

Eric S. Nelson: *Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom*

Reviewed by Jana S. ROŠKER*

(2023. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 256. ISBN 978-1-3504-1190-6)

Eric S. Nelson's *Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom* masterfully interweaves the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and classical Daoism, offering an intricate examination of their treatment of key concepts such as things, nothingness, and freedom. The book explores the nuanced variations and transformative interpretations of these central ideas, illuminating their profound impact on both Western and East Asian philosophical traditions. Both Asian and Western academics have long sought a book that offers a coherent and comprehensive introduction to the European reception of East Asian, and especially Daoist, philosophy, and thus one of the most significant contributions of this work is in fulfilling this need.

The book is structured into two main parts. The first, "Dao, Thing, and World", looks at the relationship between Daoism (specifically in the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi) and Heidegger's philosophy, focusing on the nature of things and their role in the world. The chapters in this section explore themes like the autopoietic self-transformation of things in Daoism and Heidegger, the concept of emptiness in Laozi's *Daodejing*, and the idea of uselessness in Zhuangzi's writings in relation to Heidegger's thought.

The second part, "Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Clearing", shifts focus to the themes of nothingness and emptiness. This section examines the intercultural interpretations of Daoist nothingness and Buddhist emptiness, their impact on Heidegger's philosophy, and the ethical and political implications of these concepts. The chapters here analyse the influence of East Asian philosophies on Heidegger's understanding of emptiness and the clearing, and how these ideas can be reimagined in the context of modern ethical and political challenges.

The introduction to *Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom* is included in its first chapter. This adeptly establishes a comprehensive view of its core theme,

* Jana S. ROŠKER, Professor of Sinology, Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.
Email address: jana.rosker@ff.uni-lj.si



namely the complex interplay between Heidegger's philosophy and the *ziranist* principles of Daoism. This text effectively readies the reader for the intricacies of the central part of this book, comprising in-depth analyses and insightful interpretations that enhance the comprehension of fundamental philosophical concepts crucial to its content.

Chapter two delves into the concept of the autopoietic transformation of things. It juxtaposes the Daoist perception of self-transforming nature in objects with Heidegger's notion of "thingness", underscoring a dynamic, interrelational aspect of existence that resonates in both philosophical traditions. The chapter emphasizes this shared focus on the continuous and intrinsic evolution of things within their respective ontological and cosmogonic frameworks. In the next chapter, the discussion pivots to the Daoist notion of emptiness as articulated in Laozi's *Daodejing*, and its parallel with Heidegger's concept of "the void". This chapter insightfully examines how both philosophies fundamentally integrate the concept of emptiness into their understanding of reality, proposing it as an essential and pervasive element that shapes their respective philosophical landscapes. Chapter four, which is the last chapter of the first part of the book, examines Zhuangzi's concept of "uselessness", drawing a compelling comparison to Heidegger's insights on the essence of things. The chapter stands out for its critical examination of conventional ideas about utility and purpose, challenging and redefining these concepts in a modern context through a thoughtful blend of Eastern and Western philosophical perspectives.

The insightful analyses in the first four chapters effectively lay the groundwork for the second part of the book, titled "Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Clearing". This section builds upon the foundational concepts introduced earlier, leading into a deeper exploration of these philosophical themes. In this chapter, Nelson examines the Daoist concept of nothingness and the Buddhist idea of emptiness. He does so after offering a solid critique of misleading and often completely inaccurate Western interpretations of these concepts and their associated notions. At the same time, Nelson skilfully establishes a compelling link between these Asian concepts and Heidegger's notion of "the clearing". His analysis not only draws intriguing parallels between these Eastern and Western ideas, but also underscores their collective significance in understanding the essence of being. This chapter serves as a crucial link furthering the exploration of how these philosophical traditions converge and diverge in their approaches to fundamental existential questions. Chapter six then looks at Heidegger's interactions with East Asian philosophies, with a focus on how these encounters shaped his thinking. Nelson critically assesses the influence of East Asian philosophical traditions on Heidegger, exploring the depth and implications of this often overlooked aspect of his

work. The chapter provides a critical examination of the extent and nuances of this intercultural influence, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Heidegger's philosophical evolution. In this part of the book Nelson scrutinizes the ethical and political ramifications of Heidegger's transcultural dialogues with Asian philosophies. He sheds light on the historical and social contexts of these subtle, often latent interactions and their influence on Western—and particularly European—academic thought. Here, the author also proposes how these intercultural philosophical exchanges might enrich and inform contemporary ethical and political discourse, highlighting their relevance in modern intellectual landscapes.

In the eighth, concluding chapter, Nelson synthesizes the book's major themes, re-emphasizing the significance of intercultural philosophy. He reflects on the enriching dialogue between Heidegger and Daoism, advocating for more innovative paths in philosophical research. This chapter extends beyond a mere summary, positioning the interplay between Western and Eastern thought as a catalyst for new philosophical explorations, thereby underscoring the profound impact of such transcultural engagements in shaping contemporary philosophical discourse.

As always with his work, Eric Nelson's latest book is laudable for its insightful and clear exploration of complex philosophical ideas. His comparative analysis of Heidegger's thought and Daoism is certainly profound, although it occasionally misses opportunities to explore some of the subtleties and diverse interpretations of Daoism. Moreover, the book could be further enhanced by more concrete discussions of the practical application of these philosophical concepts in modern contexts, which would provide a bridge between abstract theory and real-world relevance. This expansion into practical implications would enrich the book's impact, offering readers not only philosophical insights but also guidance for real-life applications of the ideas it explores.

Nevertheless, recognizing the challenges of integrating theory and practice, Nelson's approach is understandably cautious. The synthesis of abstract philosophical concepts with real-world applications risks oversimplification, potentially reducing complex theories to superficial solutions. Such a reductionist and individualized approach could inadvertently undermine the depth of theoretical insights, offering superficial, apolitical fixes to systemic social issues. Nelson's discernment in this matter likely informs his reluctance to deeply engage in the practical application of these philosophical ideas. His approach ensures the maintenance of academic rigor and depth, carefully balancing the exploration of theoretical concepts with the complexities inherent in their real-world translation. This decision underscores a commitment to preserving the integrity of philosophical discourse while acknowledging the complex relationship between theory and praxis.

In evaluating the overall significance of Nelson's *Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom*, it is evident that this work is a major contribution to the domain of comparative transcultural philosophy. This book, with its depth and comprehensive analysis, is likely to be recognized as a landmark in intercultural philosophical studies. The author successfully bridges East Asian and Western, and particularly European, thought, offering insightful perspectives on the nature of reality, existence, and our place in the world. His work invites readers to rethink conventional philosophical boundaries and to embrace a more holistic view of human understanding and existence. Throughout, Nelson critically engages with both Heidegger's and Daoist philosophies, offering insights into their relevance in contemporary philosophical discourse. He highlights the transformative potential of these philosophies in understanding and responding to modern existential and ecological crises.

In conclusion, Nelson's work is a significant contribution to intercultural and transcultural philosophy, offering a nuanced understanding of Heidegger's engagement with Daoist thought. It encourages a re-evaluation of Heidegger's philosophy in light of Daoist concepts, ultimately suggesting a path towards a more open, responsive, and relational way of living and thinking. Nelson's critique is balanced, acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of Heidegger's and Daoist philosophies.

This book skilfully merges diverse philosophical traditions, urging a transcendence beyond established intellectual paradigms. It promotes a dynamic environment for transformative thought, enabling the elevation of ideas and the discovery of new perspectives. The work is instrumental in bridging the gaps between culturally distinct philosophies, uncovering innovative approaches and insights. Such a contribution is pivotal for enhancing our comprehension and capacity to forge fruitful connections among various concepts stemming from different cultural perspectives. In doing so, it enriches and deepens our insights into the diverse ideas that weave the inspiring tapestry of global philosophical discourse.