

HEIDEGGERIAN AESTHETICS, EAST AND WEST: CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

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Postmodern thought has preoccupied itself with questioning the existence of a firm 'centre' that grounds the human being and her experience in the world. However, such questioning finds a contrasting relief in the work of other late twentieth century philosophers, particularly that of Martin Heidegger. This is evident in Heidegger's appreciation of the religious significance of the arts. A number of commentators, such as Graham Parkes¹ and Chang Chung-Yuan², have argued that Heidegger's philosophy and aesthetics specifically closely parallel Taoist thought. Indeed Chung-Yuan describes Heidegger as 'the only Western philosopher who not only thoroughly intellectually understands but has intuitively grasped Taoist thought.'³ Exploring such a statement, I will argue that in the writings of both Heidegger and Taoist practitioners, the question of 'being', its relationship to 'non-being', and each of these notions' presence (or otherwise) in works of art, and in language, have been paramount concerns and preoccupations.

Taoist aesthetics is concerned with the expression and realisation of the *Tao*. In contrast to Confucianism, the philosophy against which it was conceived, Taoism was critical of strict morality, unconcerned with formal education, and saw no true relevance in the political life. If

¹ Parkes, Graham. (Editor) *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1987.

² Chung-Yuan, Chang. 'Tao: A New Way of Thinking.' in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Volume 1, 1974, pp.138 – 152.

³ *ibid*, p.138.

Confucian philosophy is based on *li* (ritual propriety) and *jen*, (human-heartedness or benevolence), Taoism is based on the concept of the *Tao* – the Way.⁴ The two main thinkers within the Taoist tradition are Lao Tzu of the 6th century BCE and Chuang Tzu (369? – 286? BCE)⁵, and their writings, the *Tao Te Ching*⁶ and the *Chuang Tzu*⁷ are the texts from which Taoism has developed. Although their writings reveal differences, an essential point of convergence for their thinking is the importance they attribute to the *Tao*.

Tao is literally translated as ‘the Way’. Essentially it is understood as an Emptiness or a Void which precedes all form and matter – ‘Tao – the Eternally Nameless.’⁸ ‘There was a completed, amorphous something before the Heaven – Earth was born. Tranquil! Boundless! Abiding alone and changing not! Extending everywhere without risk. It may be styled ‘the world mother’. I do not know its name, but characterise it – the Tao.’⁹ The word *Tao*, therefore, represents an all-embracing, dynamic, creative potentiality, from which and in which all things have their existence and being – ‘The Tao produced One. The One produced two; the two produced three; the three produced all things.’¹⁰

⁴ Other central concepts of Taoism are *Te* – the potency derived from a natural comprehension of the *Tao*, *p’u* – the uncarved block, the Unwrought simplicity inherent in the natural, original state of all things and *wu wei* – doing without doing, or non-action. The focus on this essay will be on *Tao*, however, as this relates most directly to the core question of the paper.

⁵ Yutang, Lin. *The Wisdom of Confucius*. Random House, 1938, USA, p.408. Debate still continues about the exact dating of the *Tao Te Ching* and is author, Lao Tzu. This debate does not directly effect the content of our discussion, and thus will not be dealt with.

⁶ Medhurst, C Spurgeon. (Translator). *The Tao-Teh-King. Sayings of Lao Tzu*. A Quest Book, The Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, Illinois, USA, 1972.

⁷ Chuang Tzu. Burton Watson (Translator). *The complete works of Chuang Tzu*. Columbia University Press, New York, 1968.

⁸ op.cit, Medhurst, p.81.

⁹ ibid. p.69.

¹⁰ ibid. p.98.

Importantly, however, the *Tao* is neither Being, nor Non-Being, as it embodies and expresses both Being and Non-Being – it is beyond distinctions of opposites and holds within itself the totality of creation and thus transcends duality.¹¹ It is at the same time, however, existent in all things, immanent in creation, as the natural, spontaneous originator of ‘the ten thousand things’.¹² Taoism advocates a returning to a comprehension of this innate, spontaneous origin within all of the creation, with Lao-Tzu writing, ‘He who knows the Invariable [*Tao*] is liberal. Being liberal he is without prejudice. Being without prejudice he is comprehensive. Being comprehensive, he is vast.’¹³ Through a realigning of oneself to the ‘Great’ Way, a person achieves ‘enlightenment’, from which his/her actions flow naturally and spontaneously. ‘Man’s standard is the earth. Earth’s standard is the heaven. Heaven’s standard is the *Tao*. The *Tao*’s standard is spontaneity.’¹⁴

The intimate connection between the *Tao*, the One, the primordial ground of creativity, the pre-ontological source, and the Creative Power that emerges from it forms the foundation on which Taoist art rests. Since a comprehension of the *Tao* is the basis of Taoist art, then it is natural that the artist’s experience of the *Tao* will be reflected in the work. Significantly, since the *Tao* is understood as essentially formless, pre-ontological, ‘The indefinite,’¹⁵ and ‘The imageless,’¹⁶ negations are viewed as most effectively encapsulating and expressing its presence, conveying the core principle upon which the art work rests.

This can be clearly seen in the texts of Tung Yu, a Taoist aesthete. He comments, ‘If through pursuing one of the arts

¹¹ op.cit. Yu-Lan, p.178.

¹² op.cit. Medhurst, p.98.

¹³ op.cit. Yu-Lan, p.182.

¹⁴ op.cit. Medhurst, p.69.

¹⁵ op. cit. Medhurst, p.46.

¹⁶ ibid. p.46.

a man can attain harmony with the Tao, this is what the ancients called ‘approaching skill’...’, and

Those who look at paintings by Li Ch’eng [919 – 967] are first impressed by the forms and then suddenly seem to forget them.... [The painter, after many years of contemplation of his natural environment]... attains an exceptional clarity... within his breast.... When the time has come, the painter suddenly forgets his physical self, and what he sees instinctively... is all mountains, and so he is able to achieve their Tao.¹⁷

And a painter Mi Yu-jen (1072 – 1151) states,

People know that I am good at painting.... My condition in the world is like that of one hair in the ocean, tranquil and colourless. Often I sit in meditation in a quiet room, forgetting all the worries of the mind and sharing my wanderings with the emptiness of the blue void.¹⁸

The concept of the *Tao* is clearly central to Tung Yu’s aesthetics, and its relationship to the ‘clarity’ achieved by the artist resonates with the negation of ‘emptiness’, crucial, as we have seen, to the concept of the *Tao* in Taoist philosophy itself. Tung Yu also notes that observers of the paintings forget ‘the forms’ of the works – this echoes with the negation of ‘formlessness’ which is attributed to the *Tao*. Mi Yu-jen conveys clearly the intimate connection between meditation of the *Tao*, tranquillity, emptiness and the void and the practice of ‘good painting’. Quite clearly the emptiness he experiences in his meditation is related to his comprehension of the *Tao*, which he sees as crucial to his talent as a ‘good’ painter.

¹⁷ Bush, Susan and Shih, Hsio-yen. *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985, pp.210 - 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.211.

Taoist poetry also reveals the dependence of Taoist art on the central concept of the *Tao*. This poem by T'ao Ch'ien particularly expresses and reveals the metaphysical principles that have been the focus of this discussion:

To build a house in the world of man
And not to hear the noise of horse and carriage,
How can this be done? –
When the mind is detached, the place is quiet.
I gather chrysanthemums under the eastern hedgerow
And silently gaze at the southern mountains.
The mountain air is beautiful in the sunset,
And the birds flocking together return home.
In all these things there is a real meaning,
Yet when I want to express it, I become lost in no-
words.¹⁹

A work that reflects well the presence of the *Tao* as experienced by the poet in the quotidian, it indicates the importance of 'wordlessness' as a central negation of Taoist philosophy. The 'real meaning' – the experience of the *Tao* within all Creation – which is intuited by the poet, cannot be expressed or understood in the concrete meaning of words – it surpasses the attempt to be contained or understood in language. Interestingly enough, Heidegger, the true successor to Nietzsche in his critique of the traditional metaphysical structures in Western thinking, spent much of his later work analysing and critiquing problematic structures in Western language and pointed to the possible redemptive quality of poetry.

Heidegger's work is an attempt to offer solutions to the problem of nihilism that Nietzsche suggested would dominate the spiritual life of twentieth century people. Heidegger's work rejects the typical distinction between a transcendent 'true' self and the material self of the

¹⁹ Chung-Yuan, Chang. *Creativity and Taoism*. The Julian Press, Inc. New York, 1963, pp.190.

everyday. Heidegger envisions human beings as working wholly within and participating with the material, everyday world they inhabit. The result of his concerns with a changing conception of human being is the concept *Da-sein* – being there, or ‘being-in-the-world’.²⁰ He states,

The proposition ‘Man exists’ means: man is that being whose Being is distinguished by the open-standing standing in in the unconcealedness of Being, from Being, in Being. The existential nature of man is the reason why man can represent beings as such and why he can become conscious of them.²¹

This ontology creates a particular relationship between the human being as ‘being’ and its previous and eventual physical ‘Nothingness’. Within this world too, within the plane of existence, beyond which there is Nothing, this ontological structure points to the contingency of the ‘self’ in its actions and choices. ‘Being-in-this-world’ is not restricted to *physical* Being, but also to psychic and emotional being. In short, the ontological structure proposed by Heidegger points to an Emptiness or Nothingness beyond *Da-sein* itself. He states, ‘*Da-sein* means being projected into NOTHING...’;²² and further, ‘Man’s *Da-sein* can only relate to what-is by projecting into Nothing. Going beyond what is, is of the essence of *Da-sein*.’²³ Human being’s ontological ‘truth’, then, is the comprehension of its relationship to the Nothingness of its future existence and the Nothingness of its past – it is created through an active willing of its being within this world into the empty blank of its future existence.

This seems to resonate quite strongly with the Taoist conception of Nothingness. The *Tao* in Taoist thought is

²⁰ Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New American Library, New York, 1971, p.251.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.272.

²² *ibid.*, p. 251.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 256.

described as ‘the eternal not-being...[leading] towards the fathomless...the abysmal...The abyss of the abysmal.’²⁴ It is an Absolute Nothingness, not a nothingness in relation to something.²⁵ Taoism also asserts that being arises out of this Nothingness: ‘All that is, exists in being, being in non-being.’²⁶ Similarly, Heidegger asserts that human existence begins in Nothing and returns to Nothing. It is out of a comprehension of this fact that being can come into existence in the world – with an understanding of the lack of beyondness in one’s existence as human, the ‘truth’ of one’s being can be made.

In addition, the structure of *Da-sein* undercuts and resolves the Cartesian distinction between the subject and object – a distinction that is also dissolved in the Taoist’s comprehension of the *Tao*. In challenging the established spilt between metaphysical reality and material reality, Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s work completely rejects the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. Cartesian thought, in supposing the complete separation between mind and body, further proposes that a purely objective picture of external reality can be attained, through the application of the mind’s power on the environment. Thus the human person, in their essential mind is divorced and unattached to her/his surroundings and ‘world’. The ontological structure of *Da-sein* which posits the human person as ‘Being (in its verbal sense) in-the-world’ collapses such a distinction, situating the human person quite directly and fully within and part of the environment they inhabit. Chuang Tzu’s words, already quoted, exemplify the similar dissolution of the classical separation of subject and object in Taoism. He writes, ‘Heaven and earth and I live together, and all things and I are One. Since we are all One, how can we express the

²⁴ Op.cit. Medhurst. p. 21.

²⁵ Parkes, Graham. ‘Intimations of Taoist thought in early Heidegger.’ in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol 11, No 4, December, 1984, pp. 354 – 55.

²⁶ Op.cit. Medhurst. p. 95.

One? If we express the One, our expression and the One become two.’²⁷ and ‘This is that. That is also this. When this and that are not seen as relative opposites, this is called the essence of *Tao*.’²⁸

A third comparison between the two philosophies can be made in their discussion of ‘usefulness’. Taoist thought rejects the idea that the usefulness of an object is inherent characteristic, stating that it finds its functional meaning within the matrix of relationships in which it finds itself. A commentator notes, ‘...for a Chuang Tzu... there are... no such things as ‘essences’ in the sense of hard and solid ontological cores of things.’²⁹ Chuang Tzu writes, ‘Likewise, the ‘things’ are formed by their being designated by this or that particular name (simply by virtue of a social custom or convention).’³⁰ Heidegger proposes an almost exact proposition. A commentator writes, ‘[A] hammer is encountered in terms of its place in... [a] ...holistic context of functionality – the “ready-to-hand”... Hammering is “in order to” join boards, which is “for” building a bookcase, which is “for the sake of” being a person with a neat study.’³¹ Further, ‘the *being* of the equipment – its “ontological definition” – consists of its relations to the equipment and its actual use within the entire practical context.’³² There is a clear correlation between the two ways of thinking in this particular area.

It was in his later work that Heidegger addressed specific aesthetic issues, most clearly in his analysis of language, thinking and poetry, and it is also here that one can see Taoist resonances. As has been pointed out, much of

²⁷ Op.cit. Chung-Yuan. p. 144.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 144.

²⁹ Izutsu, Toshihiko. *Sufism and Taoism*. Iwanami Shoten Publishers, Tokyo, 1983, p. 360.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 364.

³¹ Audi, Robert. (Editor). *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 1995, USA, p.318.

³² *ibid.*, p. 318.

Heidegger's work was focussed on the dismantling of the typical metaphysical distinction between being and becoming in language and philosophy. He maintained that philosophy as a metaphysical enterprise was over, and he called for a new way of thinking which transcends these usual distinctions. In arriving at this 'new way of thinking'³³ he advocated that one 'step back'³⁴ from language to the moment when language is born – to the clearing – '*aletheia*'³⁵ – in which the 'event of Appropriation'³⁶ occurs – the moment of silence before the word is thought or heard. This sort of thinking 'steps back out of metaphysics into the active essence of metaphysics.'³⁷ In this process of critiquing language, the origin of metaphysical language, idea and thought can be critiqued, and the established structures of language that perpetuate the mistaken distinctions of metaphysics can be overcome. This process of stepping back has been likened to a process of contemplating and apprehending the Tao, and Chung-Yuan equates the event of Appropriation with the *Tao*.

Furthermore, the idea of stepping back in Heidegger's thought appears to lead to an approximation of, if not identity with, a metaphysical principle akin to the *Tao*. Heidegger himself uses the word *Tao* to signify the new method or exposition of language that arises from this process of stepping back. He states,

The word 'way' probably is an ancient primary word that speaks to the reflective mind of man. The key word in Lao Tzu's poetic thinking is Tao... Tao could be the way that gives all ways, the very source for our power to think what reason, mind, meaning, logos properly mean to say – properly by their proper

³³ Op.cit. Chung-Yuan, p. 140

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 140

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 140

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 140

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 140.

nature. Perhaps the mystery of mysteries of thoughtful Saying conceals itself in the word 'way,' Tao, if only we will let these names return to what they leave unspoken....³⁸.

In conclusion, there are strong resonances and links between Heidegger's work and core Taoist ideas, especially in the area of poetics, and as evident in Taoist painting. In light of our present focus of the notion of the 'centre', can we ask whether Heidegger's work leads us back to a centre? And can such a centre serve as a meeting point between the ostensibly disparate discourses of Western philosophy, and Eastern religious philosophy?

The *Tao* is conceived as a reality present for all people at all times; it is seen as a universal. However, Heidegger understood himself to be working in the wake of the *death* of God, the prime universal. It seems that an assertion that Heidegger's ontology or aesthetics leads to an assertion of the immanence and transcendence of the *Tao* is to imbue Heidegger's work with a metaphysic he was actually more concerned to reject.

On the other hand, one cannot deny the presence of religious and indeed metaphysical concerns in Heidegger's work. His work represents an attempt to refigure the religious or spiritual in the wake of the death of God, but such an attempt is in no way completed in his work – nor would Heidegger, it seem to me, have desired it to be. However, by calling on the motifs and concerns of Taoist art, he invokes the presence of the 'other' within Western culture, and opens a space within which difference and plurality can be negotiated. Furthermore, whilst he claimed to bring philosophy to an end he reaffirms the sacred power of artistic practice, calling on philosophers and artists to

³⁸ Heim, Michael. 'A Philosophy of Comparison: Heidegger and Lao Tzu' in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 4, December, 1984, pp. 314 – 328, p. 315.

reinvent and revivify the poetic endeavour, endowing it with the capacity to strip back ancient structures of thought and enshrine the new, revealing a new way of thinking, a new way of Saying, a new way of creating and a new way of being.