difficulty, moving once again toward the discursive space of the East. (Iwaki 2001, 280)

3 For a detailed discussion on Nishida’s appropriation of Hegel see Hetrick (2022a).

Western artistic practices, with their logic of the “monumental ... and aggressive mastery of space”, are not sufficient for expressing absolute nothingness, as Nishida explains in his late essay “Artistic Creation as an Act of Historical Formation” (quoted in Wirth 2011, 292). Rather, he identifies the East Asian arts of the brush as the forms of expression most adequate to the formlessness of absolute nothingness, since they involve not merely the mimetic production of images, but ethico-aesthetic practices in which “the whole body must become a living power”. It is only with this type of “aesthetic activity” that one enters into “true reality” (Nashida 1973, 104).

Zen calligraphy is a free expression of *mushin* ... the active self-predication of absolutely nothing, which therefore does not chiefly express a conscious, goal-oriented striving on the part of the calligrapher-agent, but rather the coming-to-expression of one’s “original face”. (Wirth 2011, 294)

In one of his earliest essays, “An Explanation of Beauty”, Nishida defines aesthetic experience by more or less conflating the Kantian idea of disinterested pleasure with “the ecstatic self-effacement” (Odin 2017, 45) of *mushin* (no-mind) or *muga* (no-self):

According to the explanation of German Idealism since Kant, the sense of beauty is pleasure detached from the ego. It is a pleasure of the moment, when one forgets one’s own interest such as advantage and disadvantage, gain and loss. Only this *muga* is the essential element of beauty. (Nishida 1987a, 216)

Steve Odin has compared this artistic expression of *muga* to the aesthetic ideals of Schopenhauer, the so-called “Buddha of Frankfurt” (Schirmacher 2010, x). Odin argues that, even though “Nishida does not make reference to Schopenhauer” in this essay, “one can clearly see the influence of Schopenhauer’s aesthetics on Nishida’s early concept of beauty” (Odin 2017, 48). He also claims that, in *An Inquiry into the Good*, “Nishida makes reference to Schopenhauer’s ‘pure intuition without will’ in relation to his own idea of ‘intellectual intuition’” (ibid., 49). The problem with this claim is that the idea of intellectual intuition is not robustly theorized and deployed in the works of either Nishida or Schopenhauer. Rather, it is a major concept in the tradition of German Idealism, which is cited by name in “An Explanation of Beauty”, and which is represented in this chapter of *An Inquiry into the Good* only by the figure of Friedrich Schelling. In fact, Schopenhauer is barely cited in this book at all. It is clear that the aesthetic experience of *muga* involves a self-effacement of the

ego, or what Schopenhauer sometimes calls the *principium individuationis*, but it not clear that this experience, for Nishida, “acts as a violent *tranquilizer* of the will” as it does for Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer 2010, 280). The Kantian concept of disinterestedness already seems to have done away with the deliberations of the personal ego, without the need for Schopenhauer’s idea of will. Furthermore, the philosophical ground of *An Inquiry into the Good* is the concept of pure experience, which is borrowed from William James. In the very first paragraph of the book, Nishida explains that the qualifier “pure” refers to the fact that this is a completely empirical form of cognition—involving “sensation and perception”—which is “without the least addition of deliberative discrimination” (Nishida 1990, 3). That is, without recourse to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, this experience is already understood as being beyond personal will and intellectual knowledge, both of which are “superficial ... and cannot grasp reality” (*ibid.*, 175). To be clear then, Nishida’s concept of intuition should not, properly speaking, be understood as version of intellectual intuition. We also have none of the violence of Schopenhauer’s description of aesthetic experience: “to say that we know a thing simply means that the self unites with it. When one sees a flower, the self has become the flower” (*ibid.*, 77). Finally, and most importantly for this paper, nothing in *An Inquiry into the Good* is suggestive of Schopenhauer’s idea of tranquilization. On the contrary, Nishida suggests the need to develop an entirely new conception of action beyond the dualisms of subject and object, activity and passivity:

We reach the quintessence of good conduct only when subject and object merge, self and things forget each other, and all that exists is the activity of the sole reality of the universe. At that point we can say that things move the self or that the self moves things, that Sesshū painted nature or that nature painted itself through Sesshū. There is no fundamental distinction between things and the self, for just as the objective world is a reflection of the self, so is the self a reflection of the objective world. (*ibid.*, 135)

We will come back to the relevance of the Japanese painter Sesshū Tōyō for this new conception of ethico-aesthetics, which in Nishida remains underdeveloped. For now, I would like to suggest that the work of Henri Bergson, more than Schopenhauer or even James, can help clarify the artistic expression of *muga* without falling into poetic Romanticism.

In *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida defines intuition as “the unifying activity in pure experience. It is a grasp of life, like having the knack of an art or, more profoundly, the aesthetic spirit. For example, when inspiration arises in a painter and

the brush moves spontaneously, a unifying reality is operating behind this complex activity.” Nishida’s intuition is therefore an ethico-aesthetic attunement to life that “deepens and enlarges our state of pure experience” (ibid., 32). But it is only with the publication of *Intuition and Reflection in Self-consciousness* that Nishida fully defines this concept as a “system of perceptual experience” (Nishida 1987b, 46). In this book, Nishida relies less explicitly on the work of James and there is a greater emphasis on Bergson’s philosophy. Furthermore, there are again no references to Schopenhauer and even the concept of will is understood through Bergson:

We have finally come to something beyond intellectual knowledge. ...
If will grounds knowledge, the immediately given object of knowledge must have the form of will, must be dynamic reality. Bergson grasped this as pure duration. (ibid., 140)

By folding a Bergsonian conception of intuition into James’s idea of pure experience, we can understand that Nishida, like Gilles Deleuze, was completely committed to developing an epistemology rooted in radical empiricism. The motivation for *Intuition and Reflection in Self-consciousness*, in particular, can be characterized an attempt to resolve some of the persistent problems of post-Kantian philosophy—most importantly, the impasses that arise from concept of intellectual intuition—by developing such an epistemology. Eventually, he will use the word “aesthetic intuition” to highlight this fact (Nishida 1973, 104). Furthermore, Nishida’s continuous appeal to artists in this pursuit also follows Bergson, who claims that “if we accept and admire artists, it is because we had already perceived something of what they show us. But we had perceived without seeing, lost ... in a pale and colourless vision of things that is habitually ours” (Bergson 2007, 112). Bergson argues that intuition, understood as an extension of the faculty of perception beyond ordinary recognition, is not just a fantastic philosophical theory. Artists continually show us that it is indeed possible, and philosophy should therefore take inspiration from them. But Nishida’s reading of Bergson is not entirely accurate and, as stated above, devolves into a visionary Romanticism in which one seems to become “one with nature”. In the first paragraph of *Intuition and Reflection in Self-consciousness*, Nishida writes that

Intuition is a consciousness of unbroken progression, of reality just as it is, wherein subject and object are not as yet divided and that which knows and that which is known are one. *Reflection* is a consciousness which, standing outside of this progression, turns around and views it. In Bergson’s terms, it is that which refashions continuity in the form of simultaneous existence and time in the form of space. (Nishida 1987b, 3)

The problem arises because Nishida maps intuition and reflection too easily onto Bergson's transcendental distinction between temporal, qualitative multiplicities and spatial, quantitative multiplicities, a distinction that he either misunderstands or misrepresents. The aim of Bergson's early book *Time and Free Will* (1889), which Nishida quotes in a footnote to this paragraph, is precisely to elucidate this theory of multiplicities. For Bergson, the first type of multiplicity *includes* internal heterogeneities and differences, even though it is characterized as continuous. Deleuze highlights and radicalizes this paraconsistent idea in his Leibnizian reading of Bergson such that "continuity never makes difference vanish" (Deleuze 1993, 65). Therefore, Bergsonian intuition cannot be simply conceived as "a consciousness of unbroken progression" in which there is a complete unity between subject and object. Unfortunately, Nishida never develops his concept of intuition beyond this point, and his mature writings about art contain similar claims.⁴ Even in his very last writings, we find statements like: "we think by becoming things, and we act by becoming things" (1987c, 55).

Besides the Romantic undercurrents we find in such descriptions of the ecstatic effacement of the ego in *muga*, Nishida fails to adequately describe the precise nature of the "aesthetic activity" that ensues from this experience. This is the case even in *Art and Morality*, where Nishida cites Bergson precisely on this issue and seems to agree with him, but only in an unelaborated and cryptic manner:

Aside from the consciousness that is based on the excess of representation with respect to the action of which Bergson speaks, there is consciousness that arises by being inhibited by action—that is, by the unity of subject and object. (Nishida 1973, 32)

For Bergson, intuition involves a deep penetration into things beyond the individual intellect and, indeed, beyond the individual self. However, this individual self does not dissolve and merge into "the flow of one great *élan vital*," as Nishida claims (*ibid.*, 27). Bergsonian intuition is a method "by which we can emerge from our own duration, by which we make use of our own duration to affirm the existence of other durations, above or below us" (Deleuze 1991, 33). Through an almost meditative extension of the faculty of perception, one is installed firmly within one's own duration—or milieu of space-time—but immediately senses beneath it an entire spectrum such that there seems to be "a choice between an infinity of possible durations" (Bergson 2007, 156). With this ethico-aesthetic act, according

⁴ "In the actual will subject and object are one, and the self functions in the horizon of behavior.... To enter into true reality that is the object of this kind of actual will is aesthetic activity." (Nishida 1973, 104)

to Bergson, we are able to open onto all the nuances of different durations that are normally only available to individual species. Intuition thus “allows one to pass beyond idealism as well as realism, to affirm the existence of objects both inferior and superior to us, though nevertheless in a certain sense interior to us, to make them co-existent” (ibid., 155). That is, intuition is a method not of disappearing into an undifferentiated flow, but of discerning—that is “cutting up and dividing”—an expanded field of perceived reality that includes “lines of different natures” (Deleuze 1991, 115). Furthermore, it entails an entirely new conception of action, which Nishida certainly suggests in his discussion of Sesshū and elsewhere but does not sufficiently elucidate. For Bergson, intuition initially requires action to be inhibited in order to reach a state that “precedes representation” (Bergson 1977, 47). And this state does in fact involve connecting to *élan vital*. Indeed, “it is this impetus itself, communicated in its entirety to exceptional people” (ibid., 235). However, authentic intuition is decidedly *not* “a sudden shock that paralyzes us” (ibid., 160), but rather a radical empiricism that is “consummated in action” (ibid., 212). It is precisely “the source of the great creations of art, science, and civilization” (ibid., 42) beyond the “superficial activities” of habitual, everyday life (ibid., 160). At the end of this paper, I will show that Deleuze’s reading of Bergson—along with his own appropriation of East Asian calligraphy—will enable us to understand this type of activity more precisely.

Nishida spent a lifetime correcting any pre-critical or Romantic overtones in his expression of the experience of absolute nothingness. But he ultimately falls back into Romanticism in his discussions of art, which remained a constant source of truth that he kept returning to in order to bolster his wider philosophical project. That is, relative, to his critical metaphysics—which inserts a “continuity of discontinuity” into the heart of reality—his thoughts on art remain underdeveloped. So why did Nishida fail to render, with regard to the function of art, a movement of discontinuity within the flow of Bergson’s *élan vital*, just as he did for his logic, metaphysics, and ethics? “Nishida never clarifies the structure of the flow of life that is characteristic of art. As a result, in the end Nishida’s speculation on art ... reduced art to a self-identical, continuous will that drives men and to the concretization of the will” (Iwaki 2001, 272). Of course, the quick answer is that his early use of Bergson was superseded by dialectical concepts developed from Hegel. But if we want to take his continued appeal to art as a privileged space seriously, why are his later reflections on art not rendered more philosophically in line with this later thinking? Even for Bergson, the act of visual perception operates by *cutting* through and subtracting out large chunks of the material world. And, as we shall see, Gilles Deleuze employs such cutting in his own Bergsonian metaphysics as well as his mature ethico-aesthetics, remarkably, with a special reference to East

Asian calligraphy. But we have to wait for later generations of the Kyoto School, with Nishitani Keiji and Ōhashi Ryōsuke in particular, to get a something like a Japanese philosophy of art adequate to these ideas.

Nishitani Keiji completed his doctoral dissertation on Bergson and Schelling under Nishida at Kyoto University. He then received a scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education to study with Bergson but, due to the latter's ill health, ended up studying with Martin Heidegger in Freiburg. "While there Nishitani himself prepared and delivered a talk on Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Meister Eckhart. On returning he wrote long essays comparing Japan to modern Europe and on German mysticism" (Heisig, 2001, 184). This interest in mysticism can be detected in his much more overt embrace, relative to Nishida, of Buddhist philosophy. And, in general, Nishitani was more heavily invested than Nishida in the issues post-Hegelian continental philosophy, from the critique of metaphysics to the problem concerning technology. Nishitani claimed that "the fundamental problem of my life ... has always been, to put it simply, the overcoming of nihilism through nihilism" (quoted in Heisig 2001, 215). This perhaps helps to explain why, in his later writings, Nishitani explicitly reverts to the Mahāyāna Buddhist term *sūnyatā* (Japanese *kū*, emptiness), even though he never completely disavows Nishida's concept of absolute nothingness. In this regard, Nishida's "place of absolute nothingness" becomes a "field of emptiness" for Nishitani.

In 1953, Nishitani wrote a short but powerful essay on the Japanese art of ikebana which, he notes, expresses "something entirely different from the whole ethos of European art". In general, the ethos of European art presents us with a "will to endure; buildings, sculpture, paintings, and so forth, are all made to withstand this thing we call time" (Nishitani 2011, 1198). Ikebana, like many of the East Asian arts, is not concerned with embodying a timeless and geometrically perfect conception of beauty, as in classical Western art, but with the concept of impermanence. The will to survive, whether in a work of art or a living being, is seen by Nishitani as a will to deny time and the inescapable fact of impermanence and death. By contrast, the art of ikebana highlights the fact that "all things in the world are essentially rootless and without fixed abode. In putting down roots they conceal their own rootlessness from themselves. ... The flower with its roots cut has, in one stroke, returned to its original fate in time" (ibid., 1199). Furthermore, it is the ethico-aesthetic act of cutting (*kire*) it off from the source of life that turns the plant into art. Through cutting, "the emptiness that lies hidden in the depths of the plant is unveiled" (ibid., 1200). Therefore, according to this logic, the fundamental difference between Western and East Asian art is a matter, quite literally, of life and death. "One is an art immediately in life, the other an art alive in death. That is, one kind of art seeks eternity by

denying temporality, and the other tries to unveil eternity by becoming radically temporal” (ibid.). It is with this paradoxical logic that we can understand the literal meaning of ikebana: “making flowers live”. By explaining the art of ikebana with terms like impermanence and emptiness, it is clear that Nishitani understands the difference between Western and Eastern art in broadly Mahāyāna Buddhist terms. It is important to note that the logic of cutting is not unique to ikebana but can be discerned, in one form or another, across the arts of Japan: in the rock boundaries of dry gardens that literally cut the garden off from nature, in the unnatural gait of Noh actors in which the raised toes cut through a continuous slide along the floor, as well as the cut-syllables of haiku poetry. Nishitani discusses cutting in an essay on haiku poetry by describing how the syllables that separate the three lines of a poem disrupt the normal flow of logical expression—creating what Nishida might call a continuity of discontinuity—in order to suggest a place prior to subject and object (Nishitani 2011, 1999). But the concept of cutting itself has a Mahāyāna provenance. It was used by the 18th century Japanese Zen master Hakuin Ekaku to express the act of cutting through the fog of samsara in order to reach enlightenment, that is, to die in order to return to life:

if he has not cut off the root of life, he will never attain to the joy where the “Ka” is shouted. What is this root of life? It is that instant of ignorance that has come down through endless kalpas of time. (Hakuin 1971, 13)

If you wish accordance with the true, pure non-ego, you must be prepared to let go your hold when hanging from a sheer precipice, to die and return again to life. Only then can you attain to the true ego of the four Nirvana virtues. (ibid., 135)

This existential aspect of cutting in Buddhism is, as we shall see, also curiously evident in Deleuze’s ethics and aesthetics. We should also note that Nishida himself understood the principle of “living by dying” through his particular dialectical logic such that the existential dimension of the continuity of discontinuity involves the awareness of “a deep contradiction at the bottom of our lives in terms of birth-and-death or generation-and-extinction” (Krummel 2015, 76.) The unified felt sense of self, like the structure of time, is ultimately an instance of the logic of continuity of discontinuity. “Each moment of self-determination is a moment of unique creativity that cuts off the past to move from the made to the making. The affirmation of that moment is thus also its self-negation that engenders the new in a continuity of discontinuity” (ibid., 103). According to Nishida:

In order to be connected with the following moment, as a continuity of discontinuity, we must die at this moment and enter into nothing. But without dying in this sense, there is no I. ... We live only by dying in the present. (quoted in Krummel 2015, 104)

Ōhashi Ryōsuke has made the connection between Nishida's onto-logical concept of continuity of discontinuity and Nishitani's ethico-aesthetic act of cutting explicit. He states that "another term" for continuity of discontinuity is his concept of "cut-continuity" (*kire-tsuzuki*) (Ōhashi 2002, 31). He has written extensively on cutting, establishing it as a central concept in Japanese art, and directly compares it to the pre-Modern notion of *ma* (Ōhashi 2014c, 76). But he notes that *kire* should be connected with the word *tsuzuki* "because the cut does not merely cease or dissect the flow but connects it to a new flow", as we saw in the lines of haiku. It is clear from his writings that such cuts can be found everywhere and on multiple levels, within the onto-logical, existential, aesthetic, and cultural domains, as well as the gaps between them. "This kind of cut is not only a feature of traditional Japanese art but also and above all of life." (Ōhashi 2002, 32) For example, in a recent article, Ōhashi cites the *Diamond Sutra*—whose title in Sanskrit is literally "The Perfection of Wisdom Text that Cuts Like a Diamond"—in order to show that there is an anti-nature within nature itself. "An 'anti-nature' must be contained somewhere within nature itself. Nature is never a substantial self-identity. It is a 'contradictory self-identity'" (Ōhashi 2014a, 26). While the language of this onto-logical claim seems to disclose that it is inspired by the work of Nishida—which, of course, it is—Ōhashi more directly develops this idea from a statement in the *Diamond Sutra*: "The world is not the world that is named the world.... The world is *śūnya*, therefore a non-world" (Ōhashi 2002, 31). Ōhashi replaces "world" with "nature" in order to argue that "this is a central theme in Mahāyāna Buddhism ... in which the self as the nameless anti-nature is named 'the true *śūnya*'" (ibid., 33). Ōhashi here wants to reiterate the fact that the philosophy of emptiness entails a metaphysics of becoming that can be understood as a radically immanent form of vitalism: "not only the organic and biological but also the mechanical and material nature is alive ... nature, including the inorganic and lifeless world, has never been unmoved" (Ōhashi 2014a, 26).

In addition to offering this vitalist conception of nature—which has resonances not only with Buddhism but also with the philosophy of Bergson—Ōhashi wants to offer a different angle to the question concerning technology by claiming that the anti-nature contained within nature is ego consciousness, which conceals and reveals itself in the form of human action. Interestingly, technology is not simply understood as a cut within nature, as a simple anti-nature. *Tsuzuki* represents the

ability to suture the artificial back into the natural, something Ōhashi believes that the Japanese sensibility is particularly attuned to (Marra 2010, 257). For example, Japanese dry gardens “cut off the naturalness of nature” in order to frame the artificial arrangements of rocks which, in turn, highlight the uncanny continuity between natural and artistic beauty (Ōhashi 2002, 33). “The radical way of solving the problems caused by technology is not to go back to the natural world prior to civilization but to gain an insight into the fact that anti-nature roots in nature itself.” That is, ethical action must begin with the recognition that a fundamental rupture—a continuity of discontinuity—exists within the fabric of nature itself. “What is required of us is to transform this battle of anti-nature with nature itself into a kind of a ‘playing game’ in a profound sense of the term” (Ōhashi, 2014a, 33). Crucially, instead of explaining the details of this imperative, Ōhashi quotes a text from the Japanese monk Shinran that discusses the activities of a bodhisattva whose enlightened actions—undertaken to save all sentient beings from suffering—should be considered as a kind of ethical play.⁵ In the next section, I argue that it is Deleuze who unwittingly offers a more adequate solution to the problem of ethico-aesthetics being drawn out here.

Ōhashi extends Nishida’s consideration of the principle of living by dying through a discussion of two other types of cut-continuity: spiritual renunciation and meditative breath work. The Buddhist renunciate gives up mundane attachment to worldly existence in order to live more authentically (Ōhashi 2002, 34). Furthermore, in order to live this authentic spiritual life, the meditator should focus on the rhythm of breathing, which is “life itself—as the inhalation-exhalation of respiration.... This not a mere continuum but rather a cut-continuity in each and every moment ... to experience the true reality of life is to become aware of this cut-continuity in life” (Ōhashi 2014b, 554). Although such ethico-aesthetic practices of cut-continuity are “actually rooted in Zen Buddhism”, Ōhashi finds a close analogue in *bushidō*, the way of the warrior, and the Japanese ways of art more generally (for example *sadō*, the way of tea; *shodō*, the way of writing; and *kadō*, the way of flowers) (ibid., 554). Swordsmanship is of course the ultimate art of cutting and is essential to the ethical code of the samurai, whose very life is premised upon the awareness that death may occur in any moment. Similar to the renunciation of the Buddhist monk, “everydayness is ‘cut off’ but, precisely through this cutting, there arises a new daily life in which one is aware of one’s own mortality” (Ōhashi 2002, 34).

Just as there is a cut-continuity between the ontological and existential registers, there is a “discontinuous continuity between the commonplace life-world and the

5 “There is not sufficient time left to discuss the problem of responsibility.” (Ōhashi 2014a, 33)

art-world” (ibid., 34). Furthermore, for Ōhashi, the concept of *kire* can be applied across the arts of Japan, since art is particularly good at highlighting the way in which a whole range of onto-logical dualisms are both differentiated and fused together. But he claims that this term was first used to describe the particular rhythm of Japanese poetry in which the “cut syllable interrupts a poem’s flow of expression to create space for a new phase of poetic expression” (ibid., 31). Ōhashi uses one of Matsuo Bashō’s haiku verses in order to suggest that rhythm is cut in order to create a space within which an everyday event is artificially highlighted. “A dried salmon / and a pilgrim’s gauntness / in midwinter cold” (Ōhashi 2011a, 1193). Paradoxically, it is only through such an artificial act that the beauty of nature can be appreciated as it is. As we have already seen, this is because the cut itself discloses “the true *sūnya*”, which implies a metaphysics of discontinuous becoming. The ethico-aesthetic act of the cut therefore expresses the nature of time. “Cutting is, first of all, an interruption of the natural mode of life, a break in the activity of nature’s time. Through it, time is not only cut off; it matures into a new mode of *being*” (ibid., 1193). Within this context, Ōhashi brings to our attention the fact that this paradox is encoded within Bashō’s use of the word “and”, which is an instance of cut-continuity since it marks a line break even as it sutures two lines together. “The conjunction ‘and’ is employed disjunctively. This cutting work serves to break the natural flow of time so that the original temporality of natural life can be brought into relief” (ibid., 1194). That is, the artificial cuts in the poem bring our attention to ontological cuts that make up the very fabric of nature: “the cut and continuity of light and darkness, of life and death, that make up the landscape becomes visible for the first time” (ibid., 1192). Ōhashi then comes back to ikebana in order to acknowledge the provenance of the concept of *kire* within the work of Nishitani. He quotes the latter’s 1953 essay in order to illustrate that nature paradoxically “goes against” its own essence. Offering his own interpretation of the logic of ikebana, Ōhashi writes:

In ikebana, “cutting” the flower off from its roots in the fullness of life is to cut it off from the resistance to time that is the mark of that fullness. Through this “cut,” its natural life in time appears together with the temporality that is hidden there. (ibid., 1194)

But it is not only in the traditional Japanese arts of dry gardens, haiku, and ikebana that we find such cuts. We even see them in the cinema of Ozu Yasujiro, who “hardly ever uses any other transition than the cut” (Parkes and Loughnane 2018). Such cuts remain a central trope in Japanese contemporary art—from Gutai to Mariko Mori—where we find not only formal cuts of all kinds, but also cuts that demarcate the lines between the traditional and the modern, between the

Japanese and its global others.⁶ *Kire* may in fact be “the key for the postmodern overcoming of modernity. This cutting of a modernity that originally did not belong to Japan” involves “recycling the premodern” (Marra 2010, 259). Like Nishida and Nishitani before him, Ōhashi does not advocate a naive return to the past. However, it may be through a reinvention of traditional culture that Japan can move beyond the crisis of global nihilism that, in their view, characterizes European modernism. For Ōhashi, Japanese modernism would entail a “Buddhist and Shinto mindset that underlies Japanese culture provid[ing] the peculiarly malleable basis on which the foreign European world and its products, science and technology, were taken over, cultivated and modified” (quoted in Davis 2011, 47). This malleability at the heart of Japanese sensibility has been forged in the history of its culture, which has been “repeatedly born anew through the cut-continuity with the other in its own self” (Ōhashi 2002, 35). In this, again, he builds upon the work of Nishida and Nishitani. Both of them had “anticipated and foreseen” the fact that our world was and is becoming more and more globalized. It is therefore necessary to envision a “‘worldly world’ in which every cultural world, precisely in the place where it maintains its creative subjectivity, co-determines this ‘world’ without recourse to ego-centred domination, let alone to Orientalism or Occidentalism” (Ōhashi 2011b, 80). This idea of a “worldly world” is derived from Nishida, who thought that a truly globalized world would not involve cultural imperialism but rather “a unity-in-diversity to which each nation contributes on the basis of its own world-historical perspective.” We should think of this type of cultural interaction at the global level occurring according to the logic of cut-continuity or, as Nishida describes it, as a “contradictory identity” that involves both “mutual supplementation” and mutual struggle” (quoted in Davis, 2011, 45). Ōhashi, like Nishida, privileges art as the place from which we can most clearly make sense of this contradictory construction of a “worldly world”. The “self-determination” of each individual world can be understood “in the realm of art”, since “inspired” artists are best positioned to enter a “dimension of consciousness”—prior to both subject and object—which is precisely the place of nascent creation. “What the artist has created can be understood as the self-creation of the world as it happens through the artist” (Ōhashi 2011b, 80). This idea seems to be very close to François Jullien’s concept of a “dia-logue of cultures”, in which *dia* refers to a gap or a cut, a space in-between, that divides and holds differences in a productive tension (Jullien 2021). It is with this attitude of carving-out such a productive dialogue between cultures that we can now turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze, who independently developed his own concept of cut-continuity that further clarifies the issue of ethico-aesthetics.

6 For more on cut-continuity in Japanese contemporary art, see Hetrick 2022b.

Ethico-aesthetics in Gilles Deleuze

Even though there is no indication that Deleuze was familiar with the work of the Kyoto School, he was drawn to East Asian thought more generally. Indeed, we find references to East Asian philosophy and art scattered throughout his extensive *oeuvre*. He told Kuniichi Uno, his student and the main Japanese translator of his works, that he would have liked to have investigated more fully “Leibniz’s fascination with the Orient” (Uno 1995). One area in which Deleuze employed East Asian ideas in a more rigorous way, beyond a vague fascination, was in his two books on cinema, where he uses them to help bolster his “cinemachinic” onto-aesthetics (Sauvagnargues 2016, 55). He relied especially on Kurosawa Akira, Mizoguchi Kenji, and Ozu Yasujirō in his description of “the crisis of action-image” and the subsequent rise of the “time-image” in cinema (Deleuze 1986, 188–96). Furthermore, Deleuze admitted to Uno that “Japanese cinema has been a marvelous discovery for me” (2006b, 202). Like a Zen sage, Deleuze was interested in investigating the “spiritual” movements of the mind and this sentiment underlies his deep and abiding interest in cinema:

There’s something strange about cinema. What strikes me is its ability to show not only action, but spiritual life as well (including aberrant actions) ... the choice of existence. Cinema puts movement not just in the image; it puts it in the mind. Spiritual life is the movement of the mind [*La vie spirituelle, c’est le mouvement de l’esprit*]. It is perfectly natural to go from philosophy to cinema and from cinema to philosophy. (ibid., 283)

According to D. T. Suzuki, whose work Deleuze knew well, such inward movement does not point to “quietism” or “tranquilization” (Suzuki 1956, 181)—charges that have been brought to Deleuze’s own philosophy (Hallward 2006)—but rather to a paradoxical conception of action in which one paints without painting or shoots without shooting. And as Deleuze himself states: “In the smooth space of Zen, the arrow does not go from one point to another but is taken up in the middle at any point, to be sent to any other point, and tends to permute with the archer and the target” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 377). For Deleuze, as for Zen, one perpetually hovers in the gaps, or cuts, between given things. In the following, I will show how such gaps permeate Deleuze’s thought and can be detected, as in the Kyoto School, at the onto-logical, existential, as well as the ethico-aesthetic levels. Furthermore I will argue that, in this respect, his philosophy unwittingly connects with issues that were important for the Kyoto School and offers a more adequate theory of post-Kantian ethico-aesthetics than that of Nishida, Nishitani, or even Ōhashi.

As we read in the above quote, Deleuze, like Nishida, understood that the power of art—and especially cinema—has to do with the ways in which it reciprocally informs the most fundamental problems and solutions of philosophy. For example, his two books on cinema most clearly and systematically present his Bergsonian-Leibnizian metaphysics, in which the ontological and aesthetic registers are intimately intertwined. In *Cinema 1* (1986), the universe of things—which includes both subjects and objects—is presented as a Bergsonian flux of signaleptic matter-images that connect and disconnect through the intervals, or gaps, between them. In the theoretical move from *Cinema 1* to *Cinema 2* (1989), Deleuze's Leibniz—operated upon by Nietzsche—intervenes such that these gaps become discontinuous, irrational cuts which “have a disjunctive and no longer conjunctive, value” and which stand on their own (Deleuze 1989, 248). Remarkably similar to the way in which *kire* in Japanese art disjunctively exposes the nature of time, the resulting discontinuous or aberrant movement discloses “a direct presentation of time” (ibid., 36). Furthermore, for Deleuze, it is in the films of Ozu Yasujiro—who “directs silences and voids” (Pilgrim 1986, 260)—that we find some of the first instances of such direct images of “time out of joint” (Deleuze 1989, 41). In prolonged shots of objects—for example, in the famous shot of the vase placed before a *shoji* screen in *Late Spring* that is seemingly cut off from the actual flow of the narrative—we experience their particular duration well up within the space of the image. Remarkably, this direct image of time is described as a “visual reserve of events”, a phrase that Deleuze attributes to Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* (ibid., 17).

Cinematic gaps, or cuts, might be compared to the Japanese concept of *ma*—“the interval between two or more things existing in a continuity” (Isozaki 2009, 156). Deleuze, like Nishida, theorizes a genetic logic in which being is determined from a gap, a place of nothingness. Although Nishida does not give much importance to the pre-Modern Japanese concept of *ma*, his logic of place (*basho*) from the late 1920s—the same time that he employs both the concept of nothingness (Japanese *mu*) and Hegelian dialectics in a systematic way—is somewhat analogous. According to Richard Pilgrim, “*ma*, in Buddhism, is the *mu* that necessarily forms a background for *yū*” (Pilgrim 1986, 265). It can therefore be defined as “a place in between where the subject/object world is continually emptied and, by virtue of that, continually filled with a radically impermanent, mutually dependent reality” (ibid., 275). The Japanese architect Isozaki Arata, who has extensively used the concept of *ma* in his practical and theoretical works, specifically relates *ma* to Nishida's *basho* as well as to Plato's *chora*, which in part inspired Nishida's concept (Krummel 2015, 263). *Basho*, for Nishida, is the “*a priori* of *a prioris* . . . the concrete ground on which his previous concepts of will, self-awareness, and even pure experience are implaced” (ibid., 64). *Basho* is not simply a passive container for ideas, as in Plato, but a creative

and even an-archic place of endless “generation-and-extinction” (Nishida quoted in Krummel 2015, 77). *Basho* is often characterized in a way that is strikingly similar to Pilgrim’s description of *ma*: “Nishida calls it a self-forming formlessness. It is in this sense that it is a nothing (*mu*) that gives rise to being (*yū*). Place forms itself via the inter-determinations of things for which it makes room” (Krummel 2015, 204). Like Deleuze’s cinemachinic universe in which matter-images emerge and collapse back into a void, here everything is situated in and as a dynamic place of self-generation and dissolution and, ultimately, every place is encompassed by the place of absolute nothingness such that “within the infinite expanse of *chora*, we have *choras* within the *chora*” (ibid., 205). The pre-Platonic sense of *chora* refers to the open and an-archic space beyond the constructed boundaries of the *polis*, and ultimately to “chaos . . . the dark nocturnal space-matter of the universe” (ibid., 202). *Basho* might therefore be productively compared to Deleuze’s various concepts of space and place—plane of immanence, any-space-whatever, smooth space—which are understood as “nomadic” by which Deleuze means “an-archically indifferent to Plato’s *logos*” (Hetrick 2012, 38). But more fundamentally, Deleuze’s understanding of discontinuity is not to be understood spatially, but rather as the texture of pure becoming.

Following Deleuze’s cinemachinic logic, the gap between matter-images must precede the terms of the relation, that is, between the images themselves. Such gaps therefore mark the place of the event, the place in which things emerge from encounters with the inessential and incorporeal. Interestingly, Deleuze refers to these gaps in *Cinema 2* as “voids”, a term that resonates with the language of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Deleuze 1989, 211). The word void was the way in which *śūnyatā*, or emptiness, was originally rendered into English.

The question is no longer that of the association or attraction of images. What counts is on the contrary the interval between images: a spacing which means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it. (ibid., 179)

If we require further evidence that Deleuze uses Mahāyāna philosophy to help bolster his own metaphysics, we only need to read the following statement from *Logic of Sense*, which Deleuze makes in the context of Zen: “The event is the identity of form and void” (Deleuze 1990, 136).⁷ Quite remarkably, Deleuze seems to be conflating one of his most important concepts, that of the event, with one of the most important Buddhist ones. The famous line from the *Heart Sutra* states that “form is emptiness, emptiness is form”. Ultimately then, Deleuze’s cinemachinic

⁷ Here Deleuze remarks that the Stoics “already” had their own concept of the void, which shows that the “later” one being employed here is indeed derived from Buddhism.

universe can be described as a perpetual flux of matter-images in which relations are prioritized over things and discontinuous becoming is prioritized over being. We thus have a fundamentally empty universe, in the Buddhist sense. This emptiness is not nihilistic, devoid of anything at all, it is rather vibrating with ruptures, or gaps, from which matter-images emerge. Even though Deleuze's evocation of Dōgen remains incredibly impressionistic, the Japanese philosopher seems to be a lasting influence since Deleuze and Guattari refer to the *Shōbōgenzō* again in *What is Philosophy?* (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 220). It may therefore be useful to explore this connection a bit further.

In a short essay, Ōhashi explains that at the heart of Dōgen's concept of time are a series of disjunctions. Beneath the time of everyday affairs (*uji*) is the metaphysical "hidden sense" of "being-time" (*u-ji*) (Ōhashi 2012, 151), which has been characterized as a "nondual middle-voiced event" (Davis 2020, 212). On one level, being-time means that "time is already being, every being is always time", a statement that points to the Buddhist concept of impermanence, the idea that everything is enfolded in a constant flux of interdependent becoming such that "grass contains within it all of time" (Ōhashi 2012, 152). Here, Ōhashi explains that grass is to be understood simultaneously in the everyday sense and as a Buddhist metaphor for all "phenomena in the world of time and space" (*ibid.*, 154). Furthermore, with the metaphysics of being-time we are confronted with a logical contradiction. He notes that such contradictions in Buddhism, although quite common, are not resolved but are syntactically held together with a hyphen. "Seemingly contradictory words, for example being and nothing, life and death, are often united into one word: being-nothing, life-death" (*ibid.*, 150). In the case of *u-ji*, the hyphen highlights the paradoxical fact that time both "flows" and "does not flow": "One should not think that time merely flows, one should not believe that it is the property of time to merely flow. If time is permitted to flow, there should be openings" (*ibid.*, 155). Conceptually, this paradoxical "coming and going of being-time is the starting point of Zen practice". And ultimately, through practice, we empirically realize that subjectivity itself "is time". In Ōhashi's reading of Dōgen, this realization is "not merely epistemological" but a profound awareness of the nature of being-time (*ibid.*, 153). Although necessarily speculative at this point, we might now reread the following statements from *Cinema 2* in a new light:

The only subjectivity is time, non-chronological time grasped in its foundation, and it is we who are internal to time and not the other way around ... the highest paradox.... Subjectivity is never ours, it is time, that is, the soul or the spirit. (Deleuze 1989, 82)

We will come back to the relationship between subjectivity and the experience of time. For now, we should note that the paraconsistent logic of a time that both flows and does not flow resonates with Deleuze's own cinemachinic logic of "break-flow", which is employed in order to explain how recognizable things emerge and continuously differentiate from encounters with the inessential and incorporeal. This machinic logic is, more generally, also remarkably similar to Ōhashi's concept of cut-continuity since it is defined as "a system of interruptions or breaks" in which, "far from being the opposite of continuity, the interruptions or breaks condition this continuity" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 36).

In Ōhashi's reading of *u-ji*, there is a cut-continuity between the time of everyday objects—the vase and the shoji wall in *Late Spring* or the rocks of Ryōan-ji temple garden that resemble the human characters of the subsequent scene—and a more profound "being-time" that hovers around them like an efflorescent mist. As noted above, Deleuze refers to this dimension of time as the "reserve of events", a phrase that is derived from an unconventional French translation of *Shōbōgenzō* (Dōgen 1980). A literal translation of this word might be something like "treasury of the true dharma eye". Despite this seeming linguistic disparity, the resonance between the two thinkers is quite remarkable. Jason Wirth, who has attempted to make sense of Deleuze's reference to the *Shōbōgenzō*, plays on the literal meaning of this term in order to argue that it is precisely when cinema moves us from representations of everyday activity towards a direct presentation of being-time, that we are opened to a "true cinematic eye ... a zen cinematic sensibility" (Wirth 2017, 354). In this reading, we could speculate that if the conceptual persona of volume one of Deleuze's cinema books—the *movement-image*—is Dziga Vertov and his kino eye, then that of volume two—the *time-image*—might be Dōgen and his dharma eye. Furthermore, Deleuze claims that it is arguably in Ozu's films that we first encounter images that "make time and thought perceptible" (Deleuze, 1989, 18). These images disclose "a direct presentation of time" (ibid., 36), rather than time that is merely re-presented serially through montage. As in Dōgen, this presentation of time is seemingly paradoxical or "out of joint" (ibid., 41). Time is experienced, for example, as both full and empty. And it is here that we come across Deleuze's allusion to the *Shōbōgenzō*: "time is the unchanging form of that which changes ... the visual reserve of events." He also notes that this distinction between full and empty "brings into play all the nuances or relations in Chinese and Japanese thought" (ibid., 17). Even though we are presented with "the pure and empty form of time" (Deleuze 1994, 86), we simultaneously experience everyday objects as "ordinary or banal ... close to a Zen kind of wisdom" (Deleuze 1989, 14). But rather than explore such paradoxes through a rigorous reading of Dōgen, Deleuze resorts to the paraconsistent onto-logic he derives

from Leibniz “who was not unaware of the existence of Chinese philosophers” (ibid., 14). Remarkably, however, the result is comparable to Dōgen’s thinking about time.

For Deleuze, Leibniz shows us how the world is both “made up of series which are composed in a very regular way, according to ordinary laws” and “breaks, disparities, and discrepancies that are out of the ordinary” (ibid., 14). The key to understanding this paradox is that, like Ōhashi, “the conjunction ‘and’ is employed disjunctively” (Ōhashi 2011a, 1194). For Deleuze, the relation “and” most accurately defines the productive movement between related entities. However, rather than a mere conjunction, it is paradoxically described as an inclusive disjunction. This is Deleuze’s answer to the Hegelian dialectic, which relies upon negation— itself elevated to contradiction—in order to affirm disjunction. But for Deleuze, “divergence and disjunction are, on the contrary, affirmed as such” (Deleuze 1990, 172), which allows neither the identity of the self, nor of the world, to subsist” (ibid., 350). Since relations are causally prior, we have a world in which things “are multiple and different, they are always produced by a disjunctive synthesis, and they themselves are disjointed and divergent, *membra disjuncta*” (ibid., 179).

The disjunction is not at all reduced to a conjunction; it is left as a disjunction, since it bears, and continues to bear, upon a divergence as such. But this divergence is affirmed in such a way that the *either ... or* itself becomes a pure affirmation. (174)

We find similar types of paraconsistent logic employed in Mahāyāna Buddhism, from Nagarjuna’s *catuskoti* to the Kyoto School’s use of *soku-hi*. Deleuze seems to have had an, at least, intuitive understanding of this: “Buddha’s tree itself becomes a rhizome” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 20). In this tradition, as well as in Ozu’s films, the most fundamental inclusive disjunction is “the nonseparation of form and emptiness” (Wirth 2017, 363). Additionally, for Deleuze it is with this onto-logic that we can understand—without resorting to transcendence or contradiction—how “one and the same horizon links the cosmic and the everyday” (Deleuze 1989, 17). Furthermore, the direct presentation of time-in-itself opens up a moment of “pure contemplation” in which one experiences other paradoxical disjunctions, for example, between “the mental and the physical, the real and the imaginary, the subject and the object, the world and the I” (ibid., 16). That is, for Deleuze, like Ōhashi, cut-continuities can be found everywhere and on multiple levels: in the formal elements of film—for example, the multiple cuts between frame, shot, and montage—as well as in the onto-logical, cinemachinic gaps between movement and time. Zooming out, we also find them in the existential and ethico-aesthetic registers.

As we have seen, the “spiritual life” evoked by an encounter with the pure form of time ultimately forces upon us the “choice of existence” (Deleuze, 2006b, 283). Quite literally, as in much of Japanese philosophy, this entails a cut-continuity between life and death. This is because cinema, like philosophy itself, can make us “pass through death”, to be “born from an apparent death” (Deleuze 1989, 208). Similar to Nishitani, Deleuze puts forth a non-classical conception of life that only appears in its fading. Here death is no longer understood as “a decisive moment or indivisible event” but as “coextensive with life”, which is itself reconceived as “something made up of a multiplicity of partial and particular deaths” (Deleuze 1988a, 95). It is only with this “fundamental relation between life and death” that we can begin to understand Deleuze’s “vitalism” (Deleuze 1988a, 145). More specifically, it is with this disjunctive relation that we can begin to see how Deleuze’s ethico-aesthetic imperative approaches something like the self-effacement of the ego in the experience of *muga*.⁸

Between life and death, there is a moment where *a life* is merely playing with death. The life of the individual has given way to an impersonal and yet singular life, which foregrounds a pure event that has been liberated from the subjectivity and the objectivity of what comes to pass: a *homo tantum* with whom everyone sympathizes and who attains a kind of beatitude. (Deleuze 2006b, 386)

But crucially, for Deleuze there is an experience of no-self without falling into poetic Romanticism. He indeed acknowledges that “Romanticism had already set out this aim of ... becoming-visionary” (Deleuze 1989, 18). But, ironically, he seems to employ Japanese art and philosophy to help move beyond the kind of Romantic rhetoric that Nishida himself resorted to.⁹ For Deleuze, the individual becomes eclipsed by a singular, “a-subjective stream of consciousness ... a duration of consciousness without a self” (Deleuze 2006b, 384). This does not entail dissolving into an oceanic expanse of nature; the individual does *not* “become nature itself”, as in Nishida (1973, 27).¹⁰ Just as there is no ego, there is no nature or world, precisely because both subject and object are continuously recreated out of a fundamentally empty, cinemachinic temporality. Ultimately, “it is as though the *I* were fractured from one end to the other: fractured by the pure and empty form

8 We notice a similar paradoxical logic in Dōgen for whom the “death of the ego is nothing other than the great affirmation of life” (Schroeder 2019, 251).

9 “The greatest danger is that of lapsing into the representations of a beautiful soul” (Deleuze 1994, xx).

10 For Deleuze, on the contrary, “a single and same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all the drops, a single clamor of Being for all beings: on condition that each being, each drop and each voice has reached the state of excess—in other words ... individuating difference” (Deleuze 1994, 304).

of time. In this form, it is the correlate of the passive self which appears in time” (Deleuze 1994, 86). In the remainder of this essay, I would like to demonstrate how this visionary moment of “pure contemplation” is not passive in the usual sense of this word, but rather necessities a nearly unrecognizable, paradoxical kind of action. As Félix Guattari puts it, this does not imply a necessary “withdrawal into oneself (as in transcendental meditation) or a renunciation of political engagement” but rather a “refoundation of *praxis*” (Guattari 1995, 120).

Deleuze sometimes characterizes the shift from movement-images to time-images as giving rise to situations in which “the seer has replaced the agent” (Deleuze 1989, 272). But to leave it at that would be a gross oversimplification, which may misconstrue Deleuze’s practical philosophy as passive, and therefore apolitical, because it uncritically repeats the kind of “Oriental intuition which Hegel found at work in Spinoza” (Hallward 2006, 6). The encounter with the empty, or non-chronological, form of time temporarily short-circuits our habits of perception and action because we are shocked “by something intolerable in the world”, something that escapes the grasp of—and is therefore “imperceptible” with respect to—our normal capacity of empirical recognition (Deleuze 1989, 169). “The visionary, the seer” encounters a “powerful non-organic life that grips the world” and must negotiate a fine line between life and death (*ibid.*, 81). There is the very real danger of collapsing into a catatonic catastrophe—“paralyzed, petrified, frozen”, as was the case with Antonin Artaud (*ibid.*, 166)—which might be theorized, following Schopenhauer (2010, 280), as “a violent *tranquilization* of the will”. But, for Deleuze such a collapse would constitute an existential failure—what he describes as spiralling irrevocably into a “black hole” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 285)—even though it attests to a fundamental paradox: “the powerlessness to think at the heart of thought” (Deleuze 1989, 166). Nonetheless, this precarious moment of becoming-visionary or becoming-imperceptible is crucial for Deleuze’s ethico-aesthetics, because it allows for the possibility to break free from the clichéd images that circulate incessantly around us. Although this moment is not to be understood as primarily mystical—which is perhaps why Deleuze strategically presents the concept of “seer” in his cinema books—he sometimes uses language that is curiously reminiscent of Asian spiritual practices:

The third eye enables one to see life beyond all false appearances, passions, and deaths. The ascetic virtues—humility, poverty, chastity—are required for this kind of vision, no longer as virtues that mutilate life, but as powers that penetrate it and become one with it ... a life no longer lived on the basis of need, in terms of means and ends, but according to production, a productivity, a potency. (Deleuze 1988b, 14)

That is, a certain kind of “ascetic” practice is necessary in order to avoid collapsing into an immobile catatonia, which Deleuze equates with a “regression into the undifferentiated”, or oceanic, expanse of nature (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 270). Although a thread of ethics can be traced across Deleuze’s *oeuvre*, it is perhaps in the chapter on becoming in *A Thousand Plateaus* that we get the clearest glimpse of how his philosophy might be interpreted as a spiritual exercise, in Pierre Hadot’s specific sense of an “abstract theory” that informs an “art of living” (Hadot 1995, 83). Hadot concurs with Deleuze that the original sense of *askesis* points to an ethical “practice of spiritual exercise”—that is, an effect of the self on itself for the purpose of self-transformation—rather than a constraining set of moral virtues (ibid., 82). In this chapter, after an initial section significantly entitled “Memories of a Moviegoer”, we are instructed on the imperative of continuously becoming other-than-ourselves in a process that approaches “becoming-imperceptible ... the immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 279). Crucially, we are not presented here with practices for developing an “Oriental intuition”, but rather an ethico-aesthetics that we might employ in order to reconceive the parameters of action beyond the traditional logic of means and ends.

Becoming-imperceptible should be understood as having two aspects, which together move us “toward the realms of the asignifying, asubjective, and faceless” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 187). The first—which Deleuze discusses at length in *Difference and Repetition* and *Cinema 2*—involves raising perception to its proper transcendental limit, unbound from the normal laws of recognition, in a becoming seer or visionary. This implies a rejection of the *a priori* restrictions that Kant placed upon perception. Instead, Deleuze follows Foucault in understanding the conditions of possibility of perception, and of knowledge more generally, to be historically determined and therefore malleable such that each *episteme* is marked by the invention of a new “distribution of the visible” (Deleuze 1988a, 48), a new “space-time” (Deleuze 1995, 172). Or, in the language of the chapter on becoming: “to make a world” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 280). The figure of the seer has the capacity to co-create a redistribution of the visible that initially remains unrecognizable to the majority of people who—following Paul Klee’s Creative Credo—are therefore “missing” (Deleuze 1989, 224). It is in following this Credo that Deleuze might be understood to subscribe to a version of the avant-garde, whose manifesto would be: “Art does not reproduce the visible but renders visible” (Klee 1961, 76). The second aspect of becoming-imperceptible, which is more important for the present analysis, describes a type of disjunctive action that is co-emergent with this vision. Deleuze explains this most fully in *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Cinema 1*. But in a much earlier essay, we can already detect the beginnings of the need to conceptualize “a new way of doing”, or “another way

of acting” (Deleuze 1975, 1226). This shows a great deal of prescience, since it is only until quite recently that other thinkers—both artists and philosophers—have expressed the ethico-aesthetic imperative to rethink the precarious relationship between being and acting, sometimes to the point at which acting appears to involve “doing nothing” (Odell 2020, 22).¹¹ Many of these assessments take into account the seemingly bizarre behaviours of Bartleby the scrivener, “a man without properties” who invents “a new logic that grasps the innermost depths of life and death” with his affirmation of non-action (Deleuze 1998, 74, 82). By embracing such logical contradictions—which were never a fundamental problem for East Asian thought—contemporary artists and philosophers have created a milieu in which it has become possible to move beyond the strictures that Hegelianism has imposed upon practical philosophy: “Since the zero degree of political *praxis* is taken to be Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ from Žižek to Occupy, theory knows already that passivity is not inherently apolitical. Yet the specter of hundreds of ‘passive’ people sitting like statues is haunting the Hegelianism that underpins Marxism: the specter of Buddhism” (Morton 2015, 251). Becoming visionary opens up a new configuration of possible actions that, from an old-guard perspective, may indeed appear passive. In terms of political action, Deleuze argues that new modes of resistance—beyond the “strikes and sabotage” of the 19th century—are necessary because we have entered a new epistemic regime. Now the imperative has become “to create vacuoles of non-communication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control” (Deleuze 1995, 175). However, exact parameters cannot be given in advance, but must continually be renegotiated by becoming sensitive to a particular situation.

More generally, Deleuze (1988b, 5) is clear that we can only evaluate the efficacy of spiritual exercises by the relative increase in our “power of acting”. He follows Bergson, who claims that any initial shock from an experience of the intolerable and unrecognizable must ultimately be “consummated in action” (Bergson 1977, 212). Crucially, this new form of action cannot simply repeat the habitual activities of everyday life even if, paradoxically, they may appear to. This is the meaning of Deleuze’s idea that “vision has short circuited the sensory-motor loop” (Deleuze 1989, 59), and that what he calls “spiritual life” must include “aberrant actions” (Deleuze 2006b 283). While this still sounds quite cryptic, Deleuze gives us a few hints for understanding this new form of action. For example, in relation to the films of Kurosawa, he claims that characters “who have become seers cannot or will not react, so great is their need to ‘see’ properly what there is in the situation” (Deleuze 1989, 128). That is, this new action cannot be merely a

11 Or: “We need to become visionaries and imagine practices of freedom ... a human strike ... that doesn’t correspond to what others tell us about ourselves” (Fontaine 2020, 121).

reaction, which always “limits action” and implies a nihilist attitude of resentment (Deleuze 2006a, 111). Furthermore, even if the movements of a character initially tend towards zero, “this is not what is important, because movement may also be exaggerated and incessant” (Deleuze 1989, 128). One way to understand this paradoxical and aberrant movement—which is both immobile *and* exaggerated, at “the photographic and cinematic threshold” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 281)—is with the figure of Søren Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith, whose “walk imperceptibly becomes a dance” that “goes beyond the motor situation only to return to it” (Deleuze 1989, 61). With each ordinary step, the Knight of Faith imperceptibly makes an extraordinary leap of infinity, as if moving simultaneously horizontally and vertically. Indeed, the Knight of Faith is the conceptual personae of the second aspect of Deleuze’s becoming-imperceptible, in which action is reconceived as a disjunctive affirmation of the ordinary *and* the extraordinary.¹² The Knight of Faith, “on the strength of the absurd” (Kierkegaard 1986, 70) is able to “continually make the movements of infinity” while “getting finitude out of it” (*ibid.*, 67). Furthermore, “if one didn’t know him, it would be impossible to set him apart from the rest of the crowd” (*ibid.*, 69). For Deleuze, however, this movement of infinity does not imply a transcendence. Rather there is a cut-continuity in the *form* of action, a disjunctive continuity between the remarkable and the everyday, such that effective action is reconceived as a kind of non-action whose slogan might be “I would prefer not to”, provided that the “I” itself disappears in the process, blending imperceptibly into the background:

This is what Kierkegaard relates in his story about the Knight of Faith, the man of becoming: to look at him, one would notice nothing, a bourgeois, nothing but a bourgeois ... after a real rupture, he succeeds in being just like everybody else. To go unnoticed is by no means easy. If it is so difficult to be like everybody else, it is because it is an affair of becoming. Not everybody becomes everybody [and everything: *tout le monde*], makes a becoming of everybody/everything But this requires much asceticism, much sobriety, much creative involution.... Becoming everybody/everything is to world [*faire monde*], to make a world [*faire un monde*]. By process of elimination, one is no longer anything more than an abstract line. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 279)

Deleuze says that “in Europe” the poet-painter of the abstract line *par excellence* is Henri Michaux. In his work there is nothing left “but the world of speeds and slownesses without form, without subject, without a face. Nothing left but the

12 Nishitani cites Kierkegaard when discussing subjectivation as “the relation of the self to itself” (Nishitani 2006, 134).

zig-zag of a line, like ‘the lash of the whip of an enraged cart driver’ shredding faces and landscapes” (ibid., 283). This reference to Michaux is an important component of Deleuze’s ethico-aesthetics, which will not be pursued here since it has already been extensively analysed elsewhere (Hetrick 2017; 2014; 2013). In any case, it seems that the figure of the *Chinese* poet-painter—whose practices directly inspired Michaux’s own—is of even more importance for Deleuze. Immediately following the long quote above, he explains that these artists “extract only the essential lines and movements of nature, and proceed only with continuous or superposed strokes [*traits*]. It is in this sense that becoming-everybody/everything, is to world, to make a world” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 280). Here Deleuze directly references François Cheng’s now classic text (2016) *Chinese Poetic Writing*. Cheng claims that the practice of the poet-painter is a form of “spiritual exercise ... an occasion for dialogue between the visible and the invisible, the active and the passive.” The resulting work—a loose composition of “broken strokes”—expresses emptiness, “the infinite, and the rhythmic breath by which the universe is animated”. This emptiness reveals a different kind of onto-logic, beyond “artificial oppositions”, a movement that “plunges things back into the process of reciprocal becoming: mountain ↔ water, tree ↔ cloud, man ↔ rock” (Cheng 2016, 17). We will return shortly to the concepts of the rhythmic breath and broken stroke, which are crucial for understanding Deleuze’s ethico-aesthetics.

But first, why this seemingly Romantic preference for East Asian art? Deleuze understood enough about it to realize that his conception of ethico-aesthetic practice—which effaces the subject even as it creates a world—is very close to the soteriological aim of *geidō*, in which it is perfectly normal to talk about desubjectivation, even up to the contemporary period. For example, Morita Shiryū, one of the founders of avant-garde calligraphy, explains that: “This shell called ‘I’ must split open, this hull must fall off, for the self to be released into a world that is formless and infinite. Only then does it really happen that ‘I do calligraphy’” (Morita 2011, 1201). In the West, on the other hand, there are very few examples of such practices that are not tainted by references to the occult, drugs, or insanity. Michaux dabbled in all three. Beyond the question of morality, not only do these risk collapsing into a catatonic black hole, they ultimately render Deleuze’s ethical theory less convincing. He was also cautious to pre-empt any charge of Orientalism. The first reference to East Asia in *A Thousand Plateaus* is followed by a series of questions that immediately complicate and redirect the overly simple demand for proper cross-cultural representation towards what he will eventually call geophilosophy: “Which China [are we] talking about? The old China, the new, an imaginary one, or yet another located on a shifting map?” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 19). Much later in the book, he argues that an essential component of the

type of spiritual exercise he advocates must involve preventing “the Oriental pole from becoming a phantasy that reactivates all the fascisms in a different way, and also all the folklores, yoga, Zen, and karate” (ibid., 379).

It is well documented in the secondary literature how Deleuze derives some aspects of his ethics from Stoicism (Sellars 2006). However, and quite remarkably, Deleuze argues that this is not enough, that “it is necessary to imagine someone” who is part-Stoic and part-Zen (Deleuze 1990, 248). The “adventure of the Stoic sage” becomes “later on, and in another context ... the adventure of Zen” (ibid., 136). This is also remarkable because, in a few seemingly naive pages, Deleuze appropriates for himself the two primary aspects of East Asian aesthetics: 1) art expresses the reality of emptiness and impermanence; 2) artistic practice involves a form of self-cultivation that implies “moving beyond the binary of activity or passivity” (Parkes and Loughnane 2018).

We can see this clearly in the Zen arts: not only in the art of drawing, where the brush controlled by an unsupported wrist balances form and emptiness and distributes the singularities of a pure event in fortuitous strokes and “furry lines;” but also in the arts of gardening and flower arranging, in the tea ceremony, and in the arts of archery and fencing, where the “flourishing of iron” arises from a marvelous vacuity.... The question is less that of attaining the immediate than of determining the site where the immediate is “immediately” *not-to-be-attained*: the surface where the void and every event along with it are made; the frontier as the cutting edge of a sword or the stretched string of the bow. To paint without painting, non-thought, shooting which becomes non-shooting, to speak without speaking. (Deleuze 1990, 137)

Emptiness is conveyed through the poet-painter’s broken strokes, which evoke a “faint incorporeal mist that escapes from bodies” (ibid., 10). Not only do these impressionistic strokes “make a world” in the resulting image, which could be a painting or a film. Perhaps more importantly, they “world”, they hover fortuitously on a site—liberated from subjectivity and objectivity—that is, without end, *not-to-be-attained*, implying a paradoxical form of non-action. Here we should recall that art, for both Nishida and Nishitani, is a privileged site for the expression of emptiness: “emptiness as a Buddhist doctrine has permeated the sensory world” through “Chinese and Japanese art. Particularly, this permeation appears in painting and poetry” (Nishitani 1999, 180). This is not mere patriotism since, instead of rendering static things “visible in the perfection of form and boundaries”, as in classical Western aesthetics, the East Asian artist creates “a voiceless echo reverberating without form and without bounds in the heart of artist and viewer”

(Nishida quoted in Heisig 2001, 58). Furthermore, it is interesting that Deleuze uses the language of “mist” which—along with analogous forms like clouds, shadows, dusk, smoke, and soft moonlight—was commonly used in East Asian art as a visual metaphor for emptiness. These indistinct forms poetically evoke the “continuous modification” of emptiness’s corollary, impermanence: “now disappears and now appears, now is empty, now full, now there is and now there is not. All this is vague without determined figuration” (Jullien 2009, 35). As we shall see, such works are purposefully incomplete in order to evoke the process of the formation and dissolution of things into each other and ultimately into the void.

Deleuze builds upon Sergei Eisenstein’s idea that the power of cinematic art depends on its capacity to provoke an affective shock in the viewer, a “total provocation of the human brain” that ultimately forces us to think (Eisenstein 1949, 21). This is precisely what Deleuze means when he says that cinema puts movements in the mind. Interestingly, Eisenstein derived this idea from his reflections on Kabuki theatre as well as other “cinematic” aspects of Japanese art and culture that “lie beyond Japanese film”, especially calligraphy and scroll painting (ibid., 28). Deleuze appreciates this and also looks to East Asian aesthetics for inspiration at a crucial moment between movement-images and time-images. It is precisely here that he expands upon the concept of broken strokes and relates it to a new form of action. The reference to Eisenstein is doubly significant because it allows us to subtract Deleuze’s cinematic ethico-aesthetics from his analyses of individual films and construct a more general theory. This is consistent with other readings of Deleuze’s cinema books. For example, Jacques Rancière argues that the cinematic is an artistic sensibility which “pre-dates film as a technical means and distinctive art ... whose meaning cuts across the border between the arts” (Rancière 2006, 6). We might say that, beyond film form, *cinematic art* in a Deleuzian context refers to any art that provokes a becoming-imperceptible through the direct presentation of cinemachinic temporality.

In his cinematic metaphysics, Deleuze differentiates three major types of images—perception-images, affection-images, and action-images—which he then distills into their respective “genetic or embryonic” elements (Deleuze 1986, 159).¹³ Of the three types, the action-image is of course closest to narrative, but narrative

13 I agree with Raymond Bellour, Jacques Rancière, and Anne Sauvagnargues that the difference between movement-images and time-images is functional and epistemological rather than metaphysical or even historical. “The movement-image and time-image are by no means two types of images ranged in opposition, but two different points of view on the image” (Rancière 2006, 112). Despite a certain ambiguity around this issue, Deleuze himself admits as much when he claims that movement-images express an indirect representation of time as *chronos*. On the other hand, time-images express a direct presentation of time as *aion*. In the glossary of the second volume, the time-image is therefore not defined as a new and distinct type of image, but rather through a refraction into seven distinct qualities or signs.

itself presupposes not only particular arrangements of the perception- and affection-images. Beneath narrative is the metaphysical—that is, the genetic or embryonic—element of the action-image, which provides the conditions of possibility for the narrative itself. Following Noël Burch’s terminology, Deleuze calls the two basic structures of the action-image the Large Form, which consists of a situation, an action within it, and a subsequent modification of the situation, and the Small Form, where there is a transition from an action to a clarified situation, which then gives rise to a new action. At the limit, the Small and Large Forms are ideas in the Platonic sense since they “do not merely designate forms of action, but conceptions, ways of conceiving and seeing” that “generally precede” and “determine” the “script ... mise-en-scene, cutting and montage” (ibid., 178). If the genetic elements of the perception-image and the affection-image define the very nature of the movement-image—the *gramme*, or “gaseous perception” (ibid., 86)—and the fundamental shock between two movement-images—the *espacequelconque*, or “any-space-whatever” (ibid., 110)—then the distilled action-image is the poetic element of the movement-image, the creative force before narration. The *encompasser* and *vector* determine two possible Forms of a cinematic work, which Deleuze—in one of his most curious philosophical operations in the *Cinema* books—appropriates from traditional principles of Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, namely the movement of the vital breath and the gestural drawing-out of a brush stroke. Relying upon the work of Henri Maldiney, Deleuze defines the qualities of these proto-filmic spaces in this way: *encompasser*, an integral space that determines the rhythmic contraction-dilation of individual actions; *vector*, a local zig-zagging line that connects intensive actions step-by-step, thereby constructing a heterogeneous and an-archic space.

Maldiney himself builds upon the first two of six principles described by the 6th century Chinese artist and critic Xie He. These principles are quite succinct and notoriously difficult to translate, but they have laid the foundations of East Asian aesthetic theory in many ways. The first principle—spirit- or breath-resonance—which Maldiney renders as “reflect the vital breath, that is, create movement” (Maldiney 1973, 167), helps inform his conceptions of systole and diastole, which are in turn appropriated by Deleuze in theorizing the relation between the flux of the world and a primary, non-phenomenological sensation. The second principle—bone-method—rendered by Maldiney as “seek the skeleton, that is, know how to use the brush” (ibid., 167), is used by Deleuze in his various meditations on the line and stroke. Maldiney’s concept of rhythm, which Deleuze also utilizes, connects these two principles creating a circuit between the play of forces within the world, sensory experience, and the coming-to-form of a work of art. Deleuze employs these principles to define two types of spaces created by cinematic art in a

way that seems to clarify on his use of François Cheng. While, according to Maldiney, the element of the vital breath is primary in East Asian aesthetics and in fact determines the movement of a brush stroke, here Deleuze is more interested in theoretically defining the type of space each cinematic element constructs. In this respect, he prioritizes the stroke since the disconnected, heterogeneous, local space it draws is closer to the cut-continuity of Bergsonian-Leibnizian intensive movement than the all-encompassing whole of the vital breath. Appropriating the logic of East Asian landscape painting in an idiosyncratic way, Deleuze then describes the spaces of the *encompasser* and *vector* in manual terms such that we have the “single stroke” which traces “the movement of a great circle or an organic spiral”, and the “broken stroke” (Deleuze 1986, 187). And, remarkably, he does this with specific reference to the films of Kurosawa and Mizoguchi, respectively.

In the Japanese cinema itself, each of the two great directors closest to us has given priority to one of the two action spaces. Kurosawa’s work is animated by a breath which fills the duels and battles. This breath is represented by a single stroke ... as Kurosawa’s personal signature. (ibid., 188)

But it is the work of Mizoguchi that can further help us understand Deleuze’s concept of the broken stroke.

In the structure of the Small Form, of which the *vector* is the genetic sign, small intensive actions “create space” rather than “presuppose it”, as in the Large Form (ibid., 193). Deleuze argues that the strongest examples of vectors and the broken gestural spaces they draw-out are to be found in Mizoguchi’s films, which rely upon extended, slow-paced pans and tracking shots. The camera’s movements trace a line that “connects or joins heterogeneous elements, while maintaining them as heterogeneous” (ibid., 194). Not only does vectorial space evoke the meditative movement of a calligrapher’s brush stroke. Deleuze also cites Noël Burch’s work on Japanese cinema, which compares Mizoguchi’s horizontal pans—what Burch calls “scroll-shots, the proto-filmic organization of ... space”—to the experience of unrolling a traditional Japanese painted handscroll, or *emakimono*, thus suggesting that the gestural movement of the camera across the screen itself creates vectorial space (Burch 1979, 228). At this point, Deleuze reminds us that “Eisenstein was also fascinated by Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, because he saw in it a prefiguration of the cinema” (Deleuze 1986, 188), but he was ultimately “less interested in different spaces than in the form of ‘rolling-pictures’, which he compares to a pan shot” (ibid., 240).¹⁴ There is a sequence in Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu*

14 For Eisenstein’s extensive analysis of East Asian scroll painting as proto-cinematic, see Eisenstein (1987, 216–383).

that beautifully illustrates such scroll-shots or rolling-pictures. The camera moves slowly from a palace room where the potter and his lover are casually awaking from bed. With a subtle dissolve, the camera continues to move, as if in one long gesture, through the palace wall into a forest where the two are now bathing in a small pond. The camera gradually tracks left, again in close-up, across the rocks and, while we still hear the lovers giggling and splashing, makes its way to an open clearing in which they are picnicking next to a lake. These three fragmented spaces, each with its own rhythm and dramatic mood, are linked by the meandering *vector* of the camera, which traces out what Deleuze calls a “line of the universe”. The spaces—heterogeneous, but neither totally disconnected nor unified in an encompassing whole—are elements on a zig-zagging line of force that “leaps from one to another ... across the gaps” (ibid., 168). This line of the universe is a “jagged line that unites singular points or remarkable moments at the summit of their intensity” passing from intensive action to intensive action, creating a patchwork space of related but fragmented elements in its wake (ibid., 218).

Deleuze thus takes Maldiney’s rendering of Xie He’s second principle quite literally, as to “seek the skeleton” refers both to the gestural stroke of the camera as well as the broken line it constructs. And it is in this sense that Mizoguchi is seen as developing “a metaphysics as much as a technique”, making visible a cinemachinic idea of cosmic skeleton-space (ibid., 193). It is also in this sense that Mizoguchi “reaches the extreme limit of the action-image” in which lines of the universe “bring forth a reality that is no longer anything but disoriented, disconnected” (ibid., 195). In his work, the action-image begins to collapse since the normal sensory-motor schema that underlies it is threatened by the emergence of a disconnected space. Certain sequences of films like *Ugetsu* display the three deformations of the action-image that signal for Deleuze the need to conceptualize new ways of doing and acting: the “dispersive situation”, in which there is no longer a globalizing space that holds actions together coherently; the “deliberately weak links” that create a broken trajectory along a line of the universe; the “rambling stroll and the continual return journey”, the logic of which denies the possibility for habitual forms of action (ibid., 207). Even though Deleuze emphasizes the broken stroke in order to characterize the kind of disjunctive space in which a contemporary form of action emerges, he would ultimately agree with Maldiney—as well as a more traditional reading of East Asian aesthetics—on the primacy of breath-resonance. This term is the way painters since Xie He have described “the *between* ... precisely that which deprives the thing of itself ... that from which things arise and that which animates them” (Jullien 2009, 95). This of course sounds remarkably close to Deleuze’s cinematic metaphysics of becoming in which the “interval *between* images ... means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it” (Deleuze 1989, 179). But the question remains : in this speculative

movement from Cheng to Maldiney, have we come any closer to understanding the concept of the broken stroke and its place in Deleuze's ethico-aesthetics?

Since it is non-representational—that is, it does not “pursue resemblance” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 280)—and suggests a movement that precedes the differentiation between subject and object, we do not have to wonder if the broken stroke points to the gestural trajectory of the film camera or the crippled movements of actors. It does. But these are merely the outer—secondary and tertiary—movements of a creative act that, even as they make a world as a work of art, also document a more fundamental inner movement. The broken stroke is ultimately an ethico-aesthetic activity that “worlds”, that constructs a new, disjunctive space-time in which one is oneself no longer “a subject but a work of art” (Deleuze 1995, 95). And it does this in three ways. First, by inventing a new an-archic space-time through its movements, without relying on an encompassing set of constraining rules that would prescribe actions in advance, the logic of the broken stroke points to an immanent ethics that creates its own facilitative rules in the process. The impetus for the creative act is derived from an inner necessity—“a very complex thing” (Deleuze 2006b, 313)—rather than a static and transcendent moral code. That is, “a creator only does what he or she absolutely needs to do” (ibid., 316). Second, without given rules, Deleuzian ethico-aesthetics proceeds by “a sort of groping experimentation”, the only guiding principle of which is “the eye of the mind” (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 41). Such creative experimentation follows a general procedure that determines the conditions of any particular problem: “the search for fragments, the progressive determination, and linking of adjoint fields” (Deleuze 1994, 190). The trajectory of this process is broken—Deleuze interchangeably uses the terms zig-zag or irrational—in the sense that there are always points of intensification and contraction in which the conditions of the problem have to be reconfigured and the course of action recalibrated. Creation always “takes place in bottlenecks”, according to “a set of impossibilities” that demand “a lot of silence and work” (Deleuze 1995, 134). Another example that Deleuze uses to model this type of non-linear problematization is “the famous problem-tests, the questions-answers” of Zen koans (Deleuze 1990, 136). Thomas Merton, in a book that Deleuze was probably familiar with, describes this process in the Zen context:

when your thinking goes deeper and deeper, you will get no answer until finally you will reach a cul-de-sac, your thinking totally checked. You won't find anything within that can be called “I” or “mind”. (Merton 1961, 236)¹⁵

15 Elsewhere, I give evidence that Deleuze was familiar with texts on Zen that circulated in avant-garde milieus of the 1960s, which include this one as well as, for example, Alan Watts' *The Spirit of Zen* (Hetrick 2023).

Third, the concept of the broken stroke brings us back to the cut-continuity at the heart of Deleuze's temporal metaphysics. Quite broadly, we could map Dōgen's time of everyday affairs onto what Deleuze calls *chronos* and Dogen's metaphysical being-time onto what Deleuze's calls *aion*. *Aion* is precisely the "pure and empty form of time that has ... unwound its own circle, stretching itself out in a straight line", which is "all the more dangerous, more labyrinthine, and more tortuous ... very different from the circular or monocentered return of *chronos*" (Deleuze 1990, 165). The time of *aion* is riven by singularities that are no longer those of persons or things but of pure events—*eventum tantum*—which are "displaced over a line that goes on dividing ... across all its disjuncts" (ibid., 176). It is precisely in the experience of *aion* that subject and object become shimmerings on the surface of a much more profound movement. Again, it is not that the subject dissolves into "the flow of one great *élan vital*", as Nishida claims (1973, 27). It is closer to Ōhashi's inclusive disjunction between the remarkable and the everyday, or to the Knight of Faith who's rambling stroll is simultaneously a vertical dance that draws-out a line of the universe. One becomes "an abstract line or stroke" that worlds. "One is then like grass" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 280).

Conclusion

Deleuze's idiosyncratic use of East Asian painting ultimately offers a more workable, and indeed more contemporary, conception of ethico-aesthetics than either Nishida or Ōhashi. Their vague evocations of the "good conduct" (Nishida 1990, 135) of a bodhisattva remain underdeveloped and, as we have seen, run the risk of collapsing into Romantic reverie or even radical passivity. Furthermore, it is only with this appropriation that Deleuze's ethico-aesthetics—which also builds upon the work of the Stoics, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Foucault—is fully conceptualized. This is because its immanent end—becoming-imperceptible—is "intimately intertwined" with references to East Asia, especially "the figure of the traditional poet-painter" (Bordeleau 2014, 500). Deleuze's reference to Chinese and Japanese landscape painting is important because the conception of non-action that it implies offers both a comparative interpretation of *muga*—which the members of the Kyoto School were unable to do—as well as a contemporary ethico-aesthetics that precludes the charge that his philosophy leads us "forever out of our actual world" since it remains at "a maximum distance from the demands of interest and action" (Hallward 2006, 164).

The Schopenhauerian reading of Kyoto School ethico-aesthetics completely misconstrues the concept of non-action that it seems to imply. When Nishida

discusses the cut-continuity between statements like “Sesshū painted nature” and “nature painted itself through Sesshū” (Nishida 1990, 135), he is evoking the logic of *wuwei*, which is itself implied by the Daoist roots of Zen. While Nishida spent his entire philosophical career rendering a whole range of East Asian concepts into the language of continental philosophy, this one in particular remains curiously under-theorized. Sesshū Tōyō mastered all the major Chinese painting styles before contributing to the widespread shift, during the Muromachi period, towards developing particularly Japanese ways of art. He is known today for his “broken ink” (*haboku*) landscapes, which build upon Chinese techniques that are remarkably contemporary in the sense that they recall, for example, the flicks, drips, and splashes of Jackson Pollock’s all-over paintings. As a Zen priest, Sesshū would have been interested in using these techniques as spiritual exercises, that is, in order to achieve the experience of *muga*, which demands an extraordinary kind of interest and action beyond the typical form of conscious intentionality that dominates the European conception of subjectivity. Instead, reduced to an “a-subjective stream of consciousness” (Deleuze 2006b, 38), the “inner movement” of the poet-painter’s “contemplative spirit” is transmitted through a “vital impulse” into broken gestural movements that—rather than pursuing resemblance—are documented directly on the canvas. That is, without an intentional subject, there is a cut-continuity between inner and outer movements, rather than a “conscious manipulation of the brush” (Jullien 2009, 224). According to François Jullien—who’s work Deleuze cites in relation to the pure immanence of East Asian thought (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 74)—the resulting image is “fragmentary and seemingly in pieces” (Jullien 2009, 73), presenting a formless emptiness “in the mode of appearing-disappearing, at once ‘as if they were’ and ‘as if there were not’” (ibid., 8).

Neither form nor ground exists any longer, in any sense, because the powers of the line and the plane tend to be equalized. By constantly being broken, the line becomes more than a line, while at the same time the plane becomes less than a surface. As for the contour, the line does not delimit one; it is never the outline of anything, because the line is swept along by an infinite movement. (Deleuze 2005, 105)

Crucially, without a recognizable subject or object the form of action itself becomes nearly unrecognizable. Such spiritual exercises are aberrant actions that put movements in the mind as well as in the image. They involve a choice of existence that trace a zig-zagging line between life and death, between activity and passivity. This form of non-action—rather than a simple “will to nothingness ... Schopenhauer’s greatest error” (Deleuze 2006a, 97)—must be reconceived

through a disjunctive logic that includes *both* a “contemplation” that is “the mystery of passive creation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 212) as well as a “will that is essentially creative” and ultimately increases our power to act (Deleuze 2006a, 85).

Not only are there no transcendent laws that govern the movement of this type of experimentation, the concept of the broken stroke—which implies the logic of impermanence—renders a formless image that is without determinate figuration and is necessarily unfinished. Non-action short-circuits the traditional Western dichotomy between *praxis* and *poiesis*, and hovers within the disjunctive gap between them as a means without end. In this sense, it is a form of action that is remarkably contemporary: the continuous practice towards a work that never fully manifests (Boon and Levine 2018). Nothing is represented and nothing is completed; there is only perpetual gestation and experimentation. This non-action therefore belongs “to the realm of ethics . . . and not only to that of aesthetics” (Agamben 2004, 109). There is a creative suspension of climax, a plateau that Deleuze describes as the circulation and multiplication of intensities without orientation toward a point of culmination. In a reference to “a great Japanese compilation of Chinese Daoist treatises”, Deleuze also calls this plateau “*Dao*, a plane of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion”. A groping experimentation on and of this plateau is necessary in order “to succeed in abstracting from a Self” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 157). And, again, this brings us back to the paradoxical logic of non-action for the East Asian poet-painter:

Not only can one *do* without finishing . . . there can also be something *done*, all the more done, without anyone doing, that is, without anyone aiming to do. Instead of having to strain or struggle at the level of the figural and tangible, the sage and the painter do not need to act. (Jullien 2009, 73)

This conception of non-action, which Deleuze extracts from a certain reading of East Asian art and philosophy, is one way to make sense of the immanent aim of his ethico-aesthetics. Hovering in the creative and disjunctive space *between*, both the subject (the artist) and the object (the work) are deprived of themselves and become engulfed in the broken circulation of gestural intensities that traverse the surface plane of the canvas, animating everybody and everything. We (the spectators) may also disappear into the crowd, ourselves painted “gray on gray” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 197). In “Negotiating the Way”, “a treatise on practice” said to contain “the essence of all ninety-five fascicles of the *Shōbōgenzō*” (Dōgen 2002, 7), Dōgen claims that the goal of Zen is to “become, *imperceptibly*, one with each and all of the myriad things and permeate completely all time” (ibid., 13). At this

point, and now according to Deleuze, having “returned to the surface, the sage discovers objects–events, all of them communicating in the void which constitutes their substance; and discovers the *aion* in which they are sketched out” (Deleuze 1990, 136). After drawing–out a broken line of spiritual exercises by plunging into being–time, there is a return journey in which one then experiences a cut–continuity between objects *and* events simultaneously. That is, like the Knight of Faith, one becomes an abstract line that cuts through all the myriad things, even as one becomes just like everybody else. This immediately brings to mind the stages of the way as outlined by the Zen “Oxherding Images” in which, from the eighth image onwards, the subject and object fall back into emptiness (Watts 1936, 66). Finally, and unremarkably, one returns to the everyday world of the marketplace, and we would notice nothing, “nothing but a bourgeois” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 279). However, it would be a grave mistake to suggest that *satori*, or “mystical intuition” more generally (Hallward 2006, 133), might be the true goal of Deleuze’s ethico–aesthetics, which has neither a prescriptive *arche* nor a predefined *telos*. This is precisely what precludes it from becoming a list of moral codes such as the six *pāramitās* of the bodhisattva. Indeed, the type of ethical experimentation that it can accommodate may be applied to a variety of endeavours, including especially the ones Deleuze explicitly names: philosophy, art, and science. To these we could add the revolutionary and the sorcerer, two other exemplars that recur in his writings. It is important to remember that each of these endeavours, and not just art, involves aesthetics in the sense that it begins with a desubjectifying vision that creates new possibilities of life: “Even Descartes had his dream. To think is always to follow a sorcerer’s line” (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 41).

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Humean Elements in the Teachings of Itō Jinsai: A Study of Moral Motivation in Confucian Ethics

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Abstract

The present article juxtaposes selected elements of the Humean position on moral motivation with the ethical teachings of the Edo period Japanese Confucian scholar Itō Jinsai—especially the latter’s critical reading of the notion of structural coherence *li*, his defence of human feelings as the fundamental ground of moral motivation and his views on the origins of moral sentiment. In doing so, the article aims to show that there is an interesting line going through Jinsai’s work that might be argued to bear, within the philosophical project of Confucian ethics, similarities to certain of Hume’s more famous positions, which it actually predates.

Keywords: Itō Jinsai, David Hume, structural coherence *li*, moral motivation, sentimentalism

Humovski elementi v naukih Itōja Jinsaija: Študija moralne motivacije v konfucijanski etiki

Izvleček

Pričujoči članek si jemlje za primerjavo izbrane elemente Humovega pogleda na moralno motivacijo na eni ter etične nauke japonskega konfucijanskega učenjaka obdobja Edo Itōja Jinsaija na drugi strani – posebej Jinsaijevo kritično branje pojma strukturne koherence *li*, njegov zagovor človeških čustev kot temeljne podlage moralne motivacije in njegovega pogleda na izvor moralnih stališč. Na ta način se v članku pokaže, da se skozi Jinsaijevo delo vije zanimiva rdeča nit, za katero bi se dalo trditi, da poseduje znotraj filozofskega projekta konfucijanske etike določene podobnosti z nekaterimi Humovimi bolj znanimi stališči – od katerih je Jinsaijevo delo sicer starejše.

Ključne besede: Itō Jinsai, David Hume, strukturna koherenca *li*, moralna motivacija, sentimentalizem

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Introduction

David Hume's (1711–1776) arguments on moral motivation are well known and have sparked numerous debates in the Western philosophical tradition. I do not propose in this paper to enter this vast and expansive field and to argue either for or against Hume's positions. I rather wish to try and show that certain distinctions, similar to Hume's, can also be found within the bounds of Confucian ethics¹—and that the selected example of this actually predates Hume's arguments themselves. Namely, I would like to use Hume as a lens to examine certain aspects of the work of the Edo period Japanese scholar Itō Jinsai 伊藤仁斎 (1627–1705).

Taking the Humean position as a specific lens to look through, I would like to analyse Itō Jinsai's critique of the philosophical teachings of the Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism, also taking into account the fact that Jinsai's thought was developed within a completely different philosophical tradition to Hume's. I would especially like to take a closer look at Jinsai's critical examination of one of Cheng-Zhu School's key philosophical notions: that of structural coherence (*li/ri* 理), as well as his defence of the notions of human feelings and desires as the fundamental ground of moral motivation and the natural origins of moral sentiment. I will argue that Jinsai's project might actually contain elements similar to the Humean position, and that it might be precisely this question of moral motivation that gives Jinsai's critique its cohesive thread.

As I show elsewhere (see Ogrizek 2021) even though the philosophical work of Jinsai might for him perhaps be seen as neither the starting point, nor the actual goal, it can also be said to be the central activity that holds his project together (ibid., 206). Jinsai's main contention is that the Cheng-Zhu School was in its readings of Confucian notions too deeply influenced by the Buddhist and Daoist teachings—which for Jinsai symbolized a sort of antithesis to Confucian ethics². Here then, in contrast to Hume, Jinsai's work stands also in service to the Confucian project as a whole—a project that is turned not only towards philosophy, but primarily towards practical self-cultivation and the proper practice of virtue.

1 There is some research into similarities between Hume's work and works of Confucian philosophy, especially of Mencius. In their article "Mencius, Hume and the virtue of humanity: sources of benevolent moral development" Carey and Vitz, for example, argue that we can see a similarity between what they themselves call the Humean and Mencian moral philosophy, especially on the psychological and social sources of benevolent moral development (Carey and Vitz 2019, 2). In the present article I focus instead on the similarities of critical examination of notions carried out by Jinsai and Hume.

2 As with Hume's position, in the present paper I do not try to adjudicate such disputes on the whole. Instead I wish to emphasize certain points of similarity (as well as those of difference) with the Humean position.

I do not propose to present an exhaustive list of similarities and differences, but instead draw upon those elements of Hume’s critique which I find to be the most readily useful to try and juxtapose with Jinsai’s own works. In this sense, I place the real focus on Jinsai’s teachings, while I take Hume to represent a certain influential lens, through which aspects of Jinsai’s work can be more readily contrasted and identified. It would therefore be wrong to claim that these ideas are *Humean* first, although they are here identified as such, since that is the name under which they were perhaps most famously represented in the Western philosophical canon. But I also realize that Jinsai’s work actually predates Hume’s. I thus take Hume’s work as a lens simply due to its influential status.

Taking cues from Hume’s critique—which has inspired an enduring position on the subject of moral motivation—I examine Jinsai’s critical discussions and try to show that while the notions and formulation of his critical arguments are very different, there might be some similar elements in both of these positions. I believe that some of these elements can also be seen at the centre of Jinsai’s own critique of the ethical teachings of his predecessors—but at the same time I point out the ways in which Jinsai always operates within the Confucian ethical project of self-cultivation, as well as relational ethics.

The Inactivity of Reason and Structural Coherence *li* 理 as a Dead Term

I would first like to draw parallels between Hume’s critical examination of *reason* as a possible source of moral motivation and Jinsai’s own examination of the term structural coherence *li/ri* 理—a term that played a central role in the teachings of Song Neo Confucians and which in the Chinese philosophical tradition might be most closely associated with reason and rationality.

Jinsai’s examination starts with a critical look at Zhu Xi’s famous duality of *li* and *qi/ki* 氣. In this regard, much has been written about Jinsai denying the substance “dualism” of Zhu Xi Learning (see for example Yamashita 1983), but such a reading is surely too simple. For one, John Makeham argues that Zhu Xi himself was never a substance dualist (Makeham 2018, 317), and shows that in Zhu Xi’s system *li* is never considered a creative force (*ibid.*)—a charge that Jinsai would surely agree with. Jinsai does not even seem to dissolve the duality (much less a non-existing dualism) of *li* and *qi* in a direct way—but he does emphasize that *li* cannot be understood as existing *a priori* in any way, even conceptually. He argues: “If we further seek the origins of *yin* and *yang*, we cannot but return

to the notion of *li*” (Transl. Tucker 1998, 74, ed.³) (しこうして再びかの陰陽たるゆえんの本を求むるときは、すなわち必ずこれを理に帰せざることをあらず。) (Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 16, 116⁴). But he then goes on to criticize Neo-Confucian statements such as structural coherence *li* might have existed before generative force *qi*, and that even prior to the existence of Heaven and Earth there was *li*⁵, which he, in the Neo-Confucian tradition, criticizes as “subjective opinions” (*okutaku* 臆度) (Tucker 1998, 74–75), concluding: “Like legs added to a picture of a snake or a head growing atop another head, they will never really be confirmed via experience (ibid., 75) (蛇を描いて足を添え、頭上に頭を安んず、実に見得る者にあらず。) (Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 16, 116).

He furthermore describes the notion of *li* as a dead term, saying:

Structural coherence is a dead term (*siji* 死字). Dictionaries classify it under the jade radical (*tama* 玉), while pronunciation derives from the word “mile” (*ri* 里)⁶. Structural coherence originally denoted the veins in a piece of jade (*gyokuseki no bunri* 玉石之文理). By extension, it came to refer to the order of things (*jibutsu no jōri* 事物之条理). Thus, structural coherence can neither convey nor capture the mysteries that Heaven and Earth spawn through productive and transformative life (*tenchi seisei kaka no myō* 天地生々化々之妙). (Trans. Tucker 1998, 101, ed.)

道の字はもと活字、その生生化化の妙を形容するゆえんなり。理の字のごときはもと死字、玉に従い里の声、玉石の文理を謂う。もって事物の条理を形容すべくして、もって天地生生化化の妙を形容するに足らず。(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 31, 124)

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- 3 I lean heavily on Tucker’s translations throughout the text and mark this accordingly, but I will also edit those translations appropriately to accord with my own translations of Jinsai’s philosophical notions.
 - 4 Jinsai’s original text is written in well-annotated *kanbun*, but as most Japanese sources quote the *kakikudashi* version of the text, I do the same here. However, in the book by Yoshikawa and Shimizu (1971) there is also the original *kanbun* version of the text—I therefore also quote the page numbers for that version of the text.
 - 5 In *Zhuzi yulei*, for example, Zhu Xi says: “Before Heaven and Earth existed there was only *li*. Because *li* exists, so do Heaven and Earth. Without *li* there would be neither Heaven and Earth, neither man nor animals, neither containing nor sustaining (of things by Heaven and Earth). Because there is *li*, *qi* flourishes everywhere, nourishing and developing everything (transl. Tucker 1998, 74–75, ed.) (未有天地之先，畢竟也只是理。有此理，便有此天地；若無此理，便亦無天地，無人無物，都無該載了！有理，便有氣流行，發育萬物。)” (*Zhuzi yulei*, 1)
 - 6 This is apparently from the *Showwen* (ibid.).

Jinsai's intentions here seem to be both to place the notion of *li* strictly within the notion of *qi*, and also to try and shift emphasis from *li* to *qi* when it comes to the notions that define value within the creative process of the common movement. While John Makeham again shows that Zhu Xi's own concerns with the diagram of Taiji are in fact far from cosmogonic, but rather ontological⁷, Jinsai's concern from the very start seems to be in setting the stage for his ethics of everyday human relations: starting with the universe in which the creative movement of a unitary generative force (*ichigenki* 一元氣) is the only origin of things and affairs—and especially value. Thus Jinsai's first criticism of *li* can also be seen as part of his rebellion against the notion of *li* as conceptually *a priori* and as the main notion value giving. There can be no value before value arises within the unitary generative force,⁸ and we cannot really speak of the truth of things outside all human experience.

However, Jinsai's reading could also be seen here as somewhat too narrow to encompass the different philosophical aspects and semantic nuances of the notion *li*. As Brook Ziporyn points out, the term *li/ri* 理 has played a rather interesting and controversial part in the history of Chinese philosophy, and it is also notoriously hard to pin down a translation of it. Several translations of *li* into English have been attempted, like “principle”, “order”, “reason”, “Logos”, “pattern” and “coherence.” However each of these has presented problems of its own, and there seems to be no ready-made fit for the concept in the existing philosophical lexicon⁹ (Ziporyn 2008, 403).

Ziporyn goes into detail of where all these different aspects of *li* stand in relation to the historical and philosophical uses of the term. And while following his thorough search for a proper translation would go beyond the confines of this paper, I would

7 See Makeham (2018). Makeham sees Zhu Xi as providing “a new solution to the problem of how badness is possible, which avoided the radical proposals entailed in the Buddhist attempts to deal with the issue for over half a millennium. Zhu's solution was to develop a monistic ontology in which the conditions that make badness possible are not associated with pattern [*li*] but rather are associated with *qi*, but with the crucial stipulation that there can be no pattern [*li*] without *qi*.” (Makeham 2018, 334) Whether Zhu Xi actually developed what can rightly be called a “monistic ontology”, while going far beyond the bounds of the present article in scope, might also be a question worth exploring further in the future.

8 Thus here, the notions of the Way and virtue already supplant the notion of *li* as value-giving and standard-setting.

9 Recently, several other translations or interpretations of the term *li* have come *in vogue*. In the context of Zhu Xi's philosophy, Margus Ott (2020, 281), for instance, uses the term veins. I myself use the translation “structural coherence”. *Li* as “structure” is not mentioned by Ziporyn, but it is used consistently by Jana Rošker (see for example, Rošker 2012). Rošker also offers an important discussion of *li* as a structural compatibility between the human mind and the external world (see Rošker 2018).

like to highlight those elements of *li* which seem to stand in starkest contrast with some of Jinsai's allegations. Explaining the earlier uses of the term, as also pointed out by Tang Junyi (in Tang 1986), Ziporyn emphasizes that *li* always demonstrates an important component of human action and cohering with desire.

The earliest Chinese dictionary, the *Shuowenjiezi*, defines the term simply as 'to treat jade' (治玉也). The implication is that Li here means 'to cut and divide in a way which is consistent with a particular human value'. One cuts away pieces from a raw piece of jade in order to make it serve as a ritual implement or to attract a human buyer. Thus the raw jade material must be reorganized to form a whole that also necessarily coheres with some human desires or purposes. Tang thus stresses that in its earliest uses, the subjective and active/temporal sense of Li as primary, with its objective and static/spatial aspects as derivative: Li as a verb rather than as a noun. He also notes, importantly, the role of human will, a human project, in all these early usages of Li; that is, the essential connection with value and valuation. (Ziporyn 2008, 404)

Ziporyn himself, after examining all the different possible treatments of the term, offers the definition of *li* as "a harmonious coherence, which, when a human being becomes harmoniously coherent with it, leads to further harmonious coherence" (ibid., 415), and points out that the "coherence, in Li, must cover at least these four senses: sticking together of parts, sticking together with the environment, intelligibility, and value (ibid., 412). Ziporyn also, here and elsewhere, stresses a very relevant point about *li*, namely the normative/descriptive fusion within it, noting that: "The Li of a thing is both 'what makes it so' and also 'how it should be', and ethics are derived directly from this fusion of 'is' and 'ought'" (Ziporyn 2008, note 4).

Ziporyn finally points out that:

[I]t is still far too easy to imagine Li simply as some sort of pattern to be apprehended, without considering the subjective position of the apprehender. Li is not just any togetherness: it is a valued togetherness. Value, however, is here also a type of togetherness: it is a relation between a desire and its object. The valuer is already implied in this notion of value. The intelligibly coherent thing must cohere with certain human inclinations, which must themselves cohere with other inclinations in a valued way—i.e., "harmoniously". (Ziporyn 2008, 413)

All these elements speak towards the fact that Jinsai's reading of the term is in fact quite narrow and many of his concerns are actually addressed by giving it a

more well-rounded interpretation. In many ways, the reading itself seems to be pre-empted by the reading of the notion of *li*, as presented above by Ziporyn (2008). *Li* in its relation with *qi* also already presupposes the kind of movement-and-negotiation-based value-arising that one could consider Jinsai trying to describe—and one would be hard-pressed to argue Jinsai here does more than stress once more what Zhu Xi had himself already argued (see for instance Thompson 2017, 11). However, it is still important to follow Jinsai’s own train of thought and to see whether these problems might in fact not carry deeper implications.

Jinsai sets against *li* the Way and virtue as the proper value-giving notions and does not allow for these notions to coincide in any way. Value is first defined by the Way and virtue of Heaven and Earth, and the notion most closely associated with it in Jinsai’s own system is that of life.

The Book of Changes states, “The great virtue of Heaven and Earth (*tenchi no daitoku* 天地之大徳) is life-giving productivity (*sei* 生).” Thus, ceaseless reproduction (*seisei shite yamazaru* 生生而已) is the Way of Heaven and Earth (*tenchi no michi* 天地之道). (Transl. Tucker 1998, 75)

易に曰く、「天地の大徳を生と言う」。言うところは生生して已まざるは、即ち天地の道なり。(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 16, 116)

Jinsai seems to afford life, as he sees it, a sort of special place in his limited ontological considerations. He says that “the Way of Heaven and Earth consists of life (*sei* 生) not death (*si* 死) (天地の道は、生有って死無し。)” (Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 16, 116) and “life and death are utterly opposed to one another¹⁰ (生と死と対するが故なり。)” (Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 17, 116). He argues that while we can say things die and the integrated disintegrates, life itself never ends (*ibid.*, 17), as it is an ongoing and interconnected process. To Jinsai life and death are so utterly opposed to one another that they fall outside of any kind of complementary pairing of opposites—life and death are completely incommensurable.

In a sense, life and death, the animate and inanimate, seems to be one of the deepest ontological divides Jinsai allows in his teachings. It is therefore an interesting question as to what Jinsai might actually consider the animate and inanimate universes, but it also seems that this question does not lead to a simple answer. While for him animate things are “vivacious” (*huo/katsu* 活), inanimate things are dead

10 Translated by Tucker 1998, 76

(*si/shi* 死) and only exist (*cun/son* 存); living things possess *Dao* 道 and virtues *de* 德, while dead things only possess *li* 理; living things also possess a living suchness (*xing/sei* 性) and the heart-mind (*xin/kokoro, shin* 心), but dead things do not seem to. The living universe possesses productivity and transformative potential, and it also possesses an inherent moral dimension that the dead universe does not. The animate universe is a moving, changing universe—and it is also motivated.

Jinsai thus also differentiates between what can be either morally good (*shan/zen* 善) or bad (*e/aku* 惡) and between what is simply ordered. Order is neither good nor bad, death is neither good nor bad, because it does not pertain to the living universe and so does not pertain to the Way and virtue. The Way and virtue are both notions of the living universe—but of course this distinction cannot be made along any modern scientific lines, nor would it be fair to expect this. As a Confucian Jinsai sees life as a grand process of production and transformation that makes the animate universe a coherent whole—as different but not separate from the inanimate universe: life itself is the great process of production, reproduction and perseverance, it is also the great web of productive and meaningful relations.

And it is at this point that I propose we first examine Hume's thoughts upon the subject of *reason*. Hume famously begins his third book *A Treatise of Human Nature* with a section titled "Moral Distinctions not Deriv'd from Reason", in which he asks the question: "Whether 'tis' by means of our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blameable or praise-worthy?" (Hume 2000, 294; T 3.1.1.3) and he comes to the conclusion that:

Actions may be laudable or blameable; but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable: laudable or blameable, therefore, are not the same with reasonable or unreasonable. The merit and demerit of actions frequently contradict, and sometimes controul our natural propensities. But reason has no such influence. Moral distinctions, therefore, are not the offspring of reason. Reason is wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals. (Hume 2000, 295; T 3.1.1.10)

Even at first glance it would be hard to propose that such objections be projected upon Confucian thought in a simple manner—even those readings of it which at their centre employ the notion of structural coherence *li*. And yet the last part of the above paragraph—namely, that reason is wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals—bears a striking resemblance to Jinsai's own view on the notion of *li*. Jinsai criticizes *li* as a *dead*

notion and tries to show that as such it can never properly describe or (re)produce the movement of the living universe—an aspect of which is also a sense of morals.

Hume produces one of his most famous observations in connection with the above view:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it ... [I] am persuaded, that a small attention [to this point] wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason. (Hume 2000, 302; T 3.1.2.27)

This might help us illuminate one of Jinsai's less apparent criticisms. Jinsai also identifies a kind of inactivity in *li*, a sort of stillness, which for him is inherent in the notion itself and antithetical to life. And this stillness is perhaps precisely what both connects (but also separates) within the notion itself the *what is* from the *what ought to be*. *Li* possesses an element of value and takes into account the valuer—but in the works of Zhu-Cheng Neo Confucians penetrating it always comes with a certain appeal to purity, a purity that is further linked to stillness. The divide is a demand for stillness, since agitations can cover what is pure; but at the same time, it also remains a Confucian demand for an active moral growth. Jinsai does not seem to believe that the divide formulated in this way can be surmounted—that entering the stillness of inanimate existence could also give special insight into the moral workings of the living universe. He sees stillness and inactivity as inherent in *li* and thus also as a necessary burden upon the proper Confucian project.

Jinsai criticizes the teachings of the Cheng-Zhu School in both their project of self-cultivation as well as language, since they both make an appeal towards stillness and purity. Jinsai, for example, criticizes the metaphor of “bright mirror,

still water (*mingjing zhibhui/meikyo shisui* 明鏡止水), as describing the heart-mind¹¹—and argues that such language is not originally Confucian, and thus brings the wrong kind of direction into Confucian thought and practice. Jinsai here points out the fact that the *stillness* and *purity* that penetrating *li* seems to demand, are in fact inherent in the notion itself—at least in the way that it was used by the followers of the Cheng-Zhu teachings.

Jorgensen indeed traces such metaphors to the Buddhist lineages (Jorgensen 2018, 78–81)¹² and argues that they probably did in fact influence Zhu Xi in his teachings.

Without this *tathagatagarbha* framework, with its many implications, Daoxue would lack much of its core structure, even vocabulary, and perhaps its *raison d'être*. In the end, Daoxue, especially that of Zhu Xi, formulated a kind of Confucian “Northern Chan” because it claimed there was an empty, radiant mind obscured by habituation and *qi*, which could be realized by gradual practice—all doctrines of the Northern Chan of the early Tang period. While Zhu would have strenuously denied this contention, he was also interacting with people such as Liu Pingshan¹³ and Zhang Jiucheng¹⁴ who were openly attempting to reconcile Buddhism and Confucianism or create a new synthesis. Zhu was trying to do the opposite, but like many who attempt to oppose something strenuously, he ended up mirroring many of his opponents’ doctrines as he responded to agendas already well-established in Buddhist circles, central to which were interpretations of the *tathagatagarbha* doctrine. (ibid., 121)

Jorgensen here bases his conclusions on a similar argument to that which Jinsai bases his own on: that Zhu Xi had used similar root metaphors¹⁵ that the Buddhists used, and thus came to see philosophical problems in a similar light (though his project was meant to argue the exact opposite in many cases).¹⁶ Jinsai may have

11 Though he claims that it comes from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, which is not true. While the metaphor of the mirror does appear in the text (for example: Ch. 5), there is no mention of the mirror being covered, like in Zhu Xi’s use of the metaphor.

12 He also notes that there is no covering of the mirror in similar pre-Buddhist metaphors, and Daoist traditions cannot be seen as a key influence on this matter (see Jorgensen 2018, 49).

13 Liu Zihui 劉子翬 (Pingshan 屏山; 1101–1147).

14 Zhang Jiucheng 張九成 (1092–1159).

15 See MacCormac (1976, xiii).

16 In the same book, Stephen C. Angle argues that Jorgensen overstates what his evidence shows (see Angle 2018, 164–65). The point is not argued here further, only that Jinsai’s own criticism certainly does stem from a point of view closer to Jorgensen’s.

conflated these metaphors, but he is in effect arguing that in case they represent the language of stillness—language that facilitates the practices of Quietism and thus integrally belongs to the Buddhist and Daoist traditions.

And at the centre of it all stands Jinsai's idea that the notion of structural coherence *li*, when basing any kind of proper Confucian practice upon it, carries with it an appeal to purity and stillness—and this, for Jinsai, is actually damaging to the natural basic moral motivation of humanity.

Human Feelings as the Ground of Moral Motivation

On the question of moral knowledge and moral sense, Hume asserts:

Since morals [...] have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prove'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason. (Hume 2000, 294; T 3.1.1.6)

In this Hume asserts the impotence of reason to (alone) dictate the rules of morality and directly links those rules to passions. Jinsai himself seems to believe that within the Confucian discussion the notion of *li* is burdened with similar inactivity, and tries to therefore turn away from any assertions on an *a priori*, unchanging moral structure, towards a morality based on human feelings (*qing/jō* 情) and an ethical life based on the everyday experience of the people. Jinsai's concerns here are therefore also quite different from and more radical than Hume's. While Hume asserts the impotence of reason in this regard, Jinsai actually sees a danger in basing the Confucian project of self-cultivation on the notion of *li*.

Jinsai believes that the notion of *li* is also at the root of the Neo-Confucian ideas of curtailing human desires, which were in the Cheng-Zhu discussions seen as part of the habituation covering the pure *li*. The language is one of purity and stillness—it calls for purity and stillness and therefore puts a negative value connotation on the notion of movement and of human desires. Jinsai defends human feelings—themselves belonging to human desires—as the basic activators of humanness (*xing/sei* 性), seeing them as the ground of moral motivation, which *li* in his view does not possess. And in this sense Jinsai also attempts to offer a reading of the notion of the Mencian four sprouts of the heart-mind (*shiduan zhi xin/shitan no kokoro* 四端之心) that is not based on any *a priori* morality.

Jinsai begins his argument by establishing the meaning of the word “sprout” (*duan/tan* 端). Consulting a dictionary¹⁷, he says that this word can mean both a “start” (*shi/shi* 始) and also a “tip” (*zhu/sho* 緒). He does however disagree with Zhu Xi’s view that the four sprouts can be seen as “thread-tips” (*duanzhu/tansho* 端緒). He argues: “His reasoning was that while a thread is hidden within (*naka ni aru* 在于中), its tip appears externally (*sho soto ni arawaruru* 緒見於外也).¹⁸ (謂えらく、「なお物中に在って、緒外に見わるるがごとし.)” (Itô in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 54, 137)

As Koyasu Nobukuni points out, this actually represents a fundamental difference between how Zhu Xi viewed the notions of the heart-mind and humanness and of the Way and virtue, and how Jinsai did (for his discussion, see Koyasu 2015, 165–66)¹⁹. While Zhu Xi’s description points to a tip of something inner emerging as something outer—the original state of humanness being realized as the four virtues—Jinsai’s heart-mind is the heart-mind of living people, working and moving towards other things and other people. Such a “being turned towards others” is an inclination that all people are born with and what helps define humanness as good. All people possess a fundamental kind of sympathy²⁰ that moves them towards the effort of ethical practice, but they do not possess virtue itself as part of their humanness:

Mencius’ idea was that people have the four sprouts just as they have four limbs.²¹ Everyone has them. We do not search for them externally. If we know how to develop (*kakujū* 拡充) them, they emerge forcefully like a fire blazing or a flood rising. Ultimately the four sprouts are realized as the virtues (*toku* 徳) of humanness, appropriateness, propriety and wisdom. Thus the heart-mind’s four sprouts are the very sprouts (*tanpon* 端本) of the four virtues. (Transl. Tucker 1998, 143–44, ed.)

17 According to Tucker “Jinsai’s reference is to Mei Yingzuo’s 梅膺祚 *Zihui* 字彙, compiled in 1615. This dictionary was published in Japan in 1660. Jinsai apparently consulted and quoted it frequently. His copy is in the Tenri University 天理大学 Central Library’s Kogidō bunko 古義堂文庫” (Tucker 1998, 143).

18 Translated by Tucker 1998, 143.

19 While Huang Chun-chieh argues Jinsai’s account here is closer to the Han commentary of Zhao Qi 趙岐 (?–201) and believes both Zhao Qi and Jinsai have failed to “grasp the fundamental insight of Mencius’ idea of the heart-mind with its transcendental dimension” (Huang 2015, 194).

20 For a good comparison between the Mencian and Humean notions of sympathy and a look at their parallels, see Carey and Vitz 2019)

21 *Mengzi*, 6A/6.

孟子の意、以為えらく「人の四端有るや、なおその身の四体有るがごとし」と。人人具足、外に求むることを仮らず。いやしくもこれを拡充することを知るときは、すなわちなお火燃え泉達するがごとく、ついに仁義礼智の徳を成す。故に四端の心をもって仁義礼智の端本とす。(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 54, 137)

Jinsai criticizes the idea of the four sprouts “emerging” as a precondition to developing proper moral sensibilities—as he believes that if moral sensibilities emerged only in answer to proper stimuli, this would cause the Confucian project of self-cultivation to become confusing and difficult. People would be in a constant state of worry as to whether they are engaging in the right kind of situations through which their inner goodness would be allowed to emerge—they would be lost in a constant, daily search for the proper stimuli to help them release their inner moral sensibilities (Tucker 1998, 144–45; Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 54–55, 137). Instead, Jinsai believes such sensibilities are in everyone, they are always present, just as people possess four limbs, and they are (to a degree) exercised daily.

But on the other hand, by exercising them more and more, we also strengthen and cultivate them—and this is also a fundamental characteristic that defines humanness as good: because the four sprouts are in everyone and because they can be enlarged, they allow all people to enter into universal virtue and thus become truly human. But this project takes effort—such a movement away from the limitations of humanness and the individual person, both in the direction of encompassing more and more situations, pertaining to different relations, extending to more and more people—can only be achieved through the daily striving for consummate practice. Thus, while the four sprouts are not universal virtues in themselves, they are what allows people to enter into universal virtue.

In discussing “things that people cannot endure” (*shinobazaru tokoro* 所不忍) and “things they will refuse to do” (*sezaru tokoro* 所不爲)²², Mencius was referring to the sensibilities of compassion and shame (*sokuin shū no kokoro* 惻隱羞惡之心). “To extend” (*tassuru* 達) means to “develop” (*kakujū* 擴充). Mencius’ idea is that one should develop sensibilities of compassion and shame so that they extend everywhere and penetrate everything. (Transl. Tucker 1998, 145–46)

孟子の曰く、「みな忍びざるところ有り。これをその忍ぶところに達するは、仁なり。人みなせざるところ有り。これをその

するところに達するは、義なり」。いわゆる「忍びざるところ」「せざるところ」の者は、即ち惻隱・羞惡の心なり。達と云う者は、即ち拡充の謂い。けだし謂えらく惻隱・羞惡の心をして、至らざるところ無く、通ぜざるところ無からしむ。(Itô in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 56, 138)

Jinsai argues that we can practice virtue in one form or another from our very births, since virtue is universally established in ongoing human relations—our heart-minds make this possible, but this does not mean that such relations are set up as *a priori*. Only that life does not begin and end with the birth and death of a single person, and so its ethical dimensions don't begin and end with such an event either. Going from people's moral sensibilities—the possibilities of which are inborn, but which are first developed through practice of basic relations within familial environments—simultaneously moving in unison with the universal values of humanity: this is the proper Confucian project. Since heart-minds come to recognize that they share universal values, they also come to recognize such values require the effort of adhering to consummate practice.

The personal moral sensibilities and the universal ethical values are not connected through the notion of *li* that needs to be properly understood by a radiant, uncovered mind. Rather, for Jinsai, the basic moral motivation comes from feelings:

Feelings (*jō* 情) are the desires of our humanness (*sei no yoku* 性之欲). They refer to what activates (*ugoku* 動) people. Thus, humanness and human feelings are often discussed together. (Transl. Tucker 1998, 147, ed.)

情とは、性の欲なり。動くところ有るをもって言う。故に性・情をもって並び称す。(Itô in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 56, 138)

Jinsai goes on to quote the “Yue ji” 樂記 [Record of Music] in the *Book of Rites*, which says: “Through contact with things (*mono ni kanjite* 感於物), we become active (*ugoku* 動); this activity results in the desires of humanness (*sei no yoku* 性之欲). (Transl. Tucker 1998, 147., ed.²³) (感於物而動，性之欲也。)” (*Liji*, 19) It is clear that Jinsai speaks of feelings as what moves people, and this movement is the result of coming into contact with things (it is certainly not *a priori*)—but what reacts to such contact is also a basic aspect of the desires of humanness. This seems to also take into account the fact that *qing/jō* 情 possesses the added meaning of a “situation” or “external conditions”—therefore it moves humanness in accord with

23 James Legge translates this passage as: “His activity shows itself as he is acted on by external things, and develops the desires incident to his nature.”

the common movement of *qi*; it is what drives the movement within the movement, the process that is itself the whole of humanness.

Jinsai thus believes feelings must be understood as belonging to human desires—that is, they accord with external situations, but also possess their own moral dimension. This again argues against the kind of teachings that would try to dichotomize the notions of human feelings and human desires and subject these notions to differing value judgements. Feelings are what drive humanness as a movement within a movement—they are thus the fundamental activators of humanity, answering to the external conditions of life; but they also belong to the desires of humanness and thus possess their own fundamental quality.

It is humanness for the eyes to respond to forms; the ears, to sounds; the palate, to tastes; and the four limbs, to rest.²⁴ However, feelings are in the eyes' desire (*hosshi* 欲) for beauty; the ears' desire for fine music; the palate's, for exquisite cuisine; and the four limbs' for peaceful rest. Familial love between father and son (*fushi no shin* 父子之親) is humanness (*sei nari* 性也). But a father's desire (*hosshi* 欲) that his son be morally good (*zen* 善) and a son's desire that his father live long (*ju* 壽) are feelings (*jō* 情). (Transl. Tucker 1998, 147, ed.)

目の色における、耳の声における、口の味における、四支の安逸における、是れ性。目の美色を視んことを欲し、耳の好音を聴かんことを欲し、口の美味を食らわんことを欲し、四支の安逸を得んことを欲す、是れ情。父子の親は、性なり。父は必ずその子の善を欲し、子は必ずその父の寿考を欲するは、情なり。(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 56–57, 138)

Jinsai affirms feelings as the fundamental moral motivation. In accord with Mencius,²⁵ he argues that “everyone loves success, but hates shame. No one wants to be viewed as a wild animal (Transl. Tucker 1998, 148) (人のために榮とせらるるは、天下の同じく好むところ、人のために辱しめらるるは、天下の同じく悪むところなり。ひとわれを指してもって禽獸とせば、人の欲するところにあらず)” (Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 57, 138). All people possess feelings that answer to external conditions, but they answer in a way in which the Mencian “goodness of humanness” can be asserted, and this in a way that is turned towards the moral.

24 See *Mengzi*, 7B/24.

25 See, for example, *Mengzi*, 6A/8.

However, here Jinsai once again goes on to reject some of the more prominent Neo-Confucian discussions of feelings. He criticizes Zhu Xi's formulation that "the heart-mind unifies humanness and the feelings", and argues that while the "four sprouts" are integral to the heart-mind they themselves are not in fact human feelings, and therefore are not in fact the basis of moral motivation:

Zhu Xi further claimed, "the heart-mind unifies humanness and human feelings" (*kokoro wa seijō o subu* 心統性情).²⁶ In this context he saw humanness as the heart-mind's corporeality (*kokoro no tai* 心之體), and the feelings as its functioning (*kokoro no yō* 心之用). Zhu formulated these ideas because he never realized that the heart-mind is the heart-mind, and humanness is humanness. For each, there are distinct methods of cultivation. Feelings are the activators of humanness (*sei no dō* 性之動); they belong to desires (*yoku ni zoku suru mono* 属欲者). As feelings congeal into intentions they become parts of the heart-mind (*shiryo ni wataru toki wa sunawachi kore o kokoro to iu* 涉乎思慮則謂之心). The four sprouts, as well as anger, fear, affection, anxieties, are intentions of the heart-mind (*kokoro no shiryo tokoro* 心之所思慮); they should not be called feelings (*jō to iubekarazaru nari* 不可謂之情也). (Transl. Tucker 1998, 149, ed.)

晦庵以為えらく、心は性情を統ぶと。しこうして性をもって心の体とし、情を心の用とす。故にこの説有り。殊えて知らず。心は是れ心、性は是れ性、おのおの功夫を用うる処有り。情はただ是れ性の動いて欲に属する者、わずかに思慮に涉るときは、すなわちこれを心と謂う。四端および忿懣等の四つの者のごとき、みな心の思慮するところの者、これを情と謂うべからざるなり。(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 57–58, 138)

Here Jinsai first argues from the point of view of cultivation techniques and goes on to touch upon the famous Korean Neo-Confucian "four-seven" debate.²⁷ The discussion pertains to the difference between the "four sprouts of the heart-mind" and the "seven feelings", both established separately in the canonical literature. The problem at the heart of the debate lay in trying to determine how both of these canonically established notions stand in relation to Zhu Xi's fundamental duality of *li* 理 and *qi* 氣²⁸ and the corresponding notions of the "original humanness" (*benran*

26 It was Zhang Zai who first made this remark.

27 For a recent discussion on the four-seven debate, see Lee (2017).

28 Interestingly, Lee Ming-huei points out that in effect we could see a parallel in how the notion of

zhi xing/honzhen no sei 本然之性) and the “humanness of embodied *qi*” (*qizhi zhi xing/kishitsu no sei* 氣質之性), of corporeality *ti/tai* 體 and function *yong/yō* 用. But by rejecting the *a priori* ontological status of the notion of *li* Jinsai does not really take any side in this debate. Instead, he sets up a differentiation of his own.

The ancients (*kojin* 古人) viewed pleasure (*ki* 喜), anger (*do* 怒), sorrow (*ai* 哀), joy (*raku* 樂), love (*ai* 愛), hate (*o* 惡) and desires (*yoku* 欲) as “the seven feelings” (*shichijō* 七情).²⁹ In doing so they were simply categorizing reactions to external situations (*jō no hin* 情之品). Yet it is wrong to identify pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate, and desires as feelings. Feelings involve no thought, but they do activate people (*shiryo suru toko-ro nakushite ugoku* 無所思慮而動). As intentions occur, feelings become aspects of the heart-mind. If pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, hate, and desires involve no intention, but do activate people, they are feelings. Once they become intentions, however, they should no longer be referred to as feelings. (Transl. Tucker 1998, 150, ed.)

古人 喜・怒・哀・樂・愛・惡・欲をもって七情とす。けだし言う 情の品この七者有りと。喜・怒・哀・樂・愛・惡・欲を謂いて即ち情とするとき、すなわち不可なり。およそ思慮するところ無くして動く、これを情と謂う。わずかに思慮に涉ときは、すなわちこれを心と謂う。喜・怒・哀・樂・愛・惡・欲の七つの者のごとき、もし思慮するところ無くして動くときは、すなわち固にこれを情と謂うべし。わずかに思慮に涉ときは、すなわちこれを情と謂うべからず。(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 58, 139)

For Jinsai feelings belong to desires, but are as yet unfacilitated by thought. They represent spontaneous reactions to external situations, but are also driven towards the moral—and thus they themselves represent a fundamental motivating force. Once feelings are facilitated by thought, they are no longer simply feelings but become intentions of the heart-mind. While the fundamental drive towards virtue—as what preserves the Way—seems to come first, the more complex movement of the four sprouts comes later and is already facilitated by thought. This would mean that while the moral tendencies of humanness can actually be seen as basic human drives, such drives represent “the four sprouts and the seven feelings”

“the four sprouts” relates to the notion of “seven human feelings” and how Kant’s notion of “moral feelings” relates to his notion of “physical feelings” (see Lee 2017, 55).

29 See *Liji*, 9.

only when facilitated by thought: but even unfacilitated, they are motivated towards moral goodness as moral goodness, as this is aesthetically pleasing.

In Jinsai's formulation the feelings are there before they are facilitated by thought and can be seen as basic human drives—which goes against elements of Zhu Xi's formulation, where the original nature can be seen as pure *li*, described by the language of stillness, and feelings as a mixture of *li* and *qi*, described by the language of movement, but also as already potentially obscuring the original good humanness. Jinsai's notion of human feelings describes a kind of tendency of humanness, to react to external situations as humanness: a basic human motivation towards virtue, unfacilitated by thought, completely unreflected upon—akin to a kind of moral instinct.

Hume famously asserted:

Reason is, and ought to only to be a slave of passions, and can never pretend to any office than to serve and obey them. (Hume 2000, 266; T 2.3.3.4)

And while this very contention is impossible to translate into the language of Confucian notions of structural coherence *li* and of human feelings *qing*, nevertheless Jinsai most certainly sets the feelings as the most basic of human activators—and it is this very notion that is at the centre of Jinsai's own positions on moral motivation. It is in the feelings that Jinsai first tried to resolve the duality between *li* and *qi* (see: Yamashita 1983). It is in the feelings that he sees “what activates people”—and, interestingly, it is for the feelings, he argues, that there are no special techniques of cultivation. As he writes:

There are requisite methods for cultivating the heart-mind (*kokoro* 心), humanness (*sei* 性), and the purpose (*shi* 志). But there are none for human feelings (*jō* 情) or human abilities (*sai* 才). Methods of cultivation for the heart-mind are referred to as “heart-mind preservation” (*son* 存) and “exhaustive realization of the heart-mind” (*jin* 盡). For humanness, they include “cultivating humanness” (*yō* 養)³⁰ and “toughening humanness” (*nin* 忍)³¹. Techniques for cultivating one's purpose include “grasping one's purpose” (*ji* 持)³² and “setting one's purpose high” (*shō* 尚志)³³. These are all necessary. Feelings and human abilities, however, have no such requisite methods of cultivation. (Transl. Tucker 1998, 150)

30 *Mengzi*, 7A/1.

31 *Ibid.*, 6B/15.

32 *Ibid.*, 2A/2.

33 *Ibid.*, 7A/33.

およそ心・性・情・才・志・意等の字、必ず功夫を用うる字有り、必ずしも功夫を用いざる字有り。心においては、すなわち存と曰い尽と曰い、性においては、すなわち養と曰い忍と曰い、志はすなわち持と曰い尚と曰う、みな是れ功夫を用ゆるの字、情の字・才の字のごときは、みな必ずしも功夫を用いず。
(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 58, 139)

Jinsai argues that within the Confucian project of self-cultivation feelings and abilities cannot be directly cultivated, writing: “By cultivating our humanness, the feelings are naturally corrected (*sono sei o yashinau toki wa sunawachi jō onozukara tadashiku* 養其性則情自性). By preserving the heart-mind, one’s abilities naturally mature (*sono kokoro o sonsuru toki wa sunawachi sai onozukara chōzuru o motte nari* 存其心則才自長也).³⁴(その性を養うときはすなわち情おのずから正しく、その心を存するときはすなわち才おのずから長ずるをもってなり。)” (Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 58, 139)

Feelings and abilities cannot be directly cultivated, because they pertain to how we relate to others and only through consummately relating to others, coming into contact with people and things, can they be well exercised and set right: trying to cultivate feelings and abilities in absence or stillness is futile, and will ultimately do damage. In this sense Jinsai feels that techniques that cultivate feelings—or even demand that they be curtailed so that the underlying pureness of the structural coherence *li* can be cohered with—work against the inherent human moral motivation.

The Way as the Origin of Moral Sense

Jinsai writes that the Way, as a vivacious concept (*katsuji* 活字), signifies organisms alive with activity (*kō* 行), while structural coherence, an inanimate, dead term (*shiji* 死字), denotes things that exist (*son* 存), but are not alive (Transl. Tucker 1998, 103, ed.). The living universe denotes activity and action, while the inanimate universe deals with what exists but is not alive: and in the case of moral action, is unmotivated.

Jinsai defines the Way like so:

The Way is the path that people should follow in daily ethical conduct (*jinrin nichiyō masa ni yukubeki no michi* 人倫日用當行之路). It does not

34 Translated by Tucker 1998, 150, ed.

exist simply because it was taught. Nor does it exist simply because it corrects human tendencies. Rather it naturally exists (*mina shizen ni shite shikari* 皆自然而然). Throughout the four directions and eight corners of the world everyone understands the moral relationships naturally existing between rulers and ministers, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, elder and younger brothers, and friends. Everyone also understands the ways of parental love, duty, distinctions, order, and fidelity. (Transl. Tucker 1998, 93)

道とは、人倫日用当に行くべきの路、教えを待つて後有るにあらず、又矯揉して能く然るにあらず。みな自然にして然り。四方八隅、遐陬の陋、蛮貊の蠢たるに至まで、おのずから君臣・父子・夫婦・昆弟・朋友の倫有らずということなく、亦親・義・別・叙・信の道有らずということなし。(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 27–28, 122)

Koyasu Nobukuni contrasts Jinsai’s formulation of “the path that people should follow in daily ethical conduct”³⁵ with Zhu Xi’s similar statement of “the structural coherence people should embody in daily ethical conduct”³⁶ (Koyasu 2015, 99–100) and points out that in abandoning the notion of the Heavenly *li* (*tianli/tenri* 天理) as something absolute that connects both Heaven and humanity—which acts as humanness itself when pertaining to people—Jinsai minimalizes the normative character and stresses the Way as the natural state of humanity (*ibid.*). His rejection of an unchangeable structure (as his own reading of the term *li*), through which we could understand and describe the ever-present ethical norms of humanity, is here replaced by what arises daily from the common living experience of all people, who by their very humanness, their common suchness, produce certain ways of co-existing and relating to one another and in which “what is good” and “what is wrong” can then be discerned on some level as universal.

The Way of Humanity is “humaneness (*ren/jin* 仁) practiced along with appropriateness (*yi/gi* 義)”. If Heaven and Earth are the crucible for the production and reproduction of the movements of *yin* and *yang*, then the daily living experiences of humanity, in their many varieties, represent the crucible, the “box”, within which humaneness and appropriateness are practiced. The Way is not a normative teaching that is designed to fix human tendencies—it is the natural way of people relating to one another. Jinsai argues that the Confucian Way is the Way all

35 人倫日用當行之路

36 人倫日用當然之理 (see Zhuzi yulei, 24).

people follow naturally, and no one can depart from, even when they might not understand it fully—it is in effect the Way of a healthy and productive human life, and its inherent moral and ethical dimensions: the parameters by which we can be considered fully human.

A similar sentiment can again be gleaned in Hume’s own thought:

[N]ature may also be oppos’d to rare and unusual; and in this sense of the word, which is the common one, there may often arise disputes concerning what is natural or unnatural; and one may in general affirm, that we are not possess’d of any precise standard, by which these disputes can be decided. Frequent and rare depend upon the number of examples we have observ’d; and as this number may gradually encrease or diminish, ‘twill be impossible to fix any exact boundaries betwixt them. We may only affirm on this head, that if ever there was any thing, which cou’d be call’d natural in this sense, the sentiments of morality certainly may; since there never was any nation of the world, nor any single person of any nation, who is utterly depriv’d of them, and who never, in any instance, show’d the least approbation or dislike of manners. The sentiments are so rooted in our constitution and temper, that without entirely confounding the human mind by disease or madness, ‘tis impossible to extirpate and destroy them. (Hume 2000, 304–05; T 3.1.2.8)

But Jinsai’s own thought always exists within the Confucian project of self-cultivation and his relational ethical understanding. As can be seen from his words, the Way to Jinsai represents basic human relations in their most ethically fulfilled sense—but one which is connected to the inherent good of humanness (*xing/sei* 性), and he sees humanness itself always as a movement within the common movement of *qi*. In this sense, he also denies that virtues are something that is already inherent in humanness—instead, he seems to imply that it is the motivation towards universal virtue and the kind of instinctual basic distinction of the quality of moral and immoral that the limited humanness possesses.

Humaneness, appropriateness, propriety, and wisdom are all concepts pertaining to the Way and virtue (*dōtoku no mei* 道德之名). They do not denote humanness (*sei no mei ni arazu* 非性之名)! We speak of “the Way” and “virtue” in universal terms (*amaneku tenka ni tasuru o motte iu* 以遍達於天下而言), not as something specific to one individual (*hitori no yūsuru tokoro ni arazu* 非一人之所有)! Humanness, however, refers only to the particular self (*moppara onore ni yūsuru o motte shite iu* 以專有於己而言), not everyone in the world (*tenka no kanuru tokoro ni arazu* 非天下

之所該!) Such is the distinction between humanness and the Way and virtue. (Transl. Tucker 1998, 117, ed.)

仁義礼智の四者は、みな道德の名にして、性の名にあらず。道德とは、遍く天下に達するをもって言う。一人の有するところにあらず。性とは、もっぱらおのれに有するをもってして言う。天下の該ぬるところにあらず。これ性と道德との辨なり。
(Itô in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 39–40, 129)

The Way and virtue are the ground and nutrition by which humanity grows—but in contrast with the notion of *li*, they are a part of the living universe and thus they also possess the power to motivate. People are motivated by the circumstances of their daily lives, and their daily lives are their interpersonal relations in movement. The difference then between the Way and virtue and between *li* is exactly that it is not hard to see in what ways daily life—among one’s friends, family and peers—motivates people towards growing and preserving what is already in accord with human desires. But in trying to penetrate an all-pervading harmonious coherence, one will in most cases find oneself in search of purity and stillness.

To Jinsai then, the notion of *li* attracted Buddhist (and supposedly Daoist) discourse precisely because it is a notion that in itself lacks that most important quality of life (*katsu* 活), and is one which inevitably arrives at emptiness and vacuity (*xu/kyo* 虚, *kong/kū* 空)—a state opposed to the given feelings of humanity. As he writes:

The way of the sage Confucius makes daily morality its foundation (*irin o motte hon to nashite* 以彝倫爲本), and compassion and appropriateness its binding strength (*ongi o motte musubi to su* 以恩義爲結). The thousand discourses and myriad conversations of Confucians have all centered around these moral teachings. Buddhists and Daoists make purity (*shōjo* 清淨) their foundation, and the absence of human desire (*myoku* 無欲) their way. By perfecting those qualities, the heart-mind supposedly becomes vacuous (*munashiki* 空) like a bright mirror and deep (*tataeru* 湛) like still water. When contamination no longer exists, the heart-mind’s soil is pure and clean (*shinchi ketsujō* 心地潔淨). But the same process of mental purification also severs the heart-mind from its sense of compassion and appropriateness (*ongi mazu taete* 恩義先絶) utterly destroying humanity’s ethical ground (*irin kotogotoku horobu* 彝倫盡滅). Though our heart-minds may be pure, they will come to see the relations between ruler and minister, parent and child, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, and friend and friend as useless, childish relics. Buddhist and Daoist views of

the heart-mind thus contradict the Way of the Confucian sages just as water extinguishes fire. (Transl. Tucker 1998, 131–32, ed.)

それ聖人の道は、彝倫をもって本となして、恩義をもって結びとす。千言万語、みなこれをもって教えをせざることなし。今かの仏老の教えたるや、清浄をもって本とし、無欲を道とす。功夫すでに熟するに暨んでは、すなわちその心 明鏡の空しきがごとく、止水の湛えたるがごとく、一疵せず、心地潔浄、ここにおいて恩義まず絶えて彝倫ことごとく滅ぶ。君臣・父子・夫婦・兄弟・朋友の交わりを視ること、なお弁髦綴旒のごとくしかり。聖人の道と相反すること、なお水火の相入るべからざるがごとし。(Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1971, 47–48, 133)

Jinsai argues that the search for purity and stillness actually brings about the destruction of the ethical dimensions of the living universe: going beyond good and bad, beyond meaningful human relations, we enter into something which is simply empty and dead. This search then can never represent the same notions of consummate ethical life that the Confucian language is supposed to represent. In this, Jinsai surely does not simply represent a similar position to Hume's ideas, but rather exists as an original thinker within the Confucian project of self-cultivation and relational ethics.

Conclusion

The article aims to examine Jinsai's critical project through the lens of the Humean discussions on moral motivation. It also aims to show that while it is impossible to simply project the Humean notions upon Confucian ethics, certain sensibilities and familiar emphases can be found in Jinsai's critical project, predating those of Hume himself.

While the notion of the structural coherence *li* could be read in a more open-minded manner, Jinsai's criticism that it is a dead notion comes from observing the kind of practice of cultivation associated with it—usually accompanied by appeals to purity and stillness. Jinsai believes that human feelings are the basic moral activators, belonging to the desires of humanness. He thus in his project gives priority to human feelings before structural coherence *li* and any kind of *a priori* morality—human feelings are the most basic reactions to the external world. Jinsai juxtaposes the notion of the structural coherence *li* with the notion of the Way, which for him is the living process of ethically fulfilled human relations. He

claims that the two cannot be seen as equal—as the Way and virtue represent the living, motivated universe, while *li* represents the dead, ordered and inactive one.

It can be argued that Jinsai’s criticism, while in its details very different from Hume’s own—being developed within the Confucian project of self-cultivation and relational ethics – does in certain ways bear striking similarities to Hume’s own concerns. It contains elements similar to Hume’s critique of reason as inactive, of moral knowledge as not enough to activate moral action, as well as his contention that feelings (or passions) are the basic motivators of human behaviour and can never come second to any *a priori* state of moral purity.

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Heidegger and Watsuji on Community: A Philosophical Counterpoint of West and East

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Abstract

This paper explores the Japanese philosopher Tetsurō Watsuji's idea of community as an alternative to Heidegger's thinking on "*Volk*". Watsuji was so greatly influenced by Heidegger's unique way of philosophizing using ordinary German language that he undertook an etymological analysis of the Japanese word for humans, which provided him with the central idea of his ethics, namely that human beings are individual and social at the same time. However, despite this positive response to the German philosopher, Watsuji criticized Heidegger regarding the concept of authenticity. In Watsuji's *Ethics*, authenticity is not regarded as a state of isolation but as a kind of communal relationship, which he characterizes as "nonduality between the self and the other". In his lectures in the 1930s, however, Heidegger further developed the notion of authenticity, reconsidering it as the *Volk*, or a "space for community" on the basis of which actual community comes forth. According to my interpretation, Watsuji's idea of nonduality between the self and other, which serves as a primordial place for the existence of any kind of community, can help us to consider our primary coexistence in a manner different from Heidegger's.

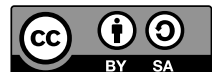
Keywords: community, authenticity, Heidegger, Watsuji, Nancy

Heidegger in Watsuji o skupnosti: filozofski kontrast med Zahodom in Vzhodom

Izvleček

Članek raziskuje idejo skupnosti japonskega filozofa Tetsurōja Watsujija, ki predstavlja alternativo Heideggerjevi filozofiji koncepta *Volk*. Watsuji je bil pod tako velikim vplivom Heideggerjevega edinstvenega načina filozofiranja z uporabo običajnega nemškega jezika, da je naredil etimološko analizo japonske besede za ljudi, ki mu je dala osrednjo idejo njegove etike. To je ideja, da so ljudje individualni in družbeni hkrati. Kljub temu pozitivnemu odzivu na nemškega filozofa pa je Watsuji kritiziral Heideggerja glede koncepta avtentičnosti. V Watsujijevi etiki se avtentičnost ne obravnava kot stanje izoliranosti, temveč kot nekakšen skupnostni odnos, ki ga označuje kot »nedvojnost med sebstvom in drugim«. Heidegger je v svojih predavanjih v tridesetih letih 20. stoletja pojem

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avtentičnosti razvil naprej in jo preoblikoval v koncept *Volk* oziroma »prostor za skupnost«, na podlagi katerega nastane dejanska skupnost. Po avtorjevi interpretaciji nam lahko Watsujijeva ideja o nedvojnosti med sebstvom in drugim, ki služi kot prvotno mesto za obstoj kakršne koli skupnosti, pomaga, da svoje primarno sobivanje obravnavamo na drugačen način, kot ga obravnava Heidegger.

Ključne besede: skupnost, avtentičnost, Heidegger, Watsuji, Nancy

Introduction

As is shown in the liberal-communitarian debate in Anglophone political thought, community has long been one of the central themes of contemporary philosophical discourse, including continental philosophy. For instance, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy is widely acknowledged to be the foremost theorist of community, tackling the question of what “being-with” (*Mitsein*) in its profound sense implies under the inspiration of Martin Heidegger, along with such French thinkers as Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida. At the same time, Heidegger’s theory of the “*Volk*” (people or nation) during the 1930s remains quite provocative due to his notorious engagement with National Socialism. In this sense, it can be said that Heidegger still offers a significant and also controversial contribution to contemporary reflections on sociality in the West.

In relation to the notion of *Volk*, as I will discuss in detail later, Heidegger conceives of a kind of fundamental community, which seems to be a prototype of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the inoperative community (*la communauté désœuvrée*). However, it is also possible to develop an idea of community dissimilar to that formulated by Western philosophers like Heidegger and Nancy. Where might we then find an inspiring role model? I would like to suggest that in this context Tetsurō Watsuji (1889–1960), who was arguably one of the most iconic Japanese philosophers of the 20th century and who both appreciated and criticized Heideggerian philosophy, is in a position to serve as a good example for us. Hence, this paper aims at exploring Watsuji’s view of community as an alternative to Heidegger’s thinking on “*Volk*”.

For this purpose, it is useful to divide the essay into three sections. First, I will show how Watsuji’s ethics was conceived under the influence of the Heideggerian way of philosophizing. Second, I attempt to deal with Watsuji’s critique of the notion of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) in *Being and Time*. Third, I try to elucidate what we can learn through this critique if we situate it in relation to Heidegger’s understanding of fundamental community.

Human Existence's Duality: Watsuji's Reception of Heidegger

In Japan, Watsuji is highly renowned for his original system of ethics. In constructing this ethical theory, however, he was greatly influenced by Heidegger. If this is the case, precisely how was Heidegger's philosophy received in Watsuji's ethics?

In 1927–1928, Watsuji undertook a research stay in Germany. Drawing on his observations during this long-term overseas trip, in 1935 he published *Fūdo* (風土), a philosophical essay reflecting on the relationship between climate and culture in various parts of the world. Interestingly, Watsuji writes in the preface of the book: “I started to consider the problem of the climatic factor (*fūdosei* 風土性) in the early summer of 1927, when I was reading Heidegger's *Being and Time* in Berlin” (Watsuji 1962a, 1).¹ Indeed, the Heideggerian existential analysis of *Dasein* with regard to its temporal structures fascinated Watsuji deeply; at the same time this Japanese philosopher grew discontented with *Being and Time*, which, in his view, excessively prioritized the temporality of *Dasein* over its spatiality and thereby emphasized the historicity of *Dasein* at the expense of ignoring its climatic character. This dissatisfaction motivated him to conceive of a unique theory that deals with climates and their phenomena from the viewpoint of cultural philosophy.

Yet *Being and Time* did not only inspire Watsuji's philosophical climatology: it also taught him how important it was to philosophize on the basis of the ordinary language of his mother tongue (i.e., Japanese) and its etymology. Watsuji's earliest attempt to do philosophy using the everyday words of his native language is exemplified in “Japanese Language and Philosophy” (1928), a lecture he gave just five months after returning to Japan. In his manuscript of the lecture, there are frequent references to the Heideggerian corpus amid the analysis of common words in Japanese, for instance the Sino-Japanese word “*renjian/ningen* (人間)”. In modern Japanese, this word chiefly denotes a human being or person. Based on his own etymological investigation, however, Watsuji claims:

The word *ningen* originally implies [...] not individuals isolated from each other but society. It should be literally understood as *jin-kan* [or *ren-jiān*], i.e., the in-betweenness between person and person. (Watsuji 1992, 373)

Here we can clearly see that Watsuji considers the pre-modern Japanese usage of the word *ningen*, imported from the Chinese language, to be an expression of human existence as “being-with”.

1 In this paper, all citations except from *Watsuji Tetsuro's Rinrigaku. Ethics in Japan* (trans. by S. Yamamoto and R. E. Carter) (Watsuji 1996) are my translations.

In the history of the Japanese language, however, the primary meaning of this word has, since early modern times, changed from “society” to “individuals”. What caused such a peculiar change? Watsuji’s 1934 [1962b] book *Ningen no gaku toshiteno rinrigaku* 人間の学としての倫理学 (*Ethics as a Study of Humankind*) takes the view that the Japanese reception of Chinese Buddhist sutras, beginning around the 8th century, was very likely responsible for this semantic transition of the word:

According to an ancient Indian mythical representation, all living things are born again and again through transmigration in the five realms ([in Sanskrit:] *loka*): in hell (地獄中), in the hungry-ghost realm (餓鬼中), in the animal realm (畜生中), among humans (人間), and in heaven above (天上). These “in (中)”, “among (間)”, and “above (上)” are [Chinese] translations of *loka*. Hence [...] the phrase “among humans” denotes the human realm. [...] However, the Chinese translations of Buddhist sutras often omit “in (中)”, which is the Chinese equivalent for *loka*, and arrange the name of each realm in two-character compounds like “hell (地獄)”, “hungry ghosts (餓鬼)”, “animals (畜生)”, “humans (人間)”, and “heaven above (天上)”. [...] Using such forms of abbreviation, the theory of six realms [i.e., the above mentioned five realms and the titan (or *Asura*) realm] dominated the Japanese view of humans from the Heian era (the 8th–12th centuries) to the age of the samurai warriors’ ascendancy (the 12th–19th centuries). From this, it follows that the Japanese word *ningen* or *jin-kan* (人間) clearly meant human society, e.g. in the expression “*jinkan no hito* (a person in the society)”, while, at the same time, it stood for humans insofar as they formed a stark contrast in opposition to animals. Though humans as members of human society were contrasted with animals as members of the animal realm, humans as set against animals were directly designated as *ningen*, insofar as this implied they were members of human society, namely *hito*. (Watsuji 1962b, 17–18)

In short, Watsuji considers the unique Japanese reading of the Chinese translation of Buddhist sutras to have made it possible that “the word *ningen*, which at first signified human society, acquired the meaning ‘humans’ in distinction to animals afterwards through the fortuitous fact that this word constantly appeared together with the word ‘animals’” (ibid., 19). In his view, these two senses of the word *ningen* represent the double aspect of human existence that implies “a community itself and an individual in the community at the same time” (ibid., 20).

This double aspect can be easily illustrated with facts from our common, daily life. Let us suppose we are now gathered for a conference presentation. You are

my audience, and I am a speaker in front of you. On one hand, without you and me, namely the people who are the particular, individual persons composing the ongoing session by means of acting in certain respective capacities (as audience or speaker), my conference presentation could never come into being. On the other hand, it is this very communal “betweenness” (*aidagara* 間柄) in the form of a conference session that prescribes such specific roles as audience and speaker and accordingly determines your and my existence in advance.

If this is the case, how is this duality of human being (or *ningen*) possible? In his magnum opus, *Ethics* (1937–1949), Watsuji argues that this duality is based on a “movement of negation” of human existence (Watsuji 1962c, 26). What is the movement of negation? His basic idea is as follows:

An individual who does not imply the meaning of negation [of totality], that is, an essentially self-sufficient individual, is nothing but an imaginative construction. [...] A totality that does not include the individual negativity is also nothing but a product of the imagination. (Watsuji 1996, 22; 1962c, 26)

From this idea, it follows that “an individual consists of the negation of community, and society consists of the negation of individuality” (Watsuji 1996, 145; 1962c, 152). If so, what precisely does such a negative, interdependent relationship between community and individuality mean? Watsuji replies:

On the very ground that it is the negation of totality, the individual is, fundamentally speaking, none other than that totality. [...] Hence, when an individual realizes herself through negation, a door is opened to the realization of totality through the negation of the individual. [...] The negation moves on to the negation of negation. (Watsuji 1996, 22; 1962c, 26)

As we can see from this passage, by the above-mentioned relationship between society and individuality, Watsuji understands the following three-phase movement, which I would like to call the “A-movement”: A-1. community → A-2. individuality (= negation of community) → A-3. community (= negation of the negation of community). Moreover, this very movement is that movement of negation belonging to human existence that Watsuji thinks renders possible the society-individuality duality of human beings.

As we have seen in this section, a remarkable feature of Watsuji’s reception of Heideggerian philosophy was his original way of philosophizing in ordinary Japanese language, which finally provided him with the central and creative idea of Watsujian

ethics, namely that, from an ontological point of view, human beings are individual and social at the same time. Yet, given that Heideggerian *Dasein* is characterized as “mineness” (*Jemeinigkeit*) and “being-with”, or given Karl Löwith’s conception of the individual in the role of the fellow human being (*Mitmensch*), didn’t these two thinkers cast light, albeit in a different way, on this individual-community duality earlier than Watsuji? And, as is clearly shown in Watsuji’s *Ethics*, wasn’t he already quite familiar with their ways of thinking and doesn’t he, indeed, actually follow them? Should this be the case, in what sense is the Watsujian view of human existence original?

Field of Coexistence: Watsuji’s Critique of Heidegger

In my view, Watsuji’s thinking on the double aspect of human existence based on its movement of negation is unique and not reducible to the standpoints of Heidegger and Löwith. On the contrary, Watsuji even criticizes Heidegger on the basis of this very thinking. In this section, I will address his criticism of Heidegger and its background.

Let me begin by clarifying what makes Watsuji’s idea of the duality of human existence original. In *Ethics*, for instance, contrary to Heidegger Watsuji insists: “Human existence consists fundamentally in the movement of the negation of absolute negativity” (Watsuji 1996, 124, partially modified by me; 1962c, 131). More precisely, he thinks that human existence’s “movement of negation” is also, “in its extreme, the self-activity of absolute negativity” (Watsuji 1996, 187; 1962c, 195). What is this negative movement of “absolute negativity” (*zettaiteki-hiteisei* 絶対的否定性),² on the basis of which even human existence’s movement of negation, or the A-movement (A-1. community → A-2. individuality → A-3. community), is possible? In *Ethics*, it is described as “the movement of the negation of negation in which absolute negativity returns to itself through its own self-negation” (Watsuji 1996, 117; 1962c, 124). Concretely, it is the following three-step movement, which we shall call the “B-movement”: B-1. absolute negativity → B-2. individuality (= “self-negation of absolute negativity”) → B-3. absolute negativity (= “self-returning movement of absolute negativity through its own negation”) (ibid.).

The question then arises: What does it imply that the B-movement underlies human existence’s duality and the A-movement? According to Watsuji, this means that the A-movement, as well as human dual existence, is, in reality, the “place where absolute negativity manifests itself” (Watsuji 1996, 121; 1962c, 127; cf.

2 According to Watsuji, absolute negativity is equivalent to “absolute emptiness (or *sūnyatā*)” (*zettai-kū* 絶対空) and to “absolute wholeness” (*zettaiteki-zentaisei* 絶対的全体性) (Watsuji 1996, 99; 1962c, 105).

1996, 124; 1962c, 130–31) and, hence, that the B-movement, as the infinite and trans-phenomenal movement of absolute negativity, finds its finite and phenomenal expression in the A-movement. To put it another way, moving from a certain community (= A-1) to another community (= A-3) in the A-movement represents—albeit imperfectly—the self-return of absolute negativity (or emptiness) from B-1 to B-3 in the B-movement.

Interestingly, in this context, Watsuji regards the emptiness at the stage of B-1 as “the ultimate ground out of which we come” (Watsuji 1996, 187; 1962c, 195) or our “authentic home ground” (ibid.). Thus, for him, such emptiness is our ideal “authenticity as the ground out of which we, fundamentally speaking, come forth” (ibid.), insofar as it is qualified as “the subject in which the self and other are not yet disrupted” (*jitamibun-no-shutai* 自他未分の主体) (Watsuji 1996, 225; 1962c, 237). On the other hand, the emptiness at the stage of B-3 is naturally “the ultimate *terminus ad quem*” (Watsuji 1996, 187; 1962c, 195) of human existence; but at the same time, Watsuji thinks of this ultimately final goal as also “the home ground” (Watsuji 1996, 188; 1962c, 197) that we finite human beings can never reach but to which we incessantly try to return and to approach as closely as possible by way of the A-movement. Moreover, in his view, this home ground of human existence is emptiness *qua* the supra-individual subject in a state of “nonduality between the self and the other” (*jitafuni* 自他不二) (Watsuji 1996, 187; 1962c, 197).

Given the above discussion, we can work out two points of the background against which Watsuji criticizes Heidegger. First, the A-movement or “the negative movement of human existence is an act of returning to one’s home ground” (Watsuji 1996, 188, partially modified by me; 1962c, 197), namely “returning to the home ground” (*moto e kitaru* 本へ来る), which corresponds to the emptiness at the stage of B-3. Second, such an ultimate home ground implies the ideal of the “authenticity” (*honraisei* 本来性) of human existence, i.e., a human being’s way of being in accordance with the nonduality between the self and the other. With these points in mind, let us deal with Watsuji’s critique of Heidegger’s thought in *Being and Time*, and in particular his idea of the authenticity of *Dasein*.

According to *Being and Time*, an authentic mode of our existence is realized if we follow the call from our conscience summoning our own-most self and try to charge ourselves with the possible way of being to which the conscience urges us to return. Furthermore, this possibility of being, to which the call from the conscience brings us, corresponds precisely to the way that the calling self in anxiety is. Consequently, the authenticity of our existence turns out to be the same as the very way that the self *qua* the anxious caller is. Importantly, Heidegger depicts this caller-self as “It”—say, in the phrase “It’ calls” (*Es’ ruft*) (Heidegger 2001,

275)—because of its “peculiar indefiniteness and indeterminableness” (ibid.). This means that anxiety makes the world “insignificant” (*unbedeutsam*) and “individualizes” (*vereinzeln*) the caller-self in such a way that, due to the insignificance of the world, this authentic self cannot understand itself in terms of its being familiar with things and other *Dasein* anymore, but is disclosed as the sheer and own-most self without being mediated by the other entities that it usually encounters.

In *Ethics*, however, Watsuji comments that “what Heidegger calls authenticity is, in reality, inauthenticity” (Watsuji 1996, 225; 1962c, 237). Why? Through Watsuji’s eyes, when the Heideggerian authentic self is individualized it is “already the ‘self’ as opposed to the ‘other’” (ibid.), which corresponds to the A-2 step of human existence. However, as stated above, A-2 is established by way of negating A-1, which represents B-1 and is to be negated by A-3, which is a finite substitute for B-3. Hence, Watsuji considers Heideggerian authenticity to be a mode of human existence negating authenticity in his own sense (= B-1). In short, for Watsuji, the authentic self in the sense of Heidegger is inauthentic, as long as it is not only the negation of authenticity (namely, of “the subject in which the self and other are not yet disrupted”) but at the same time does not yet realize authenticity (or “nonduality between the self and the other”).

As we have seen, Watsuji criticizes the conception of authenticity in *Being and Time*, because he thinks that it disregards the supra-individual character of existential authenticity.³ According to Watsuji’s interpretation, such neglect of the communal aspect of authenticity indicates Heidegger’s one-sided individualistic view of *Dasein* in “complete defiance of subjective spatiality” (Watsuji 1996, 228; 1962c, 240) or the “subjective betweenness of human beings” (Watsuji 1996, 175; 1962c, 185). Consequently, Watsuji’s criticism of Heidegger boils down to the following simple question: “What is the field where *Dasein* coexists with other *Dasein*?” (Watsuji 1996, 221, partially modified by me; 1962c, 234).

Nowadays, however, it is well known that in the 1930s Heidegger developed the notion of authenticity by reconsidering it in connection with the *Volk*. In the final section, I will try to confront the Heidegger of the first half of the 1930s with Watsuji concerning the idea of primordial community.

3 It seems easy to defend Heidegger’s idea of authenticity from Watsuji’s critique by arguing that in *Being and Time* the supra-individual character of authentic *Dasein* is never overlooked. Indeed Heidegger insists that “resoluteness, as authentic being-oneself (*Selbstsein*), does not detach *Dasein* from its world” but rather “pushes it into solicitous being with others” (Heidegger 2001, 298). Nevertheless, Watsuji can still refute Heidegger’s claim that “only authentic being-oneself in resoluteness makes it possible to be with each other authentically (*das eigentliche Miteinander*)” (ibid.) as long as Heideggerian authenticity has no bearing on the supra-individual mode of our existence, which Watsuji characterizes as “nonduality between the self and the other”.

What is the Place of Our Coexistence? Heidegger *contra* Watsuji

In *Being and Time*, *Dasein's* authentic “disclosedness” (*Erschlossenheit*) or “resoluteness” (*Entschlossenheit*) is found in her “wanting to have a conscience” (*Gewissen-haben-wollen*), namely her hearing that properly understands the call from the conscience and individualizes her existence (Heidegger 2001, 296–97). Later, in his lecture during the summer term of 1934, Heidegger reinterprets such resoluteness as “the essence of decision (*Entscheidung*)” (Heidegger 1998, 97) while connecting this concept of decision with his new idea of “belonging to the Volk” (*Zugehörigkeit zum Volk*) (Heidegger 2020, 53):

We are authentically we—only in the decision; everyone individualizes themselves in the decision. [...] By wanting to be herself, each one is actually sent beyond herself to the belongingness, to which each one submits in the decision. In the decision, each one is separate from one another—as far apart as she can be separate; and despite this individualization that separates us by way of the decision—or rather exactly in this very individualization—the hidden harmony of “We” (*der verborgene Einklang des Wir*) arises. (ibid., 55)

In contrast with *Being and Time*, this passage from the 1934 lecture emphasizes that each *Dasein's* respective individualization through decision brings forth not only her solitude but also and at the same time her belonging to the *Volk* as “We”. Furthermore, this idea of a kind of community consisting of every solitary person isolated from everyone else is further developed in the following lecture, where Heidegger analyses the individualization of *Dasein* running ahead toward her own death:

The nearness of death as sacrifice has already led everyone into the same nothingness (*Nichtigkeit*), and consequently, this nothingness became the origin of unconditional cooperation. The very death which each individual must die by herself and which individualizes her toward herself most extremely [...] and the readiness for sacrificing herself create the space for community (*der Raum der Gemeinschaft*) in advance and for the first time. (Heidegger 1989, 73)

As is shown in the above quotation, Heidegger reformulates the *Volk* into the space of community as a fundamental place, on the basis of which any type of actual community comes forth. In this sense, this space of community can be also called “fundamental community” (*ursprüngliche Gemeinschaft*) (Heidegger 1989, 8), which is “neither individual in solitude nor community as such” (ibid., 72). I

interpret this fundamental community as the one primordial place for our coexistence, where we are always and already accepted, as long as we build and belong to different particular communities based on this very place. In other words, we are the members of such actual communities only when all of us originally coexist in the primordial place. Despite his differences from Heidegger, this is also the gist of Nancy's thought with regard to an inoperative community, which focuses on "original or ontological 'sociality'" (*une "socialite" originale ou ontologique*) (Nancy 1999, 71), on the basis of which each of us is fundamentally "separate, distinct [from each other] and open for community (*communautaire*) at the same time" (*ibid.*, 74–75).

Notwithstanding all the remarkable contributions to contemporary debates in community theory, I find the Heideggerian idea of fundamental community problematic because, to my eyes, Heidegger does not appropriately elucidate why all members of the fundamental community can find themselves in a state of "being with each other" (*Miteinandersein*) (Heidegger 2020, 154) instead of simply separating apart from each other without any nexus. How does the fundamental community harmonize these isolated persons? In short, what is such a fundamental community as the place of our coexistence that precedes all actual communities?

The above discussion shows that Watsuji's aforementioned question addressed to *Being and Time*—namely, the question of what the field of *Dasein's* coexistence is—is applicable to Heidegger's later idea of fundamental community as well. Should this be the case, how does Watsuji himself reply to the question? Can we expect him to shed new light on the primordial place for our coexistence?

As already stated, Watsuji thinks that this place is subjective spatiality. Moreover, he characterizes this also as "subjective materiality" (Watsuji 1996, 233; 1962c, 245). What does he mean by the notion of subjective materiality? According to my reading, it is the "subjective human body" (*shutaiteki nikutai* 主体の肉体) (Watsuji 1996, 65; 1962c, 69), for instance, this particular body of mine, which fundamentally serves for me as the place to coexist with others, because it is originally "absolute emptiness" (Watsuji 1996, 68; 1962c, 71), which is beyond my individual personality. Watsuji illustrates such view of the body as follows:

A mother and her baby can never be conceived of as merely two independent individuals. A baby wishes for its mother's body, and [the] mother offers her breast to the baby. If they are separated from each other, they look for each other with all the more intensity. [...] This power of attraction, even though not physical attraction alone, is yet a real attraction connecting the two as though one. If it is thinkable that a nucleus,

with its electrons circulating around it, constitutes one atom and not just separate individuals, then it is equally permissible to think that a mother's body and her child's body are also combined as one. [...] Bodily connections are always visible wherever betweenness prevails, even though the manner of connection may differ. (Watsuji 1996, 61–62; 1962c, 65)

I hope that this idea of the one transindividual body of human existence provided by Watsuji inspires us to consider our primary coexistence differently than Heidegger, Nancy, and other contemporary theorists of community have.

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SPECIAL ISSUE

*TRANSCULTURAL (POST)COMPARATIVE
PHILOSOPHY, PART 2*

*Philosophical Dialogues between East Asia and
Europe: From Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond*

*Creative Interpretations: Comparison of Con-
cepts and Categories*

Deconstruction of a Dialogue: Creative Interpretation in Comparative Philosophy

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Abstract

It is common knowledge that Martin Heidegger's attempts at engaging non-Western philosophy are very much a construct of his own making. This article in no way seeks to disagree with those observations, but argues two things: first, that Heidegger's "dialogue" with his two main other sources of inspiration, the ancient Greek thinkers and the German poets, is not different *in kind or in principle* from his engagement with East Asia. One can of course quite easily argue that Heidegger's main interest was the ancient Greek thinkers, and then the poets, and only lastly Asia. But this hierarchy in preference does not make Heidegger's approach different in kind or in principle. Second, I argue that there is an important place in comparative philosophy for the type of thinking displayed by Heidegger in this kind of *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) with—and "appropriation" of—Asian (or Greek, or Poetic) thought.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger, comparative philosophy, dialogue, Japanese philosophy, *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation)

Dekonstrukcija dialoga: ustvarjalna interpretacija znotraj primerjalne filozofije

Izvleček

Splošno znano je, da so Heideggerjevi poskusi vključevanja nezahodnih filozofij v veliki meri rezultati njegovih lastnih konstruktov. Pričujoči članek nikakor ne želi negirati takšnih opazovanj, vendar pri tem izpostavi dva dodatna argumenta. Prvi opozarja na dejstvo, da se tudi Heideggerjev »dialog« z obema najpomembnejšima viroma njegovih navdihov, namreč s starogrškimi misleci na eni in nemškimi pesniki na drugi strani, niti po vrsti ne po načelih nikakor ne razlikuje od njegove obravnave Vzhodne Azije. Seveda bi lahko rekli, da je bil Heideggerjev glavni interes pri tem povezan z grško miselnostjo in šele kasneje s pesniki, medtem ko je bil njegov interes za azijske filozofije šele na zadnjem mestu. Vendar ta hierarhija priljubljenosti nikakor ne vpliva na način ali načela njegovih izhodišč. Drugi argument pa izpostavlja, da pripada vrsti mišljenja, ki jo je uporabil Heidegger v tovrstnem soočenju (*Auseinandersetzung*) z azijsko – oziroma grško ali poetično – mislijo, pomembno mesto znotraj primerjalne filozofije.

Ključne besede: Martin Heidegger, primerjalna filozofija, dialog, japonska filozofija, *Auseinandersetzung* (soočenje)

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Introduction

That Martin Heidegger's "A Dialogue on Language: Between a Japanese and an Inquirer"¹ (hereafter: "A Dialogue") is very much a construct of his own making, rather than the representation of an actual dialogue, is not news. Many scholars have pointed out that in this dialogue Heidegger seems more interested in his own thinking and how he can "interpret" the Japanese contributions in his own way to fit his own programme. One can think for example of Reinhard May's *Heidegger's Hidden Sources* ([1989] 1996) and Lin Ma's *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue* (2008). This article in no way seeks to disagree with those observations, but I want to argue two things: first, that Heidegger's "dialogue" with his two main other sources of inspiration, the ancient Greek thinkers and the German poets, is not different *in kind or in principle* from his engagement with East Asia. One can of course quite easily argue that Heidegger's main interest was the ancient Greek thinkers, and then the poets, and only lastly Asia. But this hierarchy in preference does not make Heidegger's approach different in kind or in principle. We are well aware that Heidegger did not have (the best) access to the languages and thinkers of China, Japan, or India, but I will argue that he also lacked perfect access to the world of the ancient Greeks and German poets, and that he employed just as much "creative interpretation" (much to the chagrin of some philosophers, philologists, and other scholars) with these ancient Greek thinkers and German poets, as he did with East Asian thinkers. Of course, the conceptual world of the ancient Greeks and the German poets was much closer to Heidegger's own than the ancient Chinese world could ever be, but my point will be that Heidegger employed just as much creative interpretation in his readings of all these sources. In all of these "cases" he certainly went beyond what could reasonably be established within the paradigms of his sources. Second, based on these findings I argue that there is an important place in comparative philosophy for the type of thinking displayed by Heidegger in this kind of *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) with—and "appropriation" of—Asian (or Greek, or Poetic) thought. Might it not be the case that, although we are fairly sure that Heidegger neither had a thorough grasp of Asian thought and languages, nor too much knowledge of their intricacies, he was still very interested in Asian thought and managed to get something out of it that he found worthy of deliberation, or to stay in Heidegger's terms, worthy of thought? Something he may not have found had he stubbornly stuck only to the Western thinkers and traditions? And that comparative philosophy should do well to not frown too hard on such endeavours? In order to argue these points, I

1 In *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1985a). All references unless otherwise indicated will be to the English translation in *On the Way to Language* (1971). All references will be indicated by OWL followed by the page number.

will first have a closer look at “A Dialogue” itself, its dynamics and intricacies, in section 2. Then in section 3 I will argue that Heidegger’s approach to the Greeks and poets is of the same kind. Section 4 then provides an interpretation of Heidegger’s “A Dialogue” as a form of *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation)² that is relevant to comparative philosophy. Lastly section 5 draws some interesting lessons that comparative philosophy may take to heart from my arguments.

“A Dialogue” as Comparative Dialogue?

In this section I will first highlight what I take to be the most fundamental ideas from “A Dialogue”. I will argue for seeing this work in a different way from what is the norm. Having once called “A Dialogue” “one of the finest examples” (Burik 2009, 40) of an intercultural encounter, I am now more cautious. However, to inquire into Heidegger’s comparative thinking it is necessary to explore this work in greater detail. The first reason why “A Dialogue” is not necessarily to be understood as an effort in intercultural thinking is that much of it could have been between the inquirer Heidegger and any other person, for example in the parts where the interlocutors discuss Heidegger’s hermeneutics, the lecture series “Expression and Appearance”, and the nature of language as “Saying” (*Sage*). In these sections of “A Dialogue”, Heidegger just tries to clarify his own thoughts *via* an audience or interviewer who could be anyone, much like his other published *Feldweg Gespräche*. The references to Japanese thought in these sections are largely incidental, or merely agree with what Heidegger is saying already.

One could also (partly) defend Heidegger against all the accusations of appropriation and putting his own thoughts into the mouth of his Japanese interlocutor. To do that one can point to the continued humbleness and reticence Heidegger displays on all the occasions he talks about non-Western thought. From his well-documented saying that “Who knows, one day in Russia or in China ancient ways of thinking may come to the fore that can help us in our struggle against Metaphysics” (Heidegger and Wisser 1988, 214, my translation) to the humility he displays in “A Dialogue” and in other places about his inability to follow what his interlocutors were trying to get at. For example, Heidegger writes to Hellmuth Hecker that he “lack(s) the presuppositions” (in Hecker 1990, 91)³, to adequately interpret Chinese or Japanese thought. This humbleness can also be explained as

2 The German *Auseinandersetzung* will be translated with “confrontation”, unless it appears in quotations where it is sometimes translated as “con-frontation”. In such instances I will keep to the original translated text.

3 Quoted from the translation of Ma (2008, 150).

a “confession” (May 1996, 49), to use Reinhard May’s term, of the fact that he is *interpreting in his own way*, and not pretending to get Japanese thought right.

If not an exercise in comparative philosophy, then what is “A Dialogue”? Heidegger presents himself not as a philosopher or a Westerner, but as someone who asks questions, an inquirer (*ein Fragender*). “A Dialogue” is not a work where arguments are put forward or positions are taken or defended, but there occurs a reciprocal reaching out to what is other in pursuit of learning from different ways of thinking, in complete realization of the complexities and dangers inherent in such endeavours. There is a constant emphasis on language, both on its possibilities and the seemingly insurmountable problems and difficulties facing a dialogue between very different languages or conceptual schemes. These issues make Heidegger very cautious in his approach to Japanese thought.

In this context, Heidegger emphasizes the idea of “Way” (*Weg*). Thinkers are always underway, there is no fixed abode to stay or positions that are always correct, there is only the continuous movement on the way. With this notion, Heidegger wants us to perceive our own cultural truths and values: they are provisional. Ways can go in different directions, and there is no one way which is the only right or true one. Being provisional, such truths and values are also not closed off to change or interpretation.

Consequently, I believe that Heidegger also shares the idea that there is no one correct interpretation of a text or a thinker. There is no one truth. And we do not necessarily have to get it “right”. Heidegger’s focus in “A Dialogue” is more on interpretation itself. A large part of “A Dialogue” discusses hermeneutics, and specifically Heidegger’s ideas on this term and method. Heidegger explains early in the dialogue that he came to the notion of hermeneutics through his background in theological studies, and based on this his interlocutor offers a broad definition of “hermeneutics”: “the theory and methodology for every kind of interpretation...” (OWL 11). Heidegger then states that in *Being and Time* he has used the idea of hermeneutics in an even broader sense as “neither the theory of the art of interpretation, nor interpretation itself, but rather the attempt first of all to define the nature of interpretation on hermeneutic grounds” (OWL 11). The broadness hinted at here by Heidegger does not mean extension, but means rather “in keeping with that vastness which springs from originary being” (OWL 11). These passages show two things: first, Heidegger’s creative use of terminology, as he is not interested in finding the one and only correct definition of hermeneutics, but in what he can make the term mean for (his) thinking. Second, and more importantly, not only is he quite willing to stretch the meanings of concepts and terms, but the meta-importance of such passages lies in the fact that Heidegger turns the

term hermeneutics back upon itself. It is interpretation itself that is hermeneutics, the topic of the “hermeneutic” exploration that Heidegger and the Japanese are engaged in. This is a hint that we should also read “A Dialogue” as being turned to itself, as the title suggests: a dialogue *of/from* language. Heidegger is adamant that we cannot (or rather: should not) talk *about* language, but are speaking *from or of* language, and “A Dialogue” is an “expression” of this. We always interpret. This we can see as Heidegger’s veiled “confession” or defence of his idiosyncratic interpretation of Japanese thought in “A Dialogue”.

The conversation then leaves the topic of hermeneutics to discuss various other things, among them the danger of language, gestures and Noh theatre, the undefined, hinting and the return to mystery, only to come back to hermeneutics much later. When Heidegger and his Japanese interlocutor do eventually return to hermeneutics, the story and the scene have much changed. Heidegger now says that hermeneutics “does not have its usual meaning, methodology of interpretation, but means the interpretation itself” (OWL 28). Heidegger then discusses hermeneutics as linked to the Greek *hermeneuein*, which conveys

that exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message. Such exposition becomes interpretation of what is said earlier... All this makes it clear that hermeneutics means not just the interpretation but, even before it, the bearing of message and tidings. (OWL 29)

I believe that the mistake one often makes in understanding such passages as these is to think that Heidegger will give us *the correct message* of the ancients, the real version of what they were thinking, or is even interested in finding this correct message. I do not think he is, because the bringing of the message already *is* interpretation, as the above passage shows. After all, Heidegger explicitly mentions that he seeks to “think what the Greeks have thought in an even more Greek manner” (OWL 39). And before one concludes that this means we must get to the bottom of what the Greeks thought, Heidegger explains that he means that we must find what was “unthought” by the Greeks in their thinking, and finding that “unthought” “is in its own way Greek, and yet in respect of what it sees is no longer, is never again, Greek” (OWL 39). The point is pertinently not to try to recuperate or retrieve exactly what was meant. Such historical interests are not what Heidegger sees as worthy of philosophical thinking. He has just stressed that he is necessarily *interpreting* a message, it is he himself who is bringing a message. In short, Heidegger wants us to take extremely seriously the role of the interpreter in any exposition, where I will later in section 4 identify this term “exposition” with Heidegger’s *Auseinandersetzung*. In this context Heidegger says that “Language

defines the hermeneutic relation (*Bezug*)” (OWL 30). We necessarily interpret, and do so through language. But Heidegger then shifts the focus to the words *Bezug* and *Beziehung* (relation). Heidegger explains that *Bezug* and *Beziehung* are not to be thought of in terms of how we normally understand “relation”, as in A has a relation to/with B. Instead, “the word ‘relation’ does want to say that man, in his very being, is in demand, is needed, that he, as the being he is, belongs within a needfulness which claims him” (OWL 32). Without wanting to bother the reader with too much Heideggerian jargon, what Heidegger means is that man does not have relations, but *is* relation. This hermeneutical “relation” in language to Being is then defined as “use” (*brauch*) (OWL 33), which also means “need”.

As just noted, Heidegger’s idiosyncratic jargon can be disturbing and unclear to some. My point with the above discussion of Heidegger’s exposition of hermeneutics is to understand that he is an inquirer whose goal is to deconstruct the texts he engages with. He is willing to take the risk of sounding strange, willing to twist and turn concepts and ideas to suit his programme, and most of all willing to return to the mystery in all its vastness, to leave things open, and to understand ourselves *as* beings defined by open-ended conversation, dialogue, and relation. This is indeed something that defines Heidegger’s work, even before he encountered Daoism. Yet we can safely say that Heidegger’s interest in Daoism stems at least in part from this similarity he found in it.

As a giving up, rigorously, of attempts to solve the riddle, to solve the mystery, to reach a destination, Heidegger then tries to let the thinking journey itself be seen as crucial. The destination of this journey is not so important. In the words of the *Daodejing*, Heidegger seems to urge us to “know when to stop” (Ames and Hall 2003, 127). Or in his own words: “The lasting element in thinking is the way” (OWL 12). Heidegger seeks to take us on a thinking journey, and that journey neither necessarily has a fixed destination, nor is it necessarily the journey of whoever he is dealing or conversing with, be it Greeks, poets, or Asian thinkers.

Yet this journey is fraught with “danger” (*Gefahr*). This danger lies not only in the ongoing Westernization and technologization of the world, a topic frequently brought up in “A Dialogue”. Since his Japanese interlocutor is unable to translate into a Western language key Japanese concepts, and Heidegger is unable to fully comprehend the intricacies of Japanese ideas, he sees the underlying danger in language. It is the conceptual schemes and languages of the West that prohibit access to the ideas found in Japanese thought. But to converse or discuss things in such Western languages is unavoidable. The quest then is to find the kind of language that would not (or only minimally) be tied to the West. Western languages, according to Heidegger, are so infected with metaphysics that any intercultural

dialogue in any Western language necessarily corrupts the thoughts of other cultures. Even German cannot escape this predicament, although Heidegger was more hopeful of its possibilities. The problem has more to do with the metaphysical way of thought and modern technological thinking:

Who would want to dispute that these German words are firmly rooted locutions? Today nothing in us takes root anymore. Why? Because the possibility of a thoughtful conversation with a tradition that invigorates and nurtures us is lacking, because we instead consign our speaking to electronic thinking and calculating machines, an occurrence that will lead modern technology and science to completely new procedures and unforeseeable results that probably will push reflective thinking aside as something useless and hence superfluous. (Heidegger 1991a, 15)

As is also made clear in “A Dialogue”, German is very much counted among the languages which cannot convey these other ways of thinking. These limitations and the ensuing one-sidedness of Western philosophy show themselves in translation. In the words of Richard Kearney:

Traditore, traduttore: to translate is always in some sense to betray; for one can never do one’s guest true justice. And this means accepting that we all live East of Eden and after Babel—and this is a good thing. Our linguistic fallenness is also our linguistic finitude: a reminder of human limits that saves us from the delusion of sufficiency, the fantasy of restoring some prelapsarian *logos*. (Kearney 2019, 2)

The point is that, instead of seeing this as an insurmountable obstacle, it should, with Kearney, be seen as a good thing. It may be worth taking a little detour via Jacques Derrida here. For Derrida, the “original” text is never really original, since it cannot refer to its outside (meaning) any more or any better than a translation can. This means the idea of translation as the simple transfer of a univocal meaning from one language to another language is made problematic and hence needs to be reconsidered:

a notion of *transformation* must be substituted for the notion of translation: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We shall not have and never have had to deal with some “transfer” of pure signifieds that the signifying instrument—or “vehicle”—would leave virgin and intact, from one language to another, or within one and the same language. (Derrida 1981, 31)

Firstly, transformation has the implication that there is no original and no derivative, both texts can perpetually be transformed by reading, both are defined by open-endedness. Secondly, transformation better conveys the “violence” of translation in general: transformation indicates something different from what is translated, it transforms instead of merely transfers the “original”. With this rejection of the standing of what is conventionally seen as the “original text”, Derrida does not deny that there is one text being translated or transformed into another, but he is questioning how the relationality between these texts is customarily perceived. This means he denies the suggestion that the “original” would mean anything *outside* of or *without* its ever-expanding context, which involves specifically its interpretations and translations. Derrida has thus said that:

the so-called original is in a position of demand with regard to the translation. The original is not a plenitude which would come to be translated by accident. The original is in the situation of demand, that is, of a lack or exile. The original is indebted a priori to the translation. Its survival is a demand and a desire for translation... (Derrida 1985, 152)

Heidegger uses the term transformation often, including in “A Dialogue”. Although the context is different from what Derrida is talking about, the short detour into the French philosopher is nevertheless instructive to understand the following passage from “A Dialogue” discussing the need for “a transformation of thinking—a transformation which, however, cannot be established as the consequence of an accumulation of the results of philosophical research... The transformation occurs as a passage ... in which one site is left behind in favor of another ... and that requires that the sites be placed in discussion” (OWL 42, modified). A transformation of thinking (which is what Heidegger is after) cannot come about as a result of just accumulating more philosophy, or by putting different philosophies side by side. This is what Heidegger means when he says in the *Spiegel* interview that such a transformation “cannot come about by the adoption of Zen Buddhism or other Eastern experiences of the world” (in Wolin 1993, 113). What needs to happen is that *in* the dialogue both sides are transformed and are turned back towards themselves exactly *because of* the dialogue. This is also why I believe that Heidegger was not so interested in Japanese (or Chinese, or Indian) thought *per se*, but only in the larger question of how a transformation of thinking was to be prepared. But interesting for comparative philosophy is that he thinks such a transformation can indeed happen (at least partly) as a result of a mutual search for it in dialogue between different cultures. This also makes it easier to comprehend Heidegger when he says, for example, that the dialogue needs to be of a very particular kind, and indeed *of/from* language:

Everything would hinge on reaching a corresponding saying of language... Only a dialogue could be such a saying correspondence... But, patently, a dialogue altogether *sui generis*... Wherever the nature of language were to speak (say) to man as Saying, *it*, Saying, would bring about the real dialogue... which does not say ‘about’ language but *of* language... (OWL 52, modified)

We see not only that translation cannot be anything else but corruption. We also see that Heidegger himself had no problem with “corrupting” Western languages (or words therein) themselves. Think only of *Ereignis* (appropriation), *Lichtung* (clearing), *Aletheia* (unconcealment), to name but a few. His goal is to transform thinking, and to do that one cannot be thinking conventionally, trying to get it right. I thus believe Heidegger did not try to get Japanese thought “right” in “A Dialogue”, but was after something else. Heidegger’s real interest therefore lies elsewhere than in Asian thought itself, that much is clear. But it is important to realize that this attitude is not just held with regard to Asia, but also (for example) with regard to the translation of ancient Greek into Latin, which according to him was a major cause for the deterioration of Western thinking into metaphysics. To Heidegger, there is no way out of at least a certain form of metaphysics: “the metaphysical manner of forming ideas is in a certain respect unavoidable” (OWL 25). There is thus no easy way to escape such dangers, yet one way Heidegger tries to do so is by circumventing them by encouraging us into another idea and usage of language, another way of thinking.

Greeks, Poets, Asians, and Heidegger

We must put Heidegger’s efforts with regard to Asian thought into the context of this other kind of thinking in general. In this section I will focus on how Heidegger approached the ancient Greek thinkers and German poets in his work. We will see that Heidegger was also not really interested in what Heraclitus or Anaximander were actually thinking. He was interested in what their works could mean to us. Even as the German poets Heidegger discusses were rather close in time and culture to himself, he also had no way of tracing exactly what they meant with their poems, and was more interested in how poetry (*Dichten*) and thinking (*Denken*) could be aligned. Let us consider Heidegger’s “forceful” translations of some of the ancient Greek thinkers and some of his statements on the German poets.

In “The Anaximander Fragment” (Heidegger 1975, 13–58), Heidegger turns his attention to what was said in one of the oldest known fragments of Western philosophy:

ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστὶ τοῖς οὐσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰ εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεών. Διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίχην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν. (from Heidegger 1975, 13).

The usual, standard translation of Anaximander's fragment runs as follows:

And from what source things arise, to that they return of necessity when they are destroyed; for they suffer punishment and make reparation to one another for their injustice according to the order of time. (Nahm 1964, 39/40)

Heidegger's translation sounds completely different, having reinterpreted most of the terms and queried the authenticity of part of the fragment attributed to Anaximander, so that only the part "... κατὰ τὸ χρεών. Διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίχην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας" remains under consideration. Heidegger of course translated into German⁴, but in English his translation of the latter part is the following:

in accordance with exigence (brook); for they let enjoining and thereby also reck belong to each other (in the getting over) of disjoining, responding to the directive of time's coming into its own. (Translation by Kenneth Maly in Sallis 1993, 231)

Another translation into English of Heidegger's German version, again only of the part which Heidegger focuses on, runs as follows:

... along the lines of usage; for they let order and thereby also reck belong to one another (in the surmounting) of disorder. (Heidegger 1975, 57)

In these translations of Anaximander according to Heidegger, one can clearly see how he interpreted the Greek author according to his own preferences.

When Heidegger turns to Heraclitus, he examines fragment 53 which supposedly says that "war is the father of all things". Heidegger again reinterprets what he believes is a one-sided interpretation. A more "originary" translation of the fragment, which starts with "πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι", is according to Heidegger: "Con-frontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) is indeed the begetter of all (that comes to presence) ..." (Heidegger in Maly and Emad 1986, 41, German added). The ensuing part of the fragment: "..., πάντων δὲ βασιλεύς, is translated by Heidegger as "... but (also) the dominant preserver of all" (Heidegger in Maly & Emad 1986, 41).

4 Heidegger's German translation is as follows: "... entlang dem Brauch; gehören nämlich lassen sie Fug somit auch Ruch eines dem anderen (im Verwinden) des Un-Fugs entsprechend der Zuweisung des Zeitigen durch die Zeit." (Heidegger 1991b, 101)

Another example of Heidegger's idiosyncratic interpretations of the ancient Greek thinkers is found in his discussion of Heraclitus' fragment 123: "φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ". Conventionally translated along the lines of "nature loves to hide itself", Heidegger's version is: "Rising (out of self-concealing) bestows favour upon self-concealing" (Heidegger 1975, 114).

What I hope to show the reader with these examples is that Heidegger is no different in his "creative interpretation" of these ancient Greek thinkers to how he is with Asian thought. While it is true that Heidegger was both much more interested and well-versed in Greek and the Greek thinkers in general, what we see is that his interpretations here are equally as "liberal" (when seen from the conventional background of some of his contemporaries) as his interpretations of Japanese ideas in "A Dialogue" are.

Turning to the German poets, we find the same story. Heidegger's etymological escapades and liberties in his own time infuriated philologists and philosophers alike. Take Georg Trakl, for example. In *On the Way to Language* Heidegger says in an essay on a work by Trakl:

This [Trakl's] language is essentially ambiguous (*mehrdeutig*), in its own fashion. We shall hear nothing of what the poem says so long as we bring to it only this or that dull sense of unambiguous (*eindeutigen*) meaning ... The ambiguous tone of Trakl's poetry arises out of a gathering, that is, out of a unison which, meant for itself alone, always remains unsayable. The ambiguity of this poetic saying is not lax imprecision, but rather the rigor of him who leaves what is as it is ... (OWL 192, German added)

Here Heidegger clearly enlists Trakl for his own purposes, in the same way as he does with Japanese thought in "A Dialogue". He will take the meaning he wants to find and go with that, using his "interlocutors" only for inspiration.

The same goes for Heidegger's interpretation of Hölderlin. In my book I already noted that:

Heidegger did not concern himself with literary scholarship on Hölderlin, and ... his reading of Hölderlin is not necessarily what the latter thought of his own work himself, but first of all Heidegger's effort to wrestle Hölderlin from the narrow bonds of philology, so as to open his words to a wider understanding, of which the intercultural aspect is an important part. (Burik 2009, 28–29)

In *Elucidations to Hölderlin's Poetry* Heidegger says that “the present *Elucidations* do not claim to be contributions to research in the history of literature or to aesthetics. They spring from the necessity of thought” (Heidegger 2000, 21). As Lin Ma remarks regarding this passage:

Heidegger insists that his lectures on this poet are neither mere commentaries (*Anmerkungen*) nor explanations (*Erklärungen*), but elucidations (*Erläuterungen*). He claims that his elucidations stem from a dialogue of this thinking (*Denken*) with Hölderlin's poetizing (*Dichten*), from the necessity of thinking. (Ma 2008, 78)

While I agree with this point, I wonder why, given the above, Ma wants to draw a firm distinction between Heidegger dealing with the Greeks and poets on one side, and with Asia on the other. As I have argued above, at least for the purpose of understanding Heidegger's “engagements” with his main sources, I do not believe such a firm distinction is defensible. While of course Heidegger was conceptually and culturally much closer to the ancient Greeks and German poets than he was to the ancient Asian thinkers, and as such a distinction is indeed reasonable, I believe to have shown that on the level of his creative engagement with all of these sources, any firm distinction is not warranted.

Because of Heidegger's already mentioned and well-documented confession of his lack of understanding with regard to Asian thought and languages, and consequently his hesitation with regard to doing comparative philosophy, it is thus better to understand Heidegger as doing something else when he does indeed mention Asian thinkers. In the words of Lin Ma: “Heidegger is probably less motivated to understand Laozi than to discover in it what he had already contemplated himself, or to obtain inspirations for alternative expressions” (Ma 2008, 154–55). I think this is correct, but I believe we can take this one step further than Ma and say that Heidegger was also not that interested in *understanding* Heraclitus, Anaximander, Hölderlin, or Trakl. If we read carefully, then we find no indications that he was interested in getting those thinkers and poets historically right, either. He was interested in what he could get out of them. Ma perceives this mostly in a negative way, but while that is possible and again correct, it seems to me also to be one-sided as an approach. For example, Ma claims that the danger of language Heidegger mentions a number of times in “A Dialogue” “always belongs to the Japanese world, not to the European world. The European world unilaterally brings disorder, corruption, and threat, whereas European languages seem to be immune to the ‘danger’ of corruption” (Ma 2008, 173/4). This seems only to focus on one side of Heidegger, as the earlier quotation from Heidegger

on German words has shown. European languages are far from immune to the danger of corruption, in fact much of Heidegger's thinking is about retrieving some possible other meanings of words that have ossified or "metaphysified":

Our Western languages are languages of metaphysical thinking, each in its own way. It must remain an open question whether the nature of Western languages is in itself marked with the exclusive brand of metaphysics, and thus marked permanently by onto-theo-logic, or whether these languages offer other possibilities of utterance—and that means at the same time of a telling silence. (Heidegger 1969, 73)

While Heidegger thus clearly tells us that Western languages have been "corrupted" by metaphysics, he does leave the possibility open that they may also be used to say something else. When Heidegger mentions that he does not know "how" the Japanese translation of *Sein und Zeit* was done (that is how well or adequately or even if it captures what Heidegger wanted to say)⁵, the implied distortion in Japanese of Heidegger's "original" also very much implies the possibility of distortion in Western languages. Distortion is possible both ways. As Ma also notes, on the efforts to translate the *Daodejing* by Heidegger and Hsiao: "Heidegger paid attention to representing the originariness of the text, while Hsiao emphasized faithfulness to the original text, which, to Heidegger, was equal to forcing the original into the system of Western concepts" (Ma 2008, 155). I agree with this, but argue that Heidegger's approach is not necessarily a bad thing in comparative philosophy, but should be seen as a form of "creative interpretation" that can complement our continued efforts to understand non-Western philosophy in its own context, in how far that is possible. Heidegger's "originary" means not going back to the original (trying to get it right), but rather means a way of thinking that is originary. Youru Wang puts this in the following way: "It is impossible to be fixed, since meaning is always context-bound, and context is always on the move in the continuing process of signification and communication" (Wang 2003, 146). In fact, Ma herself seems to acknowledge this when, discussing Heidegger-inspired discourse that bears on comparative philosophy, she states that "such a discourse does not need to be concerned with whether Heidegger would find their theses acceptable, since the essence of a discourse that draws on a certain philosopher lies in application or expansion of a cue found in his writings" (Ma 2008, 4). And Ma and Jaap van Brakel also acknowledge my position when they say that "strictly speaking, there is no such thing as explanation (or understanding, letting speak, etc.) *on its own terms*" (Ma

5 In Hartig (1997, 269), translation from Ma (2008, 147).

and van Brakel 2019, 9, italics in original). So while one form of comparative philosophy should definitely continue to seek to come as close as possible to letting non-Western philosophy speak ‘on its own terms’ (probably in full awareness that this is an ideal that cannot be reached), there should be room for another form of comparative philosophy, as I have argued for here.

“A Dialogue” as *Auseinandersetzung*

In “A Dialogue”, Heidegger presents himself as an inquirer. Why this move? Is it because he does not want to be identified with Western philosophy? With metaphysics? Perhaps, but importantly, he also seeks to convey the idea that we are always underway, we never arrive, we must ever remain inquirers, the ones asking questions. There are several passages in “A Dialogue” which indicate this. For example, he admits quite readily that he will always be a beginner, a questioner, on the way (OWL 7). One can “blame” Heidegger for not learning the relevant languages of the East (Japanese, Chinese), but Heidegger himself was both aware of this and saw real “access” as being fundamentally denied to him. Yet some kind of coming together would then still be possible, if only under different conditions. Heidegger calls this “the attempt to walk a path of which I did not know where it would lead” (OWL 6). That path, for which “the fitting word is still lacking even today” (OWL 8), is not a path of traditional comparative philosophy. It is a path that questions about, but mostly from and toward, what Heidegger thought was the single source of thinking, in a thinking dialogue. That source, of course, is “Nothing”, and the form of questioning is what he termed *Auseinandersetzung*, of which the usual English translation is “confrontation”: “The grounding form of confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) is the actual creative dialogue (*wirkliche Wechselgespräch*) between the creators (*Schaffenden*) themselves in a neighbourly encounter” (Heidegger 2002a, 20, my translation).

“A Dialogue” is thus an exercise in trying to overcome metaphysics in the confrontation with other ways of thought, in the full awareness of the futility of doing exactly that, yet still always being attempted anew, and guided by what Heidegger saw as possible other openings for such attempts, besides his own thinking. Such possible openings were of course the ancient Greeks, the poets, and also what he conceived to be the non-metaphysical non-West. One may and probably should disagree at least to some extent with Heidegger’s conception of the “East”, but my argument so far has been that Heidegger *in all three cases* distorts the originals, twists them to fit his purposes, and thereby angers many purists. In my opinion this is firstly because Heidegger is not a historian (i.e. he is not interested in the

“original” as such) and secondly because he believes there is no such thing as the original. Yet, in my opinion, these purists need not be angry. After all, there is indeed no indication that Heidegger really tried to get Laozi, Zhuangzi, or the Zen Buddhists “right”. All he wanted was a rich source of thought, and to leave that source mysterious and open. We can and should of course also criticize Heidegger, as May does, for not revealing any of his sources, especially his Asian sources. Yet this valid criticism does not affect my argument that Heidegger was not interested in getting them right. If anything it would support it, as Heidegger probably knew he would not be able to get away with claiming he was right in his interpretation of Laozi or Zhuangzi, for example.

More importantly, the form and flow of “A Dialogue” itself is specifically geared to luring the audience on a thinking journey, a thinking experience of the *Auseinandersetzung* kind that would not be tied to metaphysics, but Heidegger recognizes that our language constantly pushes us back. This is why Heidegger is so difficult to follow for most people, as they are either unwilling or incapable of letting go of this metaphysical tradition. But again, it is only those who expect from Heidegger the kind of philosophy that he agitates against who will be upset. Heidegger is clearly against the dominance of the Subject-Object distinction and its ensuing hierarchical way of metaphysical thought (OWL 2), and continuously warns against the imposition of Western conceptuality and categorization. Thus, “A Dialogue” should be read more as an exercise in deconstruction, an exercise in recognizing how things might be thought in different directions, in order to develop an attitude of openness in attempts at intercultural *Auseinandersetzung*. Heidegger is not a purist. Purists (at least of the Western variety) tend to think in dualisms, and then in hierarchies. But for Heidegger, Being *is* Nothing, unconcealment *is* concealment. A confrontation is always provisional, there is always retreat and reticence, darkness and silence as well as light and speech. And he finds a welcome audience for that in his Asian interlocutors. So instead of seeing “A Dialogue” as an intercultural dialogue *per se*, we should rather see it as hinting at the (im-)possibilities of saying the “*unbestimmte Bestimmende*”, an exercise in the possibilities and impossibilities of language, where eventually Heidegger hints at “Saying”. Heidegger will not tell us exactly how things are, but will hint at what may be:

A hint beckons away from the one, toward the other. The guide-word beckons us away from the current notions about language, to the experience of language as Saying. Hints hint in many ways. A hint can give its hint so simply and at the same time so fully that we release ourselves in its direction without equivocation. But it can also give its hint in such a

manner that it refers us, from the first and persistently, back to the dubious (*das Bedenkliche*) against which it warns us, and lets us only suspect at first the memorable thing toward which it beckons us, as thought-worthy (*das Denkwürdige*) matter for which the fitting mode of thinking is still lacking. (OWL 95–96)

The *Auseinandersetzung* is what Heidegger is after, and that means interpretation. Confrontation is a

bringing the other and thereby also oneself to what is primary and original. This is the essence of the matter and is automatically the common cause of both parties, so we do not need to make up afterwards or aim at a subsequent alliance. *Philosophical confrontation is interpretation as destruction.* (Heidegger 2002b, 198, modified, italics in original)

Interpretation necessarily “destroys” an original, but this destruction should be understood as de-con-struction. In a work on Nietzsche Heidegger puts it in the following way: “Confrontation does not express itself in ‘polemic,’ but in the manner of interpretative construction ...” (Heidegger 1979, 279). Once understood in this fashion, we can see that “A Dialogue” is exactly such “interpretative construction”. The *Auseinandersetzung* between Heidegger and his Japanese interlocutor is a confrontation seeking to bring together different ways of thinking in an interpretative context that seeks not so much to understand the intricacies of those different ways of thinking, but to focus on their mutual source of nothingness. This does not mean that confrontation is *only* about a bringing together. It is as much a setting apart, which is necessary for the real ‘relation’ to manifest itself:

...only where the foreign is known and acknowledged in its essential oppositional character (*Gegensätzlichkeit*) does there exist the possibility of a genuine relationship (*Beziehung*), that is, of a uniting that is not a confused mixing but a conjoining in distinction (*Unterscheidung*). (Heidegger 1996, 54, German added)

One must see the *Auseinandersetzung* as a process of coming together and drifting apart, both an exploration and exposition of the ongoing movement of “gathering” in Heidegger’s sense of the word. That means we are not looking for a fusion, but for an ex-positioning that recognizes the Sameness in difference and the undefinable source which is Being (or Nothing).

Lin Ma argues that there are three ways Heidegger uses *Auseinandersetzung* (Ma 2008, 103–13). She believes that he sometimes uses it with a focus on the bringing

together and gathering, and sometimes on a setting apart, a struggle or strife. Ma then further claims that *Auseinandersetzung* is used in a predominantly negative fashion when applied to Asia, as an overcoming (*Überwindung*) of the East by the West. But is not Heidegger's idea of "overcoming" in fact not based on denial or defeat, but on "coming to terms with"? Just as his overcoming of metaphysics is not a defeat or denial, but a coming to terms with metaphysics in order to think otherwise. This is how I would understand Heidegger's comment that the greatness of the Greeks came about only by "overcoming" the Asiatic, a comment by the way immediately followed by Heidegger saying that to overcome here means "to bring it to the jointure (*Gefüge*) of a truth of Being..." (Heidegger 1985b, 145–46, German added). It is this kind of "coming to terms with" that is meant in Heidegger's following comment:

... that every reflection upon that which now is can take its rise and thrive only if, through a dialogue with the Greek thinkers and their language, it strikes root into the ground of our historical existence. That dialogue still awaits its beginning. It is scarcely prepared for at all, and yet it itself remains for us the precondition of the inevitable dialogue with the East Asian world. (Heidegger 1977, 157–58)

We need first to come to terms with the Greeks, and then with Asia. Such "coming to terms with" can, if one wishes, be read negatively, but I believe this would be a rather one-sided reading of Heidegger. This is exactly why I believe it is more likely that Heidegger means all three interpretations of *Auseinandersetzung* all the time, in ways similar to what we grant for example some classical Chinese terms like *xin* meaning not "mind" or "heart", but rather both in "heart-mind". Bringing together is always setting apart, conversation or dialogue is always also struggle that is literally a "coming to terms with" an other, just as we saw that unconcealment is concealment, and Being is Nothing. There is no need to choose if we see Heidegger engaged in creative interpretation when he is engaged in *Auseinandersetzung*.

It is Heidegger's conviction that we can only challenge our own metaphysical background through such *Auseinandersetzung*. Heidegger mentions that "in the field in which we are moving, we reach those things with which we are originally familiar precisely if we do not shun passing through things strange to us" (OWL 33). And this *Auseinandersetzung* thus means that we look for ways to also transform our own ways of thinking. The dialogue is meant not to merely appropriate different cues from other cultures into one's own thinking. In fact, since different conceptual schemes cannot be accommodated into our own metaphysical schemes, we need

to upset these preconceived notions and that means we need to look for different forms of interpreting and different forms of understanding language. The goal of doing this is to become more aware of our own conceptual schemes, our own ways of thinking, and to use the non-Western ideas to help us challenge a certain (metaphysical) dominance of interpretations in our own traditions, as Heidegger does with *Logos* for example, and in his rereadings of Hölderlin or the ancient Greeks. But the goal is also to realize the futility of trying to get it right. We are always interpreting from a certain standpoint, and challenging that standpoint does not make us objective. The search for objectivity needs to be abandoned and replaced with an *Auseinandersetzung* that appropriates other thought not in a possessive, but dialogical way. “A Dialogue” is an attempt at showing that.

I shall now indulge in some speculation. Although we know that Tezuka Tomio—the Japanese scholar who visited Heidegger and on whom the Japanese person in “A Dialogue” is loosely based—had his reservations about Heidegger’s interpretations (see May 1989, 60–62), we should also not discard the possibility that the “Japanese” person is based on multiple visitors, some of whom may have been happy to actively play Heidegger’s game with him, so instead of giving the audience an “authentic” account of Japanese thought in his deliberations on *kotoba*, the Japanese person might also be engaged in the creative reinterpreting of his own tradition, in an *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger. For example, consider the Japanese character’s comments on Heidegger’s exposition of *Charis*. Heidegger has him saying: “I would need more time than our dialogue allows to follow in thought the new prospects you have opened with your remark. But *one* thing I see at once—that your remark helps me to say more clearly what *koto* is” (OWL 46, italics in original). A negative reading of this passage might suggest that not only is Heidegger putting words into his Japanese interlocutor’s mouth that sound more like Heidegger himself, but also that the Japanese is influenced by Heidegger in his thinking. But thought of more creatively, it may indeed be that given Heidegger’s remarks his Japanese interlocutor sees “new prospects” in bringing the idea of *kotoba* into the service of a thoughtful confrontation with a different kind of thinking, and indeed with the tradition of Japanese thought itself. He may actually be willing to twist “the” meaning of *kotoba* to seek new ways of thought and expression. Especially since a page later the Japanese asserts that we must be “full ready to give away freely whatever it may be that we attempt on our own, even if it falls short of perfection” (OWL 48–49).

I will of course immediately admit that this still consists of Heidegger putting words into the mouth of his Japanese interlocutor, but the mutual confrontation or exploration is not to be denied so easily. We have seen the same happen, for example, with Chang Chung-yuan’s work, which was explicitly influenced by

Heidegger. This may also explain why Heidegger was reluctant to think that the East understood him, because he may have thought that the Eastern thinkers were also just creatively appropriating his thought, in much the same way as he was creatively appropriating theirs.

I hasten to add that I warned the reader this is speculation, but it is exactly the kind of speculation that Heidegger’s “creative interpretation” might consist of, where something interesting is gained through mutual cross-fertilization, although we did not (and did not attempt to) get it right. In my view, Lin Ma—who interprets Heidegger in a somewhat negative fashion with regards to comparative philosophy—actually suggests something similar when she says that there is

an internal approach to Heidegger. Admittedly, this approach may safeguard one in getting Heidegger right, since that is the way in which Heidegger expects one to read him. However, “the task of thinking,” to use Heidegger’s phrase, may have something that exceeds getting him right. (Ma 2008, 194–95)

The “task” of thinking deconstructively demands that we not necessarily follow what an author may have wanted to say, but search for the possibilities of the text in new ways.

Comparative Philosophy

Let me start this last section by stating that I do not necessarily endorse all free speculation and/or plain mistaken readings. I do not believe that “anything goes” in this regard. But if my arguments set out above hold any water, then maybe we need to interpret “A Dialogue” not as an exercise in “standard” comparative philosophy, where Heidegger would have, in his eagerness to find similarities between his own thinking and that of the East, (wilfully) misunderstood and misinterpreted his interlocutor. When seen this way, it is natural that in the same way as most philosophers would balk at Heidegger’s reinterpretations of concepts such as *logos*, *poemos*, *Lichtung*, *Ereignis*, etc., they would resist his take on Asia. But that misses the point. Heidegger uses the Asian “creatively”. And one may read that as “stealing what he can use while distorting it”, which is indeed in a way true, but one may also read it in the way that for example Picasso “stole” from African art or used other artefacts out of their context, to create (from out of a different context) something new and very interesting, but not necessarily true to the original. The “original”, as mentioned before, is only interesting historically. As I put it in *Comparative Philosophy and Method*:

While as comparative philosophers we should make efforts not to distort the ideas coming from other cultural backgrounds, such ideas can only be useful if placed in our current context, and for that, historical considerations are less important than what we think we can achieve in our times by looking at the tradition in new ways. (Burik et al. 2022, 208)

Or in the words of Gadamer: “To try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us” (Gadamer 1989, 398). While it is true that we may not be able to completely escape our preconceptions, it is also true that we should endeavour to expand our conceptual apparatus with every new reading of a text. This is one possible way of doing comparative philosophy. As Arindram Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber argue:

What makes it “right” *philosophically* is not the scholarly accuracy of the history of ideas or the “scientific historical” correctness in discovering who said what first, or who influenced whom across the cultures, but “the motivation, the intended next step”—where one wants to go with the comparison. (Chakrabarti and Weber 2016, 28)

Comparative philosophy is, or should be, based on what Chakrabarti and Weber call “the conscious attempt of filling one’s mind in an almost terribly unsystematic manner with whatever one gets out of the study of different styles and traditions” (ibid., 231). Or as what they call “fusion philosophy”, which really is “just doing philosophy as one thinks fit for getting to the truth about an issue or set of issues, by appropriating elements from all philosophical views and traditions one knows of but making no claim of ‘correct exposition’” (ibid., 22). As I wrote myself in *Comparative Philosophy and Method* with regard to comparative philosophy:

We cannot be objective. We should not try, and one of our strengths lies in acknowledging the fundamental limitations of what we do. There are better and worse efforts, but all efforts suffer from incompleteness (never having the entire context available), lack of access to the sources (the impossibility of knowing exactly what Zhuangzi was about), interpretive limitations (where we come from and what our goals are and the language that we use), and, not the least, philosophical limitations (we cannot and should not include everything into philosophy). (Burik et al. 2022, 219)

And if the reader counts herself as one of the purists, whose intent it is to purge Western interpretations from our thinking in order to let other traditions speak for themselves, then I of course applaud and appreciate such efforts, and agree that we must make efforts not to distort what other people say in general. But I *also* believe that such distortions, if they occur, and if they are acknowledged as “not trying to get it right”, can be valuable as (comparative) philosophy. And the purists may be reminded that such interpretative manoeuvres are not a novel phenomenon in philosophy. Again, as I wrote in our recent work on comparative methodology:

misreadings and their productiveness are really nothing new. In fact, one could say that the Chinese commentarial tradition is at least also in part based on misreadings. For example, it is quite certain that Guo Xiang “mis”-interpreted some of Zhuangzi’s words to suit his own project, but that is part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the *Zhuangzi*. Wang Bi’s reading of the *Daodejing* could be considered a “misreading” to those not inclined to see the *Daodejing* as a work of metaphysics comparable to Western metaphysics. (ibid., 216)

Heidegger was not well versed in the philosophies of his Asian conversation partners and creatively reinterpreted them, yet he also protested fiercely against total cultural relativism. All thinking everywhere is based on the universal source of thought, *Being*. But because *Being* itself is nothing, it is not something we can identify and thus as source it will remain forever in the background, retreating further the harder we try to expose “it”, because “it” is non-existent, it is nothing other than the play of differences. In mining that source, we must of course take care not to twist and turn. But on the other side, we must also be aware that twisting and turning is what we do of necessity, and that as long as we are able to generate interesting insights from that manoeuvre, then why not? As long as we do not pretend to be getting it right, should we not be allowed to take anything we can as inspiration for interesting philosophy? Deconstruction is about the idea that multiple interpretations are always possible, that there is no one single truth about things, and comparative philosophy would do well to heed that particular insight (in fact, I believe this is one of the key tenets that comparative philosophy should have). Some people may get upset if we do not get them right, but as long as we clarify that that is not our intention anyway, is this really a problem? And if this means we are treading precariously on the boundaries of what is allowed in comparative philosophy, then I believe that “A Dialogue” is an exploration of the boundaries of thought. Comparative philosophy should also be done by, in Heidegger’s words: “he who walks the boundary of the boundless. And on this path ... seeks the boundary’s mystery” (OWL 41).

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Martin Buber and Daoism on Interhuman Philosophy

David CHAI*

Abstract

For Martin Buber, a person participates in two kinds of relationship: the I-Thou and the I-It. In the case of the former, the wholeness of being is employed resulting in genuine dialogue, while the latter objectifies things and is thus devoid of anything genuine. Among the influences on Buber's thought, that of Daoism has not gone unnoticed by scholars of comparative philosophy. This paper will contribute to said discourse by examining Buber's concept of the interhuman and its employment of the following themes: oneness and the genuine person, non-deliberate action (*wuwei*) and the in-between, and genuine dialogue as a turning towards being. What our analysis will show is that Buber's interhuman philosophy bears witness to the transcendence of words by bringing to life the silence from which they arise and recede, attuning participants in genuine dialogue to the spiritual resonance between themselves and the primal Thou, while elevating their faith in human life in the process. The interhuman was seen by Buber as a viable solution for the societal ills of his time and it remains so half a century after his passing.

Keywords: Martin Buber, Daoism, genuine person, non-deliberate action (*wuwei*), dialogue, interhuman philosophy

Martin Buber in daoizem v medčloveški filozofiji

Izvleček

Po Martinu Buberju se oseba udeleži dveh oblik odnosov: jaz-ti in jaz-ono. V primeru prvega se celota bivanja uporabi tako, da rezultira v pristni dialog, medtem ko slednji popredmeti stvari in je tako izpraznjen česar koli pristnega. Med vplivi na Buberjevo misel je tisti, ki ga je nanj imel daoizem, ostal popolnoma neopažen s strani primerjalnih filozofov. Ta članek bo prispeval k omenjenemu diskurzu tako, da bo preučil Buberjevo pojmovanje medčloveškega in njegove uporabe v naslednjih temah: enost in pristna oseba, nenamerno delovanje (*wuwei*) in vmesnost ter pristni dialog kot obrat k bivanju. Naša analiza bo pokazala, da Buberjeva medčloveška filozofija priča o transcendentnosti besed, tako da pripelje v življenje tišino, iz katere vznikajo in kamor se umikajo, uglašujoč udeležence v pristnem dialogu v duhovno sozvočje med njimi samimi in

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prvinskim Teboj, medtem ko hkrati višajo tudi njihovo vero v človeško življenje. Buber je v medčloveškem videl izvedljivo rešitev za družbene težave svojega časa, kar drži tudi pol stoletja po njegovi smrti.

Ključne besede: Martin Buber, daoizem, pristna oseba, nenamerno delovanje (*wuwei*), dialog, medčloveška filozofija

Introduction

What does it mean to engage in dialogue with another person? Is it merely an exchange of words, or is something more profound occurring? We can interact with the utterances of others and integrate them into our own thinking, but given the subjective nature of language, its mutuality is not assured. For Martin Buber (1878–1965), genuine dialogue centres upon the I-Thou in that it is spoken with the wholeness of being, whereas the I-It is not, making the I-Thou the primal word of the in-between. Buber was long interested in the in-between of things and how it might be brought into being through a dialogical encounter. By engaging the being of another, as opposed to relying on words, it becomes possible to value their ability to convey what they find meaningful instead of how this meaningfulness is delivered, thereby giving rise to a genuine encounter wherein each thing's uniqueness is acknowledged and preserved.

Of the influences on Buber's philosophy of the interhuman, that of Daoism stands out.¹ This paper will contribute to the discourse on Buber's engagement with Daoism by examining his concept of the interhuman and its employment of the following themes: oneness and the genuine person, non-deliberate action (*wuwei*) and the in-between, and genuine dialogue as a turning towards being. What our analysis will show is that Buber's interhuman philosophy bears witness to the transcendence of words by bringing to life the silence from which they arise and recede, attuning participants in genuine dialogue to the spiritual resonance between themselves and the primal Thou,² while elevating their faith in human life

1 When it comes to influences on Buber's thought, Friedrich Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard are notable examples, however, as Maurice Friedman writes, "the mysticism of Meister Eckhart and the philosophy of Jakob Boehme were just as influential on Buber's early thought as was Daoism" (Buber 1964, 5).

2 Buber's descriptions of the primal Thou are uncannily Daoist sounding, as the following examples from *I and Thou* demonstrate: "In the relationships through which we live, the innate You [Thou] is realized in the You [Thou] we encounter: that this, comprehended as a being we confront and accepted as exclusive, can finally be addressed with the basic word, has its ground in the *a priori* of relation" (Buber 1970, 78–79); "Human life which is created only by a third element: the central presence of the You [Thou], or rather, to speak more truthfully, the central You [Thou] that is received in the present" (*ibid.*, 95); "The purpose of relation is the relation itself—touching the You

in the process. The interhuman was thus seen by Buber as a viable solution for the societal ills of his time and remains so half a century after his passing.

The themes guiding our discussion first appeared in “The Teaching of the Tao”, an early and now famous essay that Buber included as an afterward to his translation of the *Zhuangzi*.³ Regarding this early essay, a great deal has been said of remarks Buber made in the foreword to a collection of his essays assembled by Maurice Friedman:⁴

In this selection of my essays from the years 1909 to 1954, I have, with one exception, included only those that, in the main, I can also stand behind today. The one exception is “The Teaching of the Tao”, the treatise which introduced my 1909 translation of selected *Talks and Parables of Chuang-tzu*. I have included this essay because, in connection with the development of my thought, it seems to me too important to be withheld from the reader in this collection. But I ask him while reading it to bear in mind that this small work belongs to a stage that I had to pass through before I could enter into an independent relationship with being. One may call it the “mystical” phase if one understands as mystic the belief in a unification of the self with the all-self, attainable by man in levels or intervals of his earthly life. (Buber 1957, ix)

Six years prior to these comments, however, Buber declared in a prefatory note to his *Zhuangzi* translation that

[Thou]. For as soon as we touch a You [Thou], we are touched by a breath of eternal life” (ibid., 113); “Through every single You [Thou] the basic word addresses the eternal You [Thou]” (ibid., 123); and, “in every sphere, in every relational act, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze toward the train of the eternal You [Thou]; in each we perceive a breath of it; in every You [Thou] we address the eternal You [Thou], in every sphere according to its manner” (ibid., 150). This does not imply, as Jason Wirth points out, that Buber’s engagement with Daoism “is a kind of Chinese mirror in which he gazes upon his own thinking or unduly appropriates Chinese thought for his own purposes” (Wirth 2020, 123). Nevertheless, Buber will use the above statements as fodder in developing his philosophy of the interhuman.

- 3 Buber’s *Chinese Tales – Zhuangzi: Sayings and Parables and Chinese Ghost and Love Stories* was first published in 1910, followed by a second edition in 1918, and a third in 1951. For more, see the introduction by Irene Eber to Buber’s *Chinese Tales* (1991). Buber also spoke at length about the *Daodejing* when he visited Ascona, Switzerland, in 1924. These previously unpublished notes now form part of volume 2.3 (2013)—*Schriften zur chinesischen Philosophie und Literatur*—of his *Werkausgabe*, which totals 21 volumes and took nearly 20 years to complete (i.e., 2001–2019). For more on Buber’s connection to Daoism, see: Friedman (1976); Eber (1994); Herman (1996); Allinson (2016); Johnson (2020, 116–45); Nelson (2017; 2020), and Wirth (2020).
- 4 The work in question is *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays* (1957).

the afterward was originally a separate essay in which I intended to provide a summary of Daoistic teachings, to which I owe a great deal ... the afterward has remained virtually unchanged since its first publication; I did not believe it should be modified, even though my ideas of many of the topics treated have undergone substantial change. (Buber 1991, 3)

What is more, in his introduction to the 1963 edition of *Pointing the Way*, Maurice Friedman notes that for Buber “Daoist *wuwei*—the action of the whole being that appears to be non-action—still informs the second part of *I and Thou*” (Johnson 2020, 121–22). In other words, “Buber intended the piece to be read for the sake of understanding the background, the early ‘mystical’ phase of his development that led to his mature thought, but not as an expression of that mature thought in itself” (ibid., 118). In 1952, one year after the third edition of his *Zhuangzi* translation was released, Buber published *Eclipse of God*, a series of lectures given at various American universities in late 1951. It is in “Religion and Philosophy” that he makes a clear distinction between philosophy and religion which helps explain why he distanced himself from the mysticism associated with “The Teaching of the Tao” in order to embrace the oneness of authentic dialogue:

Philosophy understands faith as an affirmation of truth lying somewhere between clear knowledge and confused opinion. Religion, on the other hand, insofar as it speaks of knowledge at all, does not understand it as a noetic relation of a thinking subject to a neutral object of thought, but rather as mutual contact, as the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between one active existence and another. Similarly, it understands faith as the entrance into this reciprocity, as binding oneself in relationship with an undemonstrable and unprovable, yet even so, in relationship, knowable Being, from whom all meaning comes. (Buber [1952] 2016, 25–26)

Tying this knowable being from which all meaning comes to the Dao, Buber says “the Chinese Dao, the ‘path’ in which the world moves, is the cosmic primal meaning. But because man conforms his life to it and practices ‘imitation of the Dao’, it is at the same time the perfection of the soul” (ibid., 26). These words also echo what he wrote in “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism”, one of eight addresses given from 1909–1918 and found in his *On Judaism*:

[...] the Daoist Chinese, in whose ancient world-image the world’s happenings flow from the counteraction of two principles, the light and the dark, but who perceives Dao, the way, as the single, primal principle in

which both are grounded. This Dao which the wise man realizes on earth through his life, not by interfering with but by actualizing in this world the cosmic intent of oneness through the significance of both his action and his non-action. (Buber 1967, 61)

What is more, Buber interpreted the authentic life of the Orient to be “the fundamental metaphysical principle, not derived from nor reducible to anything else” (ibid., 69) and owing to this, “the Orient perceives that the full manifestation and disclosure of the world’s inner substance is thwarted; that the primally intended unity is split and distorted; that the world needs human spirit in order to become redeemed and unified; and that this alone constitutes the meaning and power of man’s existence in the world” (ibid., 62). Not long after making these comments, Buber in his 1929 essay “Dialogue” again broached the subject of mystical experience, writing:

Since then I have given up the “religious” which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. (Buber 2002, 16)

Although Buber admitted to being disillusioned with the mysticism informing “The Teaching of the Tao”, the principles of Daoism were never in doubt for him, as the above examples so aptly illustrate. To these, we can add one more from the essay “Judaism and Civilization”:

Whether we take the Chinese principle of Dao, the “Way” in whose eternal rhythm all opposites contend with each other and are reconciled ... everywhere transcendent Being has a side facing toward man which represents a shall-be; everywhere man, if he wants to exist as man, must strive after a suprahuman model; everywhere the outline of a true human society is traced in heaven. (Buber 1967, 192)

As interesting as these glimpses of Buber’s relationship with Daoism are, they do little to help us understand how Daoism aids his interhuman philosophy. The task before us, therefore, is to analyse the pillars supporting the notion of the interhuman, foremost of which is genuine dialogue. Given genuine dialogue is grounded in the oneness of the I-Thou, we shall begin with the individual who exemplifies such unity: the genuine person.

Oneness and the Genuine Person

For Buber, uttering I-Thou will not only prove impossible without oneness, but the in-between facilitating authentic dialogue will fail to emerge too. When *I and Thou* first appeared in 1923 it immediately eclipsed “The Teaching of the Tao” and yet, as Maurice Friedman notes, “if we look at part two of *I and Thou*, we discover that everything that Buber says about the free man who wills without arbitrariness is, in fact, the direct application in almost the same words of what he wrote in ‘The Teaching of the Tao’ about the perfected man of the Dao” (Friedman 1976, 419). Without digressing too far, let us examine this “perfected man”⁵ and see how their teaching awakens people to the oneness of ultimacy (i.e., the primal Thou or the Dao).

Buber’s story of a piece of mica beautifully conveys the unity symbolized by the I-Thou dyad:

On a gloomy morning I walked upon the highway, saw a piece of mica lying, lifted it up and looked at it for a long time; the day was no longer gloomy, so much light was caught in the stone. And suddenly as I raised my eyes from it, I realized that while I looked I had not been conscious of “object” and “subject”; in my looking the mica and “I” had been one; in my looking I had tasted unity. I looked at it again, the unity did not return. But there it burned in me as though to create. I closed my eyes, I gathered in my strength, I bound myself with my object, I raised the mica into the kingdom of the existing. And there, Lukas, I first felt: *I*; there I first was I. (Buber 1964, 140)⁶

From the perspective of Daoism, the oneness Buber experiences replicates the stories of cook Ding and the butterfly dream in the *Zhuangzi*.⁷ The two figures in these stories—cook Ding and Zhuangzi—have mastered the art of conjoining with things and no longer distinguish themselves from the objects of their attention. The need to do so comes from the idea that one thing can know another according to its own perspective without realizing said point of view is confined by its own momentariness. If we are to acquire the unity spoken of by

5 The perfected person is one of several names used by Daoism to describe the sage. Others include: spiritual person, ultimate person, and paradigmatic person. In this paper, I will use the designation of genuine person.

6 Italics in original. Buber’s *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization* was first published in German in 1913 and according to Maurice Friedman, “this book is obviously a book of transition to a new kind of thinking and must be characterized as such” (Buber 1964, ix).

7 The story of cook Ding appears in chapter 3 while that of the butterfly dream is from chapter 2.

Buber, there must be a cessation in thinking of things as an “It” whose existence is located outside the realm of “I” and instead view all “Its” as equal to the “I” of realized oneness with the primal Thou. This account differs from that of Elliot Wolfson for whom “a careful reading of this text [the mica story] lends support to our previous claim, namely, unification is complete when the I withdraws into itself, when what is over against the I is shut out, when, in short, the I closes its eyes” (Wolfson 1989, 431).

Wolfson’s description is also a response to Buber’s claim that the genuine person “bring[s] forth the totality of his being in order to withstand a single thing or event” (Buber 1964, 69). Wolfson might be correct with regard to Buber, but in Daoism the I-ness of the genuine person does not withdraw into itself but conjoins with the nothingness of the Dao. To withdraw into oneself indicates there is an identifiable self whose existence is independent of the objectified self as seen by the world. The *Zhuangzi* contains a single instance of an I-Me duality but instead of withdrawing the I-self, it is the Me-self that is discarded.⁸ Put differently, the genuine person in Daoism is selfless, mindless,⁹ and without knowledge, in that having these will corrupt his genuineness and spontaneity thereby breaking his oneness with things and the Dao. To have, as Wolfson writes, the I close its eyes does not change the fact that it is still an I; it would be better, in the view of Daoism, to transform the I into a boundless non-I.

The selfless non-I of Daoism symbolizes a freedom unhindered by the trials and tribulations humanity artificially applies to being. Oneness, therefore, is not the exclusive domain of being, nor does it signify uniformity amongst beings; on the contrary, to be one with the world is to be one with the collectivity of both being and nothingness. Nothingness is a vital component of Daoism, acting as a counter-balance to being and its associated properties.¹⁰ Buber knew this but hardly spoke of it. The one noteworthy passage on nothingness, what Buber calls counterbeing, occurs in dialogue 4 of *Daniel*:

8 See the story of Ziqi and Ziyou in chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*.

9 This term does not mean the genuine person is without self-awareness, thoughts, and the like, but that his heart-mind remains empty of any thoughts, schemes, feelings, etc., that would corrupt his harmony with the Dao. Buber, in his Ascona notes on chapter 7 of the *Daodejing*, expressed it thusly: “The existing selfhood, the individuation, also comes from Dao. Dao manifests itself in multiplicity, by virtue of an infinity of participations. Participation of things in Dao, Dao’s in things. This relationship established by Dao is violated as soon as a thing wants to go out into a self-determined, independent ‘spatial environment’. Once it sets a goal, it aims away from Dao, from the relation of Dao manifestation and participation to Dao. This affects its duration. The rest follows from this. Participation does not result in deprivation of self, but in completion of the self” (Buber 2013, 235).

10 For more, see Chai (2019).

Being and counterbeing; but they were not set in opposition to each other as the two in the drama who now appeared to be enclosed in a unity; they did not carry out their polarity as those did. Each persevered in its calling, the one in happening, the other in perceiving. And this perceiving seemed to me no less notable than that happening. For it did not behave with that well-meaning neutrality that the observer commonly brings to the observed. Rather it bore its oppositeness in itself, in some way expressed, confirmed it; and not just one part of that which had been divided in two but the whole reality over against it. (Buber 1964, 108)

When Buber speaks of being and nothingness as “bearing its oppositeness in itself”, he has in mind comments he made in his “The Teaching of the Tao” about

the unity of the masculine and the feminine elements that do not exist for themselves but only for each other, the unity of the opposites that do not exist for themselves but only through each other, the unity of the things that do not exist for themselves but only with one another. This unity is the Dao in the world. (Buber 1957, 47)

Laozi’s *Daodejing* refers to the union of feminine and masculine in just three chapters, while the *Zhuangzi* speaks of them in only four. Buber is not pointing to these designations of gender but to one of many possible English translations for Yin and Yang. Since Yin and Yang do not appear in the *Daodejing*, Buber must be referring to Yin and Yang as found in the *Zhuangzi*. Here are a few pertinent examples:

In stillness, he [the genuine person] and the Yin share a single virtue; in motion, he and the Yang share a single flow. (Watson 2013, 120)

At that time the Yin and Yang were harmonious and still; ghosts and spirits worked no mischief; the four seasons kept to their proper order; the ten thousand things knew no injury; and living creatures were free from premature death. (Watson 2013, 123)

In the same way, heaven and earth are forms that are large, the Yin and Yang are breaths that are large, and the Dao is the generality that embraces them. (Watson 2013, 224)

The genuine person abides by the regulatory laws of nature and does not question the results they bring. A few pages after the above-quoted passage from “The Teaching of the Tao”, Buber rephrases what he says about the perfected person as follows:

“[He] reconciles and brings into accord the two primal elements of nature, the positive and the negative, Yang and Yin, which the primal unity of being tore asunder” (Buber 1957, 49). Not only this but “the perfected man is self-enclosed, secure, united out of Dao, unifying the world, a creator, ‘God’s companion’: the companion of all creating eternity” (ibid., 50). It is language such as this that has caused non-specialists of Chinese philosophy to misconstrue Daoism. Phil Huston is a case in point: “Since the unity of the world only exists for the perfected person, it is he or she who brings to life the Dao that is latent in them” (Huston 2007, 85). The oneness of the cosmos exists regardless of whether or not the genuine person exists in the world. Indeed, the genuine person in Daoism tries their utmost to remove any trace of their presence which could be taken by others as signifying “the path” to harmonizing with the Dao. Additionally, it is not accurate for Huston to describe the genuine person as one who “brings to life the Dao that is latent in them” because the Dao is innate to all things, events, transformations, and so forth. There is, therefore, nothing to “bring to life”, since the Dao lacks life and so cannot die; it exists without having a surplus or deficit and is immeasurable in time and space. The Dao is simply the source of all possibilities regardless of whether or not they are actualized.

It is this cosmological unity that the genuine person embraces and teaches the world. This teaching, however, does not take the form of linear discourse wherein others are instructed how and when to act; instead, the genuine person employs the teaching of no-words¹¹ such that it “goes forth as the shadow from the substance, as the echo responds to the sound”.¹² Put differently, the genuine person in Daoism teaches others by letting them teach themselves, by letting them discover what it means to be a living being whose fate is not self-determined but is intertwined with all other things as bestowed to them by the Dao. Given this, any discourse that espouses the pedagogical power of reason or ritual abandons the Dao and instils in humanity an erroneous scepticism of the Dao and its operative ways. Unity of knowledge thus lies with the unknowable just as the oneness of being traces its roots to nothingness. To speak of the primal Thou, one must overcome the space separating each “I” from all others so as to stand in the space of the in-between and gaze upon the eternal Thou. For Buber (and Daoism), the easiest way to accomplish this is to teach others *via* the parable.

The parable, Buber argues, is what brings genuine dialogue into the world:

The central man brings to the teaching no new element, rather he fulfils it; he raises it out of the unrecognized into the recognized and out of the

11 See *Daodejing*, chapter 43.

12 See *Zhuangzi*, chapter 11.

conditioned into the unconditioned ... As soon as the unity becomes teaching out of the ground and goal of a separated man, submerged in wordless wonder, as soon as the word stirs in this man in the hour of stillness, before the break of day, where there is yet no Thou other than the I, and the lonely talk in the dark traverses the abyss across and back the unity is already touched by parable ... That he [Zhuangzi] composed its parable is not to be understood as if he had “explained” it through things or “applied” it to things. Rather, the parable bears the unity of the teaching into all the world so that, as it before enclosed it in itself, the All now appears full of it, and no thing is so insignificant that the teaching refuses to fill it. (Buber 1957, 39–43)

We will have more to say about the parable in section four below. In the meantime, let us conclude our examination of the genuine person by turning to his knowledge. Having described the Dao and quoted extensively from the *Daodejing*, it is only in the five pages comprising section 7 of “The Teaching of the Tao” that Buber addresses the unknowable. A few pages earlier, in section 6, he states

the unknowableness of the Dao cannot be understood as one speaks of the unknowableness of some principle of a religious or philosophical explanation of the world, in order to say nevertheless something further about it. Even what the word “Dao” expresses does not express the unknowable. (Buber 1957, 46)¹³

Bearing this in mind, Buber connects the unknowable to the parable through the unity of the genuine person as it is “not in the dialectic of subject and object, but only in the unity with the all is knowledge possible” (ibid., 52). The basis for this claim is Zhuangzi’s statement that “there must first be a true man before there can be true knowledge” (Watson 2013, 42).

Unity with the all is another way of saying harmony with the Dao. That the genuine person can do so is not on account of his taking elixirs or being put into a trance by a shaman; rather, it is as the *Zhuangzi* states: “Understanding that rests in what it does not understand is the finest” (ibid., 14). That the genuine person is able to do this is because he follows the teachings of the masters of antiquity:

The men of ancient times who practiced the Dao employed tranquility to cultivate knowledge. Knowledge lived in them, yet they did nothing for its sake. So they may be said to have employed knowledge to cultivate

13 Buber’s second sentence is referring to chapter 1 of the *Daodejing*.

tranquility. Knowledge and tranquility took turns cultivating each other, and harmony and order emerged from the inborn nature ... Although men had knowledge, they did not use it. This was called the perfect unity. (ibid., 122–23)

Guarding their oneness with the Dao against sources of disturbance, the genuine person does not disturb their knowledge or grow weary of its presence within. To have knowledge but not employ it when encountering things is to let things stand in the clearing of their own being, a being they neither question nor try to alter. Buber found this idea particularly attractive, writing:

This knowledge is not knowing but being. Because it possesses things in its unity, it never stands over against them; and when it regards them, it regards them from the inside out, each thing from itself outward; but not from its appearance, rather from the essence of this thing, from the unity of this thing that it possesses in its own unity. This knowledge is each thing that it regards, and thus it lifts each thing that it regards out of appearance into being. (Buber 1957, 52)

The Daoist belief in cosmic holism and its unknowable source not only extends to its views of language, hence its adoption of the parable, but to the actions of things as well. To act according to what is unknowable is to act without preconceptions or schemes; it is an acting that is both natural to one's being and that of others. When describing the genuine person, Daoism calls their behaviour non-deliberate action (*wuwei*). For Buber, “as the true knowledge, seen from the standpoint of human speech, is called by Laozi ‘not-knowing’ ... the action of the perfected man, is called by him ‘non-action’” (Buber 1957, 53–54). When it comes to the interhuman, Daoist *wuwei* is recast in the language of the I-Thou as the “in-between”. Just as *wuwei* allows things to come together in a climate of authentic being—the in-between—we shall now analyse how it serves as a sphere within which people authentically encounter one another.

Wuwei and the In-Between

In “The Teaching of the Tao”, Buber describes *wuwei* as having these traits: it is an effecting of the whole being, it is an effecting out of gathered unity, and it stands in harmony with the nature and destiny of all things (Buber 1957, 54). During his 1928 lecture “China and Us”, delivered at the China Institute in Frankfurt, Germany, Buber had this to say about *wuwei*: “It is, I believe, in the commencing

knowledge of this action without doing, action through non-action, of this powerfulness of existence, that we can have contact with the great wisdom of China” (ibid., 125). Clearly, *wuwei* is seen by Buber as something that amounts to more than the specialized conduct of the genuine person. Indeed, according to Irene Eber, Buber does not “relate non-acting to either cognition or a special person; anyone can practice it, he implied, as long as the person realizes that short term success in the historic here and now is illusory” (Eber 1994, 456). Eric Nelson argues that *wuwei* for Buber “could reorient the West ... by indicating an alternative vision to the restless activism and consumption of modern technological civilization” (Nelson 2017, 202). Regardless, any perceived success during a *wuwei* encounter is wholly illusory because the dynamics between both parties are themselves inconstant and fleeting. The genuine person in Daoism, however, avoids the dangers of the relationship between himself and his conversational partner by dwelling in the nothingness sustaining the Dao.

Buber, as we saw above, renders Daoist nothingness as counterbeing but its function is different from his concept of the in-between. In part two of *I and Thou*, Buber argues that communal life needs to integrate the “It” into the I-Thou otherwise its isolation will lead to the demise of the collective. Without the in-between to facilitate interhuman dialogue, a genuine encounter such as what stems from two people coming together in *wuwei* will lack the means to see being and nothingness mutually nourish one another. If, as Buber says, “I require a You [Thou] to become; becoming I, I say You [Thou]. All actual life is encounter” (Buber 1970, 62), then the man of I-It is really the anti-*wuwei* man; he is the self-willed man who has no trust but wants to make things happen (Friedman 1976, 419). Maurice Friedman, who coined the phrase “anti-*wuwei* man”, goes on to say:

The anti-*wuwei* man has no grand will, only a self-will which passes off as a real will. The unbelieving core in the self-willed man can perceive nothing but unbelief and self-will, establishing a purpose, and devising means, the means here and the end there. When in thought he turns to himself, he knows this. So he spends most of his time turning his thoughts away from himself. (Friedman 1976, 419–20)

Buber does not speak of the anti-*wuwei* man; rather, it is the “capricious man [who] does not believe and encounter. He does not know association; he only knows the feverish world out there and his feverish desire to use it” (Buber 1970, 110). Regardless of what we call him, such an individual is the complete opposite to the genuine person:

The sage embraces all heaven and earth, and his bounty extends to the whole world, yet no one knows who he is or what family he belongs to. For this reason, in life he holds no titles, in death he receives no posthumous names. Realities do not gather about him, names do not stick to him—this is what is called the great man. (Watson 2013, 208)

In his selflessness, the genuine person in Daoism instantiates openness in others by redirecting the focus of their thinking away from the particularity of their being towards the oneness of the world. To take the world as a multiplicity of beings conjoined in cosmological unity is to regard the space of betweenness dividing them not as a chasm of the unknown, but as the fertile territory of becoming. Partaking in the becoming of another's being has its ontological value, but in the context of interhuman philosophy, the freeing of the word is more valuable in that one who is free in thought will concurrently enjoy a freedom of being. *Wuwei* does not produce said freedom, but instead signifies it. Given the natural world is inherently in a state of *wuwei*, anyone who mirrors its equanimous harmony will reap the benefits of oneness with the Dao: spiritual freedom. Thus, the receptive nature of *wuwei* clarifies the mind and spirit alike while strengthening the body and its essence and breath. Laozi notes how “the teaching that is not expressed in words, the advantage that is had by acting without conscious purpose, rare is it that anyone under heaven ever reaches them” (Lynn 1999, 137), while Zhuangzi argues “if the gentleman finds he has no other choice than to direct and look after the world, then the best course for him is inaction [*wuwei*]. As long as there is inaction, he may rest in the true form of his nature and fate” (Watson 2013, 75). In a similar fashion, Buber notes in “The Teaching of the Tao” that “[*wuwei*] is an effecting of the whole being. To interfere with the life of things means to harm both them and oneself. But to rest means to effect, to purify one's own soul means to purify the world, to collect oneself means to be helpful, to surrender oneself to Dao means to renew creation” (Buber 1957, 54).

Although Buber's “surrender oneself to Dao” in order to “renew creation” belongs more to the religious aspect of Daoism than the philosophical views put forward by Laozi and Zhuangzi, Buber is correct to highlight the bidirectionality of *wuwei*. We see the influence of this understanding on his concept of the in-between, which the 1951 essay “Distance and Relation” describes thusly:

Genuine conversation, and therefore every actual fulfillment of relation between men, means acceptance of otherness. When two men inform one another of the basically different views about an object, each aiming to convince the other of the rightness of his own way of looking at the

matter ... the desire to influence the other then does not mean the effort to change the other, to inject one's own "rightness" into him; but it means the effort to let that which is recognized as right, as just, as true ... take seed and grow in the form suited to individuation. (Buber 1965, 69)

Suspending words in the in-between reconnects them with their root in the unsayable by forcing them to shrug-off their human conferred ornamentation. In the realm of the in-between, classifying things via attributes belonging to the I-It is no longer possible since the in-between nullifies all designations outside of its own betweenness. Said differently, "the interhuman opens out what otherwise remains unopened" (ibid., 86). Should the genuine person leave the unopened as such, its presence in the world will go unnoticed by all who are not attuned to it. This is not to say the closedness of the in-between vanishes whenever it is overlooked by humanity; rather, humanity's attunement to the in-between weakens to such an extent that it is not even thought of. We thus lose the ability to think of the primal Thou whose oneness unites us in its togetherness of being and nothingness. Knowing increasingly less about what we are unable to utter, we take the words of the I-It as the extant of the knowable; however, we run into a problem which the *Zhuangzi* poetically expresses as:

We can use words to talk about the coarseness of things, and we can use our minds to visualize the fineness of things. But what words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing—this has nothing to do with coarseness or fineness. (Watson 2013, 129)

Elliot Wolfson characterizes the in-between as "double-faced" since it is ontologically prior to all relations while also being posterior to the particular events of relation (Wolfson 1989, 433), and he derives this idea from Buber's essay "Distance and Relation" which states:

For the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men, that is, pre-eminently in the mutuality of the making present—in the making present of another self and in the knowledge that one is made present in his own self by the other—together with the mutuality of acceptance, of affirmation and confirmation. (Buber 1965, 71)

Referring to Buber's 1957 essay "Elements of the Interhuman", Martin Freidman explains "making present" as "to imagine quite concretely what another person is

wishing, feeling, perceiving, and thinking ... [it is] a bold swinging into the other which demands the intensest action of one's being to imagine the particular real person in all her wholeness, unity, and uniqueness" (Friedman 1999, 408). Recalling our earlier remarks on Buber's renunciation of mysticism, it must be said that he continued to write about it in the 1929 essay "Dialogue" and in "What is Man?" from 1938. In the latter essay, Buber lays the groundwork for his concept of "making present" by connecting it to the mystery of being:

In an essential relation, on the other hand, the barriers of individual being are in fact breached and a new phenomenon appears which can appear only in this way: one life open to another—not steadily, but so to speak attaining its extreme reality only from point to point, yet also able to acquire a form in the continuity of life; the other becomes present not merely in the imagination or feeling, but in the depths of one's substance, so that one experiences the mystery of the other being in the mystery of one's own. (Buber 2002, 201–02)

An essential relation is thus one whereby genuine dialogue rises to the fore and each party turns towards the being of the other as if it were their own. Turning to the being of the other is to become open to oneself, to rediscover oneself as the Thou or non-self of Daoism. Relatability between non-selves is hence the crux of interhuman philosophy, as it is the realm of becoming whose possibilities can only blossom in the state of passive receptivity that is *wuwei*. If *wuwei* is the milieu wherein genuine dialogue occurs, the question we must ask is not what *wuwei* entails but why genuine dialogue is a turning to the (non-) being of Thou? Before answering this question, a few final observations on Buber's use of *wuwei* are in order.

In *I and Thou* Buber asserts that *wuwei* is the action of a person who is whole because "nothing particular, nothing partial is at work in [the *wuwei*] man and thus nothing of him intrudes into the world" (Buber 1970, 125). Both Laozi and Zhuangzi describe the genuine person as one who leaves no trace in the world, reflects the world without retaining anything, speaks without talking, and so forth. What does this mean? The best way to explain it is via the analogy of the tree. In the *Zhuangzi*, the tree appears in twenty-one of its chapters,¹⁴ two instances of which are the following:

Carpenter Shi went to Qi and when he got to Crooked Shaft, he saw a serrate oak standing by the village shrine. It was broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around, towering

14 The tree also appears in two chapters of the *Daodejing*.

above the hills ... When Mr. Shi was returning, the altar-oak appeared to him in a dream, and said, "What other tree will you compare with me? ... How is it that you a useless man know all this about me a useless tree?" (Watson 2013, 30)

Zhuangzi was walking in the mountains when he saw a huge tree, its branches and leaves thick and lush. A woodcutter paused by its side but made no move to cut it down. When Zhuangzi asked the reason, he replied, "There's nothing it could be used for!" Zhuangzi said, "Because of its worthlessness, this tree is able to live out the years heaven gave it." (ibid., 156)

Not intruding into the world as the tree stands free in its selflessness, the person of *wuwei* relinquishes their calculating mind to blend in natural harmony with the Dao. In this state of "mindlessness" the genuine person has nothing with which to intrude upon others, hence things are encountered as if they were but one branch of the Dao intertwining with another. Thus, in their selfless and traceless existence, the genuine person appears as a mirage-like figure, neither downplaying nor embellishing the state of things but reflecting them as they are. This being the case, humanity turns to the genuine person when words and actions disrupt the equilibrium of the world. For Buber, this person signifies the branchness of the branch, the treeness of the tree, and does so due to their mastery of *wuwei*.

In dialogue 4 of *Daniel*, Buber offers the following insight: "Look at the ground, at the shadows of the trees as they stretch themselves over our path. Have you ever seen in the upper world of the trees a branch so outlined, so clear, so abstract as here? Is that not the branchness of the branch?" (Buber 1964, 10). In section 1 of *I and Thou* we read: "The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently ... what I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself" (Buber 1970, 57–59). Finally, in discussing chapter 1 of the *Daodejing* during his stay in Ascona, Buber says: "Is the tree a complex of vibrations? No, this tree is something in itself. But only insofar as it is something for me. Both are created for each other" (Buber 2013, 228). Interhuman philosophy resembles these portrayals of the tree; standing before it as we do, the tree in its being teaches humanity about our own standing in the world. This being to being standing translates into a mutual becoming, whereby the I-ness of the human self and that of the tree coalesce into primal oneness. In this way, the ontic differences between human and tree give way to the ontological unity of existence wherein being and nothingness stand alongside one another and are realized in the form of authentic experience.

Genuine Dialogue as Turning to Being

As the connection between Buber's interhuman philosophy and Daoism comes into focus, the remaining pages of this paper will be devoted to elucidating the nature of genuine dialogue and how it aids our turning to being. In his exegetical study of Buber's translation of the *Zhuangzi*, Jonathan Herman observes the following traits of Buber's language of the parable: first, Laozi's words are concealed in silent images but Zhuangzi's belong to the existential multiplicities of oneness; second, unlike the elemental oneness of Laozi, Zhuangzi's is attainable, belonging to the life of things as well as their fulfillment in the world; third, Zhuangzi's use of parable allows those who grasp it to realize their actuality and most profound state of being human.¹⁵ If we broaden the context of Herman's remarks to include all of Buber's writings, their relevancy to the latter's dialogical thought of unity through affinity of difference remains undiminished. In his "Elements of the Interhuman" Buber proclaims:

I affirm the person I struggle with: I struggle with him as his partner, I confirm him as creature and as creation, I confirm him who is opposed to me as him who is over against me. It is true that it now depends on the other whether genuine dialogue, mutuality in speech arises between us. But if I thus give to the other who confronts me his legitimate standing as a man with whom I am ready to enter into dialogue, then I may trust him and suppose him to be also ready to deal with me as his partner. (Buber 1965, 79–80)

In the introduction to Buber's *Between Man and Man*, Maurice Friedman says something to the same effect:

Dialogue is not merely the interchange of words—genuine dialogue can take place in silence, whereas much conversation is really monologue. It is, rather, the response of one's whole being to the otherness of the other, that otherness that is comprehended only when I open myself to him in the present and in the concrete situation and respond to his need even when he himself is not aware that he is addressing me. (Buber 2002, xvi)

What is interesting about this turning to being is that it can occur in either dialogue or silence. The wordless teaching of Daoism finds equivalency in Buber's notion that whenever another person makes themselves knowable, their openness of being is accepted in its particularness while simultaneously acknowledging its

¹⁵ See Herman (1996, 114, 115, 116).

inclusion in the unity of the primal Thou. As long as both participants in genuine dialogue do not think in terms of outer and inner, the realm of the interhuman is preserved; as long as both participants in genuine dialogue turn towards the (non-)being of the primal Thou, the oneness of their existence remains authentic. In other words, turning to the being of the other involves nothing less than confirming said being as a mutual partner. Buber writes:

The chief presupposition for the rise of genuine dialogue is that each should regard his partner as the very one he is. I become aware of him ... I accept whom I thus see, so that in full earnestness I can direct what I say to him as the person he is. (Buber 1965, 79)

In Daoism, recognition of this kind assumes an onto-cosmological air when Zhuangzi claims that “heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me” (Watson 2013, 13).

Daoism’s cosmological outlook bears upon the style of its teaching which is itself informed by its views on the nature of language. We saw an example of this in section 3 above when quoting from chapter 17 of the *Zhuangzi*. In terms of genuine dialogue and the turning to being, there is an often overlooked yet significant component in the form of silence. Buber writes: “It is not necessary for all who are joined in a genuine dialogue actually to speak; those who keep silent can on occasion be especially important” (Buber 1965, 87). The *Zhuangzi* assigns silence a more profound role, declaring it to be “the absence of words which shares the same principle with things themselves” (Watson 2013, 226). An absence of words is not indicative of ignorance, quite the opposite—silence is the genuine way of the Dao, the praxis of the genuine person, and the sphere in which an authentic turning to being occurs. Silence abrogates the artificial differences imposed on things by letting them stand free in the in-between of I and Thou (self and non-self in Daoism). The absence of words, therefore, is the generative emptiness of the Dao in which words take shelter from challenges to their meaning that inevitably arises once they are attached to things.

What is needed for the preservation of genuine dialogue is the receptivity of *wuwei*. As genuine dialogue is rooted in the openness of truthfulness and not in words that are selfish or false, said truth, according to Buber in “Elements of the Interhuman”, necessitates people “communicate themselves to one another as what they are ... [and depends] on his letting no seeming creep in between himself and the other ... granting to the man to whom he communicates himself a share in his being” (Buber 1965, 77). In other words, genuine dialogue is akin to an “abiding of difference” (Wolfson 1989, 442). Abiding in the betweenness of things

is, therefore, to regard their otherness as an opportunity to further one's awareness to the reality of the interhuman as a "partnership in a living event".¹⁶ However, we must be weary of arbitrarily acknowledging differences in times where none exist. This is more challenging than it sounds when the medium of delimitation is language. Zhuangzi thus offers the following advice: "Be broad and expansive like the endlessness of the four directions ... Embrace the ten thousand things universally ... When the ten thousand things are unified and equal, then which is short and which is long?" (Watson 2013, 132) Rather than turning inwardly or outwardly to things, it would be better to let them flourish in the unity of the primal Thou or the Dao.

An added benefit of turning to things via oneness instead of said things directly is that it protects us from spiritual harm should our encounter fail to transcend the level of physical experience. To "communicate oneself as one is" is not a fancy way for Buber to implore people to be more sincere with their words in that words can, paradoxically, arise from an insincere heart. The genuine conversational encounter involves putting the subjective I-self into temporary stasis to create a path for the primal Thou-self (the non-self of the Dao) to shine forth. Speaking with one's spirit instead of the mind is thus an open declaration of one's participation in the collective being of the world. In Daoism, to be open to being is to inoculate oneself against the intoxicating power of words and seek solace in the creative potentiality of the Dao.

Taking *wuwei* as his model, the genuine person clings to the ungrounded word and observes the world in all its spontaneous unfolding. Any ensuing dialogue will employ words in a wholly different manner from those of common conversation. Such being the case, turning to the being of one's conversational partner whilst in a state of *wuwei* is to look beyond the physicality of the It-self as a thing whose differences are cast by others as a challenge to one's own humanity. Genuine dialogue thus transcends the limitations of words by bringing to life the silence from which they arise and recede. Being informed by the abiding nature of the Dao or primal Thou is not a solitary path however. People become spiritually attenuated in genuine dialogue, both to themselves and their conversational partner, as well as to the ultimacy of the eternally ungrounded. Buber sums it up perfectly in comments he made on chapter 29 of the *Daodejing*: "Community is not the sum of individual individuals who complement each other, but something self-acting, spiritual, like everything really living that cannot be created. If it exists, it cannot be usurped by anyone, it resists, it is unassailable as long as it is community" (Buber 2013, 259).

16 This expression is from Buber (1965, 74).

Conclusion

With people who genuinely stand before being, expressing themselves without the semblance of selfish motives or false pretences, the resultant dialogue “brings out an aspect of the human person which would otherwise remain dormant” (Moore 1996, 102). In his 1953 essay “Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace”, Buber explains why, in his view, modern society has been unable to bring such dormancy to life:

[T]he crisis of speech is bound up with this loss of trust in the closest possible fashion, for I can only speak to someone in the true sense of the term if I expect him to accept my word as genuine ... This incapacity for unreserved intercourse with the other points to an innermost sickness of the sense of existence. One symptom of this sickness, and the most acute of all, is the one from which I have begun, that a genuine word cannot arise between the camps. (Buber 1957, 234–38)

Seven decades later, this sickness has not only failed to abate, it has mutated into something far more dangerous. What Buber saw in Daoism was not a means to escape the ills of the world but a toolkit of ideas that could be used to reconfigure modern society’s approach to thinking about being, the importance of drawing ourselves together in unity, and relearning the joy to be had in silent conversation. To continue down the road of radical individualism, mechanical thinking without addressing the flourishing of spirit, to be driven by the desires of being, all the while ignoring the presence of nothingness (counterbeing), unless humanity can reverse these actions genuine dialogue will amount to nothing more than a phantom. Without genuine dialogue to illuminate us, the wonderment of the world will remain a mystery. Buber’s turn to Daoism is precisely the kind of edification modern society needs to lead us out of the fog of disillusionment we find ourselves in, and into the clearing of mutual nourishment that is authentic life.

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Gottlob Frege and Gongsun Long in Dialogue: An Exploration of Two Classical Paradoxes from the East and West

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Abstract

This work addresses the critical discussion featured in the contemporary literature about two well-known paradoxes belonging to different philosophical traditions, namely Frege's puzzling claim that "the concept *horse* is not a concept" and Gongsun Long's "white horse is not horse". We first present the source of Frege's paradox and its different interpretations, which span from plain rejection to critical analysis, to conclude with a more general view of the role of philosophy as a fight against the misunderstandings that come from the different uses of language (a point later developed by the "second" Wittgenstein). We then provide an overview of the ongoing discussions related to the *Bai Ma Lun* paradox, and we show that its major interpretations include—as in the case of Frege's paradox—dismissive accounts that regard it as either useless or wrong, as well as attempts to interpret and repair the argument. Resting on our reading of Frege's paradox as an example of the inescapability of language misunderstandings, we advance a similar line of interpretation for the paradox in the *Bai Ma Lun*: both the paradoxes, we suggest, can be regarded as different manifestations of similar concerns about language, and specifically about the difficulty of referring to concepts *via* language.

Keywords: concepts, elucidations, Gottlob Frege, Gongsun Long, language games, names, paradoxes, philosophy of logic, Ludwig Wittgenstein

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Gottlob Frege in Gongsun Long v dialogu: raziskovanje dveh klasičnih paradoksov z Vzhoda in Zahoda

Izvleček

To delo obravnava kritično razpravo, ki se v sodobni literaturi pojavlja o dveh znanih paradokseh, ki pripadata različnim filozofskim tradicijam, in sicer o Fregejevi uganki, da »pojem konj ni pojem«, in o Gongsun Longovi ideji »beli konj ni konj«. Najprej predstavljamo vir Fregejevega paradoksa in njegove različne razlage, ki segajo od preproste zavrnitve do kritične analize, na koncu pa predstavljamo splošnejši pogled na vlogo filozofije kot boja proti nesporazumom, ki izhajajo iz različnih rab jezika (to stališče je kasneje razvil »drugi« Wittgenstein). Nato podajamo pregled tekočih razprav, povezanih s paradoksom *Bai Ma Lun*, in pokažemo, da njegove glavne razlage vključujejo – tako kot v primeru Fregejevega paradoksa – zavračajoče razlage, ki ga imajo za neuporabnega ali napačnega, pa tudi poskuse razlage in popravila argumenta. Na podlagi našega branja Fregejevega paradoksa kot primera neizogibnosti jezikovnih nesporazumov predlagamo podobno razlago paradoksa v *Bai Ma Lun*: oba paradoksa lahko obravnavamo kot različni manifestaciji podobnih skrbi glede jezika, zlasti glede težav pri sklicevanju na pojme preko jezika.

Ključne besede: koncepti, razlage, Gottlob Frege, Gongsun Long, jezikovne igre, imena, paradoksi, filozofija logike, Ludwig Wittgenstein

Introduction

Gottlob Frege's paradox of the concept *horse* and Gongsun Long's paradox of the white horse are widely debated topics in contemporary Western analytic philosophy and Chinese philosophy, respectively. As philosophers of language working in the Western tradition, we are struck by the similarity of the critical discussions concerning the two paradoxes: while the temporal distance separating Frege and Gongsun Long makes the comparison difficult, this work intends to identify some common threads running through their interpreters' analysis. Critical reflection on such common threads may enhance our understanding of the two paradoxes, and perhaps also suggest some potential theoretical connections between their authors.

Sinology is not our field of expertise, and we surely cannot account for the complexity of the exegetical work required by texts such as Gongsun Long's, which constitute the bulk of the cultural iceberg of Chinese intellectual studies concerning logic and language. Thus, our approach to this matter qualifies as a theoretical reflection that attempts to include some of the contributions of both contemporary Western and Chinese philosophy. We are aware of the methodological limitations of our attempt, as we acknowledge the potential dangers in disentangling

translation-related aspects (better addressed *via* philological and historical analysis) from philosophical theorizing. Yet, we believe that the remarks on the limits of language put forward by the inventor of mathematical logic may suggest one untried interpretative stance for the analysis of the white horse paradox. In fact, the specific distinctions in the profound analysis of language first introduced by Frege, and later taken up by Wittgenstein, constitute one of the most significant contributions to Western thought, and tend to be shared ground among most contemporary scholars across the East and West.

The problems here discussed are to be regarded as related to the global questions in the philosophy of logic as defined by Hu and Hu (2022, 84), that is, to questions about propositions, paradoxes, reference, and the meaning of names, among others, that are overlapping concerns in the philosophy of language and ontology. In fact, what connects the two paradoxes is not, or not only, the reference to the concept *horse* (which is just a curious coincidence), but—we will suggest—the problem of distinguishing different ways in which we refer to concepts and objects by means of linguistic expressions. A survey of the interpretations of Frege’s and Gongsun Long’s paradoxical claims is carried out in parts I and II, respectively, while in part III we offer some general conclusions and a sketch of a possible direction for future research.

PART I

Gottlob Frege and the Paradox of the Concept Horse

“The Concept Horse is Not a Concept”: Frege on Concept and Object

The German philosopher Friedrich Ludwig Gottlob Frege is well known not only for the new foundation of mathematical logic that he set out with the publication of *Begriffsschrift* (*Conceptual Notation*) in 1879, but also for his analysis of language developed while building his logical formalism. Two main distinctions are among his main tenets:

- (1) Always distinguish between the linguistic expressions and their contents—a distinction not consistently kept in place by his contemporary mathematicians.
- (2) Always distinguish between concepts and objects, as well as between expressions for concepts (*Begriffswörter* or, currently, predicates or relations) and expressions for objects (*Eigennamen* or, singular terms).

In the introduction to his *Foundations of Arithmetic*, Frege takes the second distinction as one of the most important tenets in his philosophy. The distinction between concept and object becomes the central topic in a later essay, *Über Begriff und Gegenstand* (*On Concept and Object*), published in 1892, where Frege faces a great challenge in explaining this difference due to a peculiar characteristic of Indo-European languages, that is, the use of the definite article “the” (cf. Diessel 2006). In fact, to refer to objects we use singular terms, such as proper names and definite descriptions. The latter are expressions constituted by a description always preceded by a definite article, such as “*the* current monarch of England”, and by which we refer to individual objects (in this case, the object who is the monarch of England at this time, i.e., King Charles III). Indeed, the analysis of the definite article is fundamental to Frege’s logical theory (Frege 2013 § 11), and he develops an *ad hoc* formalism known in logic as “the iota operator”, after Russell’s peculiar interpretation of this formalization. In logic, “ $\iota x Fx$ ” (or “the $x Fx$ ”) means “the unique individual object x that has the property described by the predicate F ”.

Bruno Kerry, a colleague in Jena, Germany, objects to Frege that his distinction between concept and object is just relative to grammatical positions. Following the relevant role given by Frege to the definite article, the expression “the concept *horse*” should designate an object and not a concept. Kerry’s example is as follows:

(1) “The concept *horse* is a concept easily attained.”

We may compare it with sentences like

(2) Bucephalus is a horse.

In (1), the expression “the concept *horse*” refers to an object, while in (2) the expression “a horse” refers to a concept. Therefore, in so far as the same thing is considered now as an object and now as a concept, the distinction between concept and object simply depends on and is relative to the subject/predicate grammatical positions. To this criticism, Frege replies with a counterintuitive answer:

[...] the three words “the concept horse” do designate an object but on that very account they do not designate a concept as I am using the word. This is in full accord with the criterion I gave that the singular definite article always indicates an object, whereas the indefinite article accompanies a concept word. (Frege 1997, 184)¹

1 We will use the translation by Michael Beaney (1997), which is one of the most comprehensive

And on the following page he adds:

It must indeed be recognized that here we are confronted by an awkwardness of language, which I admit cannot be avoided, if we say that the concept *horse* is not a concept, whereas e.g. the city of Berlin is a city, and the volcano Vesuvius is a volcano. (ibid., 185)

Frege's claim is therefore the following counterintuitive assertion:

(3) The concept *horse* is not a concept

This awkwardness is partly due to the fact that Frege considers “concept” as a primitive term, and “One cannot require that everything be defined, any more than one can require that a chemist decompose every substance. What is simple cannot be decomposed, and what is logically simple cannot have a proper definition” (Frege 1997, 182). In analogy with geometric primitives (“point”, “line,” and “plane”), likewise the term “concept”—coined for something that is *logically* simple—cannot be properly defined, but only offered with what Frege calls “elucidations” or “hints”.

Frege also states that we should consider concepts as “*objects of a special kind*”, and that “to do justice at once to the distinction and to the similarity, we might perhaps say: an object falls under a first-level concept; a concept falls within a second-level concept. The distinction of concept and object thus still holds, with all its sharpness.” (ibid., 89) He offers mathematical examples following his fundamental idea—later taken up by Wittgenstein (1976, XXVI, 262) as one of Frege's most important tenets—that an attribution of numbers is a predication about concepts.² In a late work, Frege still reminds the reader that the words *the concept F* “do not really designate a concept (in our sense), even though the linguistic form makes it look as if they do” (Frege 2013, part I, § 4, footnote 1). In his writings, Frege often comments on the defects intrinsic to language and our way of speaking about concepts. Furthermore, in a letter to Russell written in 1902 he specifies that, *logically speaking*, the expression “is a concept” should be rejected (quoted by Burge 2005, 294).

collections of Frege's works.

2 The concept of *having a certain number* is a second-level concept. The notion of a second-level concept entails a particular relation among concepts, which differs from the subsumption (or inclusion) of a concept (or class) in another concept (or class)—as when I say: “horses are four-legged animals”. In this case, every individual horse has the property of being four-legged. However, in “the horses of the Emperor are four”, apparently each individual horse does not possess the property of being four, but it is the concept *horses of the Emperor* that falls *within* the concept of *being four* or *having the number four*.

A provisional conclusion is twofold:

Communication Hints: Theories may contain logically simple elements, and what is logically simple cannot be properly defined, but only “elucidated”. At first sight, Frege’s view of “concept” as logically simple and not definable may sound counterintuitive, or perhaps vague. In introducing new theoretical terms, we may have to appeal to elucidations and analogies: concepts, as *objects of a special kind*, are analogous to functions, which always require an argument to return a value.³

While Frege intends to talk about a concept, by necessity (given the intrinsic limitations of language) he is compelled to mention an object. Therefore, by interpreting his “elucidations” in their literal sense, we miss his thought. However, in introducing the notion of concept Frege relies on a reader “who does not begrudge a pinch of salt”, and who is therefore favourably disposed to get the intentions behind his words (see Frege 1997, 192).

Mathematical Logic: For a rigorous analysis and as to avoid such apparent contradictions, we need the resources of mathematical logic. Within formal language, it is not allowed to employ a definite description for a concept. Mathematical logic was at its beginning in Frege’s time, but soon the development of the lambda calculus by the American logician Alonzo Church invented a logical formulation for expressing concepts. In addition to the iota operator employed for singular terms, Church invented the lambda operator, by which we may express concepts while preserving a sharp distinction between concepts and objects.⁴

Notwithstanding the manifold logical developments of the Fregean distinctions, some doubts still remain regarding the real import of Frege’s remarks on the concept *horse* and the lacunae of everyday language, which seems to fail in clearly expressing the distinction between concept and object.

3 Such an analogy plays a fundamental role in Frege’s logical system, where concepts are conceived in analogy with functions whose value is a truth value. Frege consistently insists on the difference between the reference of a predicate (a concept) and its extension (or course of value). On the latter distinction, see footnote 6.

4 The lambda operator for expressing concepts ($\lambda x Fx$) and the iota operator for expressing singular terms are similar. The predicate “ λx . horse (x)” is a saturated expression that stands for the concept *horse*, against Frege’s requirement of expressing concepts only via unsaturated expressions. However, the distinction between concept and object is preserved by the assumption of two primitives: “E” for entity, and “T” for truth value. Concepts are thus defined as “ $E \rightarrow T$ ”, that is, as functions that, given an entity (E) return a truth value (T). This definition can be regarded as the exact application in logic of Frege’s analogy between concepts and functions.

Interpretations of Frege's Paradox

The literature on Frege's paradoxical claim "the concept *horse* is not a concept" features three main approaches to interpretation: (i) dismissals of the paradox as a mistake, or nonsense; (ii) attempts to repair Frege's claim and justify it; (iii) critical evaluations of Frege's claim as either incoherent or the expression of an intrinsic tension within his doctrines.

(i) Dismissals of the paradox as a mistake or nonsense:

A disenchanted Bertrand Russell (1903) maintains that objects can be named, whereas concepts can be both named *and* predicated; therefore, as remarked by Tyler Burge (2005, 294), there should be nothing to worry about the expression "the concept *horse*". For Terence Parsons (1986), who takes Frege to wrongly mix informal language and formal requirements, the statement "the concept *horse* is not a concept", rather than being paradoxical, is simply false. Following Parsons, after a refined analysis Burge (2005, 21) concludes that the paradox is "deeply counterintuitive", and that "it constitutes one of Frege's most serious mistakes". Neo-Wittgensteinian scholars, like Conant (2002), would consider Frege's paradox plain nonsense. In fact, "concept" and "object" are defined in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as "formal concepts", or "pseudo concepts" (Wittgenstein 1921, § 4, 126–27), that is, as something of which we cannot speak in a proper formalism, and which in logic corresponds to a variable. Therefore, any attempt to *speak of* concepts unavoidably falls into "*nonsensical pseudo propositions*" (*ibid.*, § 4, 1272). While for Frege this particular form of nonsense plays a fundamental *elucidatory* role, it should be simply *unsayable* for Neo-Wittgensteinians.

(ii) Attempts to repair:

Michael Dummett, the British philosopher who was the first to define Frege as a philosopher of language, rejects the Fregean view of the problem as being about communication, and argues that, in the absence of a solution, the horse paradox "would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of Frege's logical doctrines" (Dummett 1981, 212). He then reformulates the problem on the basis of two Fregean principles: (a) concepts are the predicates' referents, that is, concepts are what predicates stand for, and (b) concepts are to be characterized by means of a chemical metaphor, by which we have to distinguish saturated entities from unsaturated entities: concepts are incomplete, or unsaturated entities, constituted by patterns extracted from a sentence. Thus, from sentences like

“Bucephalus is a horse.”

we may derive expressions like

“... is a horse”

which are incomplete and can be *saturated* by referential singular terms (such as, “Bucephalus”). Since the expression “the concept *horse*” should grammatically refer to an object, Dummett proposes reformulating the expression as follows:

“what ... ‘is a horse’ stands for.”

We may then obtain general specifications of the kind: “a horse is what ... ‘is a horse’ stands for.”

A more complex defence of Frege’s standpoint is given by Textor (2010a): by taking Dummett’s distinction between *complete* (or “saturated”) and *incomplete* (or “unsaturated”) expressions, Textor identifies the source of the concept paradox in Frege’s ‘mirroring principle,’ according to which both thoughts and their corresponding statements can always be decomposed into saturated and unsaturated parts. If language is the “bridge to thought and reference” (ibid., 135), we may go from words (perceivable objects) to (non-perceivable) concepts belonging to the sphere of thought. Again, if sentences mirror the thought, an incomplete predicate like “horse” is expected to mirror the incompleteness of what we refer to when we use the concept-word. Hence, a concept cannot be the referent of a singular term.

(iii) *Criticism of Frege’s paradox as a symptom of unsolved tensions:*

Crispin Wright (1998) gives one of the most complex criticisms of Frege’s view, concluding that he “did not deserve” his pinch of salt. Wright identifies Frege’s fundamental mistake in his (incorrect) application of the notion of reference to predicates.⁵ Likewise, Wright rejects Dummett’s solution, since the expressions “the concept *horse*” and “... is a horse” perform different grammatical roles, and so cannot be substituted *salva congruitate*. Eventually, Wright asks how exactly Frege is to communicate his semantic proposals about predicates. To appropriately address the question, we would need a “decent semantic theory” (Wright 1998, §III), yet Frege’s “elucidations”—by his own admission—fail to provide any proper definition. Moreover, they seem to derive from Frege’s mistaken application (without further elaboration) of the sense/reference distinction to both proper names and predicates. Against this, Wright reminds the reader that singular terms

5 This standard criticism is also endorsed by Donald Davidson (2004), for whom Frege paved the way to Tarski in accounting for the logical distinction between singular terms and predicates, but made the mistake of considering concepts as the referents of predicates. The true result of Frege’s discussion on the concept *horse* should be expressed in a standard metalogical way as: “*F*” is true of *x* iff *Fx*.

and predicates behave differently: while we may directly speak of the reference for a singular term (an object), we indirectly refer to predicates by giving their extension, or class. Nonetheless, Wright preserves the concept/object distinction by distinguishing what can only be *referred to* (that is, objects) from what can also be *ascribed*: we ascribe a property to an object, and the ascription—not the reference—is the feature characterizing concepts/properties. Frege forgot this difference and generated a paradox that should have been avoided.

Textor (2010b, 253) replies to Wright by arguing that the paradox might be solved by taking a stance according to which “reference as what we want to speak about and reference as semantic role come apart. Concept words refer to concepts, but their semantic role is specified by assigning extensions to them”. In contrast to Parsons, Burge, and Davidson, Textor maintains that when we speak of the reference of a predicate, we are not only referring to the predicate’s semantic value (its extension), but also to the concept/function as such. He thereby gives a justification of the Fregean fundamental distinction between a concept (or function) and its extension.⁶

Taking Frege’s View on “the Concept Horse” at Face Value

We shall not reach a definite conclusion regarding the dispute over Frege’s claim that “the concept *horse* is not a concept”. Yet, we consider that Wright is correct in saying—after Frege and Russell—that singular terms and predicates behave differently, and that we may refer to predicates indirectly by giving their extension. However, we may use extensions, or classes, as the *semantic value* of predicates (a common move in contemporary semantics); still, this does not eliminate the possibility of *speaking of* concepts as such, or in modern terminology, of speaking of concepts as functions from possible worlds to extensions. Reference and semantic value follow different routes here (cf. Textor 2010a; 2010b).

What remains of Frege’s view on “elucidations”, “hints”, and even “nonsense”? Some authors, like Picardi (2008) and Weiner (2005)—against those who objected to Frege’s paradox—give a more charitable reading of his remarks: far from being a

6 There is a wide discussion about unresolved tensions in Frege’s philosophy. One possible resolution of the tensions comes from taking into account seriously the tripartite distinction among sense, reference, and extension, as Frege does with regard to predicates (Wiggins 1984). Penco (2013) suggests that the sense of a concept should be intended as the procedure attached to the function from possible worlds to extensions. For a clear rendering of the view about the three-level analysis of the Fregean framework, see Perry (2019) and Penco (2020). These developments can partially dispel the ambiguity about the distinction between the semantic value and the reference of a concept, yet they leave the main paradox untouched, while preserving its elucidatory import.

mistake, Frege's paradox is what the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* would call an instance of the "misunderstandings" derived from our difficulty in following the varieties of the grammar of language. In a pleasant yet provocative discussion, Picardi reminds us that Russell too, eventually, comes to endorse a view similar to Frege's, whereas Weiner stresses the important function of Frege's elucidations, given their explanatory power that goes beyond the limits of language:

The value in elucidation—including elucidatory nonsense—is that, like music and poetry, it expresses something that cannot be expressed explicitly: something that cannot be literally true or false (Weiner 2005, 211)

While Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* considers "nonsense" as something lying outside the scope of logic, in the "second" Wittgenstein the idea that mathematical logic will solve all the problems in philosophy is abandoned altogether. However, Wittgenstein's later philosophy can also be considered under the influence of Frege: his use of logic for the clarification of conceptual confusions is consistently accompanied by his profound awareness of the different uses of language, and of the mistakes arising from the ambiguity of natural language—an ambiguity that Frege acknowledges as ultimately unavoidable. The philosophers' struggle against language is a topic that runs continuously through Frege's early works to his last (cf. Beaney 1997, 50–51, 369). As such, Frege's attitude towards language is certainly a preview of Wittgenstein's famous warning on the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (Wittgenstein 1953, § 109).

Thus, in giving "hints", or "elucidations", Frege may be legitimately regarded as engaged in one of the many language games made possible by the variety of uses of language for communication purposes. Unlike Frege, for Wittgenstein philosophy is essentially an analysis of language that does not aim at the development of new formalisms or at proposing new forms of scientific explanation. His acknowledgement of the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language specifically points towards the difficulties that we encounter in the understanding and tracking of the language games that we are playing. Surely, when we use the terms of mathematical logic outside the system of logic, we cannot expect the clarity of the formal system. The acknowledgement of this kind of mistake is in fact one of the results of the philosophical enterprise:

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery. (ibid., § 119)

By admitting that “the concept *horse* is not a concept” is a kind of nonsense—although a useful way to introduce the reader to his formal system—Frege also indicates that “hints” are suggestions that touch the limits of the expressive power of language. Still, we are allowed to use different kinds of language games, so that what is considered a pseudo-proposition from the perspective of mathematical logic may still possess a real communicative value when used outside the system of logic. It is no accident that the term “pseudo-thoughts” is sometimes employed by Frege in his discussion of poetry, a form of linguistic expression that he greatly respects.

PART II

Gongsun Long and the “White Horse is Not Horse” Paradox

Gongsun Long’s Paradox: Short History of a Debated Classic Text

The paradoxical claim “white horse is not a horse” is presented in the *Bái Mǎ lùn* (*On the White Horse*, 白馬論), a chapter belonging to the *Gōngsūn Lóngzǐ* (公孫龍子). This short and intricate text of less than 4,000 characters from the pre-Qin period is attributed to Gōngsūn Lóng,⁷ who is regarded as one of the best representatives of the so-called School of Names (*Míngshí lùn*, 名實論). After a period in which it was regarded as an instance of court entertainment that used logical paradoxes and linguistic jokes as a form of divertissement, the GSLZ is now widely—yet not uncontroversially—considered an early contribution to classic Chinese philosophy of logic. The *Bái Mǎ lùn* (BML) is an independent unit, yet thematically related to other parts of the *corpus* and, in particular, to the *Zhǐwù lùn*, which is traditionally interpreted as focusing on “naming” and on the relationship between names and objects.⁸

The BML takes the form of a debate between two anonymous fictional characters: a persuader (P), usually identified as Gongsun Long, and an opponent (O). P provides support for the paradoxical claim that, under certain circumstances, a white

7 Following the convention, we will use “GSLZ” as an abbreviation for the *corpus*, and we will use “Gongsun Long” or, alternatively, its abbreviation “GSL” to refer to the either GSLZ’s unique author or its multiple authors.

8 Charles Angus Graham (1990) takes some of the essays in the GLSZ to be later additions. Although his view is widely accepted by Western scholars, it is still poorly received among Chinese scholars (Wang and Johnston 2020). A recent work by Thierry Lucas (2020) shows the difference in logical style between the two central chapters (*Báimǎ lùn* and *Zhǐwù lùn*) and the other chapters with a detailed analysis of binary comparisons among them (in § 4 of his paper). The analysis does not necessarily imply that the other essays in GLSZ are from a different time, but it does show that the two chapters display shared argumentative structure and logical features.

horse is not a horse, and O defends the common intuition that a white horse must indeed be a horse. The first argument of the BML is as follows:

O: “To say that ‘[a] white horse is not [a] horse,’ is that admissible?”

P: “It is admissible.”

O: “How is that possible?”

P: “‘Horse’ is what denotes shape, ‘white’ is what denotes colour. What denotes colour is not (the same as) what denotes shape. Therefore I say: “[a] white horse is not [a] horse.”⁹

The argument starts with O asking P on whether “white horse is not horse” is *logically* admissible. At a first glance, the argument seems to hinge on the separation of shape and colour: (the concept) “horse” must be applicable to horses of different colours, like a white horse, a yellow horse, or a black horse. However, a white horse, being white, excludes all horses of different colours; i.e., the concept “white horse” cannot apply to yellow horses or black horses. Since the concept “horse” needs to apply to horses of all different colours, we have to conclude that no actually existent horse can exhaust the variety of horses encompassed by the concept *horse*.

The paradox “white horse is not horse” (*Báimǎ fēi mǎ* 白馬非馬), although widely analysed, is still a source of new interpretations. Is Gongsun Long a naïve thinker who falls inadvertently into a trivial fallacy of reasoning? Is he perhaps just playing around with language and making logical tricks to amuse and amaze his readers? Or is he rather seriously engaged in the task of revealing something relevant about language, the world, and thought? As in the case of Frege’s “the concept *horse* is not a concept”, the nature of Gongsun Long’s paradox is a matter of ongoing debate.

Interpretations of Gongsun Long’s Paradox

The interpretative frameworks for GSL’s texts are typically spelled out in the theoretical terms of ontology, Platonism or nominalism, epistemology, and semantics. Within the various voices adding up to the discussion about the BML, we here identify three general methodological directions, namely, (i) plain dismissals and criticism of the argument, (ii) assimilations of the argument to Western classics, and (iii) attempts to repair the argument by means of analytic categories.

9 Translation by Johnston (2004).

(i) Argument dismissal and criticism:

For a long time, mainstream authors in the Chinese tradition looked upon Gongsun Long as a useless thinker, unworthy of being taken into serious account, or as a court jester. He was infamously regarded as a dialectician *par excellence* especially skilled in plays on language, paradoxes, and mischievous, hair-splitting arguments. Moreover, unlike the general spirit of Chinese philosophy, and from the perspective of the Confucian tradition, his teaching lacked commitment to morally oriented superior goals, and he was therefore considered a “talkative sophist” who had nothing substantial to say (cf. Suter, Indraccolo and Behr 2020, 5).

Even Zhuangzi, despite the fact that GSLZ is included in the Taoist canon, treated it with diffidence:

Rather than trying to prove by means of “horse” that “a horse” is not a “horse”, why not to prove by means of “not horse” that a “horse” is not a “horse”? (Itzutsu 1983, 362)

Itzutsu (*ibid.*, 362–63) comments on this passage by saying that, while Zhuangzi on the one hand admits that sophists like GSL may produce a right argument, on the other hand, he believes that “the conclusion which they reach thereby is devoid of real significance.” Dismissive approaches are also present to some extent in the contemporary literature. Christoph Harbsmeier finds that GSL is best described as a rather frivolous and logically unsophisticated character, although well equipped with argumentative skills and “capable of very subtle reasoning” (Harbsmeier 1989, 152–53). Following Pokora (1975),¹⁰ Harbsmeier recalls Han Feizi’s story about a certain sophist, Ni Yue, who was passing by custom house riding a white horse: unwilling to pay the tax due on a horse, Ni Yue maintained that “a white horse is not a horse”! Of course, the customs officer was not convinced. Still, according to Harbsmeier, GSL’s fierce defence of this statement rests on his ability to exploit the peculiar ambiguity of the ancient Chinese language, as in the specific statement “*Báimǎ fēi mǎ*”, that can be offered a twofold interpretation as either (a) a claim about objects (a white horse is not a horse, which is obviously untrue), or (b) about names/linguistic terms (the term “white horse” is not the term “horse”, which is trivially true).

Among the scholars who recognize the philosophical relevance of the GSLZ, some still criticize the argument as resting on a reasoning mistake. For example,

10 Pokora reports the anecdote from Huan T’an, in which a similar attempt to pass the frontier is attributed to GSL himself, concluding that “it is hard for empty words to defeat reality”. (Pokora 1975, 124)

Graham (1986) finds GSL “guilty of an elementary confusion of class membership with identity”, and Chad Hansen (1983, 161) considers the argument “*a simple and common deductive fallacy*”.

Dismissive approaches are often linked to the supposed frivolous character of useless sophism. Yet, on the basis of historical data, it has been argued by In-draccolo (2010, 8) that GSL may not have been “merely a court entertainer—an aspect which was utterly marginal in his active life—as he was primarily an expert politician and a shrewd diplomat, positively using his refined rhetorical skills in governmental practice.” Such an assessment highlights the value of GSLZ as an example of argumentative strategy, and it encourages the search for further assessments of its worth.

(ii) Assimilations of the argument to Western classics:

One of the most ancient and influential readings of the BML in the light of the Western classics is offered by Fung Yulan’s Platonic interpretation, whereby “horse” and “white horse” are treated as names referring to two distinct universals, or Ideas in a Platonic sense. By this interpretation, GSL would be ontologically committed to a two-world theory in which both concrete particulars and abstract universals exist. For Fung (1948, 87–88), to say that “A white horse is horse together with white. Horse with white is no horse”, is to distinguish between the universal “horseness” and the distinct universal “white-horseness”. Since the universal “horseness” implies no colour and it is attributed to all horses, it follows that “horseness” is not identical to “white-horseness”. The two terms (“white” and “white horse”) are intensionally and extensionally different, so only “horse” can be intended as horse as such, whereas “white horse” is horse together with white, hence it is not horse as such. The paradox dissolves, and the claim—clearly logically valid—amounts to the denial of the identity of the two universals. Fung Yulan’s Platonistic interpretation is supported, for instance, by Cheng Chung-Ying, who draws from GSL’s assumed Platonism that “given a certain logic, a language can generate an ontology which differs from the normally presupposed or assumed ontology of the language” (Cheng 1983, 346). Although in reference to Kant and to the analytic philosophy of language, Zhou Changzhong (1997) follows Fung (1948) in using the intension/extension distinction as one of the tools to interpret the paradox.

Joseph Needham takes a different direction, and—along the line of Marcel Granet (1934)—characterizes the Chinese way of thinking as “correlative” and “dialectical” as opposed to “analytical” and Aristotelian. However, against Chmielewski (1962) and along with Kou Pao-koh (1953), he thinks of the GSLZ as an exemplification of the Aristotelian syllogism (Needham 1956, 200). The Aristotelian

interpretation finds new life in more recent literature. Benická and Hubina (2013), for example, propose an analysis and translation of the BML which regards it as an example of Aristotle’s problem of predication. Dropping the problem of syllogism, they more generally react against those who create an “unwarranted gap between ‘Chinese’ and Greek (Western) ways of thought.” “Horseness” and “Whiteness” may be interpreted following the fundamental Aristotelian distinction between substance and quality, respectively. Under this reading, the argument displays logical consistency inasmuch as “white horse” and “horse” are intended in the light of the Aristotelian distinction in ontology between essential and accidental qualities (Benická and Hubina 2013, 14). With a careful reading of the text, they conclude that the ontological status of white horse and horse must differ: “horse” is characterized as an essential quality, and “white horse” is characterized as the accidental quality “whiteness”. Thus, “essence, though not explicitly stated, is suggested here by the Master” (ibid., 26). This reference to Aristotelian categories also has the merit of connecting two ancient authors—Aristotle and Gongsun Long—who are considered forerunners of the philosophy of language in their respective traditions.

(iii) Attempts to repair the argument by means of logical or analytical categories:

In the first half of the 20th century, the study of Chinese philosophy is given a fundamental turn by Hú Shìh (胡適), who plays a leading role in the introduction of Western philosophy to China. Hú (1922) stresses the centrality of the problem of names in the GSLZ and adopts a logical approach to its interpretation. The “white horse is not horse” thesis becomes intelligible, he suggests, once we take it to be about the relationship between name (roughly, the description) and reality (the property described). For Hu, the expression “white horse” signifies two perceived attributes, namely, the attribute “white” and the attribute “horse”, respectively, whereas “horse” signifies only one attribute, hence the assertion “white horse is not horse” (Hú 1922, 126). Hu’s account has also been regarded (Fung 2020a, 312) as an (unconscious) application of Bertrand Russell’s theory of definite descriptions, where any name refers *indirectly* via its descriptive content, a view that traces back to Gottlob Frege.

The view of GSLZ as a relevant text in ancient logic largely depends on the early interpretations by Graham and the Polish sinologist Janusz Chmielewski.¹¹ The latter, in his *Notes on Early Chinese Logic*, was the first scholar to employ symbolic logic in the analysis of the *corpus*. His novel approach encouraged the proliferation of more analytically oriented work aimed at repairing the argument by means of

11 We quote here from the original editions, yet it is worth to mention that Chmielewski’s works are also published in a more recent collection: Chmielewski (2009).

formal logic. Chmielewski's interpretation of the BML, framed within his broader view of early Chinese logic as intrinsically formal, is based on a specific class analysis whereby "horse" and "white" are names denoting neither concepts (universals) nor objects, but classes (the class of all the objects that are horses and the class of all the objects that are white, respectively).¹²

Chad Hansen (1986), followed by Graham (1989), argues that classical Chinese nouns should be interpreted as mass nouns, rather than as count nouns. Taking this feature as a main difference between Chinese and Indo-European languages, Hansen proposes a mereological interpretation of the BML based on the whole/part distinction. If "horse" is a mass noun like "water", the argument would be that a part is not identical with a whole. In the light of such an interpretation, Fung Yulan's and Chmielewski's analyses miss the target.

Hansen's mereological interpretation is challenged by Harbsmeier (1989, 155–81), Dan Robins (2000), and Chris Fraser (2007) among others. Against Hansen, Robins claims that Classical Chinese nouns can be used as either mass nouns or count nouns depending on the context. However, context dependence in this specific matter cannot be considered a distinctive and unique feature of the Chinese language. In fact—and also in English—the same term may be used either as a count noun or as a mass noun depending on the context. Consider, for example, the statements "we had a lot of beer" (mass noun) *vs.* "we ordered a beer" (count noun). Still, Indo-European languages mark many differences with inflections, which Chinese entirely lacks, thus making the interpretation of nouns more difficult. Fraser (2007) presents a deep critique of Hansen's proposal. On the one hand, he accepts that most instances of ancient Chinese nouns had a use as mass nouns, but on the other hand he claims that this is not enough to justify a mereological interpretation of the GSLZ. Together with his general criticism that a thinker's language cannot be said to have a fundamental role in shaping the more relevant

12 Against Needham, Chmielewski (1962, 10–11) presents BML's first argument in four statements, which is enough to exclude that it is an Aristotelian syllogism. His formalization assumes the following conventions: "A" for the class "horse", "B" for the class "white horse", "F" for the property of "rejecting-selecting colour." By definition, "horse"—denoting shape—does not possess the property of rejecting-selecting colour; then, the argument can be formalized as follows:

(1) $\neg F A$

the class "horse" has not the property of rejecting-selecting colour

(2) $F B$

the class "white horse" has the property of rejecting-selecting colour

(3) $(X) \neg F X. (X) F X = 0$

the intersection of the class of all classes that do not satisfy the property F and the class of all classes that do satisfy the property F is empty

(4) $A \neq B$

the class "horse" and "white horse" are not the same

aspects of his thought, he shows in great detail that the pre-Quin philosophers of language “did not appeal to the part-whole relation to explain the use of general terms” (Fraser 2007, 445). Hansen’s theory is therefore rejected.

This particular debate leads to a more general question about the conceptual tools to be used in the interpretative work on ancient texts. Harbsmeier (1989, 156) criticizes Hansen by ironically claiming that GSL “was not so intellectually advanced to pre-empt Lesniewski” (the inventor of mereology), so that the employment of mereological categories would constitute a case of “interpretative anachronism”. What does “interpretative anachronism” mean here? It seems to mean that ancient texts should not be given an interpretation based on contemporary categories, and, consequently, that only “ancient” categories may be legitimately employed for the task. Against extreme positions of this sort, Cheng (1983) maintains that the “problems of semantics and ontology can be varied, but the structure of these problems will remain universal”. We agree with Cheng and think that the problem is not *whether* to use contemporary categories or not, but *which* conceptual tools are better suited to enhance our understanding of the text at different levels (philological, philosophical, and logical).

Graham offers one of the first attempts to establish a clear link between the Chinese language and symbolic logic: in a discussion on the concept of being, in Appendix II of *The Disputers of the Tao* (1989), he presents the difficulties of the verb “to be”, which is used in too many functions in ancient Greek and Indo-European languages. That’s why Aristotle used to say that “being” is said in many ways: it works at the same time for existence, identity, and predication, with the risk of falling into ambiguity and confusion—a risk that is of no concern in symbolic logic, where the notion of “subject” disappears together with the notion of “being”. Although Graham (1989, 82, footnote 18) finds Chmielewski’s account “unconvincing”, he agrees about the similarity of Classical Chinese and symbolic logic:¹³

[...] Classical Chinese syntax is close to symbolic logic: it has an existential quantifier (*yu*) which forbids mistaking existence for a predicate and is distinct from the copula (...) and it has no copula linking subject to predicative adjective and no common symbol for them all. (Graham 1989, 411)

13 Chmielewski (1965, IV, 103–04) claims that the syntactic features of Chinese, often considered as source of the difficulty of developing logic, “hardly have any negative bearing in Chinese implicit logic; in fact, they are beneficial rather than detrimental to this logic, since they make the Chinese language more similar to the symbolic language of modern logic than any tongue of Indo-European type can claim to be. This latter point seems to be of special importance in connection with the (implicit) logic of functions.”

We find more recent examples of contemporary conceptual tools in authors, such as Yi (2018), with an elegant interpretation of BML. Mou (2020) introduces the distinction between “thick objects” as semantic-whole referents and, we might say, “thin objects” as specific referents. The interpretative choice between the two kinds of objects depends on different points of view. Mou connects the distinction to the Millian–Kripkean and the Lockean–Fregean (descriptivist) approaches to language, one depending on direct reference and the other depending on particular descriptions, or points of view. Therefore, according to Mou’s “double reference approach”, we may have in mind “both the semantic-whole referent and the specific part referent (if any) that is specific to a certain perspective focus” (Mou 2020, 201). This approach contributes to the following idea: the thick object as a whole, yet not characterized by an “essential” property (in Kripkean terms), is the object of direct reference. It is this object that provides the basis for different specific identities depending on the focus and on specific descriptions, so that we may justify both “white horse is horse” and “white horse is not horse”. This is possible because, in different contexts (provided by different sentential settings), the speaker may point to or focus on distinct specific parts from different perspectives.

Something similar is suggested by Fung Yiu-ming (2020b), who argues that the same sentence may be given two different readings depending on whether we interpret it with a Fregean descriptivist approach, or with a direct reference approach *à la* Kripke. In fact, with a charitable understanding of the opponent’s claim “white horse is horse”, we may regard the assertion as a simple analytic truth: such an understanding untangles the descriptivist reading for which the horse that has the property of being white is a horse, that is: $(x)[(Wx \& Hx) \rightarrow Hx]$. Yet, by employing the direct reference approach, it seems as if GSL is treating terms as rigid designators, that is, as terms referring to the same individuals (including abstract individuals), which should however be represented as constants in all possible worlds. As a result, the paradox cannot be expressed as $\forall x [(Wx \& Hx) \rightarrow \neg Hx]$,¹⁴ but rather as $\neg (a=b)$. (Fung 2020b, 167). Eventually, Fung also recognizes that GSL may oscillate between use and mention, insofar he sometimes refers to entities, and other times to the terms themselves. Thus, the paradoxical sentence may be interpreted either as “white horse is not the same [entity] as horse”, or alternatively, as “the name ‘white horse’ is not [referring to] the same [thing] as the name ‘horse’” (ibid.).

Zhou Changzhong (1997; 2020) interprets the BML as evidence of a large equivalence between the analytic philosophy of language in the West and early Chinese logic, with the latter being a version of the former at an earlier stage, for they share

14 The formula could be read as: *for every entity, if something is white and is a horse, then it is not a horse.*

“logic as their basic framework” and “a methodology and an analytical philosophy of language which take ontology and epistemology as their basis” (Zhou 2020, 102). Under this pragmatism-oriented stance, Zhou identifies in the argument the expression and employment of fundamental laws of logic (i.e., the principle of identity and the principle of noncontradiction), as well as of traditional metaphysical categories (particulars/object *vs.* universals/concepts or classes). Having placed the BML and analytic philosophy of language in a sort of *continuum*, Zhou identifies the peculiarity of the former in its restriction to “real contents” and “real-life examples”, whereas analytic philosophy of language in the West “[...] not only breaks through the everyday use and superficial grammar of natural language, but moreover also captures and presents its profound logical structure”. (ibid., 103).

GSLZ has become a fundamental text for comparative discussions of contemporary logic with regard to the Western tradition. Lucas (2020) argues that GSLZ is evidence of an argumentative logical style which is absent, for instance, in Confucius’ *Analects*. In his technically sophisticated study, Lucas compares Ancient Chinese to symbolic logic and provides a statistical analysis of GSLZ’s terms for logical connectives (e.g., *bù* 不, *ér* 而, and *qiě* 且), quantifiers (e.g., *yǒu* 有 and *wú* 無), and propositional operators (e.g., *yě* 也 and *fēi* 非).¹⁵

In addition to the analyses by Lucas (2020) and Fung Yiu-ming (2007; 2020a; 2020c), we may also refer to the early work of Fred Riemann (1981), who presents in an axiomatic system deriving the conclusions of BML in formulae. For instance, the conclusion that to be a white horse and to be a horse are not equivalent (ibid., 439) is rendered in formulae as:

$$\neg (x)(WHx \leftrightarrow Hx)$$

*(It is not the case that every entity is a white horse iff it is a horse)*¹⁶

Actually, Fung Yiu-ming goes so far as to claim that first order predicate logic suffices to disambiguate the various interpretations of the dialogue that represent GSL’s and his opponent’s respective viewpoints (Fung 2020b, 167). While this claim may seem too extreme, it is however undeniable that symbolic formulations avoid redundancy, and that in first order logic all is rendered with simplicity. Granted that the depth and complexity of the ancient Chinese classics could not possibly be reduced to a logical formalization, and granted that formalization requires previous conceptual clarification, the potential contribution of formalizations to

15 An example of his conclusions is as follows: using the linguistic terminology, Lucas (2020, 3176) suggests that “NP1 NP2 yě” stands for “NP1 is NP2,” and that “NP1 fēi NP2” stands for “NP1 is not NP2.”

16 We remark that in this case the quantifier has the widest scope, differently from the formulation criticized by Fung Yiu-ming and quoted above.

the interpreters' exegetical work should not go underestimated. In the following, we will move on with the discussion of some conceptual problems relevant to the assessment of the paradox. In fact, we believe that the complex interpretative problems entailed by Frege's and Gongsun Long's paradoxes cannot be solved by logical formalization alone, but essentially require conceptual clarification.

PART III

On the Hypothesis of a Common Concern across the Two Paradoxes

Bai Ma Lun's Interpretative Directions: Towards a Possible Compromise

Each of the three methodological directions briefly reviewed in the previous section can be regarded as different ways to deal with the same problem, that is, the problem of language ambiguity featured in the *Bai Ma Lun* text. The engagement with the text at issue, which typically requires a combination of philological exegesis, historical analysis, and philosophical reflection and theorizing, can be therefore viewed as a fight against its language ambiguity, which needs to be either explained or dissolved. Most of the interpretation proposals tend to ascribe the ambiguity of the text to specific problematic features of the GSLZ that are first identified and then appropriately made explicit and/or rectified. In some cases, the adopted strategy is the assimilation of such selected features to the traditional categories of the Western classics, or alternatively, their analysis by means of contemporary categories of the philosophy of language and logic. Interestingly, as we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the different accounts of the ambiguity in BML, as well as the explanatory proposals of Frege's paradox, seem to adapt to a similar taxonomy.

As with the readings of Frege about his concept paradox, with regard to the "white horse is no horse" claim, GSL has been interpreted alternatively as shifting the reference from contents to words (Harbsmeier 1989; Fung 2020b), as making a mistake in reasoning (e.g., Graham 1955; Hansen 1983), as dealing with logical inference (Chmielewski 1965; Rieman 1981; Fung Yiu-ming 2020a; 2020b), as using categories analogous to those at work in contemporary mereology (Hansen 1986), as resting on the Aristotelian and analytical distinction between essence and accident or particular and universal (Benická and Hubina 2013; Zhou 2020), or as dealing with different kinds of entities following either a Kripkean or a Fregean perspective (Mou 2020; Fung 2020b). Who is right?

While an overall assessment of the different proposals is outside of the scope of this work, we may still advance some suggestions by taking into account not only

the similarity of the discussions on Frege's and Gongsun Long's paradoxes, but also two important aspects that guide our reading. The first aspect regards the fact that in ancient times—at least, to the best of our knowledge—there is no documented explicit analysis of two Fregean distinctions discussed in Part I, that is, (i) the distinction between linguistic expressions and their referents, and (ii) the distinction between concepts and objects. In fact, this twofold distinction arises in Frege's discussion of the problems related to the essential difference between ordinary language and formalized language. With texts like the GSLZ, we can speak neither of formalized language, nor of natural language, given that what we nowadays call “language” was not conceptualized in a similar fashion in pre-modern times in China (cf. Möller 1997). However, quite independently of their historical origin, the Fregean distinctions hold in any context in which language is used. We may therefore suspect that the clash among the different interpretations of the BML may often be regarded as stemming from the difficulty of disentangling the two kinds of distinctions. Some authors seem to ascribe to GSL concerns about the distinction as in (i), whereas others tend to interpret the BML as revolving around the distinction as in (ii); moreover, both the readings may legitimately be regarded as consistent (hence, as possibly coexistent) within the GSLZ.

The second aspect concerns our observation that most of the accounts of the BML amount to an attempt to fix the argument by *eliminating* its essential language ambiguity. This is also a typical attitude among Frege's interpreters, who put forward solutions of either technical or theoretical nature to avoid the paradox. However, we concluded our analysis of the literature on Frege's paradox in Part 1 with the claim that language ambiguity, although unavoidable, may be a way to communicate new ideas to those readers who are ready to accept them. Therefore, inspired by Frege's remarks on his concept paradox, we advance a tentative reading of the white horse paradox by taking the intrinsic ambiguity of “white horse is not horse” as an indication that here Gongsun Long may be dealing with the *unavoidable* awkwardness of language, which falls short in properly and fully mirroring the essential concept/object and concept-words/object-words distinction.

Notably, the arguments in BML conclude with one of GSL's few metalinguistic statements:

“These are the world's perverse words and confusing statements.”

Given the seemingly anaphoric function of “these”, the claim appears to refer to the arguments previously expressed. However, this *finale* may also be equally considered as a general conclusion on the difficulties and confusion that linguistic statements may cause in the hearer, or reader. It is as if GSL faces a difficulty similar to the one encountered by Frege, a difficulty that the latter tries to overcome by resorting

to “nonsense”. The contrasting interpretations often forget a simple point that may be put in the form of an alternative possibility to be attended to: what if Gongsun Long was fighting, as Frege did, against the misunderstanding arising from the use of language? Even if one concedes that the focus of the BML is on argumentation, and perhaps on the exploitation of linguistic vagueness and ambiguity for political and diplomatic reasons, whereas Frege was more interested in finding ways to overcome the intrinsic problems of language via formalization, both seem to be very aware of the misunderstandings that arise from the use of language.

Postilla: on Concept and Object in GSLZ

We cannot avoid a short reference to the *Zhǐwù Lùn*, given its entanglement with the *Báimǎ lùn*. The title itself has been offered multiple and sometimes divergent translations, mainly due to disagreement on how to interpret the key character “*zhǐ*” (指), whose original meaning is “finger”, and that has been rendered as “universals” or “concepts” (Fung 1952; Needham 1956), “meanings” (Graham 1955), “point/pointer/act of pointing” (Reding 2002), “act/object of reference” in either speech or cognition (Cheng and Swain 1970), “marks” (Hú 1922) and “signs” (Thompson 1995).¹⁷

The use of the term “*zhǐ*” within a discourse on names and naming, with its range of translations spanning from “finger” (that is, an index by which we point to things) to “signs”, suggests a further interesting direction of research. In contemporary linguistics and philosophy of language, there is a wide discussion about the essential link between pointing gestures and demonstratives, such as “this” and “that” (notably, Russell thinks of demonstratives as the only ‘logically’ proper names). Indeed, demonstratives are signs of a special kind, since they are terms by which we refer to individuals, or objects. As we have seen, “*zhǐ*” is also sometimes translated with “meaning”, or “concept”—but why? A short remark may help clarify the relationship between the main function of the demonstratives in language and the rendering of “*zhǐ*” as “meaning” or “concept”: it is because we have concepts that we can *point* to specific things. If I say: “Look at *that*”, in front of a horse, in order for one to know what I am referring to, one would need to be (perceptually) acquainted with that particular object, which is the referent of the demonstrative “that”. In other words, one would need to possess the concepts referred to by the speaker: the horse as such? Its colour? Its mane? Its saddle? The exact referent of “that” in the example above may depend on the previous

17 Liu Tisheng (2020) provides a thorough investigation of the wide literature on the different meanings of the Chinese character (指).

discourse, or on the question under discussion. Concepts may therefore be regarded as playing a fundamental role in the referential process: pointing would be useless without concepts. Hence, the translation of “*zhi*” (指) as “concepts” seems fortunate, as well as theoretically legitimate.

We are not experts in Chinese philology and exegesis, but we cannot escape the feeling that the translation of “*zhi*” as “concept” and of “*wu*” as “object” brings about a remarkable set of arguments that unexpectedly fit Frege’s worries about the difficulty of speaking of concepts. Moreover, our intuition may be not inconsistent with some interpretations of the key Chinese characters from the other chapters comprised in the GSLZ, such as, for instance, the *Ming shi lun* (a chapter that revolves around demonstration) for which Jana Rošker (manuscript) proposes the translation of “*ming*” (名) as “concept” and of “*shi*” (實) as “actualities”. For key Chinese terms like “*zhi*” and “*ming*”, it seems difficult to avoid the continuous overlapping of different translations, all equally justified on different grounds. This overlapping, we suggest, might also be caused by the back and forth between the two distinctions we referred to in the previous section.

In sum, the different uses of language, as well as the challenges accompanying the attempts to make these distinctions clear cut, seem to be a concern common to both thinkers discussed in this paper, notwithstanding their distance in time. Under this general interpretative sketch, we may leave to the specialists of the GSLZ the further challenge of studying within the ancient Chinese text the interplay of the two (Fregean) distinctions, that is, the distinction between linguistic expressions and their referents, and between concepts and objects.

Concluding Remarks

In this text we have presented an overview of the discussions around two paradoxes from Gottlob Frege’s *Über Begriff und Gegenstand* and Gongsun Long’s *Bai Ma Lun*: the two works are very distant in time, yet not so much in content. Interestingly, a common pattern holds within the two debates. In their attempt to ‘make sense’ of the paradox, both Frege’s and Gongsun Long’s interpreters seem to opt for one of the following strategies: to disregard the paradox as unworthy of the philosophers’ attention or as a plain mistake, to dispel the paradoxical nature of the claim by interpreting it in the light of either novel or traditional philosophical categories and distinctions, or to repair the argument by means of logical and analytical categories.

The two texts at issue are perhaps also pursuing quite different goals: Frege wants to express the main ideas of his newly invented mathematical logic and its basic

concepts, whereas with regard to Gongsun Long it can perhaps be speculated (assuming a link between the text and the historical figure of a well-known expert in diplomatic matters) that he is probably aiming to present arguments that could be used to enhance various persuasive strategies in more important contexts. However, even under the assumption that these two texts and their paradoxical claims are hardly comparable, the contemporary literature discussing them, as we have shown, displays similar interpretative patterns and it largely employs similar philosophical categories and formalizations.

In this respect, we pointed out one particular reading of Frege's paradox—a reading that is not explicitly represented in the current discussions on the BML—which may suggest a novel interpretative direction with regard to Gongsun Long's work. After all, both Frege and Gongsun Long may have recognized the difficulty of dealing with the “awkwardness” of language, which falls short of expressing fundamental distinctions (such as the distinction between concept and object) with clarity and without ambiguity. So, both Frege's and Gongsun Long's paradoxes can be seen as warnings to the reader about the problems caused by different ways of using language, which can lead to confusion and misunderstandings.

Frege holds a disenchanted attitude towards the unavoidable misunderstandings of language. Given his capacity to invent a non-ambiguous symbolic mathematical language, he dares to use apparent contradictions (what he calls “nonsense”) to convey what he means outside his symbolic language. He certainly had an impact on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, but he had an even greater impact on the *Philosophical Investigations*, as evidenced by Wittgenstein's remarks on misunderstandings caused by different uses of language and presented in the last section of Part I of our text. This awareness brings about the suggestion that the source of misunderstanding is often to be found in the inability to understand which specific language game we are in. We should, for instance, be aware of whether we are speaking of either concepts or objects, or of linguistic expressions and their referents.

While Frege and Wittgenstein analyse the workings of language and its role in creating misunderstandings, maybe one of the possible aims for Gongsun Long is to teach the best argumentative strategies, whereby the mastery of language ambiguity can help to win a case. Future work may explore the extent to which this attitude matches the study of the strategic use of language in Western philosophy—especially since the development of pragmatics. In this paper, we limit ourselves to pointing out that the wide literature on the two paradoxes, in the end, may bring about the possible sources of misunderstanding as an open question in the interpretation of ancient Chinese texts.

We have insisted here on the possibility that the result of the discussion stemming from Frege's paradox—and from Wittgenstein's remarks on misunderstandings in language—may be of some interest to the analysis of Gongsun Long's work. However, we would like to show the other side, too: while Frege was striving to give advice for the clarification of logical and conceptual distinctions, it appears that Gongsun Long was joyfully playing with these distinctions. This playful attitude when dealing with language and its limitations might itself be regarded as one significant contribution of the Chinese tradition, a contribution that seems to match Wittgenstein's lesson: we play different language games, and the main source of misunderstandings is just our inability to tell which language game we are playing.

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SPECIAL ISSUE

*TRANSCULTURAL (POST)COMPARATIVE
PHILOSOPHY, PART 2*

*Philosophical Dialogues between East Asia and
Europe: From Plotinus to Heidegger and Beyond*

Hermeneutical Problems

The Gadamerian Discourse in China and the Fusion of Aesthetic Realms

Jana S. ROŠKER*

Abstract

Based on comparative philosophical methodology, this paper presents a new hermeneutic method for interpreting Chinese (especially ancient Chinese) texts. It first introduces the rich tradition of Chinese hermeneutics and then analyses its possible dialogues with European hermeneutic methods, especially Gadamer's "fusion of horizons". It identifies some methodological problems inherent in this method and, on this basis, proposes the application of a new hermeneutic method that may be more suitable for the interpretation of traditional Chinese metaphysical and literary texts. It is based on the traditional philosophical-aesthetic notion of *jingjie* 境界. The author preliminarily refers to this method as a "fusion of aesthetic realms".

Keywords: Gadamer, Zhuangzi, *jingjie*, fusion of horizons, fusion of aesthetic realms

Gadamerijanski diskurz na Kitajskem in zlitje estetskih sfer

Izvleček

Prispevek na podlagi primerjalne filozofske metodologije predstavlja novo hermenevtično metodo za interpretacijo kitajskih (zlasti starokitajskih) besedil. Najprej predstavi bogato tradicijo kitajske hermenevtike, nato pa analizira njene možne dialoge z evropskimi hermenevtičnimi metodami, zlasti z Gadamerjevo metodo »zlitja obzorij«. Potem prikaže določene metodološke probleme, ki so prisotni v tej metodi, in na tej podlagi predlaga uporabo nove hermenevtične metode, ki bi lahko bila primernejša za interpretacijo tradicionalnih kitajskih metafizičnih in literarnih besedil. Temelji na tradicionalnem filozofsko-estetskem pojmovanju koncepta *jingjie* 境界. Avtorica to metodo preliminarno pomenjuje s frazo »zlitje estetskih sfer«.

Ključne besede: Gadamer, Zhuangzi, *jingjie*, zlitje obzorij, zlitje estetskih sfer

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Introduction: Some General Remarks on the Issue of “Chinese Hermeneutics”

Understood as a study or methodology of text interpretation, and as a theory of the principles of the transfer of meaning respectively, Chinese hermeneutics has a rich (and very specific) tradition, which can be traced back to Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312) from the Wei Jin Nanbei Chao Period. A most important figure who left indelible traces on the history of Chinese interpretative theory was Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 455–522), the author of the famous work *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin dialong* 文心雕龍).

As King Po-Chiu (2016, 76) notes, Chinese hermeneutics mainly describes various methods of interpreting Chinese thought (mostly through comments and explanatory annotations) rather than problematizing questions regarding why we interpret something in such different ways. According to him, metaphysical discussion is not the subject matter of “Chinese hermeneutics”.¹

Now let us take a closer look at hermeneutic methods as applied and described in contemporary China. Very soon it becomes clear that in this field we can encounter similar problems to the ones pertaining to the much more general question of the very existence of Chinese philosophy:

If all acts of reading, interpreting, and understanding are seen through the Western hermeneutic lenses, based on the premise that Western hermeneutics is the only legitimate conceptual and philosophical tool, can an accurate image of the Chinese exegetical efforts ever be captured? When Western hermeneutics is taken as the normative and prescriptive manner of reading, cultural particularities are swamped and flattened out for the spurious cause of analytical unanimity and coherence; and such, in its essentials, is the sin of cultural hegemony, to employ a much-used neologism. (Ng 2013, 374)

On the other hand, some (mostly Western) scholars also express their doubts in the opposite direction, namely doubts regarding the question of whether the Chinese tradition of interpreting the classics is truly comparable with the European hermeneutic method, and hence whether it is suitable to call it hermeneutics (e.g., Kubin 2005, 312). Here, we have—once again—landed on the unstable ground on which we have to build the entire concept of Chinese philosophy. It

1 Because of this richness, many important contemporary works were published in the recent years in this field (see for instance Tu 2000; 2005). But many scholars also directly compare traditional Chinese and modern European hermeneutic theories (Ng 2005, 297–310).

is very clear that Chinese ideational and intellectual tradition did not categorize its thought in accordance with strictly separated disciplines, which means that we cannot find in this tradition systematic ideational branches of epistemology, logic, phenomenology or hermeneutics. However, this does not mean that it does not include a magnificent amount of thriving and detailed epistemological, logical, phenomenological and hermeneutic theories. Once again, we cannot but emphasize that one of the greatest differences dividing Chinese and Euro-American thought might be found in their respective classifications.

Gu Ming Dong also points out (2005, 11) that although traditionally China did not lack conceptual inquiries into reading and writing, its hermeneutic perceptions were scattered in various kinds of discourses that have never been synthesized into a clearly defined system. On the other hand, however, he also argues that the Chinese tradition has formed an implicit system of reading and writing with “fascinating insights that not only predated similar ideas in the West by centuries but also anticipated contemporary ideas of hermeneutic openness and open poetics” (ibid.). On this basis, he created a modern interpretative instrument based upon the concept of “hermeneutic openness” that proves itself as a very useful tool not only in Chinese, but also in inter-cultural research.

Here, we also have to mention Cheng Chung-ying’s innovative theory of “onto-hermeneutics”, according to which the Chinese interpretative paradigms are always rooted in a specific understanding of reality. In such a view, understanding is inseparable from being. This paradigm is tightly connected to another special feature of Chinese hermeneutic, namely to its surpassing of the subject–object division and its deep embedment into intersubjective understanding (Wu Kuan-min 2004, 237). Notwithstanding many problems and difficulties with which all scholars dealing with Chinese hermeneutics are necessarily confronted, one can certainly sense a quite optimistic spirit among them: and if there can be socialism with Chinese characteristics, why not a hermeneutics with Chinese characteristics?

Dialogues with Western Hermeneutics and the Falling for Gadamer

Notwithstanding the aforementioned kernels and promising seeds of different interpretative models, most scholars investigating classical Chinese texts still apply interpretative mechanisms derived from Western hermeneutic theories. In the first three decades after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese intellectuals were in this respect mostly limited to the studies of Hegelian

and Marxist theories.² From the 1980s on, however, they again gained access to most of the classical works of modern Euro-American hermeneutics, including Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, who's theory of the fusion of horizons soon gain a widespread popularity among Chinese theoreticians:

Overall, however, it has been the influence of Gadamer that has seemed to dominate, even though more informed discussions of a relatively wider range of European hermeneutic philosophical works were already manifest in publications available during the early years of the twenty-first century. (Pfister 2006, 4)

As it is well-known, Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons was based on an elaborated version of Schleiermacher's notion of the hermeneutic circle, i.e., on the idea that one's understanding of a text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts, and *vice versa*: the understanding of each individual part is established by reference to the whole. Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, which can be illustrated by a circular model of comprehension. According to this view, the "fusion of horizons" takes place between the writer and the readers, the speaker and the listeners, or the artist and the observers in the dialectical process of transferring meanings. In this sense, the concept of horizon refers to the particular situation into which every individual is embedded, whereas the situation is not limited to the vision or perception of what is nearby. As such, the horizon implies an openness of existence and a possibility to overcome one's own prejudices. The fusion of horizons always creates new meanings, for in this dialectical process of mediating and perceiving it incorporates both horizons and at the same time surpasses their individual limitations.

On the basis of free and unlimited horizons, Gu Ming-Dong has drawn his method of traditional Chinese hermeneutic openness, which is rooted in the so-called metaphysical-aesthetic tradition of interpretations (Gu 2005, 9).³

2 Here, it has to be pointed out that in the early years of the P. R. China, Hegelian hermeneutic was not particularly welcome, because those years were generally marked by a strong anti-Hegelian tendency. This did not change until the mid-fifties: "Engels' anti-Hegelian interpretation of Marx quickly became canonical. His anti-Hegelian approach to Marx has long influenced Russian Marxism and continued to influence Chinese Marxism. In broad terms Chinese Marxism is dependent on two main sources: Russian Marxism and the Chinese intellectual tradition. The shared Russian and Chinese anti-Hegelian interpretation of Marx was called into question in the middle of the last century through the relatively late publication of crucial Marxian texts, that is texts prepared by Marx and that are crucial for understanding his position" (Rockmore 2019, 56).

3 Although I have predominantly limited this paper to the new insights of Chinese scholars (including those situated overseas), Western Sinologists have also proposed some new directions in interpreting

However, while in China the theories of the Gadamerian discourse (i.e., including Gadamer's predecessors and successors) might represent a valuable contribution to an eventual establishment of transcultural hermeneutics, the enthusiasm for such moves could also be gently reduced by asking some questions on the nature of this circle and this horizon.

Of course, the circular character of understanding does not make it impossible to interpret a text, but instead emphasizes that the meaning of a text must be found within its context. Still, the problem is precisely that the very concept of the context has never been sufficiently explained and defined, particularly in view of different layers of reality and different modes of their perception and categorization. In my view, the very term of contextualization and its respective contents can, for instance, at least be divided into external and internal contextualization. The former refers to the cultural, historical, and literary context of the text, and the latter to its inherent conceptual dimensions and their semantic and philosophical implications and developments. The hermeneutic method is thus still lacking a binding, inherent consistence.

Recent Sinological research has still not managed to develop a method of unifying these two kinds of contextualization, and the situation in Chinese-speaking academia is not much different in this respect. On the one hand, scholars in China and Taiwan have developed brilliant theories, which help us understand the historical significance of the time, space, and politically, ideologically and culturally conditioned factors involved in the interpretation of any important classical text. Such theories of external contextualization are mainly written in the area of intellectual history. Contemporary Taiwanese scholar Huang Chun-chieh 黃俊傑, for instance, has written several significant works in this field that have clarified many important elements of the historical development of the exegesis of Mencius (see, for instance, Huang 1997; 2015). He has also clarified how and why certain classical works of Chinese tradition have been—for various cultural, political, and ideological reasons—de-contextualized and re-contextualized in the course of their incorporation by Korean and Japanese cultures.

China or developing a modern Chinese hermeneutics. For example: “David Hall and Roger Ames pinpoint what they call ‘analogical or correlative thinking’ as the first order strategy of coming to grips with reality and the human condition in classical Chinese culture. In pondering the ‘trouble with Confucianism’ in the context of modernity, Wm. Theodore de Bary posits the critical, prophetic role of the *chüntzu* (the noble man) as the fulcrum of a politico-social community in which this figure must play the ambiguous roles of a conscientious critic of the dynastic state, a loyal servant of the ruler and a caring representative of the people whose voice could only speak through him. Thomas Metzger suggests looking at Neo-Confucianism as a shared cultural ‘grammar’ that involves a ‘sense of predicament’, the result of the nagging awareness that there is a chasm between the idealized goal of life—transforming state and society by the heroic moral self—and the dismal realities of the given world—the source of the anxiety of moral failure” (Chow et al. 1999, 1).

On the other hand, let us briefly return in this context to Cheng Chung-Ying, and his aforementioned method of onto-hermeneutics (*benti quanshixue* 本體詮釋學) that was rooted in Gadamerian hermeneutics, but further explored and developed in terms of the Confucian worldview. Cheng believes that the traditional Chinese hermeneutic is ontological—his model is rooted in the presumption according to which the “understanding of reality and truth is simultaneously the source of meaning and the driving force for seeking understanding” (Cheng 2003 290). According to Cheng, no understanding or interpretation can be made without such a reference.

Irrespective of the questionable nature of the notion of truth in the Chinese worldview, onto-hermeneutics is, in general, doubtless an interesting and innovative approach to the investigation of the traditional Chinese mode of exegesis. However, the problem that should be discussed in this context is linked to the question of different contextualities underlying all these theoretical approaches. Although Huang and Cheng both write about traditional Chinese hermeneutics, the two kinds of hermeneutics they each propose obviously refer to two very different things. As I have shown elsewhere (see Rošker 2021, 113), the first is based on the external and the other is rooted in the internal contextualization. The former refers to the cultural, historical, and literary context of the text, and the latter to its inherent conceptual dimensions and their semantic and philosophical implications and developments. Hence the hermeneutic method is still lacking a binding, inherent consistency, not only in regard to its various particular methods, but also the multifarious differentiations that can be detected within and between traditional explanations of its crucial terminology.

However, this is by no means the only problem linked to this method. In my view, what is even more questionable is its premise, which presupposes the existence of a normative intelligible meaning. Proceeding from a positive re-evaluation of the function of prejudice⁴ in the sense of Heideggerian anticipatory structures, Gadamer highlights that understanding always involves what he terms the “anticipation of completeness”. In other words, it always involves the verifiable assumption that “what is to be understood constitutes something that is understandable, that is, something that is constituted as a coherent, and therefore meaningful, whole”

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer offers the clearest explanation of his notion of prejudices in his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, where he describes them as the “biases of our openness to the world”. Gadamer writes: “Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience” (Gadamer 2008, 9). In this sense, prejudices are simply “conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us” (ibid.).

(Malpas 2018, 3). In Gadamer’s own words, the concept of horizon and the fusion of horizon respectively could represent a means to grasp the “own meaning” of a text:

The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. ... We are always affected, in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence we approach the testimony of the past under its influence. Thus it is constantly necessary to guard against over hastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning. Only then can we listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its own meaning heard. (Gadamer 1989, 305)

Obviously, this is still a conceptual view of hermeneutic understanding⁵. As we have seen, it still presupposes an “own meaning” of a certain tradition (or discourse). The problematic nature of such suppositions can be illuminated by Derrida’s famous statement that “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Derrida 1997, 158). This has often been misinterpreted in the sense that “there is nothing outside the text”, implying that there was nothing outside the words (Derrida 1988, 136). He emphasized that what he really meant by “there is no outside-text” is that “there is nothing outside of context”:

The phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction (“there is nothing outside the text” [*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]), means nothing else: there is nothing outside context. In this form, which says exactly the same thing, the formula would doubtless have been less shocking.⁶ (ibid.)

5 In this predetermined (and hence, conceptualized) notion of meaning that is implied in such a positive conception of prejudice, Gadamer redeploys the notion of our prior hermeneutic situatedness as it was developed in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (first published in 1927) in terms of the “fore-structures” of understanding, i.e., “in terms of the anticipatory structures that allow what is to be interpreted or understood to be grasped in a preliminary fashion” (Malpas 2018, 3.1). Since, in this view, understanding functions by means of such anticipatory structures implies that it necessarily implicates what Gadamer denotes as the “anticipation of completeness”. Such an understanding is necessarily preconditioned by revisable presupposition that “what is to be understood constitutes something that is understandable, that is, something that is constituted as a coherent, and therefore meaningful, whole” (ibid).

6 Indeed, for Derrida, the word “text” implies all possible referents. Hence, even when claiming that “there is nothing outside the text” (*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*) this does not mean that “all referents are suspended, denied or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naïve enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent and all reality has the structure of a differential trace [*d’une trace différentiale*], and that one cannot yield to this ‘real’ except in an interpretative experience”. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring. (Derrida 1988, 148).

The contextual nature of meaning has hence prevailed in several contemporary Western discourses, including psychoanalytical philosophy. On such a level, the very idea of the hermeneutic circle also becomes problematic, and thus it is not surprising that Lacan also highlighted that such a circle is without semantic support, since the meaning is a product of an infinite sliding of the referential surface.⁷ On this basis, Žižek (1976, 75) rejects the hermeneutic circle, which implies the anteriority of the entirety of the semantic horizon in particular statements. In his view, “hermeneutics proceeds to the edge of interpretation, but just before reaching it, it covers its eyes for the realization of the fact that there is no original meaning, which could provide a basis for a different referential network for the transmission of the reference, because the meaning is always relational.” (ibid.)

I agree that meaning is always relational. Hence Gadamer’s model of the hermeneutic circle, which is based upon a conceptual view of horizons, is indeed problematic. However, instead of mourning this we should rather search for a non-conceptual foundation of the semantic unification in the process of interpretation. In my view, Gadamer’s paradigm of horizons (which is—as we have seen—still conceptual in essence) should be replaced by a non-conceptual paradigm, such as *jingjie* 境界 (sphere, atmosphere, aesthetic realm), which has a Buddhist origin and belongs to crucial notions in traditional Chinese metaphysical and literary writings. Hence, in hermeneutic interpretations of Chinese philosophy, we could replace the notion “fusion of horizons” with the term “fusion of *jingjie* or aesthetic realms (境界融合)”.

Beyond the Hermeneutic Circle: The Fusion of Aesthetic Realms?

This important and typically Chinese aesthetic notion is a hermeneutic tool that can help us understand artistic and intellectual creations through the lens of the various manifestations of the living, human world. The *jingjie* sphere can only be

7 This critique of a static conception of meanings can also be connected to Jacques Derrida’s critique of the “metaphysics of presence” (Huang Kuan-min 2020, 23). Derrida criticized this discourse for its systematic tendency to prefer or privilege notions such as identity, unity, and entirety over marginality, otherness, and difference. Particularly damaging in his view has been the tendency to conceive of linguistic truth as the “presence” of what is expressed by its representation in words. Indeed, the ungrounded nature of meaning—the fact that meanings are not given by a direct relation with things in the world, but only by their mutual structural connections—confirms that what is expressed is never fully “present”, but is instead infinitely mediated by an endless chain of meanings. The concept of truth as “presence” is therefore not viable (ibid.). In Derrida’s theory, the two concepts of “différance” (a neologism that implies both a (spatial) difference and a temporal deferral) and “dissemination” characterize the infinite nature of meaning and the futility of metaphysics’ attempts to reach a point of finality or closure.

experienced, but it cannot be fully described in concrete language, nor can it be reflected upon in purely conceptual thought.

In the beginning, *jingjie* was a term pertaining to geopolitical discourses. Expressing a certain realm limited by boundaries, it was used for mapping out the geopolitical world of ancient China. It evolved into a philosophic-religious discourse of a mental or psychological “territoriality” after it was employed to communicate the Buddhist ideas of spiritual reality and enlightenment in the sense of crossing to the other shore (Han 2014, 86). In other words, the notion of the aesthetic realm primarily pertained to the “objective” features of external reality. The internalization of the psychologically transmitted formations of this basic level of *jingjie* is linked to the Buddhist interpretation of its nature. The unification of external and internal elements takes place on the level of transforming these outward formations and images into a specific mental realm (Cheng 1995, 92). According to Christina Han (2014), it further gained many new implications and complex semantic dimensions in the Neo-Confucian discourses of the Song and Ming dynasties.

In pre-modern Chinese philosophy, the notion of *jingjie* was central to Wang Guowei’s⁸ (1877–1927) aesthetics. Wang himself defined the concept in as follows:

The “realm” does not only refer to a landscape or scene. The emotions of joy and sorrow, anger, and pleasure also constitute a sort of aesthetic realm in the human heart. (Wang Guowei 2013, 18)⁹

What Wang is referring to in the above quotation is the objectification of a psychological state in which the external realm¹⁰ is fused with inner world through subjective sensuality. In this way, *jingjie* is a paradigm that appears within an aesthetic *noumenon* in order to manifest a certain (in)significance of human life and convey a certain meaning (Li 2010, 210). This manifestation of meaning is therefore rooted in the experience of the *noumenal*, and hence in the merging of immanent and transcendent sections of time and space within the present moment of here and now.

8 Besides being the first scholar to introduce to China the works of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Kant, Wang Guowei initiated the comparative study of Western and Chinese aesthetics. Similar to Li Zehou’s thoughts, the idea of “human life” was the basic foundation of all aesthetic studies also for Wang Guowei. On this basis, he created an aesthetics of life in the sense of modern humanitarianism and purposelessness by elaborating Zhuangzi’s category of “the use through the useless (*Wu yong zhi yong* 無用之用)” in aesthetic activities (*Zhuangzi* s.d., Nei pian. Renjian shi: 9).

9 境非獨謂景物也。喜怒哀樂，亦人心中之一境界。

10 This “external realm” can refer to both an objective state in present or past external reality in which a subject is embedded, or a subjective reflection that is either thought of or imagined in their mind.

In spite of the fact that Wang's theoretical framework was clearly strongly influenced by Western philosophy (especially by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche), it can still be defined as the "revelation of life through the relationship between feeling and scene, and the objectified realm of the artistic subject" (Li Zehou in Samei 2010, xvi). However, this aesthetic realm cannot be reduced to the mere integration of feeling and scene, nor to the emotion, sensibility, or motivation of its author or creator. It also implies dissolving the difference between the self and others, and it transcends all utilitarian purposiveness without having to negate the will, desire, and life itself.¹¹ Therefore, it could also serve as a tool for creating subtle blends between traditional Chinese hermeneutic notions, techniques and approaches on the one hand, and Western philosophies of hermeneutics on the other.

The aesthetic realm conveys meanings with diffuse, continuously dispersing edges, which cannot be compared to the meanings confined to the narrow semantic spaces with fixed borders of conceptual definitions.

Wang Guowei continues:

Hence, if a text captures in words a real scene or a real emotion, it can be said to convey an aesthetic realm. (Wang Guowei 2013, 18)¹²

This is not only true for poetry, painting, or other works of art. Because *jingjie* possesses a noumenal dimension, it can also be discovered in numerous (but certainly not all) philosophical works. They also contain insights, which convey a philosophical idea not only through conceptual phrases, but rather through that which is engraved between the lines, creating a certain atmosphere, consisting of images, associations, sensations, and emotions, experienced and expressed by their author, and perceived and re-experienced by the readers. No wonder that—precisely through the realm of inner experience—philosophy is often linked to literature or poetry. Li Zehou, for instance, has defined it as "science, imbued with poetry" (Li 2016, 4): as science, it offers us a systematic way of exploring and comprehending reality; as poetry, it walks with us through the opaque jungle of our life, on

11 Wang Guowei used the term *jingjie* or aesthetic realm interchangeable with the concept of *yijing* 意境 or artistic conception (Cheng 1995, 93). The latter notion is a kind of imaginary domain, which is—similar to the aesthetic realm—also based upon a fusion of emotion and scene or situation (*qingjing jiaorong* 情景交融, see *ibid.*, 95). However, what the artistic conception implies, is more centered upon the mindful awareness of the here and now, which is conveyed by artistic creation. In his writings about the artistic conception Li Zehou (see for instance Li 2010) hence always highlights that it is—precisely because of this fusion or the unity it implies—completely useless and redundant to seek comprehension through any kind of conceptual medium between feeling and object.

12 故能寫真景物，真感情著，謂之有境界。

a long and intimate journey that not only offers us beauty and pleasure, but also forces us to confront fear and melancholy. Philosophy can be a way of life that is rational and artistic at the same time; it not only urges us to search for answers to eternal questions of being, but also to unceasingly raise new ones. It does not remain limited to discovering the world, but also allows for its ongoing creative change. *Jingjie* or the aesthetic realm might be one of the most typical hermeneutic tools of philosophy that was created in China. Because it seems that precisely here could this affinity and subtle closeness between the philosophical depths of rationality and sensitivity come to life and find its untroubled home—even when it comes to the ultimate existential concerns:

Jingjie, attained through literary appreciation, is the sudden realization and cognition of ultimate reality that embodies the principle of truth, goodness, and beauty simultaneously. The experience contained in *jingjie* is not only aesthetic, but religious and existentialistic as well. Our close reading of Wang’s remarks on *jingjie* has revealed the rich spiritual meaning of this concept: the fusion of subject and object through intuition, the consummation of truth, goodness, and beauty, and a deep existential concern. (Wu 2002, 450)

To a certain extent or in certain aspects, *jingjie* can be compared to Heidegger’s understanding of “moods” (or attunements),¹³ which, for him, reveal the Being of *Dasein*, for according to Heidegger, *Dasein* is always in an attunement, and the world is discovered in a mood (Heidegger 1996, 126ff, 313ff). It is a basis on which we can establish our being-in-the-world. In other words, moods establish *how we find ourselves in the world*. Similar to Heidegger’s moods, aesthetic realms or *jingjie* represent a pre-subjective and pre-objective sense of being in the world.

The *jingjie* of Zhuangzi: Birds, Fish, and the Circular Nature of Intersubjectivity

It is thus completely clear that *jingjie* is not a conceptual paradigm, but one that can at the most be grasped through situational, contextual approaches. Hence, like the Chinese language and Chinese philosophy, interpretations through aesthetic realms are always linked to contexts, as much as concrete experiences. I will try to illustrate such a holistic contextual interpretation using the example of two essays

13 *Stimmung*. The term has often been translated into English as “mood”, however in my opinion attunement is a more appropriate translation.

from Zhuangzi.¹⁴ For this purpose, let us first take a closer look at Zhuangzi's famous essay about the seabird:

Have you not heard of this? Once upon a time, on the outskirts of the land of Lu, a bird of paradise appeared. The Emperor of the land of Lu received it with the highest honours and expressed his heartfelt welcome to it. He had it transferred to the highest temple, treated it to the most select wines, and offered it the most enchanting music to please it. He had a good number of cattle and sheep slaughtered and he organized a sumptuous banquet. But the bird remained gloomy and depressed, not taking a bite to eat or a sip to drink. After three days, it died, just like that. This is what happens if one feeds birds with food for humans instead of food for birds. Those who know how birds should receive food suitable for them, would have let the bird fly into deep woods, where it would rest on trees. They would have let it fly merrily above sandy ground and soar above rivers and lakes. They would have let it hunt for its own food and feast on the small fish that it likes. It would have followed its flock, and stopped and rested wherever it pleased. It would have complete freedom of movement. Birds are most bothered by human voices. If symphonies of the greatest human musicians were played somewhere in the wild, birds would immediately fly away, all wild beasts would flee and fish would hide in the deepest waters. However, when humans hear such music, they gather around it and enjoy it. Fish can only live in water, but people die in it. Since man and fish have different properties, what they hate and love differs as well. The ancient wise men did not measure individual features of ability and behaviour with the same criteria. The name is created before the reality. Meaning is effected through appropriateness. To follow these principles brings happiness and satisfaction. (*Zhuangzi* s.d., *Zhi le*, 5)¹⁵

That which is not a bird, therefore, cannot simply judge on its own and conclude that what is best for them is best for birds. This is a Daoist critique of the Golden Rule, advocated by the Confucians, which finds its most famous expression in

14 For an informative analytical background regarding the central concepts of Zhuangzi's philosophy, which constitute the core of his aesthetic thought, see Sernelj 2017.

15 且女獨不聞邪？昔者海鳥止於魯郊，魯侯御而觴之於廟，奏九韶以為樂，具太牢以為善。鳥乃眩視憂悲，不敢食一臠，不敢飲一杯，三日而死。此以己養養鳥也，非以鳥養養鳥也。夫以鳥養養鳥者，宜栖之深林，遊之壇陸，浮之江湖，食之鰕鱗，隨行列而止，委蛇而處。彼唯人言之惡聞，奚以夫譊譊為乎！咸池、九韶之樂，張之洞庭之野，鳥聞之而飛，獸聞之而走，魚聞之而下入，人卒聞之，相與還而觀之。魚處水而生，人處水而死，故必相與異，其好惡故異也。故先聖不一其能，不同其事。名止於實，義設於適，是之謂條達而福持。

the advice “not to impose on others what you would not wish done to yourself” (*Lunyu* s.d., Yan Yuan: 2).¹⁶ We must be aware of the fact that we are parts of different worlds, living in different realities.

But let us return to the basic message of the story. Because I am not a bird, I cannot inherently know the likes and dislikes of birds. This, naturally, is merely an assumption of Zhuangzi’s method of perception and communication. It is not, by any stretch, a system of logical systematization. In Zhuangzi’s basic work, his friend Hui Shi always represents the fundamental type of argumentation, which attempts to derive logical, universally valid conclusions from assumptions. And in doing so he naturally often makes himself ridiculous. If humans cannot know birds, since we are not birds, shouldn’t it also apply that we cannot know fish, since we are not fish? Or, translated into logical inferences:

P1: Humans can not know birds.

P1: Zhuangzi is human.

C: Zhuangzi cannot know birds.

P1: Humans can not know fish.

P1: Zhuangzi is human.

C: Zhuangzi cannot know fish.

However, Zhuangzi is not quite convinced that it is all that simple.¹⁷ Let us listen to an anecdote from the *Autumn Water* section in Zhuangzi’s *External Chapters*.

Zhuangzi and Huizi are strolling on a bridge over the Hao river. Zhuangzi says: How easily the white fish swims to and fro—this is the joy of fish!

16 己所不欲，勿施於人。

17 Zhuangzi was also quite deliberately not interested in a systematic uniformity of his philosophy (Heubel 2021, 273). François Billeter (2010, 34) writes the following on this subject: “An overly coherent discourse would have seemed suspicious to him, for he was interested above all in the aporias of thought, the paradoxes and discontinuities that we encounter in the course of our experience of self and world.” In this context, Heubel refers to the phrase “an overly coherent discourse”. In his view, such a formulation proves that Billeter assumes that the author Zhuangzi certainly does have a certain desire for discursive coherence. However, despite this desire, his main interest was still in the “paradoxes and discontinuities” of self- and world-experience. In Heubel’s view, this is “an important insight” (Heubel, 2021, 273).

Huizi says: But you are not fish, so where can you know what is the joy of fish?

Zhuangzi then says: But you are not me, so how can you know that I do not know what is the joy of fish?

Huizi says: I am not you, therefore I cannot understand you; but you are also not a fish, and therefore you cannot understand fish. That is all.

Zhuangzi says: Well, then, let's go back to the beginning. You asked me: Where can you know what is the joy of fish? So at the time you asked me that, you must have known that I knew what is the joy of fish. Well, I knew this on this bridge over the Hao river. (*Zhuangzi* s.d., Qiu shui, 13)¹⁸

Was Zhuangzi here playing with sophistry? He has obviously been playing with words, for the Chinese interrogative *an* 安 can refer to time, space, or manner. It can thus mean *what, how, when, or where*. If it was understood in the latter sense, Zhuangzi provided a proper answer. However, if one takes into account the sociocultural context of traditional China at the time when this work was (or is supposed to have been) created, we will readily think that Zhuangzi truly wanted to say something more meaningful with this anecdote, and to impart a message.

Of course, the following is only my subjective interpretation of the two stories—one among many, many others.¹⁹ But since we have already rejected the idea of an absolute text or an absolute meaning, we should also question the notion of an absolute interpretation. However, the real reason for my adding more water to this flood is because with these interpretations I would like to demonstrate how a new meaning and understanding can be acquired through the method of unifying (fusing) the aesthetic realms (*jingjie*) that can be experienced in these two separate anecdotes, without relying on their strictly conceptual connotations.

18 莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰：「儵魚出遊從容，是魚樂也。」惠子曰：「子非魚，安知魚之樂？」莊子曰：「子非我，安知我不知魚之樂？」惠子曰：「我非子，固不知子矣；子固非魚也，子之不知魚之樂全矣。」莊子曰：「請循其本。子曰『汝安知魚樂』云者，既已知吾知之而問我，我知之濠上也。」

19 Throughout history, there have been hundreds of different interpretations of this charming story. The most recent ones can be enjoyed in the collection *Zhuangzi and the Happy Fish* (2015), edited by Robert T. Ames and Takahiro Nakajima. The editors wrote in the description of the anthology that they have brought together “essays from the broadest possible compass of scholarship, offering interpretations that range from formal logic to alternative epistemologies to transcendental mysticism”. Many were commissioned by the editors and appear for the first time. Some of them have been available in other languages—Chinese, Japanese, German, Spanish—and were translated especially for this anthology. And several older essays were chosen for the quality and variety of their arguments, formulated over years of engagement by their authors. All, however, demonstrate that the *Zhuangzi* as a text and as a philosophy is never one thing; indeed, it has always been and continues to be, many different things to many different people.

If we try to connect and understand both stories in this way, namely considering the broader essential context that they are part of, we can easily see that they are both dealing with human relations (or relations between living beings in general). In Lao Sze-kwan's view, the 'fundamental source' of both stories would probably be linked to the question of the nature of inter-subjectivity. The common ground in both debates is doubtless connected to this problem. It shows, if speaking with Ram Adhar Mall (2000, 6), that in our attempt to understand one another, we meet to differ and differ to meet.

The first story emphasizes differences between different beings. If one desires the well-being of everything that exists, one must—according to Zhuangzi—first get used to the fact that we are all different. Only based on knowing this fact, i.e., that we all live in different worlds, can one create close mutual contacts.²⁰

The creation of such contacts and communication, in turn, proves again that we all live in a single, unified world, as the second essay shows. Zhuangzi's comprehension of the joyfulness of fish resulted from the entire context in which the fish were observed. Zhuangzi was joyfully strolling in friendly nature, accompanied by his best friend, and he enjoyed the whole situation, of which the fish were also a part. Hence his joyfulness could not be separated from the fish, and *vice versa*. It was precisely this very unification in joy (a fusion of this joyful *jingjie*), which made his innate, complete, and comprehensive understanding of fish possible.

The fusion of aesthetic realms, experienced in both stories, shows us very clearly that ultimately it is human individual subjectivity which determines what should be regarded as a genuine relationship. In this sense, it can offer a new, and more complex, image of intersubjectivity. This kind of fusion is not to be mixed with a melting together of two different entities. The story of the seabird shows that what makes any aesthetic fusion possible is precisely the experience of difference and separation. The happy fish from the second essay show through the very fact of their happiness that these differences and separations are instrumental for any genuine, vital and creative unity, precisely because a fusion of aesthetic realms is always conditioned by diversity.

20 This—implicitly and latently proposed—fusion of *jingjie* could apply to contacts and relations between birds and people, as well as those between Sinologists and the Chinese, or between authors and readers.

Conclusion

Intersubjective understanding is thus not conditioned by the criteria of objectivity (with agreed-upon names) but rather by the thing itself, i.e., by understanding and experiencing the aesthetic realms in which the subjects are embedded. The apparent objectivity and independence of the human rational mind has repeatedly been proven a chimera, which only leads to self-deception.

The dynamics of being limited to the intimate world of an individual, on the one side, and the muddled, continuous merging of all individual worlds into a single one on the other, permeate our existence and position us in what we call 'time and space'. And finally, the fusion of individual aesthetic realms is precisely the starting point for constructing a tiny bridge of understanding, connecting Zhuangzi and his reader, Chinese and Western philosophy, you and me.

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Commensurability and Difference: A Hermeneutic-Deconstructive Engagement with Chinese Philosophy

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Abstract

In this explorative paper, I propose that relatively recent trends in Western continental philosophy can provide a much more commensurate access to Chinese philosophy than found in most mainstream Western philosophy. More specifically, I argue that three prominent European philosophical approaches to interpretation can offer meaningful parallels to classical Confucian views of interpretation. These are Paul Ricoeur's term "distanciation", Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy of hermeneutics and, finally, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive notion of "*différance*". While the last two approaches have had their internal clashes, I see them in this specific case as mutually reinforcing by stimulating the continuous reinterpretation of tradition, advancing the view that Western and Chinese philosophies cannot be reduced to the other in conceptual terms, and stipulating that a finalized meaning or interpretation of each is *a priori* unattainable. In this way, they provide a future opening for—and even integration of—a Chinese-Western philosophical dialogue.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy, hermeneutics, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Derrida, *différance*

Soizmerljivost in razlike: hermenevitično-dekonstrukcijski pristop h kitajski filozofiji

Izvleček

V pričujočem raziskovalnem prispevku prikažem, da razmeroma nedavne smernice v zahodni filozofiji ponujajo veliko bolj soizmerljiv dostop do kitajske filozofije, kot ga lahko najdemo v običajno prevladujočih smernicah zahodne filozofije. Menim, da trije ključni evropski filozofski pristopi k interpretaciji podajo pomembne vzporednice klasičnim konfucijanskim pogledom na interpretacije, in sicer termin »distanciacija« (*distanciation*) Paula Ricoeurja, filozofija hermenevtike Hansa-Georga Gadamerja in dekonstrukcijski pojem »*différance*« Jacquesa Derridaja. Medtem ko sta bila slednja pristopa v vzajemnem konfliktu, ju v tem specifičnem primeru vidim kot dva pristopa, ki se medsebojno krepiata s spodbujanjem nenehne reinterpretacije tradicije, z zagovarjanjem stališča, da zahodne in kitajske filozofije v konceptualnem smislu ne moremo vzajemno omejevati, ter z

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določanjem, da je dokončen pomen ali interpretacija vsake od njiju apriorno nedosegljiva. Na ta način nam bodo lahko v bodočnosti ti pojmi ponudili nove prostore za kitajsko-zahodne filozofske dialoge ali celo za vzajemno integracijo obeh filozofij.

Ključne besede: kitajska filozofija, hermenevtika, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Derrida, *différance*

Introduction: The Angst of Incommensurability and the Quest for Truth

The question of commensurability has emerged from time to time in the context of Euro-American and Chinese philosophical interactions. Some of the most explicit statements in this vein came from a communitarian celebrity, Alasdair MacIntyre, who claimed in an “infamous” paper towards the end of last century that Aristotelian and Confucian philosophies were incommensurable (MacIntyre 1991). Briefly summarized, his argument was that while the representatives of the two traditions may be able to recognize that they are working with similar topics, their concepts depend so much on their own worldviews that the criteria on which they base their discussions make it impossible to apply the concepts of one on the worlds to the other. Therefore, a genuine conversation cannot take place, MacIntyre continued, because there is no neutral point of view outside of the traditions from which they can be evaluated objectively. As a result, each tradition is locked inside itself, and any attempt to have a conversation would be bound to fail, as they would simply be speaking past each other. Considering MacIntyre’s prestige as a virtue ethicist, this verdict came as a severe blow to many of those seeking to understand Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics compatible with Neo-Aristotelian interpretations. The late Yu Jiyuan, for instance, complained that MacIntyre’s stance “directly threatens our project of comparing the ethics of Aristotle and Confucius” (Yu 2007, 6). He adamantly rejected MacIntyre’s claim, saying that he was “caught in confusion between the result of comparative philosophy and its mere possibility” (ibid., 8). By discussing the similarities and differences between the moral philosophy of Aristotle and Confucius, Yu continued, MacIntyre was already—and somewhat ironically—engaged in the enterprise of comparative philosophy. While he was exploring the conditions for a meaningful comparison, however, he jumped to conclusions without finishing the exploration. As Yu noted, “to say that two philosophical systems are different does not mean that they are incommensurable” (ibid., 7).

Although the very term may only rarely be brought up, the question of commensurability also appears to be central to the methodological debate between two major camps of comparative philosophy in the United States about how

to interpret Chinese (or, more generally, non-Western) philosophy. With some simplification, the camps can be designated geographically as the “Hawaiian” camp and the “Mainland” (or, alternatively, the “analytical”) camp. Members of both factions are in sound agreement that Chinese (as well as other non-Western) philosophy has much to offer and should be included in the curriculum of American philosophy departments, but they seem to differ about the “compatibility” of Chinese and mainstream Western philosophy. The former emphasizes the special nature of Chinese philosophy, which ostensibly differs significantly from mainstream Western philosophy, and claims that this special nature, often identified with an “aesthetic” vs. a “logical” or “rational” order (Hall and Ames 1998, 134), must be considered when approaching and interpreting Chinese philosophy. This difference lies at the heart of Roger Ames’s insistence that we need to take Chinese philosophy on its own terms (e.g., Ames 2004). The latter camp, however, while certainly acknowledging the importance of having relevant linguistic competence when working with non-Western sources, appears to believe that Chinese philosophy can be approached in more or less the same way as Western philosophy (especially in the United States), i.e., in an analytical fashion, looking into truth-claims, arguments, propositions, inner logical consistency, etc.

The Mainland camp seems to see the Hawaii camp’s argument for a significant difference between the philosophical traditions as coming dangerously close to a claim of incommensurability. In fact, it has even been explicitly argued that “MacIntyre’s perception of incommensurability arises, at least in part, from his reliance on Hall and Ames’s ‘aesthetic’ interpretation of the *Analects*” (Slingerland 2001, 99). Thus, these two debates are clearly intimately related, even revolving around the very same issues.

In these pages, I wish to advance the thought, already attributed to Yu Jiyuan, that difference does not constitute incommensurability. Furthermore, I emphasize on precisely this basis that there is no need at all to compromise or reduce our perception of difference for the sake of securing the possibility of meaningful comparative or intercultural philosophy. The penchant among many interpreters of non-Western philosophy to be wary of any claims of “radical” difference, I believe, rests upon the fear of incommensurability. Difference, even radical difference, however, does not entail incommensurability. A fundamental reason for the appearance of incommensurability is a profound Western philosophical flaw, namely the (explicit or implicit) assumption of the existence of a singular truth, which willy-nilly translates into a demand for one “correct” understanding of what philosophy is and does. My observations rest upon the very contrary assumption that philosophy is above all a *creative* enterprise, not one that aims at the discovery of

a singular and eternal truth, and that the meaning it delivers to its “consumers” depends upon the context in which they are placed. As Jana Rošker has argued, what philosophy is *not* is

a tool for finding truth, but rather a means for an endless search for constantly changing truths. The task of philosophy is not to establish an objective and eternally valid truth. Because of the situational and emotional nature of human understanding, these truths necessarily always remain merely partial. [...] Instead of being a “hardcore science”, which implies simple justifications and monotonous confirmations of what already exists, it is and should be a constructive, creative and unending critique of reality. (Rošker 2021, 139)

Thus, I argue, in order to make proper use of the philosophical resources available to us around the world, we need to acknowledge, in a more comprehensive manner, the multiple dimensions at play in *any* act of interpretation, not just one that involves different cultures. This calls for both a “loosening up” and “expansion” of the traditional or mainstream understanding of philosophy, which simultaneously suits the demand for an appreciation of philosophy originating outside of the Euro-American cultural sphere.¹ Consequently, the question of the “proper methods” to be used is one that is still locked inside the parochial presumptions of traditional Euro-American philosophy, as it already assumes that such methods can be found or established once and for all. Such an approach exemplifies yet another instance of imposing upon non-Western philosophy the aims and aspirations of Western philosophy. Indeed, an open engagement with non-Western philosophy may reveal these aims and aspirations to be outdated and inappropriate in a multicultural world.

My intention here is to make use of relatively recent developments and suggestions in European discussions of the nature of a text and how to interpret it, in

1 Heiner Roetz expressed his disapproval of this formulation when I presented an earlier version of this paper at a conference held in Berlin in December 2021. However, by “loosening up” I certainly do not mean that “anything goes”, but merely that the mainstream aims and approaches of Western (especially analytical) philosophy do not need to dictate our global philosophical endeavours. Roetz is committed to the Enlightenment project of realizing a universal or unitary philosophy (cf. Roetz 2017, 74), while acknowledging that important Enlightenment notions that he both endorses and seeks to uncover in ancient Chinese philosophy, such as reason, subject, autonomy and transcendence, do take on their own specific (cultural) forms (Roetz 2016). This is a most admirable aim, to which I am not at all opposed, but I would still suggest, first, that we should carefully study the Chinese forms and variants of these notions, as it is likely that they can be used to refine our own; and secondly, that other kinds of discourses ought not to be stifled for the sake of this one.

order to articulate *what it is that we do* when people like myself, originating and being formed in a largely Euro-American context, work with texts from a distant culture, such as the Chinese one. As I see it, the difference does not necessarily present itself as an obstacle for interpretation or understanding, but rather as a hermeneutic opportunity. As will be clear, it is not my intention to reject Western interpretations of non-Western philosophy, but I argue that such interpretations must in the very least be properly contextualized, i.e., the grounds upon which they operate made explicit and conscious, for them to be sufficiently meaningful as proposals for understanding.

I will suggest three features that I believe are helpful for formulating the process taking place when engaging in comparative or intercultural philosophy. The three features are “distanciation”, a term elaborated by Paul Ricoeur, “the fusion of horizons” coined by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and “*différance*” which is of course a term belonging to Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction.

After discussing these three features, I will then return to the topic of comparative and intercultural philosophy in an attempt to summarize my main arguments.

Distanciation and the Productivity of Distance

The term “distanciation” owes its origins to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics but is elaborated in more detail by Paul Ricoeur. Gadamer, in his discussion of the interpretation of ancient Greek texts in *Truth and Method*, suggests that temporal distance is not necessarily an obstacle for understanding a text. By having an overview of the history that has elapsed since the composition of the text, we can reveal prejudices in it that were not available to its contemporaries. Thus, the different perspectives and approaches of the interpreters enable the disclosure of new meanings of the text. In this way, far from being a “gaping ravine”, Gadamer says that we ought to “recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive opportunity for understanding” (Gadamer 1990, 302). There is, in other words, a certain “productivity of temporal distance” as Georgia Warnke, a well-known commentator on Gadamer, has called it (Warnke 1987, 114–15). I would like to suggest a slight twist of this idea, namely the “productivity of cultural distance”, that is to say, a “liberated” reading of texts that entails recontextualization of its content, which takes advantage of being “outside”, so to speak, the culture within which the text was produced. While I shall return to this interpretive mode soon, let me briefly discuss Ricoeur’s elaboration first.

According to Ricoeur's analysis, distanciation takes four interesting forms:

1. First, the meaning in the text surpasses the event of the discourse, i.e., it can make it clearer through grammatical and syntactic devices.
2. Second, the text does not necessarily express the speaker's intention: "What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies" (Ricoeur 2016, 139).
- 3 Thirdly, a written text has no specific audience. It is potentially addressed to anyone who can read and is therefore decontextualized from its social and historical conditions of production, opening itself to a vast dimension of different readings.
4. The fourth form, which intrigues me most, concerns the "emancipation of the text from the limits of ostensive reference" (ibid., xxv). In other words, since the original conditions do not apply anymore, the text can be made meaningful in other contexts.

Distanciation is for Gadamer a move involving alienation (*Verfremdung*), but at the same time a necessary presupposition for the sciences, because it involves a certain objectification of that which is being observed. It appears to me that this conception can be traced back to Max Weber.² However, I do not want to emphasize an understanding of distanciation as a move toward objectification in such a scientific sense. According to Ricoeur, this aporia between alienated distanciation and belonging is at the heart of Gadamerian hermeneutics. To Gadamer it is a painful but inescapable move toward an ontology of sorts. My aim, however, is not objectification in a traditional (post-17th century) "scientific" understanding, but rather a description of what actually takes place in the act of interpretation, and, finally, how the event of such an act can entail a certain "philosophical liberation", a creation upon a text, which involves its recontextualization and even appropriation.

I believe that a part of the disagreement mentioned earlier between the two American camps of non-Western philosophy has precisely to do with very different visions of what philosophy is or how it is understood. Proponents of the analytical camp pursue philosophy as science, as a discipline that is supposed to reveal truths

2 In the first few pages of his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber discusses the ability to "distance" oneself from one's object, to consider it in "abstract" or "objectified" terms, which, he says, enables its rationalized systematization by applying means to a given end (Weber 1988a, 1–4). However, and as Weber also argued, another consequence of such distanciation is that it alienates human beings from each other as well as from their natural surroundings. Through capitalist practice, everyone and everything becomes, to speak with Hartmut Rosa (2020, 5), "a point of aggression" in the sense of a rationalized objective to be exploited or brought under increased control.

and aim at objectivity in a traditional understanding of the term (cf. Rošker 2021, 30). They are therefore aiming at *the* correct interpretation of the text, seeking, to speak with Rudolf Schleiermacher's 19th century approach to interpretation, "to understand an author as well as and even better than he understands himself" (Ricoeur 2016, 6).³

The Hawaii camp, on the other hand, conceives philosophy to be a creative enterprise rather than a traditionally scientific one. According to this view, its task is primarily to generate approaches to the world that are meaningful to those who live in it. It requires the establishment of continuity and an evolving sense of signification. This establishment is less a discovery than an ongoing construction, while certainly a construction upon the platforms on which we have no choice but to build. As I will argue later, it can be formulated as the further clearing of the way in a Confucian or Chinese hermeneutical sense. Ricoeur clearly supports this liberating view with his elaboration on distanciation, in particular in the fourth dimension, with regard to the autonomy of the text. He says that it

encourages us to recognise a positive significance in *Verfremdung*, a significance which cannot be reduced to the nuance of decline which Gadamer tends to give to it. The autonomy of the text already contains the possibility that what Gadamer calls the "matter" of the text may escape from the finite intentional horizon of its author; in other words, thanks to writing, the "world" of the *text* may explode the world of the *author*. (ibid., 101)

Just like a work of art, Ricoeur continues, a text

transcends its own psycho-sociological conditions of production and thereby opens itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different socio-cultural conditions. In short, the text must be able, from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view, to "decontextualise" itself in such a way that it can be "recontextualised" in a new situation—as accomplished, precisely, by the act of reading. (ibid., 101)

This move from decontextualization to recontextualization is what he calls the "emancipation of the text" and a different understanding of objectification, one that evades the aporia involving *Verfremdung* precisely because of the recontextualization. This sort of objectification demands a passionate engagement on

3 The presumption to be able to reach an understanding of an author that is superior to his own goes back at least as far as to Kant. In his *Address to the German Nation*, Fichte also claimed that a German "can understand" a foreigner "completely, even better than he can understand himself" (cf. Bollnow 1979, 12).

behalf of the reader. It is even tempting to conceive of it as being influenced by Nietzsche's understanding of objectivity through a plurality of passionate perspectivism.⁴ Even Max Weber's methodological approaches, also influenced by Nietzsche and curiously neglected in modern scholarship, seem to be of relevance in this regard. The only attainable kind of "objectivity" to be gained when we try to figure out our empirical world of Heraclitean flux, Weber argued, is one whereby a finite part of it is singled out, one that is considered to be "worth knowing". In other words, any kind of objectivity necessarily depends on an evaluation of priority, which is ultimately always subjective (Weber 1988b, 171ff.).⁵

While Ricoeur's discussion offers other very appetizing features that we could call epistemological aspects of this hermeneutic process, I will not go elaborate on them on this occasion. Suffice it to say that he follows Heidegger in portraying *Verstehen*, understanding, as not necessarily an understanding of others but as a "structure of being-in-the-world". He says that

it is the projection of our ownmost possibilities at the very heart of the situations in which we find ourselves. [...] For what must be interpreted in a text is a *proposed world* which I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities. This is what I call the world of the text, the world proper to *this* unique text. (Ricoeur 2016, 104)

The text speaks to us, situated persons with certain interests, values, and preoccupations, here and now. I believe that Ricoeur's call for the "emancipation of the text" ought to appeal to us in our efforts to interpret texts such as the ancient Chinese ones. There is in any case no possibility for us to grasp the "true" meaning of such a text. Indeed, what does such truth *mean*? Where does it come from? Who can claim such truth and on what grounds? What is its *value*? Instead of striving for the aim of deciphering the text's true meaning, I would rather suggest rendering the text *truly meaningful* to those who seek to elucidate it, to us, and

4 Nietzsche's best known formulation of this epistemological view is probably the following from his *Genealogy of Morality*: "There is *only* a perspectival view of things, *only* a perspectival 'knowledge', and *the more* emotions we let express themselves about a certain subject, *the more* eyes, different eyes, behold that very same subject, the more perfect becomes our 'concept', our 'objectivity' of it." (Nietzsche 1988, 365)

5 "The concept of culture is a value concept. The empirical reality is 'culture' because and insofar as we associate it with value ideas, comprising those and only those parts of reality that become *meaningful* to us through this association. Only a minuscule part of reality that is being observed at any given time is highlighted by our interests through these value ideas, only it has meaning to us; [...] However, *what* is meaningful to us is of course not derived by any 'unconditioned' research of the empirical given, but its determination is a prerequisite for something being taken as an *object* of research." (Weber 1988b, 175–76)

speak with Ricoeur that we must aim at the “appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the text, its application (*Anwendung*) to the present situation of the reader” (ibid., 105). Appropriation in Ricoeur’s sense has nothing to do with an attempt to put oneself in the author’s shoes, but rests precisely upon the acknowledgement of its impossibility due to distanciation:

Thanks to distanciation by writing, appropriation no longer has any trace of affective affinity with the intention of the author. Appropriation is quite the contrary of contemporaneousness and congeniality: it is understanding at and through distance. (ibid., 105)

While “appropriation” has the meaning of “making one’s own” it must further be distinguished from what I am tempted to call “arrogation”. In the case of intercultural philosophy, this involves the attempt to impose upon the philosophy of another culture characteristics that are considered indispensable for philosophy in general, often because they happen to be seminal features of Western philosophy. While the intentions may be good and noble, i.e., to identify strands in the other philosophy that are believed to be of value, the danger is that more is being invented than discovered.

Distanciation enables a certain liberalization with regard to approaching classical works originating in a different culture from fresh points of view. These works can be burdened with such heavy history that it prevents their local readers from seeing potential signification that is contained in them. As I have argued elsewhere, as distanced interpreters

we are sometimes able to tease out hidden possibilities inherent in the ideas that have been inhibited by the discourse and phenomenal structures of reality in which they have been placed in their own culture. We may reach “objectivity” in the Chinese meaning of the word: the “guest’s eye view”, *keguan* 客觀. (Sigurðsson 2015, 9)

This is far from being an original idea. The Belgian–Australian sinologist Simon Leys had something very similar to say about how classics are approached. In the introduction to his translation of the *Confucian Analects*, he says that

the way in which every statement in a classic can gather the comments of posterity may be compared to a hook, or a peg on the wall of a cloakroom. Successive users of the cloakroom come one after the other and hang on the peg hats, coats, umbrellas, bags and whatnot; the load swells up, heavy, colourful, diversified, and eventually the hook disappears entirely under it.

For the native reader the classic is intricate and crowded, it is a place filled with people, and voices, and things and memories—vibrating with echoes. For the foreign reader, on the contrary, the classic often presents the forlorn aspect of the cloakroom after hours—an empty room with mere rows of bare hooks on a blank wall, and this extreme austerity, this stark and disconcerting simplicity, accounts in part for the paradoxical impression of *modernity* which he is more likely to experience. (Leys 2011, 317)

Think, in this regard, of the dominant Chinese understandings of Confucian philosophy that tend to identify it with the isolationist and reactionary nature of the Qing dynasty, and thus overlook its more creative and critical aspects. Incidentally, Leys also makes a note of this tendency:

Imperial Confucianism only extolled those statements from the Master that prescribed submission to the established authorities, whereas more essential notions were conveniently ignored. [...] As a result of these ideological manipulations, in modern times many enlightened and progressive-minded Chinese came spontaneously to associate the very name of Confucius with feudal tyranny; his doctrines became synonymous with obscurantism and oppression. (ibid., 314–15)

Certainly, the converse of approaching Chinese philosophy with fresh eyes is also possible—and certainly desirable. A Chinese reading of Plato, Aristotle, or Kant, for instance, may uncover novel and undiscovered aspects contained in their thought. A good case in point is Mou Zongsan's intricate and original interpretations of Kant's philosophy.

Différance and the Fusion of Horizons

There are two other well-known notions in recent theories of interpretation that I want to touch upon briefly in the hope that others find them worth developing further. One of them, I believe, complements distanciation, and deepens some of its strands, while the other may constrain, but not obstruct, the liberalization of the reading of a text that distanciation suggests, as discussed in the section above. The first of these is Derrida's *différance*, but I believe that a slightly modified version of it can function as a promising hermeneutic tool for a Western approach to Chinese (and other non-Western) philosophy. It may even serve as a limited parallel to what I take to be the traditional Chinese philosophical approach to interpretation. The second notion, namely Gadamer's "fusion of horizons", is

much more commonly invoked in the context of intercultural philosophy, but I feel compelled to make a few comments on its applicability here.

Différance is a hybrid concept pointing to the dual meaning of “difference” and “deference”, indicating, respectively, both spatial and temporal dimensions. The spatial refers to the inescapable difference between things in the world, and the temporal to the inevitable postponement of meaning that ensues from the sign as “deferred presence”, i.e., as being “conceivable only on the *basis* of the presence that it defers and *moving toward* the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate” (Derrida 1982, 9). This formulation appears to be in line with Ricoeur’s suggestion of recontextualization and appropriation, but *différance* goes even a little further. In the act of interpretation (or what we may call understanding), *différance* highlights in particular two important elements. Firstly, that there is necessarily an ultimately unbridgeable distance between the interpreter and interpreted; and secondly, that the meaning derived from what is being interpreted is necessarily a temporary meaning, applying to the particularity of present circumstances, of the discourse in which it finds itself, and thus, importantly, that something like an objective, final meaning *must be deferred to indefinitely*.

This usage of the term *différance* is, I believe, sufficiently in line with Derrida’s own original application, while certainly reformulated specifically for its role in communicating between distant traditions. As it happens, I believe that the very act of such adaptation is also in line with *différance* as a hermeneutic tool or concept that acknowledges that there can be no meaning without difference—no same without the other—and that there can be no absoluteness or completeness in any act of interpretation (cf. Thorsteinsson 2014, 159). The adoption of *différance* is therefore simultaneously an acknowledgment of the limiting role of the notion of truth, which is then for the most part discarded, deconstructed, or *at least* deferred. While truth is deferred, the emphasis is placed on the most appropriate or fitting interpretation of the philosophical teachings in light of the present circumstances. The question guiding us in our philosophical undertaking then becomes: how can we gain a useful and viable understanding of this philosophy?

One significant revelation of a *différance*-approach to the issue is that Western and Chinese philosophies cannot be reduced to the other in conceptual terms. This does not imply that they are incommensurable, because conceptual difference does not entail incommensurability but rather calls for intensified discussion and the ensuing fusion of horizons, to which I will turn shortly. The approach ought to act upon the attitude we take with us in our efforts to interpret between traditions, because what it points out to us is that a finalized meaning or interpretation of each is *a priori* unattainable. It is precisely the acceptance of such unattainability

that is the required opening for a meaningful and complementary Chinese-Western philosophical dialogue.

Let us now move to the hermeneutic notion of “fusion of horizons” that I believe both complements and constrains the liberalization arising from distanciation. Gadamer made it very clear, in his *Truth and Method*, that we cannot operate or approach anything at all except from some point of view. This refers to the concept of *Vorurteil*, “prejudgement”, as it is often called in English to distinguish it from the more pejorative “prejudice”. Gadamer himself does not make such a distinction, presumably because he wants to underline that the prejudgements that enable access to new things are as such not distinct from prejudice, except in their function. However, in order not to be fixed as rigid prejudice, they must be susceptible to modification as they engage dialectically with the unfamiliar text or object. This is what both Heidegger and Gadamer have called “the hermeneutic circle”. While our expectations of the other are inescapably always coloured by certain prejudices, the process of learning from the other also involves some degree of transformation or reinterpretation of those very expectations. The hermeneutic circle generates a “fusion of horizons”, which means that the new understandings gained from the other become part of the interpreter’s prejudices. At the same time, the interpreter’s horizon is expanded, giving rise to a new and more comprehensive hermeneutic circle. This is a continuous, and, needless to say, a never-ending process as long as we are engaged in an active, dialectical relationship with the “other”.

The term “horizon” originally comes from phenomenology, where it has been applied by both Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to refer to the conditions of perception, or more specifically the set of expectations that accompany the perception of an object. Perceptions are complemented with expectations. Upon hearing a sound, we immediately associate it with something we know and have experienced, and when seeing a familiar object, we do not need to see all of it to be able to recognize it. Our expectation, so to speak, “fills in” whatever may be missing from the perception as such, and when we change our perspective, the horizon also changes. Horizons are therefore “the conditions that provide the meaning for the object, conditions which need to be made conscious for a proper understanding of the object” (Vessey 2009, 536). This is important, because it sheds light on horizons not only as limits of our possible vision—which they of course are—but even more so as continuously expanding channels of understanding. A horizon is everything that can be seen, and this horizon can be expanded so that we see even more. As Gadamer puts it, “A horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further” (Gadamer 1990, 250). Such advancement, however, regards the proper contextualization of the object to be understood, i.e., that it be associated with the historical and

cultural background in which it is produced. Without such an association or contextualization, the danger is that one mistakes the object for something already known or experienced, or as Gadamer puts it: “A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him” (ibid., 307). This could apply to the penchant to perceive aspects of Chinese philosophy to be identical to Western ones, while they may in fact have arisen for very different reasons.

The fusion of horizons takes place when we have the capacity to use the context of the subject matter to gain a different perspective on it. It involves surpassing the initial understanding or interpretation and realizing the contingency of that interpretation. Thus, it can be considered as a limiting factor for the “liberalization” of the interpretation of a culturally distant text. Nevertheless, I do not consider it antithetical to it. These are two different strands operating simultaneously in an act of interpretation that is simultaneously creative *and* responsible.

Concluding Remarks: The Problem of Truth and a Note on Chinese Hermeneutics

As has been alluded to in this paper, I consider it to be a major problem with the traditional Western interpretive approach that it is geared at truth. This would not be a problem if truth were understood, say, relationally or depending on the context each time. But this is unfortunately most often not the case. Truth is generally understood to refer to the *one and correct* way to understand the object under investigation. The inescapable consequence is that such an interpretive approach ends up being so narrow and rigid that it is in fact an obstacle to an openness to other traditions. Consider, for instance, Rudolf Schleiermacher once again. According to his explicit theory of interpretation presented in the 19th century, he claims that “hermeneutics is the art to avoid misunderstanding” (cf. Gadamer 1990, 188). “To avoid misunderstanding” means to bring to light the true understanding concealed in the text. Schleiermacher’s objective was to grasp the origin of the thought that underlies the text, access the author’s intention, and thereby get to the “true” meaning of the text. This reveals not only the conspicuous tendency in Western thought to focus on singular truth, but also another questionable one—to equate “origins” with truth.

What I would like to call classical Confucian or perhaps simply Chinese hermeneutics seems generally to proceed very differently. Its proponents could surely accept the description of the first step of Schleiermacher’s objective: “grasping the origin of thought that underlies the text”. But this merely constitutes the first step, then it goes to developing, adapting, and, most importantly, realizing and implementing.

This sheds a light on why the classical Chinese tradition does not rely on definitions, at least not in the sense of Western logic. Jana Rošker (2021, 81) correctly points out that Chinese logic is first and foremost relational instead of being substance-oriented. But the Chinese mode of relationality is also implicitly dynamic because of the sense of the incessant flow of time and change. While definitions in a Western context are timeless, universal, and ultimately absolute, nothing can be timeless, universal, or absolute in a Chinese context. A vital aspect of the Chinese philosophical sensibility concerns timeliness and appropriate responses to the situation at hand. All serious students of classical Chinese philosophy are aware of this vital background cosmology, or “daoology” as I prefer to call it (cf. Sigurðsson 2020, 23ff.).

It seems therefore natural that the objective of the Chinese scholarly tradition of writing commentaries to canonical texts is not necessarily to explain the ultimate meaning of the text by getting to its “original” and “only true” meaning, as is usually the case with Western commentaries. Instead, they continue the dialogue in the hermeneutical sense that the ideas expressed in the texts invoke the commentators’ own ideas and inspire them to elaborate them further. There is much scholarship on the historicity of Chinese philosophy that seems to corroborate that interpretation is primarily understood as the continuous adaptation and readjustment of the philosophical ideas to concrete reality. For example, Huang Chun-Chieh says, speaking of the Song-Ming-Confucians’ reading of the *Mengzi*:

During the prolonged dialogues back and forth among [Zhu Xi] and his disciples we never find them regarding the *Mengzi* as an objective text unrelated to their personal lives. They all blended their life experiences into their various readings of the *Mengzi*. (Huang 2001, 258)

Certainly, there are many exceptions from such efforts and aims in Chinese intellectual history, and an ongoing creative interpretation and reinterpretation did not always take place. However, the more extreme exceptions can be attributed to rigid state control and difficult political periods during which intellectuals had limited freedom to exert their interpretive capabilities. For instance, limitations to creativity already emerge in Confucianism after it became the state ideology during the Han dynasty. François Jullien (2000, 212) points out, for instance, that under the Han, Confucianism’s “success was its downfall. [...] The Confucian openness is [...] transformed into its opposite: the codification of moralism.” Huang Chun-Chieh (2007, 42) has also expressed this most aptly: “After the establishment of the Han Empire, when Confucianism was designated the orthodox state ideology, the Confucianization of politics in the ideal of

Confucians was soon turned into the politicization of Confucianism.” The situation for intellectuals during the late Ming and Qing dynasties was even more constrained, as Zhu Weizheng (1990, 123) has pointed out in his discussion of the rather rigorous ideological control exerted by the imperial authorities during this time. In contrast, he says, Han classical scholars “researched the classics not in the search for truth, or to recover the true historical character of the Confucian texts, but to use them” (ibid., 127).

Codification of philosophical thinking is always a temptation, be it in the West, in China or anywhere else, because it appears to mitigate the requirement to think, at least creatively. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Sigurðsson 2021), Confucian philosophy may quite possibly be too demanding for most of us, and therefore it is not surprising that many of those who have engaged with it have resorted to imitation, literalism, and historical orthodoxy. Some periods in Chinese history, and quite possibly the history of other cultures that adopted Confucianism, encouraged such tendencies more than others. Though we may be experiencing such a tendency again today, recall chapter 23 in the *Daodejing*: “A gusty wind cannot last all morning, and a sudden downpour cannot last all day [...] If even Heaven and Earth cannot go on forever, much less can man” (Lau 1963). Contrary to what seems to be happening in China now, the overall philosophical tendency in Chinese hermeneutics (which I think will prevail, but this is also up to us) has been to understand canonical texts creatively and contextually depending on circumstances, which implicitly temporalizes the truth of the interpretation—we could also say *defers* truth. At the same time there is clear awareness of the distinction between the interpreters and the object of interpretation.

What we need in Western philosophy is something comparable—and I suggest that distancing, *différance* and fusion of horizon may be good starting points for generating more liberalized and productive interpretations, ones that reflect the urgency and willingness to learn from other world-cultures. If Alasdair MacIntyre had adopted approaches of this kind, he would have seen that while there are certainly clear differences between the approaches of Confucian and Western communitarian philosophers, the differences can be used for the benefit of each. Therefore, in his paper on Confucian and Aristotelian virtue ethics he would not have talked about incommensurability, but about *complementarity*. It is my claim that such complementary reading—one that still acknowledges and respects the differences—is precisely what a meaningful and productive intercultural dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy needs to be based on.

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Xu Fuguan's Methodology for Interpreting Chinese Intellectual History: An Original Innovation or the Impact of Gadamerian Lines of Thought?

Téa SERNELJ*

Abstract

The article examines the research methodology of Chinese intellectual history developed by the Modern Confucian Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904–1982). His novel methodological approach differed significantly from the methodology advocated by Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950), the founder of the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica in 1928, who advocated a rigorous adoption of Western scientific methodology in historical research, based exclusively on a philological perspective. Fu Sinian's methodological approach, however, prevailed among Chinese historians in mainland China in the first half of the 20th century and in Taiwan after 1949. Xu Fuguan was highly critical of such an approach, considering it inadequate and inappropriate because it did not allow for conceptual interpretations on the one hand, and disregarded the contextualization and historical development of concepts and meanings on the other. Xu's methodology is based on the application of the hermeneutic circle, which Xu calls dynamic and structural holism from a comparative perspective. In his methodology, *a method of seeking embodied experience* (*zhui tiyan de fangfa* 追體驗的方法) and *intersubjectiveness* (*zhuti jianxing* 主題間性) play a crucial role as they enable actualization of and communication with ancient thinkers in present times. However, Xu's methodological approaches are also strikingly similar to Gadamer's method of the fusion of horizons and Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle, which begs the question whether his critique of Fu's adoption of Western methods was not based upon hypocritical grounds.

Keywords: Xu Fuguan, methodology, dynamic and structural holism, the method of seeking embodied experience, contextualization, hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons, Gadamer

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Xu Fuguanova interpretacija kitajske idejne zgodovine: izvirna inovacija ali vpliv Gadamerjeve miselnosti

Izvleček

Članek obravnava metodologijo raziskovanja kitajske intelektualne zgodovine, ki jo je razvil moderni konfucijanec Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904–1982). Njegov novi metodološki pristop se je bistveno razlikoval od metodologije, ki jo je zagovarjal Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950), ustanovitelj Inštituta za zgodovino in filologijo Academia Sinica (ustanovljen leta 1928), ki je temeljila na doslednem prevzemanju zahodne znanstvene metodologije v proučevanju zgodovine, osnovane izključno na filološki perspektivi. Fu Sinianov metodološki pristop je imel izjemen vpliv med kitajskimi zgodovinarji na celinski Kitajski v prvi polovici 20. stoletja in na Tajvanu po letu 1949. Xu Fuguan je bil zelo kritičen do takšnega pristopa, saj je menil, da je neustrezen in neprimeren, ker ni dopuščal konceptualnih razlag na eni strani ter je zanemarjal kontekstualizacijo in zgodovinski razvoj konceptov in pomenov na drugi strani. Xujeva metodologija temelji na uporabi hermenevtičnega kroga, ki ga Xu imenuje dinamični in strukturni holizem s primerjalne perspektive. Metoda iskanja utelešene izkušnje (*zhui ti-yan de fangfa* 追體驗的方法) in intersubjektivnosti (*zhuti jianxing* 主題間性) ima v njegovi metodologiji ključno vlogo, saj omogoča aktualizacijo in komunikacijo s starimi misleci v današnjem času. Xujevi metodološki pristopi so osupljivo podobni Gadamerjevi metodi zlitja horizontov in Schleiermacherjevemu hermenevtičnemu krogu, kar postavlja vprašanje, ali je njegova kritika Fujevega prevzemanja zahodnih metod temeljila na hipokritski osnovi.

Ključne besede: Xu Fuguan, metodologija, dinamični in strukturni holizem, metoda iskanja utelešene izkušnje, kontekstualizacija, hermenevtični krog, zlitje horizontov, Gadamer

Introduction

The modern Confucian Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904–1982) was a historian of the intellectual tradition of pre-Qin China, focusing his studies on its socio-cultural characteristics. He was also an outstanding philologist, political scientist, as well as literary and art critic. Within the framework of the history of the ideational tradition, he naturally studied philosophy extensively, but did not create a philosophical system of his own. He was the only one among the second generation of Modern Confucians to contradict the notion that the renewal of Confucianism required the construction of a new ontology and metaphysics.

However, this renewal of Confucianism was to serve as a basis for preserving cultural tradition and identity in the context of China's modernization in the 20th century, which was significantly influenced by Western intellectual discourses.

Xu's argument against the construction of metaphysics and ontology was based on the view that the pragmatic core of traditional Chinese thought did not lead to

the construction of a coherently structured metaphysical system as developed by the ancient Greeks. According to Xu, the reason for this was that in ancient China the idea of ethics developed directly from mythological society and was based on the divine core of the human being. Therefore, ethics did not have anything to do with metaphysics, let alone religion. According to Xu, ethics and morality, as well as all the central Confucian virtues, developed on the basis of the concept of concerned consciousness (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識)¹.

Xu Fuguan extensively studied the socio-political theory of traditional and modern China and advocated the idea that the only solution for China in the modern era was to establish democracy. Only in this way, he argued, could the authoritarian regime that prevailed in China after the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 CE) not only enable Chinese society to participate in a globalized world, but also contribute an ethical system based on democratic values, namely the value of human beings and the protection of their rights, as well as self-cultivation and reflection on the moral self, which derive from the original Confucianism. In this regard, Xu Fuguan put enormous efforts into the historical and textual analysis of the classical Confucian texts to elucidate and promote the democratic core of original Confucianism, and he advocated for its preservation and application in modern China.

In this article, however, we will examine Xu Fuguan's methodology of exploring the Chinese intellectual tradition, which will reveal his supposedly innovative and creative approach to interpreting the historical development and conceptual meaning of Confucian thought. In this context, the present paper is focused upon the question of whether these approaches were not created under direct or indirect impact of the European hermeneutical theories of the time.

The Problem of Methodology Used in Historical Research in the First Half of the 20th Century

After 1949, Modern Confucians in exile were concerned with the problem of where Chinese culture was going and what would happen to it. For them, Confucianism represented not only the explanatory system to describe the world, but also a program for guiding transformational change in the world (Huang 2018b,

1 Xu's analysis and interpretation of the concept of concerned consciousness are certainly among his greatest contributions to our understanding of the ancient Chinese ideational history. This also answers the question of why a monotheistic religion was never established in China, even though the means of production and relationships were at such a level that this reversal occurred in other highly developed civilizations during the same historical period. For a detailed analysis and explanation and of this concept see Huang (2018a), and Sernelj (2020).

II /2). They thus sought a solution to the suffering China endured in the 20th century based on Confucian studies. The ideals of Modern Confucians were not limited to striving for the revival and rehabilitation of the ideational tradition from which they had emerged. It was clear to them that the intellectual process of modernizing Confucianism could only begin on the basis of its synthesis with the ideas imported from Euro-American philosophy, since this was the cultural background from which modernization actually emerged. The presupposed acceptance of the Western models of democracy and science, which were supposed to lead China from a backward to a modernized society, therefore led to a new reflection on the role and importance of the Confucian intellectual tradition. The main leitmotif of Modern Confucians was the revival of the traditional Chinese intellectual tradition based on the original Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, combined with a deeper knowledge of Western philosophical concepts and cultural characteristics. Of course, this process meant the reproduction of a Confucian intellectual system of thought, albeit one based on the reinterpretation and redefinition of Confucian concepts by Western philosophical systems (Chang et al. 2018, 53).

In the process of modernization, the second generation took the position that China needed to preserve and develop important elements of its own traditions, as these contained the seeds of its democratic and scientific development. Unlike most other Chinese intellectual currents of the time, which believed that Confucian ideology was the main obstacle to China's modernization, the second generation was convinced that it was compatible with both science and democracy, and that East Asian societies would not succeed in developing modern democratic social systems unless they embraced and took into account various segments of the Confucian tradition (ibid., 97).

In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a controversy between Modern Confucians working in Taiwan and Hong Kong and the liberal current of Taiwanese intellectuals led by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) over whether Confucianism and Chinese culture were at all suitable for the development of democracy, science, and technology. This current also advocated complete Westernization and held that there was nothing in Chinese political thought worth studying and adopting in the process of modernization.² Modern Confucians, however, held that these elements were not at the forefront of traditional Confucianism, but this did not mean that

2 Xu Fuguan sharply criticized this liberal current led by Hu Shi and got himself into a lot of trouble. This was probably one of the reasons why he lost his position at Donghai University Taizhong in 1970 (he had been a professor of Chinese literature there since 1955), because Hu Shi, as president of Academia Sinica (from 1957 to 1962), was very influential in political circles even after his death in 1962 (Lee 1998, 130).

it hindered the modernization of Chinese society. Taiwanese liberals took the opposite view, arguing that modernization required an end to the Confucian way of thinking (Rošker 2019, 255).

In an attempt to find a solution to the crisis, they tried to revive Confucianism by either drawing on the thought of Kant and Hegel or seeking the basis of a Confucian renewal of Chinese culture in a reinterpretation of the history of Chinese thought. According to Huang Chun-chieh (2018b, II/4–18), Modern Confucianism from Hong Kong and Taiwan can also be seen as a (new) methodology. Its representatives criticized, on the one hand, the Chinese hermeneutics developed during the reign of Emperors Qianlong 乾隆 (1735–1796) and Jiaqing 嘉慶 (1796–1820), the so-called Qian-Jia School³ (乾嘉學派), and, on the other hand, the scientism deriving from the adoption of Western knowledge.

Xu Fuguan strongly opposed the textual criticism of the Qing-Jia School and its recourse to philological and phonological methods, the study of language, bibliography, and the compilation of classics. According to Xu, the Qian-Jia School completely neglected the study of human reason, relationships between the individual and others, harmonious coexistence, and the personal practice of what had already been understood through previous study, the themes that prevailed from the early Zhou dynasty to the Qing dynasty. Xu believed that their method contained a realist dimension, but their kind of realism was too exaggerated because it did not take into account the real historical contexts of the texts. Xiong Shili and Qian Mu also rejected the Qian-Jia method, which was prevalent in the adoption of Western scientific methodology (ibid.). In other words, the problem of methodology, or lack thereof, was at the centre of intellectual debate in the first half of the 20th century. He Bingsong 何炳松 (1890–1946), for example, complained in his work *The Methodology of Historical Research*, published in 1927, that although Chinese historians recorded many important things, they did not pay enough attention to the theory and methodology of their research. Therefore, his book was to introduce the methodology of Western historical scholarship (ibid.). A year later, in 1928, Academia Sinica was founded and humanities research, including historiography, entered a new and important phase. Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950) who was a follower of Hu Shi' and the founder of the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica, clearly explained the goal of Academia, which was to develop contemporary sciences rather than to promote the so-called traditional disciplines. The goal was to treat the study of history and philology like the natural sciences. This orientation,

3 Also called the school of Han Studies (*Hanxue* 漢學) that interpreted Confucian texts mainly with philological methods (*xungu* 訓詁) and relied exclusively on the originals of the transmitted Confucian Classics that were created during the Han dynasty (see Theobald 2022). Modern Confucians, however, did not consider Han dynasty Confucianism to be part of a true Confucian tradition.

namely the development of contemporary sciences, was closely related to scientism, a current that was prevalent in Chinese thought at the beginning of the first half of the 20th century. Fu Sinian and other researchers began to introduce the German school of historical science, which subsequently led to the study of historical material becoming the main content of historical research at the Institute (ibid.).

Fu argued that modern historiography is precisely the study of historical sources, with the natural sciences providing the necessary tool to put the historical material in order. Fu Sinian's goal was to explain questions about the history of thought using a philological perspective, since philosophy is a by-product of language (an argument adopted from the West). Fu Sinian's approach to historiographical research also gained acceptance among historians in Taiwan after 1949, and was very influential. This positivist approach to historical research, adopted from the German school, was strongly advocated by Fu. He rejected metaphysics and excluded all interpretations of history outside historiographical research. For him, the basis of historiography was the description of empirical facts rather than the interpretation of the meaning of historical facts, i.e., he rigorously distinguished between "subjective philosophy and moral values" and the "objective study of historical material" (ibid., 20).

Xu Fuguan strongly opposed and criticized Fu's approach. He argued that such a method of textual criticism in studying the history of thought is unable to capture its dynamic process of development (ibid.). In the first chapter of his book *The History of Chinese Philosophy of Human Nature* (*Zhongguo renxing lunshi* 中國人性論史) published in 1969, where he presents his methodological approach to the study of intellectual history, he stated:

In recent decades, some Chinese scholars working in the field of intellectual history have advocated the adoption of the "philological perspective as a method for explaining intellectual history issues". The basis for this philological perspective is a biased theory advocated by a handful of Western scholars who consider "philosophy as a by-product of language". Chinese scholars associated this philological perspective with the marginal current of thought, the Qian-Jia School. Those who use this kind of method often analyse the essential vocabulary of the history of thought and, following the procedures of ancient commentaries, try to find out its original form and pronunciation, and believe they have found its original meaning. They use the original meaning thus found to explain the content of certain historical currents of thought. Since Fu Sinian held a dominant position in this field of research in this era, his work *The Study of Ancient Teachings on Nature and Destiny* can be regarded as a representative work of this school. But in examining the semantic content of vocabulary, he not only neglects

the fact that the original meaning of a term changes between its initial use and the emergence of a particular current of thought using the term, but he also ignores the fact that within a given epoch the same vocabulary term often has different connotations within different currents of thought. Moreover, and this is particularly important, this method neglects a fundamental idea of philology itself: The original meaning of a term, namely at the time of its creation, does not include all its contemporary meanings at a later time, and may even ignore some important ones.⁴ (Xu 1969, I/1-2)

For Xu, the error of Fu's method of applying a philological perspective is that he ignores the development of concepts. Therefore, he developed his own methodology of dynamic holism, which places concepts in the holistic context of historical development. In this way, one cannot extract the concepts or the meanings of characters from the system of thought of the thinkers or from the atmosphere of the epoch and return to their original meaning by making an isolated statistical analysis. In analysing and interpreting the history of the Chinese ideational tradition, he introduced an allegedly new methodology based on a consistent consideration of the hermeneutic circle, and he himself called his methodology dynamic and structural holism (*ibid.*, 22).

Xu Fuguan's Methodology of Dynamic and Structural Holism

The two fundamental dimensions of Xu's methodology are his holistic approach and a comparative perspective.

The essential meaning of Xu's holism is to understand the whole and its parts in their concrete historical contexts. In his research on intellectual history, Xu reflects on the significance of historical concepts by emphasizing the concreteness of their historical context as a whole and also the specifics of that context (Huang 2018b, II / 14). The interaction between a whole and its parts is a methodological principle

4 幾十年來，中國有些治思想史的人，主張採用（以語言學的觀點，解釋一個思想史的問題的方法）。其根據係來自西方少數人以為（哲學乃語言之副產品）的一偏之輪，以於我國乾嘉學派末流相結托。關於哲學於語言的關係，亦即是思想於語言的關係，乃是互相制約，互相影響的關係，這裡不進一步去涉入到此一問題。我現在所要指出的是，採用這種方法的人，常常是把思想史中的重要詞彙，順著訓詁途徑，找出它的原形原音，以得出它的原始意義；再由這種原始意義去解釋歷史中某一思想的內容。傅斯年的姓名古訓辯證，因為他當時在學派界中所佔的權力性的地位，正可以作為這一排的典範著作。但夷考其實，這不僅忽略了由原義到某一思想成立時，其內容已有時間的發展演變；更忽略了同一個名詞，在同一個時代，也常由不同的思想而賦於以不同的內容。尤其重要的，此一方法，忽略了語言學本身的一頓重大事實，即是語原的本身，也並不能表示它當時所應包含的全部意義，乃至重要意義。

that Xu uses to understand different currents of thought in ancient China. When he examined literature and thought, he placed them in the socio-political and economic context of each era, and conversely, when he examined the socio-political and economic structure of a particular era, he examined it through literature and thought. He defined this approach as a dynamic methodology and a comparative perspective, and the comparative perspective is also called structural holism (*ibid.*, 15). His holistic methodology thus consists of dynamic and structural holism, with dynamic holism characterized by constant change and development.

Xu's structural holism is based on the idea that a structural unit is an entity composed of parts of classical texts, a system of thought, and reality. Xu believes that the interpretation and criticism of texts are not sufficient to understand ancient Chinese thought. Therefore, it is necessary to apply the method of structural unity in the study, which, as we shall see, corresponds to Schleiermacher's method of the hermeneutic circle, although Xu does not refer to him directly. As mentioned above, Xu opposed the textual criticism and exegesis of the Qian-Jia method and held, according to Huang (*ibid.*, 25), that the researcher must use the circular movement of the hermeneutic circle, which connects the parts and the whole, in order to penetrate into the universe of thought of people who lived in the past. In his work *Collected Writings on Chinese Intellectual History* (*Zhongguo sixiangshi lunji* 中國思想史論集), Xu explains in detail his method of structural holism:

The phrase is composed of words, and therefore, to understand the meaning of the phrase, one must understand each of its words. The chapter is composed of phrases, and therefore, to understand the meaning of the chapter, one must understand each of its phrases. The book is composed of chapters, and so to understand the whole book, one must understand meaning of each chapter. This is the way the Ancient's books are to be read. The process is similar with the accumulation that starts with a part and progressively gathers the comprehension of the whole. At the stage of commencing, one can use the studies that Qing literati called exegesis and textual criticism. However, one must be aware that it is impossible to understand the whole without knowing its parts, that is to say phrases. This kind of comprehension is only a minimal one. In order to develop it to a greater extent, it is necessary to return and determine the meaning of each phrase, which constitutes a part, and its movement must start from the totality that is the text. In this way, the meaning of a word is determined from the phrase this word is part of, the meaning of a phrase from the chapter this phrase is part of, the meaning of a chapter from the book this chapter is part of, and the meaning of a book from the whole

thought of the author. This is the work of determining the parts from the text as a whole. This is what Zhao Qi 趙崎 (108–201) called the endeavour “to go deep into the author’s thought, so to understand the author’s texts” (*Mengzi tici*, General Preface of Commentaries on Mencius). This is the necessary second stage of the study, and one cannot reach it solely by means of accomplishing the study of exegesis and textual criticism developed by Qing literati. (Xu in Huang 2018b, II/26)

His method of analysing the history of ideas can be summarized in two points (*ibid.*):

- (a) Every system of thought is a structural and holistic network of meanings, constructed in such a way that it derives from individual parts of meanings and passes from them to the whole.
- (b) Since the system of thought is a network of meanings shared by the researcher and the object under study, a dialogical connection is established between them that creates a mutual or intersubjective relationship.

This second point is also what Xu calls the “method of seeking embodied experience” (*zhui tiyan de fangfa* 追體驗的方法), which he believes should be mastered by all who research the history of the ideational tradition, since it is possible to contact the spiritual (intellectual) cosmos of the pre-Qin thinkers and the past from afar (i.e., the present).

According to Xu, researchers who study the history of the ideational tradition must start with a concrete thing, i.e., a written work, and then move to the abstract level, i.e., thinking or reflecting on that work. At the same time, we should also start with the abstraction of thought and move to the concrete reality of human life and its time. When we go through all these stages, the author of the work and the work can reappear in ourselves and the time we live in. According to Xu, this means that we not only study classical works, but also have in mind a dialogue with the authors of these. Thus, for the researchers of the Chinese ideational tradition, the thought system of the pre-Qin thinkers has no objective existence, but there must be an intersubjective (*zhuti jianxing* 主題間性) connection between them. At the same time, the deeper one penetrates into the intersubjective system of meaning, the more one can put oneself into the thinking of the authors of the classical works one is studying, thus thoroughly expanding one’s own horizons.

The second dimension of Xu’s structural holism deals with the question of human thought and reality. Xu holds that there exists a continuous interaction between human thought and reality that forms a holistic structure in which the two elements are inseparable. This is explained in more detail in the following quote:

The genesis of a person's thinking is often influenced by four main factors. The first one is the person's temperament; the second is the school of thought to which the person belongs as well as the depth of the person's work; the third is the context of his or her epoch; and the fourth is the person's life. The influence of these four important factors is different in each thinker, for some is considerable, for others minimal. At the same time, there is also a reciprocal influence between these four essential elements, therefore one cannot determine an author's thinking from a single, isolated element. (Xu in Huang 2018b, II/28)

His point was to emphasize that the study of the history of ideas must always take into account the socioeconomic and political context in which thinkers lived. According to Xu, the history of a person is a painful record of the struggle between reality and that person's thoughts or ideas, while for Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan, for example, history is actually the process of the continuous Way of Heaven (*tian dao*). While Xu Fuguan treats a person as a subject struggling according to or against historical processes, Tang and Mou see a person as a transcendent being. This shows the essential difference between Tang's and Mou's tendency to construct a moral metaphysics, while Xu's tendency is just the opposite (*ibid.*, 30). Xu Fuguan's method of studying thought is to "discuss ideas through socio-political history".

Comparative Perspective

Because Xu conceives of thought and social reality as two interconnected dimensions of his structural holism, he is able to present original ideas and commentary on different orientations of thought in a very concrete way. According to Xu, only from a comparative perspective is it possible to truly grasp the reasons for the existence of a particular school of thought. He uses the latter because he pays much attention to the specific character of the history of the ideational tradition. He thus believes that the study of Chinese culture and thought must start precisely from its specificity, for only in this way can its essence be clearly revealed.

According to Xu, the peculiarity of Chinese culture and thought and its difference from Western culture lies in the fusion of the subjective and the objective, the individual and the community, which prevails in the Chinese tradition of ideas. In Chinese culture, a person's self-cultivation and the cultivation of the external world form a unity and are not two separate things. Only on the basis of a real understanding of the peculiarities of Chinese concepts of ideas, which, according to Xu, are always a product of the socio-political factors of a

particular time and constantly change throughout history, can researchers of the history of ideas take the next step and compare the Chinese tradition of ideas with the Western one (*ibid.*, 32).

In Xu's holistic methodology, the individual research questions are considered as a whole or interconnected. Accordingly, concepts are best understood by examining them in their space-time context. According to Huang, his interpretive method, which he applies to the analysis and interpretation of Chinese classics, can also be called the interpretive method of contextualization.

This method consists of two procedures. In the first, he places Confucian thought in a historical context to examine its interaction with the society of the time. In the second procedure, he analyses Confucian thought by situating it in the present and, through this interpretation, gives new meaning to the classical works. With these two methodological approaches, Xu's analysis of Confucian classics, Confucian commentaries, and Confucians themselves does not separate them from the actual reality in which they lived and worked.

In Xu's works, we find two premises that he states as the basis for his position. According to Xu, a person is a historical being. He also points out that the Chinese way of thinking is characterized by a tendency to turn to reality. A person is endowed with historicity and his existence is neither abstract nor universal. In his articles, Xu supports Sima Qian's understanding of the complexity, multidimensionality, and historical character of a person, and believes that one is not someone who lives outside the world, but a being who actively participates in reality and its productive activities. For Xu, the individual lives in specific and concrete historical circumstances, so that one's existence is influenced by historical experience and reality. Since a person is a historical being, it is necessary to understand his mentality within the discourses of the time in which he lives. It is thus necessary to analyse the ideas of the individual by placing them in the context of his time. As such, Xu emphasizes that the thinking developed by the thinkers of the pre-Qin period, whose common interest was human life, can be adapted to the requirements of modern society. In his view, the historian of ideas must understand the ideas of the thinker they are researching as a product of the social circumstances in which the thinker lived, and then evaluate the influence of his or her thinking on later history, when the ideas had already become a system of thought.

The second level of Xu's methodology is to review and further evaluate Confucianism by placing it in the context of the 20th century. The focus here is on Xu's critique of the study of the political problems of Confucianism and the reasons for 2,000 years of autocracy in China. He thus views despotism as a central feature of the political tradition in Chinese culture. The despotic system, established only

after the pre-Qin period, supplanted the democratic beginnings of the original Confucianism. In this context, Xu developed his thesis of the “double subject”, according to which the people were always considered the active political subject in the ideological tradition of ancient China, but the ruler was always the exclusive subject in concrete social reality (Rošker 2013, 86). For Xu, therefore, the conflict between these two dimensions can only be resolved by creating a democracy based on such democratic elements that are already present in the original Confucianism.

According to Huang Chun-chieh (2018a, 235), Xu's interpretation of original Confucianism represents a typical example of hermeneutic analysis, which can be understood as a method of political science and belongs to the classical Chinese hermeneutic tradition. The foundations of this tradition are neither ontological nor epistemological, but political-economic and socio-political, because this method is not about the study of abstract concepts, but about the history of thought in relation to socio-political history.⁵ It cannot be limited to the nominal world, for it intervenes intensively in the phenomenal world of experience, thus combining intellectual with practical activities. This kind of interpretive tradition is able to generate its own internal dynamics by establishing a strong creative interaction between the interpreter and the classics that form the content of the interpretation. Xu's method of interpretation thus belongs to the field of political sociology and economics. For Xu, human beings are political and social beings involved in the activities of daily life. His methodology involves the study of essence and practice, that is, concept and reality.

Xu's greatest contribution to Confucian thought was his rediscovery of the original Confucianism's political idea of “the people as political agents”, including his hermeneutic method, which he related to democracy and whose establishment he saw as crucial for modern China. In doing so, he assumed that all the pre-Qin Confucian philosophers lived in a period of warring states, which is considered a time of pluralistic political regimes and in which autocratic rule had not yet emerged. For this reason, the people are at the centre of politics in their works. However, as mentioned above, the political concept of “the people as the base” (*minben* 民本) gradually died out from the Qin and Han dynasties and did not

5 Huang emphasizes that such socio-political aspects were particularly important in the transmission of Chinese Confucian traditions to other parts of East Asia. According to Marko Ogrizek, these elements were especially important in creating a unified methodology of East Asian Confucianism because they allowed us to see their commonalities that outweigh their mutual differences: “While the methods of East Asian Confucianisms are different in their aims and scope, they also share common sensibilities” (Ogrizek 2020, 91). Therefore, it is by no means coincidental that these aspects also had a decisive influence on the spread and development of Confucianism in Korea (Rošker 2014, 115).

develop further due to the repressive central power. Xu's methodical approach of interpreting the political ideas of original Confucianism formed the axis for the restoration of Confucianism in the 20th century.

In this context, it is important to note Xu Fuguan's argument that Confucian theory is inseparable from democracy, as classical Chinese texts, such as the *Book of Documents* (*Shu jing* 書經), already record that the people are the foundation (*minben* 民本) of the state as well as an important and active subject in building a just and harmonious society (Sernelj 2019, 5). Although these records are vague, Confucius adopted this idea and Mencius then elaborated on it by explicitly stating that the people are the most important element in a state and the ruler the least important (Mengzi, *Jin xin xia*). On the other hand, Xu points out that in autocratic Chinese history, such supposedly democratic elements could not be realized in practice and therefore the idea of the subject as a political actor could not develop (*ibid.*). He also claimed that the realization of Confucian "democratic" ideas failed in practice because there was no legal system in autocratic society that could protect the rights of the people as well as regulate and judge the actions of rulers (*ibid.*). As for the development of science, Xu claimed that although Confucianism did not contain a scientific dimension, it did not suppress or reject science as such. He claimed that the Chinese tradition did not develop a methodology suitable for the development of scientific research because such an approach would be naive. Instead, it developed a methodology based on the cultivation of personality (Rošker 2013, 104).

Similarities with Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons and Xu's Specific Contribution

Xu's methodology of structural holism, based on strict consideration of historical, socio-political, economic, and subjective factors, the method of seeking the embodied experience (*zhui tiyan*), and the intersubjective approach, seems to resemble Gadamer's concept of horizon fusion. Gadamer claims that the horizon of the present depends on the past, i.e., text, tradition, history, which *per se* implies prejudices or presuppositions. The "historical horizons" are inevitable for the development of the horizon of the present. Therefore, "understanding" emerges from the "fusions of these horizons":

In fact, the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in

understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves. We are familiar with the power of this kind of fusion chiefly from earlier times and their naïveté about themselves and their heritage. In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other. (Gadamer 1975, 305)

In Xu's explanations, however, the emphasis is on the actualization of the ancient thinkers and the texts that, on the one hand, cannot be seen in isolation from the present, and, on the other hand, on the fact that the issues they dealt with in their thought can always resonate with the reality of the present, because they deal with the problems related to the conditions of being human. The other important content of Xu's new methodology is the emphasis on the non-objective approach to the study of the history of thought. While Gadamer was preoccupied with his desire to bridge the strict Cartesian separation of the subject and object of comprehension (see Gadamer 1975, 37ff)—and therefore turns away from the products, and rather towards the "orientation" of the subject (*ibid.*, 188)—he is still unable to resolve the question of the two anti-poles of the cognitive process, and he ultimately acknowledges that "we are given no vantage point that would allow us to see these limits and conditions in themselves or to see ourselves 'from the outside' as limited and conditioned in this way" (*ibid.*, 83).

But according to Xu Fuguan, one can understand the content of a work most deeply in a structural, holistic way, i.e. by not objectifying the text and the thinker, that is, by seeking embodied experience and developing an intersubjective relationship. In this sense, the result of this approach offers the readers not only a true understanding of the text, but also an expansion of knowledge and understanding of themselves as a result of constant self-cultivation (elimination of prejudices and judgments based on them) and introspection, as well as a true understanding of the socio-cultural and political conditions of the reality in which they live.

On the first glance Xu's alleged innovation is therefore very similar to Gadamer's ideas of the fusion of horizons. In this light, Xu Fuguan's critique of Fu Sinian's "Western-centric" approach seems more than exaggerated, if not a bit hypocritical. While it is obvious that Xu Fuguan's dynamic and structural holism is fully consistent with Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle, it is not clear whether Xu Fuguan was also familiar with Gadamer's concepts of fusion and horizons, since

he does not refer to them in his work. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether Xu's methodology is innovative and unique and developed without reference to Western methodology remains unanswered, and we can only speculate about it. However, if we look at his hermeneutic method from the perspective of Chinese intellectual history, it is easy to see that it implies a special inherent value for the development of Sino-foreign discourse because it opens up a new, previously hidden dimension of traditional Chinese thought.

Indeed, by applying his own hermeneutic method and structural holism, Xu Fuguan has shown that from the very beginning of the Chinese ideational tradition there has been a tendency toward a dynamic interrelation among human beings, society, and reality, which mutually influence and depend on each other through socio-historical processes. This reveals the fundamental character of Chinese philosophy, reflected in its holistic onto-epistemological and axiological nature.

Conclusion

As for the history of the ideational tradition and its political theories, Xu is highly regarded among Modern Confucians precisely because of his emphasis on the original Confucian concept of “the people as the basis of politics”, the dynamic spirit of Confucianism, and the concept of concerned consciousness, which became the centre of debate in the 20th century precisely because of Xu's hermeneutic analysis and interpretations. Although at first look these political aspects seem not to have much to do with Xu's method of interpretation, the above analysis has shown that in fact his hermeneutics stands at the root of his political philosophy, because they are both inseparably connected through a common paradigm which underlies traditional Chinese philosophy, which manifests itself in the relational nature of natural and social reality. Just as a ruler in this view cannot be separated from his people, the rich world of human interiority is tightly connected to the past and present of the society of which people are always part. This paradigm, which allows for the fusion of all these horizons, is precisely the paradigm of structural holism applied in Xu's hermeneutic work. The comparative aspect in which this paradigm is manifested enables us to establish a relativist and contrastive view of all the manifold aspects that constitute reality and can be transmitted from the authors to their readers.

Therefore, both of the principles emphasized by Xu Fuguan in this regard are not only important for a better understanding of Chinese ideational and intellectual history, but also offer an alternative to Western hermeneutical methods that still seem to remain trapped in an essential and isolating view of horizons, which always pertain to the separate realms of human subjectivity and the objective world.

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The Semantic Field of 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism: Engaging Chinese Philosophy through Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics

Jin QIAN*

Abstract

This article will focus on the interpretation of a key concept in Chinese Neo-Confucianism of the Ming dynasty, namely that of *xing* 性. The concept is commonly translated as “nature” in Western languages, but this text will point out that there is a gap between the meaning of the Western concept “nature” and the Chinese concept 性. The main contribution of this paper is therefore to suggest a new method of interpreting Chinese philosophical concepts that bridges this gap. The method takes its inspiration from the hermeneutic theory of F. Schleiermacher. It consists, firstly, in re-placing the concept in its historical context—i.e. in the original “language area” where it assumes a meaning; secondly, in identifying the conceptual network which surrounds it, and thirdly, in determining the meaning of the concept in question by its *relations* to other concepts within the network. The end product of such a method is what we call the “semantic dictionary” of a concept. This article will give an example of how part of the meaning of 性 can be determined by its relations to another key Neo-Confucian concept, *li* 理.

Keywords: hermeneutics, inter-cultural, Chinese philosophy, Neo-Confucianism, human nature

Semantično polje pojma *xing* 性 v mingskem novokonfucijanstvu: pristopati do kitajske filozofije skozi Schleiermacherjevo hermenevtiko

Izvilleček

Ta članek se bo osredotočal na tolmačenje pomena ključnega pojma mingskega novokonfucijanstva, namreč pojma *xing* 性. Čeprav omenjeni pojem v zahodne jezike običajno prevajamo kot »narava«, pa bomo v tem besedilu pokazali, da med zahodnim pojmom »narava« in kitajskim pojmom *xing* 性 obstaja velik razkorak. Glavni prispevek tega članka bo tako neka nova metoda razlaganja kitajskih filozofskih pojmov, ki lahko premosti tovrstne razkorake. Omenjena metoda se zgleduje po hermenevtični teoriji F. Schleiermacherja. Sestoji, prvič, iz nadomeščanja pojma v njegovem zgodovinskem kontekstu – tj.

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na izvornem »jezikovnem področju«, kjer ima pomen; drugič, iz prepoznave pojmovne mreže, ki ga obdaja; in tretjič, iz določitve pomena pojma pod vprašanjem s pomočjo njegovih *povezav* z drugimi pojmi znotraj omenjene mreže. Končni rezultat takšne metode imenujemo »semantični slovar« nekega pojma. V tem članku bomo podali primer, kako je mogoče določiti del pomena pojma *xing* 性 s pomočjo njegovih *povezav* z drugim ključnim pojmom novokonfucijanstva, namreč pojmom *li* 理.

Ključne besede: hermenevtika, medkulturno, kitajska filozofija, novokonfucijanstvo, človekova narava

Introduction

When we read classical Chinese texts, we sometimes ask ourselves questions like this: what does the word 義 mean in Mencius? Or what does the word 理 mean in Zhu Xi? For those who have a great deal of experience reading such texts, they might be able to give an answer based on their general understanding: thus, 義 means “justice” in Mencius, and 理 means “principle” in Zhu Xi. However, there are quite a few problems that are not properly resolved by giving such answers. For one, does the English word “justice” correspond exactly to the Chinese word 義, and likewise “principle” to 理? For two, do the different meanings of the word “justice” in English cover those of the word 義 in Chinese, and likewise do those of “principle” cover those of 理? These are questions which yield no easy answers, and they occur every time we open a pre-modern Chinese text. The problem is, when we encounter concepts of great complexity such as 義 and 理 in Chinese philosophy, how can we account for the variety and the richness of their meanings and at the same time properly express them in another language such as English?

We will look more closely at the problem of interpretation at issue here in a later section. For now we would just like to point out that, in fact, these questions are not peculiar to sinologists, but they have already been asked before—not concerning Chinese texts, but rather concerning those of the ancient traditions of Europe, namely the Biblical and the Greco-Roman literatures. Thus it has already occurred to interpreters of the Bible to ask: what does the word γνῶναι mean in Saint Paul? And readers of Aristotle would have asked: what does ἐνέργεια exactly mean? Does the former mean “to know”? And does the latter mean “actuality”? These questions concern concepts that are within the Western intellectual tradition, and not from some far-away culture like traditional China. However, the essential problem remains the same: how to make sense of words or concepts from another culture which have complex meanings and express them in a different language? That is why there is a dialogue possible between sinologists and hermeneuts. In this article, we want to show how the

perspectives and methods of hermeneutics, and in particular those we find in one of the founders of modern hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher, can help in the better understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy.

Writing in the age of the Romantics, Schleiermacher wondered how to understand a text “as its author understood it”, or even how to understand it “better than its author understood it”, which would be made possible by the fact that the interpreter may have access to information about the author’s sub-conscious that the author did not. In other words, his goal was to transcend the limits of the self and to communicate with the mind of other human beings, that is to say, other *subjects*. And this objective guided Schleiermacher to search for the *original* meaning of texts by placing them within their historical contexts, so that a text—or a passage, a phrase, a word—would only be understood from the language shared by its author and original public. We will explain these theoretical considerations of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics later on, but here we would just like to point out that this perspective is extremely useful for sinologists who work on traditional Chinese texts. For these texts convey meanings that were understood in a particular way, by a particular audience, which might be entirely unfamiliar for someone who is educated in today’s world, be it in Chinese-speaking parts of the world or elsewhere. Therefore, an *art*, as Schleiermacher calls it, is needed in order to *reconstruct* the original meanings of these texts. And that is where the Schleiermacherian hermeneutics comes in helpful.

Can we engage traditional Chinese philosophy through the hermeneutical methodology of Schleiermacher? Instead of giving a formal answer, here we would like to make a demonstration of it. We will take one of the most important concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy, 性, as an example. And since in different epochs the concept is likely to have different meanings, we will take a time-sensitive approach and focus only on the meanings—or the semantic field—of this concept during the Ming dynasty, and more specifically in the Neo-Confucian texts of this period, in order not to make the sample field too large. As with other key concepts in philosophy, in China or elsewhere, 性 has not one but a number of different meanings, and some of its usages seem confusing or downright contradictory. For example, the affirmation 性即理 is held by many Song and Ming Neo-Confucians, following Cheng Yi, but at the same time it is also said that 覺即性, 知即性, even 性即气. What exactly is 性, then? And what is the relationship between all these other terms? It is therefore sometimes problematic to attempt to give such concepts all-inclusive definitions, because there often exist meanings that do not fit into them.

Therefore, what we propose here is to establish an inventory of major usages of the concept 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism and to interpret its meanings *case by*

case through the language-based hermeneutic method of Schleiermacher. The end result will be a *semantic dictionary* where we will be able to find as many *possible* meanings of the concept as we can gather. What is given in such a dictionary is not a single definition based on selected passages, but a spectrum as full as possible of the major meanings of a given concept. And the language-based hermeneutic method will make sure that the interpretations we give will be as close to the ways in which the concept *was understood* in the Ming dynasty as possible. In our view, a semantic dictionary like this will be very useful for sinological studies and for the understanding of Chinese philosophical concepts, because first by using it we will be able to set the boundaries of what a given concept *could* and *could not* mean in a Chinese linguistic context, for one; and second, we will be able to see the full play between the meanings of a concept and its linguistic manifestations. As the meanings of 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism are very numerous, we will only show some of them in this article. Specifically, we will take into account all the passages in which 性 is determined in one way or another by the concept 理. To complete this dictionary, further efforts could be made to include passages where it is determined by other key concepts of Neo-Confucianism, such as 心, 氣, 學, etc.

Translation vs. Interpretation

What does 性 mean? Does this Chinese concept have Western equivalents? Can it be explained or translated by means of concepts from Western intellectual traditions? These questions seem to have an answer at hand: does it not mean “nature”, as the sinological tradition most commonly translates it? This translation was introduced by the first Catholic missionaries to China, Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci.¹ In the works of these Jesuit missionaries, 性 is used as the equivalent of the scholastic concept *natura*, and, as we shall see in more detail, this translation is still adopted by the majority of contemporary Western sinologists. This choice is favoured for several reasons: first, by the very fortunate coincidence that the Chinese word 性, composed of the radical 忄 meaning “heart” on the left and the radical 生 meaning “life” or “to be born” on the right, joins the etymology of the word “nature”, which comes from the Latin word *natura* meaning “birth”, or “the natural and constitutive state of things”, itself coming from the verb *nascor*, meaning “to be born”, or “to come into being”. Moreover, among the various basic meanings of the two words 性 and “nature” in their everyday use, there are some overlaps, e.g. the meaning of “character (of a thing)” that both words have; and finally, in some specific usages, for

1 For example, in Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* 《天主实义》 (1603), see Ricci (2013).

example when speaking of *ren xing* 人性 or “human nature”, these terms seem to refer to the same reality, namely the most essential character of man, despite the fact that in the Chinese and European traditions the conception of what man is is not exactly the same. All these elements of agreement seem to make the word “nature” the obvious choice for rendering the Chinese 性.

However, besides the fact that some meanings of these two words do not intersect,² this translation encounters certain limitations, especially when we compare the texts in which both notions originate as philosophical concepts. We will give some examples to illustrate this situation. On the one hand, in the system of Thomas Aquinas, where Ricci and his companions would have learned the concept of “*natura*”, there is a conception of this notion that is very characteristic of scholastic thought, which consists in understanding it as a synonym of the concept of “essence”, as can be seen in the often repeated expression in the work of Saint Thomas: *natura vel essentia*. In this sense, one could thus say, with Thomas: “In things composed of matter and form the nature or essence (*natura vel essentia*) has to be different from the suppositum” (*Summa Theologica* Ia, n.d., q3, a3). In other words, the “nature” of the substance is its “form”, which is opposed to the “matter” (or “suppositum” in our citation) in the Aristotelian system. Now, this meaning of “nature” is completely absent in the 性 of Chinese intellectual traditions. On the other hand, in Chinese traditions one often encounters uses of the concept of 性 that do not resemble “nature” at all. For example, Zhou Dunyi writes: “性者，刚柔善恶，中而已矣” (Zhou 2009, 20). That is, “the 性 is hard and soft, good and bad; all that matters [concerning it] is the middle.” (ibid.) Now, in no sense of the European concept of “nature”, except by far-reaching metaphor, can it be described as such.

As a matter of fact, the translation of a foreign word always involves a certain level of interpretation, as the example of translating 性 as “nature” shows. However, as we have seen, translation never exhausts the entire meaning of the translated word, and it will never be able to, since no two words from different languages and cultures have the exact span of meanings and can be used in the exact same ways. These limitations of translation, however, are not meant to dismiss it, because when we try to convey the meaning of an uttering in a foreign language we would have to translate it into our own language in an articulate way, instead of giving a list of meanings for every single foreign word, which would be absurd. But aside from this, we have to recognize that if we want to delve more deeply into the meaning of a foreign word, such as a philosophical concept, sticking to a word-for-word translation would do much to limit our understanding, as we

2 For example, the word “nature” can be taken in the sense of “the totality of non-artificial existing things” as in the “the wonders of nature”, or “the totality of the forces or principles of the physical world” as in the “laws of nature”, but these meanings are absent in the Chinese word 性.

would be bound up by it. That is why, in this case, an effort to *interpret* would be called for in order to engage more fully with the word or concept in question. This interpretation, however, does not take the place of translation—the two have each their own function, but it can be a useful tool for reaching a better translation.

The Interpretation of 性 in the Sinological Literature

As noted above, the majority of contemporary sinologists follow the tradition, initiated by Jesuit missionaries in the late Ming dynasty, of rendering the Chinese concept 性 as “nature”. In his *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, Ricci seeks to introduce the scholastic concept of “*natura*” to his Chinese audience in the form of 性. In chapter 7 of the book, where the Jesuit engages in the Chinese scholarly debate over whether or not man’s 性 is good, he writes: “To know whether man’s 性 is basically good, we must first agree on the concept of 性 and what evil and good mean. The 性 is nothing but 各物类之本体 *ge wu lei zhi ben ti*” (Ricci 2013, §423). On the meaning of this last phrase used by Ricci to give a definition of the word 性, we can follow Thierry Meynard’s translation into French, which renders it as: “the fundamental essence of the class of each thing” (ibid., 186). We thus join the scholastic sense of the concept of “nature”, i.e. as “essence”³.

Since the second half of the 20th century, in sinological studies of Neo-Confucianism (of both Song and Ming eras) it is also common to translate 性 as “nature”. But from a perspective that is fundamentally different from that of the missionaries, as instead of trying to “transmit” Western ideas to the Chinese, sinologists instead try to understand the meaning of the Chinese concept in itself. Thus this Chinese “nature” as a philosophical concept has a very ambiguous relationship with the notion of “nature” in the Western sense, for although in some contexts an analogy can be found between the two, in other uses of the term the Western philosophical concept of nature is hardly recognizable. We will now review some interpretations of 性/“nature” in the contemporary sinological literature.

First, many of the authors who have studied the Neo-Confucian concept of 性 have emphasized the aspect of it that is a subject of the predicates of “good” (*shan* 善) and “bad” (*e* 恶) (or “neither good nor bad”). This is one of the major meanings of the concept as inherited from the Mencian tradition, and the question about the goodness of the 性 remains, in the Song and Ming eras, a matter of importance. Thus, in *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'êng Ming-tao and Ch'êng Yi-ch'uan* (1958),

3 Besides, translator of Ricci’s book Thierry Meynard quotes Thomas Aquinas (Ricci 2013, 186, note 4): “We speak of nature, according to whether it signifies the essence, or the quiddity of the species”, which comes from the *Summa Theologica* n.d., IIIa, q. 2, a. 1).

A.C. Graham understands the 性 in its sense of “human nature”, that is, in the specific sense of the 性 as *ren xing* 人性. In this sense, then, the *problem* concerning 性 is whether it is good, bad, a mixture of good and bad, or neutral, a question that, in Graham’s understanding, is the same as those posed in Western intellectual history⁴. In his presentation of key texts in Chinese philosophy, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (1963), in the majority of cases Wing-tsit Chan also takes 性 as “human nature”, which is the subject of qualifications related to moral goodness.⁵

Yet, in emphasizing 性 as “good” or “bad” (or other predicates related to moral goodness), sinologists are often aware that the way the Chinese understand this concept is not exactly the same as that of Westerners. In his later article, “What Was New in the Ch’eng-Chu Theory of Human Nature?” (1986), A. C. Graham takes a more nuanced view of the Neo-Confucian concept of 性 than in his previously cited earlier book, as he writes:

A Westerner interested in original sin or natural goodness can see that Confucians are not dealing with exactly the same problem as Augustine or Rousseau, and that a Chinese solution might be wholly successful and yet not able to be transplanted to our own culture. One is most conscious of elusive differences between Western and Chinese preconceptions that frustrate understanding from deep down in the foundations of thought. (Graham, 1986, 139)

In this, he is thinking specifically of the application of the term 性 simultaneously to man’s *qi* 氣 and *li* 理.⁶ In his article on Li Guangdi 李光地, an early Qing scholar of the Neo-Confucian tradition, On-cho Ng also notes a difference between Chinese 性 and Western “human nature”:

Roger Ames pointedly claims that to translate *xing* as “human nature” is to miss the Confucian point about human flourishing and cultivation. Whereas nature as such in the Western philosophical tradition is regarded as “a ‘given’ that exists from birth”, which “cannot be altered through human

4 “Unlike some other Chinese problems, it is not at all foreign to us; in one form or another it is common to all naturalist moralists in the West also.” (Graham 1958, 44)

5 Incidentally, it seems that for Chan, the translation of 性 as “nature” or “human nature” does not pose problem, because in the appendix of his book, dedicated to the translation issues of some Chinese philosophical terms, 性 is not even listed.

6 From this perspective, Graham defines 性 or “human nature” in the following way, “It is this structured tenuity, in which Benevolence and the rest are the main lines leading outward from self to the rest of the universal pattern, which is man’s nature” (Graham 1986, 154).

action”, the Confucian *xing* is not set once and for all. (Ng 2010, 394)⁷

In order to approach the original meaning of the concept of 性, other authors have chosen to understand it through more elaborate conceptual means, sometimes moving away from the meaning of the concept of “nature” in Western philosophy. In their book *Neo-Confucianism. A Philosophical Introduction* (1988), in recognizing the intimate connection between 性 and two other Neo-Confucian concepts, *qing* 情 (passions or emotions) and *xin* 心 (the heart-mind), Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald write that, in Zhu Xi 朱熹, “to have a ‘nature’ is just to have a combination of two things: first, an ability to respond in a great variety of different ways; second, a sense of the right direction to take” (Angle and Tiwald 1988, 55). And, moreover, interpreting 性 in its relation to *li* 理, these authors write that “the Pattern that is our nature is an interdependent whole that cannot be fully captured in words, but at the same time it is possessor of a complex structuring that results in reliable responses to any of a wide variety of external stimuli” (ibid.). Clearly, these two qualifications of 性 show aspects of this concept—namely responsiveness to external stimulation in a variety of ways and the ability to prescribe practical “direction”—that are far removed from that of “nature” in Western philosophy. On the other hand, in his article “On a Comprehensive Theory of Xing (Naturality) in Song-Ming Neo-Confucian Philosophy: A Critical and Integrative Development” (1997), Chung-ying Cheng attempts to construct a “comprehensive” (holistic) theory to bring together and unify the various features of the concept of 性 in Neo-Confucianism. Translating 性 as “naturalness” and not “nature”, he points out, for example, that “Xing is conceived as a continuum, linking not only life and mind, but also heaven (the ultimate source of life and reality) and humanity”, and that “a very crucial dimension of this concept of *xing* is its essential implication of life-productivity or life-creativity (*sheng*) and life-transformativity (*shenghua*)” (Cheng 1997, 35).

These interpretations of 性 show a fundamental specificity of this concept in Neo-Confucianism that, on the one hand, is obscured if one were to stick to a simple translation as “nature”, and on the other hand requires special treatment in order to bring it into focus, and the authors we have cited have attempted—notably Angle, Tiwald, and Cheng—to do so with conceptual explanations.

The Hermeneutic Method

The problem of interpreting the Neo-Confucian concept of 性 forces us to ask a more fundamental question, namely: how do we interpret concepts across the

7 For Roger Ames’ quote see Ames (1991).

boundaries of culture and language? A concept, philosophical or otherwise, cannot be generated outside of a culture, that is, outside of a particular history or experience belonging to a particular community. The history, or the experience in the broadest sense, of a human community is, so to speak, the soil on which a concept grows.⁸ If we see things in this way, then there is necessarily a gap between all concepts coming from different cultures, for they are not produced in the same circumstances, regarding the same issues, or from the same perspectives, and so on. And in the case of Neo-Confucian concepts, which were born in a culture, China between the 10th and 17th centuries, which had little or no cultural and intellectual exchanges with the Western world,⁹ there is a real chasm if one comes from a Western point of view. The fundamental question, then, is how to understand the *Other* across this gap? And with regard to the concept of 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism that is the focus of our inquiry here, the question would be: writing in Western languages and thinking with Western concepts, how do we understand this Chinese concept as it was understood in its own cultural context, i.e. by the Chinese of the Ming era?

It may seem illusory or idealistic to want to understand discourses of the other as they understand them themselves, because every discourse is understood in a different way by different people. And as long as every person has a distinct subjectivity, this will be the case. However, when we speak with someone, for example, don't we want to understand what our interlocutor has in their mind? To put it another way, if it suffices that we understand them in our own ways, wouldn't communication be in vain? It is of course inevitable that the same thing is always understood in an individual way by every person. But this doesn't mean that every interpretation is as justified as the next one, and that everybody has the right to interpret a text however they see fit. That would be falling into relativism. On the other hand, it is only reasonable to assume that there is an *original* idea behind any given text, an idea that its author had in mind that he or she understood in a certain way. This was the assumption of Schleiermacher, and it was one of the cornerstones of his hermeneutics. It might be debated if and to what extent this "original idea" has a fixed and determinable form, and how exactly the interpreter can trace back to it, but we hold it as true that something of this kind exists, and that reconstructing it would offer a minimum degree of objectivity to interpretation. And now we will discuss in more detail the hermeneutic thought of Schleiermacher.

8 By "concept" we mean a thought or an idea expressed in a specific way through language.

9 Constant cultural contact between the two civilizations was established by Jesuit missionaries only from 1583 onwards.

For the German theologian, “hermeneutics” means “the art of understanding” (Schleiermacher 1998, 5). And the object of understanding is the thought that is expressed through the mediation of speech. For Schleiermacher, “speaking is only the external side of thought” (ibid., 7), for speech is the means by which the subject “fixes” his or her thought, which is interior, private, and amorphous as such. And speech mediates “the communal nature of thought” (ibid.), that is to say, the thought-speech, or speech expressing thought, is only generated in the context of communication. What this implies is that that a speech takes on meaning *only* in communication, and therefore meaning is closely linked to historical subjects, i.e. those for whom a given speech has meaning. This is as true for daily communication as for reading an ancient text. A joke that makes everyone laugh in the family might seem banal to outsiders, because it assumes its full meaning only between the family members. Likewise, if something that Confucius says to a disciple has a determinable meaning, we have to assume that this meaning is most likely understood by Confucius himself and his disciple. The identification of those who take part in the production of a speech is therefore essential information for understanding the original meaning of it. That is why Schleiermacher says that “only after successful making equivalent [of the past and ourselves]” that is to say, after putting ourselves on the same level as the original readers, “does explication begin” (ibid., 20). And elsewhere in the same work, he says: “before the application of the art one must put oneself in the place of the author” (ibid., 24). To “put oneself in the place” of the original authors and readers means therefore to make oneself “contemporary” to them, because there is a gap between our habits of speaking and thinking and those of the historical authors and readers, and to interpret without having carried out this “putting on the same level” would necessarily imply the importation of foreign elements, which belong to us—our culture and our subjectivity—in the comprehension of the historical text. It might be argued that the original audience or even the authors are not identifiable in an exact way for certain texts, for example the *Dao De Jing*, some chapters of the *Li Ji*, or even the *Analects* attributed to Confucius. This might be true to a certain degree, and this situation certainly sets limits to the exactitude of the identification of authors and audiences. But it does not mean that it is not valuable to try and approach the possible identities of them, nor that we cannot find relevant information that can be useful. For example, even though we do not have much historical information about the immediate disciples of Confucius, we know that they were part of the literate class of the kingdom of Lu or other kingdoms at the end of the Spring and Autumn period. All this side information could help reconstruct the cultural background in which a text was originally produced.

Another aspect of Schleiermacher’s methodology that is important for us concerns language. For Schleiermacher, “communication necessarily presupposes the

shared nature of the language, thus also a certain acquaintance with the language” (ibid., 8).¹⁰ Language is the means of communication shared by the “users” of a speech, authors and audiences alike. In order to interpret a historical text, one must therefore first “get into” the language in which it was written, or in other words, one must interpret it *from* its own language.¹¹ But this is not enough, because language being a historical reality, even if there is an identity within each language, it changes in the course of history, so that even for a language which bears the same name (Chinese, English, French, etc.), there is a non-negligible difference between the way it is used today and the way it was or will be used in another time. This is why, according to Schleiermacher, we must understand a text from the language “as [its author] possessed it” (ibid., 24). In other words, one must enter the “circle” of the language shared by the author and their audience in the historical period to which they belong. What we call the “circle” of the language Schleiermacher calls “language area”, which is like a “region” of the totality of a language, and which includes all the linguistic products with which the author and their audience are familiar and from which they draw their vocabulary and their manners of writing and speaking.¹² Thus the German theologian says that “the vocabulary and the history of the era of an author relate as the whole from which his writings must be understood as the part, and the whole must, in turn, be understood from the part” (ibid., 24). Herein lies the so-called “hermeneutical circle”. In a comment on this statement we have just quoted, Schleiermacher writes: “Complete knowledge is always in this apparent circle, that each particular can only be understood via the general, of which it is a part, and *vice versa*. And every piece of knowledge is only scientific if it is formed in this way” (ibid.).

The third aspect of Schleiermacherian hermeneutics that is useful for us has to do with the determination of the meanings of discursive elements, i.e. words, expressions, phrases, etc. For Schleiermacher, the meaning of any given discursive element can only be determined by other elements that are linked to it. There are different ways in which this happens. He notes, first of all, that “subject and

10 For Schleiermacher (1998, 8), discourse and language also have a dialectical relationship to each other: “Every utterance presupposes a given language. One can admittedly also invert this, not only for the absolutely first utterance, but also for the whole of the utterance, because language comes into being through utterance.”

11 Schleiermacher says (1998, 8), moreover, that “every person is on the one hand a location in which a given language forms itself in an individual manner, on the other their discourse can only be understood via the totality of the language.”

12 For example, Schleiermacher composes the language area of the New Testament “1. from the Old Testament [language], 2. from Macedonian Greek, 3. from translations from Hebrew, 4. from Greek Jewish writings.” (Note to the “application of the first canon to the New Testament” (Schleiermacher 2021, 240).

predicate mutually condition each other, but not completely” (ibid., 50). The reciprocal conditioning of subject and predicate in a proposition, though incomplete, seems to the German theologian to be the most direct and “strongest” mode of determination of an element of discourse.¹³ Besides this basic determination, other discursive elements come to determine subjects and predicates more precisely. For example, according to Schleiermacher, subject and predicate “both are more precisely determined in themselves and thus also mutually by their adjectives”, and more concretely, “adjectives and adverbs point in a specific direction and rule out many things. The connections *via* prepositions are also still more precise determinations of the verb” (ibid.). For Schleiermacher, each word has a “unity of meaning” which is only a guiding idea and does not really exist, and which is declined in a variety of ways according to usage. The meanings of the words have thus a “core”, but they are also volatile to a certain degree, and the “semantic spheres” of words are only trimmed down to a specific meaning when they are placed together to form a discourse. This is why we say that the meaning of a discursive element, a word representing a concept for example, is determined only in its *context*, that is to say in the network of words and concepts in which it is inscribed. As Christian Berner writes in his book on the philosophy of Schleiermacher, a concept “is determinable only in a structured network, a set of relations” (Berner 1995, 135).

Based on these ideas from Schleiermacher, our interpretation of the concept of 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism will be realized through the drawing out of the semantic field of this term. This notion “semantic field” we borrow from the German philologist Leo Spitzer. In his article “Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word ‘Stimmung’”, he writes that for what he has in view—namely “to reconstruct the many-layered Occidental background for a German word: the concept of world harmony which underlies the word *Stimmung*”—“this task implies a survey of the word’s semantic ‘field’, as it was developed in different epochs and literatures” (Spitzer 1944, 409).¹⁴ This idea helps us define our method, which has three main principles: 1. The semantic field of the concept 性 is based on a “language area” that we can roughly identify with the Neo-Confucian literature¹⁵ of the Ming period. One text stands out as a perfect example of this

13 In his *General Hermeneutics* of 1809/1810, he writes that “the subject must receive its ultimate determination from the predicate, and the predicate from the subject” (Schleiermacher 2021, 177).

14 Spitzer uses in his article a very vivid image to describe the “semantic field”: “I realize that the medieval art of tapestry, with its possibility of showing a constant motif along with the labyrinth of interwoven ramifications, would be a more adequate medium of treatment than is the necessarily linear run of the words of language.” (Spitzer 1944, 409)

15 Or in Chinese, *li xue* 理学, i.e. the study or the science of *li*.

language area, namely the *Ming Ru Xue'an* 《明儒学案》.¹⁶ This work will thus be the “language area” in which we will conduct our conceptual interpretation of 性.¹⁷ For the reasons already presented, interpreting *within* this language area is crucial. 2. The semantic field of the concept 性, we believe, has a certain *structure* defined by its relations with other key concepts of Neo-Confucianism, which we must identify in the first stage of our work. 3. The “product” we are aiming for is a “reasoned table”, a “*tableau raisonné*”, of the most common or most important uses of the concept of 性, which we will group under the headings represented by concepts with which 性 is related. Within each group, we will divide the occurrences into “direct determinations” (i.e. subject-predicate) and “indirect determinations” (any other type of proposition concerning 性). Before presenting an overview of the results of a first attempt, we just want to note that this is not a complete picture of the essential uses of the concept of 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism but only an example. Further research is required for more inclusive results.

A Sample of the Semantic Field of 性: Co-determination between 性 and *li* 理

First, we observe that the semantic field of the concept of 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism is structured around a small circle of key concepts, e.g. *li* 理, *qi* 气, *xin* 心, *shan* 善, *ming* 命, *zhi* 知, *qing* 情, *xi* 習, *jue* 覺 (the list is not exclusive). In the texts we take into account, we notice that 性 appears almost always within this circle, i.e. in the presence of one or more of these concepts—and in many cases the reverse is also true, i.e. each of them is determined by the others. In other words, the concepts in this circle are co-determined by each other.¹⁸ Starting from this

16 Or *Survey of Ming Confucians*, a work by Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲 published in 1676, is a systematic history of Confucian thought in the entire Ming period.

17 This choice of one text for finding the major expressions of the concept of 性 in the Ming era is certainly an expedient one. We recognize that this text is the product of an individual writer who, though he has included a great number of Ming Confucians, works through a lens that is peculiar to himself. Thus it doesn't represent the whole of Confucian literature in this period. We also recognize that the word 性 has meanings outside of the Neo-Confucian or *li xue* 理学 circles. These are all limitations to our sample. However, the *Mingru xue'an* does offer a considerable base for the different philosophical uses of this term, and it includes in itself a good number of major writers from the period, including people from different schools. The choice of this text as the sample is thus by no means definitive. And further research should be conducted by enlarging it to include other texts where the concept of 性 appears.

18 In the *Mingru xue'an*, there are authors who attempt to give a “definition” of 性, but it is always by one or more of these terms mentioned above. Except for omission on our part, throughout the book the question “what is the 性?”, as one might expect in a Western philosophical context, is never asked, and there is no attempt to give an explanation of the concept from more elementary notions

first observation, we will give an example of what we call the “semantic field” of the concept of 性 by putting in order the relations that this term has with one of the key concepts of Neo-Confucianism: *li* 理.¹⁹ We have chosen the concept of 理 only because it is one of the most important factors for determining the meaning of 性. Our point here is only to show how the method functions. The same procedure can be produced with other concepts.

I. Direct Determination (Subject-Predicate)

1. *xing ji li* 性即理²⁰

Grammatically, this is a construction that inserts the word *ji* 即 between 性 and 理. The word *ji* 即 is not a copula as in European languages, but it can be seen as an adverb whose function is to emphasize the affirmative aspect of the statement. It can be followed by *shi* 是, which functions like the copula and is often implicit in a sentence, as it is in this one. 性即理 can therefore be literally translated as “性 is 理”, expressing some kind of identification between the two concepts. The phrase 性即理 is originally formulated by Cheng Yi in the Song period²¹. And, as we shall see, it is as a topos that it appears in Neo-Confucian authors of the Ming. We will now examine the “behaviours” of this formula in the *Mingru xue'an* by regarding the contexts in which it appears, and the relationships it has with other statements, and the meanings it receives in each context.

First, we see that, in the *Mingru xue'an* (Huang 2008) this expression often appears as a quotation of Cheng Yi,²² which confirms its status as a topos in the Ming period. On the other hand, as we have mentioned, the linking of 性 and 理 by “即” is not exclusive.²³ This means that 性即理 is not a strict and exclusive identification between the two concepts.

Let us now see in what way authors in *Mingru xue'an* themselves explain this expression. We can divide the occurrences into three groups.

than those we have mentioned.

19 Etymologically, 理 refers to the veins within jade, a prized stone in China, so it can be literally translated as “line” or “pattern”; by extension, it has various meanings such as order, rule or reason, etc. More specifically, in Neo-Confucianism, in general, it is a kind of principle of the intelligibility of things.

20 *Mingru xue'an* (Huang 2008, ch. 3, 4, 7, 10, 20, 22, 40, 42, 47, 48, 51, 58).

21 “又問：性如何？曰：性即理也，所謂理，性是也。”(*Er Cheng ji* 《二程集》 (Cheng and Cheng 2004, ch. 22)).

22 In *Mingru xue'an*: “古聖賢論性，正是直指當人氣質內各具此理而言，故伊川曰：‘性即理也。’”(Huang 2008, ch. 3); “程子‘性即理也’之一言，足以定千古論性之疑。”(ibid., ch. 7)

23 There exist also 覺即性, 知即性, and 性即气. See Introduction (notes 1–3).

a. By *ren yi* 仁義²⁴ (“humanity”/“benevolence” and “justice”)

- i.) 問：“伊川曰性即理也，然乎？”曰：“然。性者仁義而已，曾謂仁義非理乎？仁義有不善歟？”(Huang 2008, ch. 48)²⁵

It is asked, “Yichuan (Cheng Yi) says 性即理, is it so?” He (Wang Jun) answers, “Yes. 性 is nothing but 仁義. Don’t the virtues of 仁義 participate in 理? Do they have something that is not good?”

- ii.) 聖人之心，仁義而已矣。由仁義而散為萬事，皆道也。仁義之心，乃其性也，得於天者也。(ibid.)

The *xin* 心 (heart-mind) of the Saint is nothing but 仁義. Everything (lit. the ten-thousand things) that is done according to 仁義 (lit. by a diffraction of 仁義) participates in the 道 Dao. The 心 of 仁義 is the 性 [of the Saint]; it is obtained from Heaven.

- iii.) 好善惡惡，人之性也，即理也，義也，心之所同然也。好惡未形而其理已具，故曰“性即理也”。(ibid.)

To love what is good and to hate what is evil is the 性 of man; it is 理, it is 義, it is what all 心’s (heart-minds) share. 理 is present even before good and evil appear. That is why we say “性即理”.

b. By *xin zhi ti* 心之體²⁶ (the core of 心 heart-mind)

- i.) 夫物理不外於吾心，外吾心而求物理，無物理矣。遺物理而求吾心，吾心又何物耶？心之體，性也，性即理也。(ibid., ch. 10)²⁷

The 理 of things is not outside my 心; if one were to search for the 理 of things outside his 心, [one would find that] the 理 of things does not exist. If one were to search for his 心 leaving out the 理 of things, [one would not know] what thing his 心 is. The 體 (core) of the 心 is 性; 性即理.

c. By *qi zhi li* 氣之理²⁸ (理 of 氣)

24 Two of the cardinal virtues of Confucianism. 仁 is ordinarily translated as “humanity”, “benevolence”, and 義 as “justice”.

25 Survey of Diverse Scholars Part B 2 諸儒學案中二, Wang Jun 汪俊.

26 In its literal meaning, 體 means “body”. In its philosophical usage, it forms a duo with the concept of *yong* 用, literally “utility”. In this sense, it means something like “what is at the core”, or “the essential”.

27 Survey of Yaojiang Scholars 姚江學案, Wang Yangming 王陽明.

28 *Qi* 氣 is a crucial concept in Chinese thought. Literally “air” or “breath”, its meaning is not restricted to these physical phenomena. In a philosophical sense, on the one hand, it means a certain universal and material energy whose dynamism is the source of all beings in the universe, and on the other hand, it also refers to the moral strength and character of the individual.

- i.) 古聖賢論性，正是直指當人氣質內各具此理而言，故伊川曰：“性即理也。” (ibid., ch. 3)²⁹

When the saints and wise men of antiquity were discussing 性, they were talking precisely about the fact that the *qi zhi* 氣質 (the energy, divided into two parts, subtle, 氣, and gross, 質, of which man is bodily and morally composed) of every human being has this 理. That is why Yichuan (Cheng Yi) says, “性即理”.

- ii.) 天地間渾然一氣而已，張子所謂“虛空即氣”是也。此是至虛至靈，有條有理的。以其至虛至靈，在人即為心，以其有條有理，在人即為性。 (ibid., ch 58)³⁰

The universe (天地間: lit. “between Heaven and Earth”) is entirely filled by 氣; this is [what] Master Zhang (Zhang Zai) was talking about when he said that “The empty space (虛空) is 氣.” This 氣 is extremely *xū* 虛 (empty, or subtle) and *líng* 靈 (intelligent, or responsive), and it has lines and 理 (patterns, principles). Since it is extremely 虛 and 靈, while it is in man, it constitutes his 心 (heart-mind); since it possesses lines and principles, while it is in man, it constitutes his 性.

- iii.) 問：“性即理也，有氣乎否？”曰：“氣也，惟其為理，斯謂之性，猶夫純潔而溫者，不謂之石而謂之玉也。” (ibid., ch. 48)³¹

It is asked, “性即理, is there any 氣 (in the 性)?” He (Cui Xian) said, “Regarding 氣, it is exactly because it is [structured by] 理³² that it is called 性. This is similar to the fact that a stone that is pure and warm is not called ‘stone’ but rather ‘jade’.”

Comment 1: In the *Mingru xue'an*, there are two readings of Cheng Yi’s topical expression “性即理”. First, there is a “moralist” reading, which consists in interpreting the word 理 as the most essential virtues of man in the Confucian tradition, namely *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義; thus man’s 性, or what is most central in him, are these “essential virtues”, that is, that which grounds his innate goodness according to the Confucian tradition, especially since Mencius. On the other hand, there is an “ontological” reading according to which the word 理 is interpreted as the

29 Survey of Chongren Scholars 3 崇仁學案三, Wei Xiao 魏校.

30 Survey of Donglin Scholars 1 東林學案一, Gu Xiancheng 顧憲成.

31 Survey of Diverse Scholars Part B 1 諸儒學案中二, Cui Xian 崔銑.

32 The word 為 should function as a copula, but the meaning of this equation between 氣 and 理 is not clear in the immediate context of this passage.

“pattern” or “principles” of the 氣, the breath or energy which makes up everything in the universe, including man as a physical and moral being; from this point of view, 性 appears as the 理, the “pattern”, which structures the “parcel” of 氣 which constitutes a man. Now, these two readings are related, for, as the quotations b. i.) and c. ii.) show, the concept of 心 (heart-mind) plays the role of the mediator between the two views, as in it are anchored both the moral virtues of 仁 and 義 and the 理 that structures 氣—insomuch as 心 “participates” in the cosmic 氣.

2. *xin zhi sheng li* 心之生理 (生理 of 心)

It is said several times in *Mingru xue'an*, by different authors, that the word 性 should be read according to the meanings of its two radicals: *xin* 心 and *sheng* 生 (ibid., ch. 4; ch. 24; ch. 3).³³ We see that among the occurrences in which 性 is determined in relation to these two concepts, the dominant way of articulating them is to interpret the word 性, composed of 心 (忄) on the left and 生 on the right, as 心之生理, with the addition of the concept of 理. Grammatically, this is a nominal group whose centre is the word 理: the word 生, meaning “life”, “to be born”, qualifies it, and 心 designates where 生理 is found. 心之生理 thus literally means the 理, which is marked by 生 “life”, of the 心 (heart-mind) [of man]. We find in *Mingru xue'an* several ways of interpreting this term.

a. *xin zhi li* 心之理 (理 of 心)

First, we find passages that affirm the presence of 理 in man's 心 (heart-mind).

i.) 性者心之理也，心以氣言，而性其條理也. (ibid., ch. 62)³⁴

性 is the 理 of 心. We explain 心 by 氣, and 性 is the “lines” (條理) [in this 氣].

ii.) 性則心之所具之理，儒言性善，是見性之本原. (ibid., 35)³⁵

性 is the 理 that the 心 has (具). By saying that the 性 [of man] is good in itself, the Confucians see the essence (本原) of 性.

b. *sheng zhi li* 生之理 (理 of 生)

33 Survey of Chongren Scholars 4 崇仁學案四, Xia Shangpu 夏尚朴: “性字從心, 從生, 乃心之生理也.”; Survey of Jiangyou Wang Yangming's School 9 江右王門學案九, Song Yiwang 宋儀望: “此謂生理, 即謂之性, 故性字從心從生.”; Survey of Chongren Scholars 3 崇仁學案三, Wei Xiao 魏校: “古性情字皆從心從生, 言人生而具此理於心, 名之曰性, 其動則為情也.”

34 Survey of Jishan Scholars 戴山學案, Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周.

35 Survey of Taizhou Scholars 4 泰州學案四, Fang Xuejian 方學漸.

- i.) 精神魂魄氣也，人之生也；仁義禮智性也，生之理也。(ibid., ch. 50)³⁶
精神魂魄 (four “parts” of man that are differentiated by their different levels of condensation) fall under the 氣, it is the 生 (the “life”) of man; 仁, 義, 禮, 智 (The four “cardinal virtues” of Confucianism) fall under 性, they are the 理 of 生 (生之理).
- ii.) 性者生之理也，知生之為性，而不知所以生者，非知性者也。(ibid., 31)³⁷
性 is the 理 of 生 (生之理). To know that 生 is 性, but to ignore by what there is 生 (所以生) is to not know 性.

We can then divide the occurrences where authors interpret the meaning of 生 (in 生理) into two groups.

c. As *sheng ju ci li* 生具此理 (having this 理 at birth)

- i.) 古性情字皆從心從生，言人生而具此理於心，名之曰性，其動則為情也。(ibid., ch. 3)³⁸
In their ancient forms, the words 性 and 情 follow [in their meanings] the word 心 and the word 生 to express the fact that man possesses this 理 in his 心 at birth; [this 理] is called 性, and when it is moved (動), it becomes 情 (emotion).
- ii.) 心之所同然者理也，生而有此理之謂性，非性為心之理也。(ibid., 62)³⁹

What all 心 have in common is 理; the term 性 refers to the fact that [man] possesses this 理 at birth, but it is not true that 性 means “the 理 of 心” (心之理).⁴⁰

d. As *sheng sheng zhi li* 生生之理 (the 理 that resides in the unceasingly generating process of the universe)

- i.) 孔門真見，盈天地間只一生生之理，是之謂性，學者默識而敬存之，則親親仁民愛物，自不容己。何也？此性原是生生，由本之末，萬古生生，孰能遏之？(ibid., ch. 20)⁴¹

36 Survey of Diverse Scholars Part B 4 諸儒學案中四, Wang Tingxiang 王廷相.

37 Survey of Zhixiu Scholars 止修學案, Li Cai 李材.

38 Survey of Chongren Scholars 3 崇仁學案三, Wei Xiao 魏校.

39 Survey of Jishan Scholars 蕺山學案, Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周.

40 Note that the author of this passage rejects the interpretation that 性 is the 理 of the 心, in the sense that 理 is an attribute of the latter.

41 Survey of Jiangyou Wang Yangming's School 5 江右王門學案五, Wang Shihuai 王時槐.

The school of Confucius saw it well: between Heaven and Earth there is nothing but 生生之理, that is what is called 性. Let one silently acknowledge it and respectfully preserve it (敬存), then one would not cease to love one's family, the people and things [according to a right relationship that fits each category] (親親仁民愛物). Why? Because this 性 is originally just a 生生 (literally, generating and generating), from the foundation to the applications (由本之末), [this process of] 生生 continues through all the centuries, who can prevent it?

- ii.) 天地間只是生氣中有此生理，在人亦然，故名曰性，而總謂之仁。是仁即系天地生物之心，又只是生生之理，又曰氣質之性，即告子生之謂也。 (ibid., ch. 45)⁴²

Between Heaven and Earth, there is only this 生理 in the 生氣 (literally, the living/vital 氣); the same is true of man. That is why we call [this 生理 in man] 性, and from a global point of view (總) we can call it 仁 (“humanity”, “benevolence”). For 仁 is the 心 of the Universe (of Heaven and Earth) in the process of generating all things; it is nothing but what is called 生生之理, or *qi zhi zhi xing* 氣質之性, that is to say, what Gaozi calls 生.

- iii.) 人得天地生物之心以為心，所為生理也....人之心，只有此箇生理，故其真誠惻怛之意流行，於君臣父子兄弟夫婦朋友，以至萬事萬物之間，親親疏疏，厚厚薄薄，自然各有條理，不俟安排，非由外鑠，是所謂天命之性，真實無妄者也。 (ibid., ch 24)⁴³

Man obtains the 心 [by which] the Universe (Heaven and Earth) generates all things, and this 心 becomes his 心, that is what is called⁴⁴ 生理. ... Man's 心 has nothing but this 生理. Therefore when his genuine and compassionate intention has free course, whether between ruler and minister, between father and son, between brothers, spouses, friends, or regarding every matter and thing [he deals with], in all this he keeps perfect measure (親親疏疏，厚厚薄薄), and without calculating, all his relations are well ordered (自然各有條理) and need not be arranged on purpose; [all this] does not come to him from outside, but is what is called 天命之性 (the 性 decreed by Heaven), true and without falsehood.

The last group of quotes explain the meaning of 理 in 生理 or 生生之理

42 Survey of Diverse Scholars Part A 3 諸儒學案上三, Huang Runyu 黃潤玉.

43 Survey of Jiangyou Wang Yangming's School 9 江右王門學案九, Song Yiwang 宋儀望.

44 The text has “所為”, which is probably an error. We replace it by “所謂”.

e. As *suo yi sheng* 所以生 (that by which there is 生/one generates)

i.) Cf. b.ii.).

ii.) 夫心是仁義植根之處，而性則仁義所以能生生之理也。 (ibid., ch. 13)⁴⁵

心 is where 仁 and 義 take root, and 性 is the reason (理) why these (仁義) can 生生 (literally, generate and generate) (仁義所以能生生之理).

Comment 2: The quotes from (a.) confirm what we saw in the previous section, namely, that insofar as it is embedded in 心, 性 has two aspects that coincide in some ways: as moral “principles” it denotes the essential virtues or source of man’s original goodness, and as “lines” (pattern) it is what “organizes” or “structures” the 氣 that is the 心—knowing that both “principles” and “lines” (pattern) translate the word 理 in Chinese. In addition, the word 生 enriches the semantic content of the 性, as 性 is not only 心之理, but also 生之理, the 理 of 生; thus, its meaning will depend on how one interprets the word 生. There are two major interpretations: on the one hand, 生 refers to the birth of man, and therefore 生之理, or 生理, is the 理 that comes with birth, or in other words, it is what is “innate” in man; on the other hand, 生 refers to the 生生 (literally, generating and generating) process which, according to the Confucian tradition, is the proper action of “Heaven and Earth” and which, in the Song Neo-Confucians, is related to the moral virtues, especially 仁⁴⁶—this is seen explicitly in d.i.), d.ii.), and implicitly in d.iii.)—in other words, according to this tradition, 生 is interpreted as the (cosmic) action of continually generating all things, which in turn is interpreted as the virtue of 仁, i.e. the authentic (真誠, d.iii.) love that one has for each thing or human being according to the proper relationship with them (親親仁民愛物, d.i.). Finally, we also see a development on the meaning of 理 in 生理 or 生生之理, which is explained as 所以生: that by which there is 生 (b.ii.), or 所以生生: that by which, or the “reason” why there is the action of continually generating (e. ii.); in other words, insofar as it is 生理 or 生生之理, 性 is not on the same level as the phenomenon of 生 (whether it mean birth or generating), but it is a kind of “ground” of it, it is “that by which” or “the reason why” the 生 or 生生 takes place.

II. Indirect Determinations

1. Diversity in unity (harmonization)

45 Survey of Zhejiang Wang Yangming’s School 3 浙中王門學案三, Ji ben 季本.

46 “天地以生物為心者也，而人物之生，又各得天地之心以為心者也。故語心之德，雖其總攝貫通，無所不備，然一言以蔽之，則曰仁而已矣。” (Zhu Xi, n.d.)

There is, in *Mingru xue'an*, a type of sentence characteristic of Chinese writing that consists of putting two or more key concepts (most typically, 性, 命, 道, etc.) in parallel, while emphasizing their commonalities and/or their differences. This is what we call “harmonization”. Among these occurrences we find several ways in which 性 and 理 relate to each other.

a. 理 as what 性 and *ming* 命 (“decree” or “fate”) have in common.

In the *Mingru xue'an*, there is a topos: “在天為命，在人為性，” i.e., “that which, as it is said of Heaven, is called 命, as it is said of man, is called 性”. This phrase originally comes from Cheng Yi (Cheng and Cheng 2004, 204),⁴⁷ and it is quoted at least four times in the *Mingru xue'an*. The source of this statement, and their variations, is the topical phrase in the *Zhong Yong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*): “天命之謂性”，that is, “what Heaven decrees (命) is called 性”. In the first sense, 理 plays the role of commonality between the two concepts of 性 and 命.

- i.) 天理在人如仁, 義, 禮, 智之性, 在天如元, 亨, 利, 貞之命是也. 只是合當如是, 便是理. (Huang 2008, ch 7)⁴⁸

The heavenly 理 (天理), as it is in man, is the 性 of 仁, 義, 禮, 智 (“benevolence, justice, sense of ritual, intelligence”); as it is in Heaven, it is the 命 of *yuan* 元, *heng* 亨, *li* 利, *zhen* 貞 (these are the four words that explain the 乾 *qian* hexagram in the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*). We call 理 what is as it should be (合當如是).

- ii.) 蓋一卦有一卦之理, 一爻有一爻之理, 皆所當窮, 窮到極處, 卻止是一理. 此理在人則謂之性, 在天則謂之命. (ibid., ch. 47)⁴⁹

(Speaking of divination by hexagrams according to the *Yijing*) indeed, each hexagram has its 理, and each line (in the hexagram) has its 理; [these 理’s] should be sought out, yet when they are tracked down to the very end, they are all one 理. This 理, as it is in man, is called 性; as it is in Heaven, it is called 命.

- iii.) 窮理者, 天理也, 天然自有之理, 人之所以為性, 天之所以為命也. (ibid., 58)⁵⁰

The 理 that one must seek is the heavenly 理 (天理), that is, the 理 that exists by itself spontaneously (天然自有). This is what constitutes (之所以為) 性, from the point of view of man, and 命, from the point of view of Heaven.

47 “在天為命，在義為理，在人為性，主於身為心，其實一也”。

48 Survey of Hedong Scholars Part A 河東學案上, Xue Xuan 薛瑄.

49 Survey of Diverse Scholars Part B 1 諸儒學案中一, Luo Qingshun 羅欽順.

50 Survey of Donglin Scholars 1 東林學案一, Gao Panlong 高攀龍.

b. 理 as the difference between 性 and 命

- i.) 性命雖雲不二，而亦不容混稱，蓋自其真常不變之理而言曰性，自其默運不息之機而言曰命，一而二，二而一者也。(ibid., ch. 20)⁵¹

Although it is said that 性 and 命 are one, they should not be confused with each other either. For from the point of view of the 理 which is genuine, constant and unalterable, it is called 性; from the point of view of the *ji* 機 (the imperceptible beginning of a movement or tendency) which acts silently and continuously, it is called 命. The one is the two, and the two are one.

c. 理 as a term to be harmonized next to 性

- i.) 性者，天地萬物之一原，即理是也。初本無名，皆人自呼之。以其自然，故曰天；脈絡分明，故曰理；人所稟受，故曰性。生天生地，為人為物，皆此而已。(ibid., ch. 14)⁵²

性 is the one and only source of the universe and all things; it is none other than 理. Originally it had no name; everyone calls it in their own way. Because it follows its own spontaneous course (自然), it is called 天 (Heaven); because its lines (pattern) are clear, it is called 理; as it is received by man, it is called 性. What generates (生) Heaven and Earth and makes man and things is that and nothing else.

- ii.) 蓋道合三才而一之者也 ...其燦然有理，謂之理；其粹然至善，謂之性；其沛然流行，謂之命。(ibid., ch. 24)⁵³

道 Dao (the “Way”) is that which brings together the three *cai* 才 (i.e., Heaven, Earth, and man) and unifies them ... As splendidly ordered, it is called 理; as purely good (善), it is called 性; as energetically following its course, it is called 命.

- iii.) 仁義禮智信之理一也，自天命而言謂之性，自率性而言謂之道，自物則而言謂之理，自無偏倚過不及而言謂之中，自有諸己而言謂之德，自極至而言謂之太極。(ibid., ch. 53)⁵⁴

There is only one 理 of *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, *zhi* 智, *xin* 信 (the five “cardinal virtues”): with regard to “Heaven’s decree” (天命), it is called 性; with regard to “following the 性”, it is called Dao 道; with regard to the laws of things,

51 Survey of the Jiangyou Wang Yangming’s School 5 江右王門學案五, Wang Shihuai 王時槐.

52 Survey of Zhejiang Wang Yangming’s School 4 浙中王門學案四, Dong Yun 董澐.

53 Survey of Jiangyou Wang Yangming’s School 9 江右王門學案九, Deng Yuanxi 鄧元錫.

54 Survey of Diverse Scholars Part C 1, 諸儒學案下一, Qu Zhide 瞿知德.

it is called 理; with regard to “no deviation/partiality and neither excess nor lack”, it is called *zhong* 中 (the mean); with regard to “having [virtues] oneself (before demanding them from others)”, it is called *de* 德 (virtue); with regard to perfection, it is called *taiji* 太極 (supreme ultimate).⁵⁵

d. 理—Heaven, 性—man

This is a subgroup of (c.), as here 理 and 性 are divided according to the “Heaven”—“man” dichotomy.

i.) 夫在天為氣者，在人為心，在天為理者，在人為性。(ibid., ch. 47)⁵⁶

What from Heaven’s point of view is 氣, from man’s point of view it is 心 (heart-mind); what from Heaven’s point of view is 理, from man’s point of view it is 性.

ii.) 在天為理，與天常存。在人為性，氣散則亡。(ibid., ch. 45)⁵⁷

In Heaven, [this entity] is 理; it exists eternally with Heaven. In man, it is 性; it will disappear when the 氣 [of man] disperses.

Comment 3: First, as can be seen from groups (a.) and (b.), one of the main functions of the harmonization construction in the *Mingru xue’an* is to make explicit the special relationship, simultaneously unified and distinguished, between 性 and 命, as received from the Confucian tradition, specifically from the book of *Zhong Yong* according to which, “What Heaven decrees (命) is the 性 (天命之謂性)”. On the one hand, in group (a.), 理, which is to be taken in its “absolute” sense, as 天理 (“heavenly principle”), appears as an entity that transcends both 命 and 性; in this conception, 性 appears as the “human” aspect of this 理. On the other hand, in sense (b.), 理 is not to be taken as this overarching entity, but rather as a principle of intelligibility or of reason, for what is emphasized in attributing 理 to 性 and not to 命 is the character of being “genuine, constant, and unalterable” (真常不變). The quotations in group (c.) concern the concepts of 性, 理, 命, 天, 道, 太極, 中, 德. They seem to express a conception in which there is only one essential entity in philosophical inquiry, and the names given to it express only different perspectives on it. Thus the harmonizing construction makes it possible, on the one hand, to bring together different aspects of this central entity, which often correspond to different parts of the Confucian tradition, and on the other hand, to distinguish one concept from another. Incidentally, we note that these constructions in different authors do not necessarily agree with each other and do not

55 The quotations are topical expressions from Confucians classics.

56 Survey of Diverse Scholars Part B 1 諸儒學案中一, Luo Qinqun 羅欽順.

57 Survey of Diverse Scholars Part A 3 諸儒學案上三, Huang Runyu 黃潤玉.

offer a very unified picture of the relationship of 性 to other concepts. Group (d.) presents an idea of 性 based on the Neo-Confucian dichotomy between 理 and 氣; and 性 is attributed to the latter and not to the former. Is therefore 性—since it is “in man”, a being made of 氣—that which does not partake of the constant and unalterable “principle” that is the 理.

III. Correspondence

- i.) 性非特具於心者為是，凡耳目口鼻手足動靜之理皆是也。非特耳目口鼻手足動靜之理為是，凡天地萬物之理皆是也。(ibid., ch. 7)⁵⁸

性 it is not only what the 心 has, but it is also the 理 of the ears (of listening), of the eyes (of looking), of the mouth (of tasting), of the nose (of smelling), of the hands and the feet (of touching), and of movement and rest (動靜); it is not only the 理 of the ears, the eyes, the mouth, the nose, the hands and the feet, and of movement and rest (動靜), but it is also the 理 of the universe and of all things.

- ii.) 君臣父子夫婦長幼朋友皆物也，而其人倫之理即性也。(ibid.)

[The relationship between] ruler and minister, [between] father and son, [between] husband and wife, [between] the elder and the younger, [between] friends, these are all what we call “*wu* 物” (literally: thing), and the 理 of these social relationships (人倫) is 性.

- iii.) 天理在人如仁，義，禮，智之性。(ibid.)

The heavenly 理 (天理), as it is in man, is the 性 of 仁, 義, 禮, 智 (“benevolence, justice, sense of rite, intelligence”).

Comment 4: These quotations are grouped under the heading “Correspondence” because they draw a line between the concept of 性 and well-identified entities. We saw earlier that, according to an interpretation that can be called “etymological”, i.e. according to the morphological composition of the word, 性 can be understood as 心之理 (I.2.a), 生之理 (I.2.b), or as 心之生理 (I.2). Here, the 理 of things outside the boundaries of 心 and 生 is also admitted as 性, including the 理 of sensations and actions (耳目口鼻手足動靜, quote i.) and that of human relationships (君臣父子夫婦長幼朋友, quote ii.). Quote iii.) echoes quote I.2.b.i.) as it identifies the four essential virtues of Confucianism, 仁, 義, 禮, 智, as 性. It should be noted that all of these quotes are from the same author, which means that this represents a fairly personal development.

Conclusion

In this article, we have taken as our starting point the thorny question of how to interpret concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy and express their meanings in Western languages and concepts. As we have shown, the problems faced by biblical exegetes and scholars of ancient Greco-Roman texts present some similarities to our own, and we have found especially inspiring the hermeneutic method devised by Friedrich Schleiermacher at the beginning of the 19th Century. We have thus adapted this method originally designed for interpreting the *Bible* and Plato to traditional Chinese philosophy. We have only presented part of the results that we hope to obtain, namely a “semantic dictionary” of all the major meanings of 性 in Ming Neo-Confucianism. However, it is perhaps already time to ask: does this method actually work? Does it bear any fruit? What limits does it have? In conclusion, we will thus proceed to a brief evaluation of our method, while hoping that other scholars could give more helpful feedback.

We will first enumerate the positive results of our work. In our research process we conducted a computer-based search to find all the places where 性 appears in proximity to 理 in the *Mingru xue'an*. This is a benefit that we have from the digital age, as we can conduct exhaustive research with much greater speed than before. So in the preceding section, we have presented a picture of all or almost all the major usages of 性 in relation to 理. As we can see, our results include at the same time *diverse* meanings of 性, which is sometimes puzzling when one comes from a Western point of view, and the inner relations—or, for that matter, the lack thereof—between them. This is what we see in Comment 1, namely that 性 means at the same time moral virtues 仁義, or moral principles, and the ontological structure or “pattern” of 氣; these diversifying aspects, hardly comprehensible from a purely Western point of view, are shown to be related to each other through the polysemy of 理, and through the mediation of 心 (heart-mind), which is both the home of the virtues and made up of 氣. And in Comment 2, we see furthermore that an additional semantic “layer” is added to the meaning of 性, namely through the word 生, whose two meanings, namely the cosmic life-giving movement of 生生, and “at birth”, give then two diversifying—but also related—meanings to 性. Comment 3 shows another aspect of the ways in which 性 is related to 理 and other key concepts of Neo-Confucianism. We see that Neo-Confucian thinkers felt the need to distinguish these key concepts (including 性) while at the same time affirming their unity. While the nature of this unity remains to be further explored, as well as what rules govern the differentiation, we observe that 理 plays very different roles in this process, and thus creates apparent contradictions: it can be the overarching term that assures the unity of 性 and 命, the differentiating

element between these two, a concept that get specified alongside 性, or the opposite of what 性 consists of (i.e. 氣). This diversity of relations between 性 and 理 might pertain to the different meanings of the latter in itself. The enumeration of all these different expressions also demonstrates the large span of possibilities—to the point of apparent contradiction—to determine a concept in Ming Neo-Confucianism. Comment 4 shows a very specific line of interpretation of 性 by Xue Xuan, who gives a “concrete” picture of what this concept refers to. Thus, according to Xue, 性 is the 理, or the rational or orderly aspect, of sensations, actions and social relations alike.

So what does 性 mean in Ming Neo-Confucianism? Can the results presented in this work give us an answer to this question? We probably cannot give a unifying definition of this concept. Still, using the hermeneutic method of Schleiermacher we have stayed close to the texts, and managed to give some interpretations with few ambiguities. In fact, in our interpretation of the citations we have left many key concepts intact (such as 理 itself, 命, 氣, etc.), and we have rendered into English only those expressions that can be easily transferred to the Western cultural-linguistic context (such as grammatical operators, sensible objects, social entities, etc.). And what we have obtained confirms our assertion in the beginning, namely that the meaning of a key Chinese philosophical concept such as 性 cannot be reduced to a single formula, but it is rather a network or field of relations with other concepts. The “semantic field” of 性 that we have displayed here shows all the major ways of its expression that we have been able to find and the relations it has with other concepts (especially with 理) as they appear in one of the most complete compilations of Ming Neo-Confucianism, the *Mingru xue’an*.

Work still needs to be done in order to fill certain gaps left by our demonstration. For example, the *Mingru xue’an*, as we have said, is not an exhaustive collection of Ming Neo-Confucian texts. It might be useful to look beyond this text and expand the “language area” in order to obtain a larger picture of meanings of 性. Secondly, in our demonstration, we have also omitted the influence of schools and intellectual affiliations between authors on the ways in which they conceive and express the concept of 性. It would therefore be helpful to clarify these aspects, along with the philosophical tendencies of each author, in order to develop a deeper understanding of their texts. Finally, our survey is a *synchronic* one and does not take into account the process of transmission through which the concept of 性 is received by different authors in the Ming era. It is thus recommended to add a diachronic dimension to this research.

Would all this work be worth the while? Would it not be simpler to just read the texts and give our own interpretations? We do not think that the two approaches

get in the way of each other. On the contrary, they are rather complementary. It is essential, and indeed is the minimum requirement for a sinologist to know the language, and to develop a personal understanding of the texts for him- or herself. And the “semantic dictionary” that we propose will be able to help in such a personal approach to the texts. We can discern a number of benefits that we might be able to obtain from it. Firstly, by providing the “big picture” of how a concept is conceived and expressed in a given period, it could help better understand the richness of the concept and prevent overly narrow interpretations. Secondly, in our presentation we have not given an interpretation of 性 or 理 since the start, but it was instead their different relations that helped us gain an insight into their respective meanings, and this approach can help reduce the inexactitude in interpretation caused by translating complex Chinese concepts which do not have close Western equivalents. Thirdly, the list of all major expressions concerning a given concept provides the backdrop against which one can compare one’s own personal interpretation in order to avoid mistakes and gain precision and richness. The method that we propose is thus not a substitute for translations or personal interpretations, but it can be a useful tool to support these, and it makes it possible to gain a synthetic understanding of a concept, as part of a conceptual network within a historical period.

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