

Heidegger's Legacy for Comparative Philosophy and the *Laozi*

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Abstract

The ancient text known as the *Laozi Daodejing* is a treasure of Chinese culture and civilization, and it also represents one of the world classics of religion and philosophy. However, it is also a notoriously difficult work to interpret, and modern scholars have exerted tremendous energy in attempting to make an overall sense of just what the text is all about: is it religious or philosophical? Is it a synthetically coherent work with a unified perspective, or an anthology of disparate ideas compiled from multiple sources? Is its main character, the anonymous sage, a master of bodily techniques living in mountain reclusion, or an enlightened ruler who manipulates the Dao from his royal throne to order an empire? The famous German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), himself dabbled in the thought of the *Laozi*, and in doing so he opened a novel phenomenological reading of the text that rejected the metaphysics traditionally read into it, but his approach had little impact until the discovery of several excavated versions of the ancient manuscript that appear to confirm his phenomenological interpretation. Since then, a growing number of contemporary scholars are accepting, absorbing, and furthering this phenomenological reading of the *Laozi*, allowing them to make great progress in exploring its religious and philosophical foundations that have deeply influenced Chinese culture and society for more than two thousand years. This paper examines this legacy bequeathed by Heidegger to *Laozi* studies as well as comparative philosophy more generally.

Keywords: *Laozi, Martin Heidegger, Daoism, Ontology, Phenomenology*

1. Orientations to Heidegger and the *Laozi*

The separate papers of the present volume focus on the variety of religious legacies emerging from the historical interactions between China and the non-Chinese world. The focus of the current paper is directed to the foundational text of Daoism, the enigmatic *Laozi*, an ancient Chinese text that gingerly straddles the religious and philosophical. More specifically, in contrast to the many excellent studies that document the influence of Daoist philosophy on the thought of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), this study examines his legacy as a decisive figure of the contemporary study of the philosophy of the *Laozi* as well as a decisive figure of the modern enterprise of comparative philosophy.

Throughout his long and storied career, Heidegger famously asked the following: “What is the meaning of the question of being?” which is the philosophically primordial question that follows from a previous first question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” According to Heidegger, the question of the meaning of Being was originally raised by the pre-Socratic philosophers but was soon forgotten by the metaphysical tradition of Western philosophy. The question of the meaning of Being has been forgotten because Western philosophy has led itself into conceiving Being as itself an entity of absolute being that gives “being” to all beings. The ultimate consequences of this forgetting of Being is that it has ushered human civilization into a world of technological instrumentality in which existing beings are understood as resources.

Heidegger’s thought from early on was decisively influenced by his focus on recovering the meaning of the question of Being, and it directed him back to the pre-Socratics, particularly Parmenides and Heraclitus (see Heidegger, 1975). His intent was to open the way for the inception of a new beginning for the questioning of Being by retrieving their ability to ask the same, but for the purpose of coming to terms with modern technology. His pursuit of the questioning of Being led him to the ancient Chinese philosophy of Daoism and the *Laozi*.

Heidegger found in this short text a philosophy that was in many ways akin to that of the pre-Socratics in that both were, according to his understanding of them, radically non-metaphysical in distinct contrast to the tradition of Western metaphysics that studies Being in terms of first principles that exist outside and beyond the phenomenal world. In his engagements with the thought of the *Laozi*, Heidegger sometimes expressed highly reticent and ambiguous remarks concerning a possible East-West dialogue. He was not entirely clear, in his writings and interviews, if he believed that the thought of the *Laozi* could, like the thought of the pre-Socratics, open the way to raising again the question of the meaning of Being.

For example, in the course of his *der Spiegel* interview, he said, "And who of us would be in a position to decide whether or not one day in Russia or China very old traditions of 'thought' may awaken that will help make possible for man a free relationship to the technical world?" (Heidegger, 1981: 61), but he then followed this by saying, "My conviction is that only in the same place where the modern technical world took its origin can we also prepare a conversion (*Umkehr*) of it. In other words, this cannot happen by taking over Zen-Buddhism or other Eastern experiences of the world" (Heidegger, 1981: 63). Still, his remarks on the issue have provided much fuel for debates that have been on-going now for several decades concerning the possibility for such dialogue, and there remains to this day much controversy as to his final stance. It is within this general philosophical context that Heidegger approached the *Laozi*.

The *Laozi* was composed around 500 BC, dates comparable to those of the pre-Socratics. It was the first Chinese text to introduce the notion of the Dao as the primordial source of existence. Although the *Laozi* has been transmitted to posterity in slightly different versions, for all intents there are two fundamentally different versions, what I call the early *Laozi* and the later *Laozi*.

Oddly, the early *Laozi* is both the most ancient version as well as the most recent. Originally circulating as an oral text, its earliest known transcription dates to the very end of the third century BC. Two excavated versions of it were discovered at Mawangdui, and more recently partial transcriptions in three versions were discovered at Guodian; they are known as the Mawangdui *Laozi* and the Guodian *Laozi*, both of which are taken as representing the early *Laozi*. Its core notion is the *heng dao* 恆道, where *heng* signifies the Dao's temporalizing nature. This "temporalizing Dao" exists exclusively between the space of Heaven and Earth, where beings come into existence by way of its interplay of *wu* 無 (absence) and *you* 有 (presence) within the world. I characterize its philosophy as phenomenological.

The later *Laozi* is the familiar version that has been transmitted to us today, best recognized by the two most important commentaries that accompany it: one by the second century Heshang Gong that identifies the Dao with Nothingness, and the other by the third century Wang Bi that identifies the Dao with Non-being. The core notion of the later *Laozi* is the *chang dao* 常道, where *chang* signifies the Dao's constant/permanent/eternal nature. Because this "eternal Dao" exists on a transcendent realm from where it produces Heaven and Earth and the myriad things also through the interplay of *wu* and *you*, but here understood by Heshang Gong as Nothingness and Somethingness and by Wang Bi as Non-being and Being. I characterize its philosophy as metaphysical.

Although the metaphysics of Nothingness is not the same as the metaphysics of Non-being, I do not systematically differentiate them in this paper other than to associate the former with China and the latter with the West.

2. Metaphysics with Heidegger and the Laozi

Heidegger's overriding interest in the *Laozi* stemmed from his inquiry into whether its thought spoke directly to the meaning of the question of Being. He believed that the world was threatened by the planetary Ge-stell of modern technology where beings are taken as standing reserve, and he writes, "As the essence of technology, Ge-stell would be absolute. It would reduce man and beings to a sort of 'standing reserve' or stockpile in service to, and on call for, technological purposes" (Heidegger, 1977c: 309). Heidegger understood the Ge-stell of modern technology as the destined completion of metaphysics in a world that has entirely forgotten the question of the meaning of Being; as Heidegger remarks, "Not only have the gods and the god fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history" (Heidegger, 1971b: 89). As the destiny of metaphysics, Heidegger asserted that the movement from the origins of metaphysics to its completion in the Ge-stell was a function of the forgetfulness of Being where existence is shorn of meaning and plenitude (see Heidegger 2012a).

It is in this context that Heidegger raises the possibility of the second beginning that begins by returning to the ancient Greeks in order to reawaken the question of the meaning of Being. Only by doing so will beings once again be allowed to come into the plenitude of their unconcealment by which they shed their status as standing reserve. Thus, Heidegger encouraged the pursuit of this thinking that could uncover a more appropriate way for humans to fruitfully and flourishingly exist in accommodation with the Ge-stell, and this had to begin with once again raising the question of the meaning of Being. Could the *Laozi* assist in raising the question and thereby play an important role in "the second beginning" and the overcoming of metaphysics? As Ma Lin and Jaap van Brakel note, "Despite Heidegger's general claim that the allegedly inevitable event of East-West dialogue can only be anticipated before the Western philosophical tradition gains maturity through its own self-transformation, East Asian sources have undeniably played a role in (Heidegger's) search for ways out of the Ge-stell" (2014: 548).

Heidegger's suspicion of the *Laozi* led him to uncover a radically non-metaphysical interpretation of it that resonated with pre-Socratic thought, particularly in its attention to the phenomenological interplay of Being and Nothingness. This is in stark contrast to the metaphysics that was laid over the text with the appearance of the later *Laozi*, where the metaphysical Dao was understood as an entity strictly identified with *wu* as either Nothingness or Non-being, which produces phenomenal *you* as Somethingness or Being.

For the phenomenology of the early *Laozi*, the Dao cannot be identified with *wu* because they are not the same, where *wu* (as Nothingness considered in terms of absence) can only be conceived in its interplay with *you* (as Being

considered in terms of presence). Whether Heidegger explicitly recognized the metaphysics of the standard Chinese interpretations of the *Laozi* only to reject it or whether he remained ignorant of it, it played no role in his reading of the text. Further, he saw in the *Laozi* a thought that was comparable to the pre-Socratics in that it was thoroughly pre-metaphysical.

Whereas Western metaphysics separates Being as a first principle from the beings that it produces, Chinese metaphysics (which developed directly from the early *Laozi*) separates Nothingness or Non-being as a first principle from the beings that it produces. On the other hand, phenomenology, whether of the sort articulated by the early *Laozi* or the pre-Socratics, integrates Being and Nothingness within the phenomenal world from where “poetic thinking” explores their interplay. For Heidegger, this involves the active involvement of humans who are able to allow things to be held forth in their unconcealment, and this often takes the form of art and poetry, for example in the verses of the *Laozi*, because of their ability to preserve the disclosures of being in material forms. But the world has not yet overcome this destining of metaphysics, whose overcoming will alone be the result of a return to the originary and primordial thinking that alone questions Being.

The line separating the early phenomenological *Laozi* with its directing notion of “the temporalizing Dao” (*heng dao*) from the later metaphysical *Laozi* with its directing notion of “the eternal Dao” (*chang dao*) was clearly drawn in 157 BC, although the processes that led to its metaphysicalization were already well underway by the third century BC. By a matter of sheer coincidence, the name of the ruling emperor who passed away in that year was Liu Heng. Because the beliefs of the time mandated that upon death the name of the emperor was tabooed, editors of the *Laozi* had to find a different word to substitute for the tabooed term *heng*, and they chose the term *chang* for this.¹

Where *heng* connotes notions of a watery presencing or a misty lingering, the term *chang* connotes a very different condition of permanency, even eternity. The substitution of *chang* for *heng* to identify the central feature of the Dao in the *Laozi* wrenched it out of the phenomenal world of the interplay of *wu* and *you* and re-situated it on a transcendent realm where it was identified with original Nothingness outside of time and space that produces Being that in turn produces the myriad things. Thus the metaphysicalization of the Dao of the *Laozi* had achieved completion with this term substitution, and the phenomenological reading of the text was lost to oblivion, where it lay dormant and entirely unsuspected by Western readers until Heidegger, with no training in Chinese language, culture, or history, or even Chinese philosophy, recovered it by first of all approaching it from the perspective of the primordial question of the meaning of Being posed by the pre-Socratics.

Even after the discovery of the Mawangdui *Laozi* with its uses of the temporalizing *heng dao*, sinologists still had not begun to see through the

chinks in the standard metaphysical readings of the text as they continued to assume *heng* as a synonym of *chang*. The later discovery of the Guodian *Laozi* also with its uses of the temporalizing *heng dao* instead of the eternal *chang dao* finally started to compel a small handful of scholars (many of whom are briefly mentioned herein) to rethink and cautiously distance themselves from the entire enterprise of interpreting the *Laozi* according to the metaphysical dictates of “the eternal Dao,” and they more often than not turned to Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretations of the text to direct their own engagements with it.

It is difficult to overstate Heidegger’s legacy in opening the way to overcoming the metaphysical interpretation of the *Laozi*. At the same time, it is also difficult to overstate the radical difference between the total meaning of the text when read metaphysically by way of the eternal Dao and when read phenomenologically by way of the temporalizing Dao. Examining the recent publication history of phenomenological interpretations of the *Laozi*, it is also clear that Heidegger’s overcoming of the metaphysical interpretations of it directly lead to and are intimately intertwined with contemporary phenomenological interpretations that persistently line up with the philosophy of the early *Laozi*, as demonstrated by the Guodian and Mawangdui versions with their guiding notion of the “temporalizing Dao.” Any informed examination of many (indeed if not all) chapters of the *Laozi* through the application of the phenomenological interpretation easily bears out the radical difference between the two interpretations.

3. Comparative Philosophy with Heidegger and the *Laozi*

The philosophy of the later *Laozi* is not usually characterized as metaphysical, at least not explicitly. Interestingly, Ma and van Brakel come very close to making this claim in their brief discussion of “Wang Bi’s philosophical Daoism that advocates the centrality of the Nothing (無 *wu*) on the basis of the saying in chapter 40 of the [*Laozi*] that what exists (有 *you*) comes from nothing,” and they argue that “this approach [to the issue of emptiness in China] has the potential of being developed into an Asian version of metaphysics” (2014: 545).

Still, one cannot make a metaphysics out of something not-yet metaphysics without transforming its core meanings, but it is my contention that Wang Bi’s philosophical interpretation of the *Laozi* was already metaphysics from the beginning. At the same time, his metaphysical interpretation (together with, for example, Heshang Gong’s earlier metaphysical interpretation) in fact has transformed the core meanings of the early *Laozi*, and this is nowhere more clear than in its guiding notion of the “temporalizing Dao” in contrast to the later *Laozi*’s guiding notion of the “eternal Dao.”

As the ideas and methodologies of comparative philosophy that often directly engage the *Laozi* continue to be developed, it remains a heavy order for scholars of Daoist philosophy, whether Chinese or Western, to manage Heidegger, while it remains a heavy order for Western philosophers to manage Daoist philosophy. For Western philosophers, this is primarily because its traditional metaphysics is based on Nothingness rather than on Being, which the tradition of Western philosophy is not well equipped to manage. Western sinologists, not typically trained in philosophy, also do not normally characterize the philosophy of the *Laozi* as metaphysical primarily because there is no readily corresponding term for it in the ancient Chinese lexicon; for them, it is just Daoist philosophy.

Much like the non-metaphysical philosophy of the pre-Socratics from which emerged Western metaphysics, the early *Laozi* too was non-metaphysical and from it directly emerged Chinese metaphysics. Also, much like Heidegger's work that strove to uncover the pre-metaphysical thought of the pre-Socratics before Western philosophy became metaphysical, Heidegger also was able to see through the metaphysical veneer of traditional readings of the later *Laozi* with its "eternal Dao" and uncover its pre-metaphysical philosophy that informs the early *Laozi* with its "temporalizing Dao."

The legacy of Heidegger's phenomenological reading of the *Laozi* has two decisive aspects. The first is for contemporary readings of the *Laozi*, which was the result of his ability to entirely sidestep the Chinese metaphysics of Nothingness/Non-being traditionally read into the *Laozi* as he uncovered the ancient, radically non-metaphysical core of its philosophy of the Dao. The second legacy is for the modern enterprise of comparative philosophy, which was the consequence of his engagements with the phenomenology of the *Laozi* that brought it into deep conversation with his own thinking, thereby establishing the text as canonical for comparative philosophy.

Ronnie Littlejohn characterizes comparative philosophy as "a subfield of philosophy in which philosophers work on problems by intentionally setting into dialogue various sources from across cultural, linguistic, and philosophical streams" (*IEP*). A relatively undeveloped field of study, for the most part comparative philosophy normally refers to encounters between Western and Eastern philosophy, but primarily Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism, where the comparative philosopher normally either brings his/her training in Western philosophy to bear on Eastern philosophy, or vice-versa. Littlejohn points out that the earliest works of comparative philosophy came from the Indian philosophers, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) and also the Japanese philosopher, Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), whose introduction of the Buddhist notion of Nothingness to Western philosophers was absorbed by Heidegger by way of several of Nishida's students who studied under Heidegger.²

While many others before Heidegger discussed Eastern philosophy including the *Laozi*, they typically did so to introduce and explain it to the West or to remark on its deficiencies in contrast to Western philosophy.³ Still, the collective enterprise of comparative philosophy itself as it is practised today with respect to its parameters, methods, and objectives, was largely formed and defined by Heidegger's understandings of and reflections on intercultural engagements of philosophical conversation between the East and the West, whose most important articulations are dispersed among his later writings, but his 1959 essay, "A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer" (Heidegger, 1971a) stands out among them.

Heidegger is arguably the founding figure of comparative philosophy in the West. Although few have explicitly stated this in such straightforward ways, Ma and van Brakel come close; they write:

The theme of "intercultural philosophical dialogue" has not received much focused attention.... Everyday examples of intercultural philosophical dialogue include: discussion between Heidegger and the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Hisamatsu Hōseke Shinichi; cooperation between the Chinese scholar Li Zhizao and the Jesuit Francisco Furtado in the seventeenth century; or the contemporary discussion between the American philosopher Rorty and the Indian philosopher Balslev.... In German-language publications from the 1990's, a group of scholars ascribed to Heidegger's thinking a unique significance for the foundation, initiation, and orientation of cultural philosophy. According to them, Heidegger is the only great philosopher from the European traditions who took seriously the issue of East-West dialogue and hence something called intercultural philosophy. For example, Wolz-Gottwald argues that Heidegger has presented the "beginning of a 'creative' intercultural philosophy as a third way" (2016: 184-187).

Heidegger's legacy for comparative philosophy is matched by his legacy for the contemporary study of the Daoist philosophy of the *Laozi*. Heidegger's familiarity with Daoist philosophy was, at least at first, channeled through a series of discussions throughout the 1920s and 1930s with several eminent Japanese philosophers who studied in Germany. Although they were for the most part associated with the Kyoto School with its heavy influence from Buddhist thought, all of them were also familiar with the *Laozi* as a classic of the Far Eastern philosophical and cultural tradition, however the *Laozi* did not capture Heidegger's philosophical attention until after the Second World War.⁴

When the *Laozi* did so, Heidegger read it without spending much time with its European interpretations other than to reject their tendency to identify *Laozi* as a metaphysician; commenting on the unthoughtful discussions concerning philosophy among Europeans and "contemporary Indians, Chinese and Japanese," he writes that "everything is stirred up in a gigantic mishmash

wherein it is no longer discernible whether or not the ancient Indians were English empiricists and Laozi a Kantian" (Heidegger, 2012b: 137).

Heidegger relied on several German translations of the *Laozi* that were on hand. While some of whose interpretations were more "philosophical" than others (see Ma, 2008: 121-122), he approached the text directly in his own understanding and, although he had no training in Chinese, he went so far as to "translate" (the term is used with caution) at least eight of its chapters, according to Reinhard May (1996: 6). His colleague in this who assisted him to uncover the meanings of the ancient text was the Taiwanese Paul Hsiao Shih-yi, a Roman Catholic studying theology in Italy who had dabbled with his own translation of the *Laozi* into Italian. Given the state of *Laozi* studies at the time, it was probably more propitious that Heidegger studied with a non-specialist in Daoist studies who likely found it less disagreeable when Heidegger decisively broke with standard metaphysical interpretations of the text in order to think it phenomenologically.

Next to Heidegger's wide-spread reception in the circles of Japanese philosophy, his thoughts on East-West dialogue have until recently been largely passed over by Western Heideggerian scholars who strictly attend to his position in and impact on Western philosophy. However, a watershed moment arrived in 1969 when Chang Chungyuan, among the early Chinese scholars to have attended to Heidegger's thought, organized an inaugural international conference on comparative philosophy at the University of Hawaii, an important bastion of comparative philosophy, that was devoted to Heidegger's ideas about East-West dialogue (see Ma, 2008: 17). To date, the work by the Chinese scholar, Ma Lin, has most successfully uncovered Heidegger's ideas about East-West dialogue, in part because of her advanced training in Chinese philosophy as well as in Heideggerian thought. Current trends of scholarship on East-West dialogue attend much more closely to Heidegger's ideas on the topic, with a great deal of success.

This paper does not aim to further examine Heidegger's legacy for the modern enterprise of comparative philosophy to any extent, nor to rethink the influence of Asian thought including the *Laozi* on his philosophy. Rather, it turns its focus to Heidegger's legacy that laid the foundations for contemporary interpretations of the philosophy of the *Laozi* that are fully cognizant of the dangers of subjecting it to traditional metaphysical interpretations. Although such interpretations are supportive of the metaphysics of the later *Laozi*, they distort and disfigure the original phenomenology of the early *Laozi*. The results of Heidegger's engagement with that pre-metaphysical philosophy of the *Laozi* are starting to bear fruit in philosophical circles, in large part due to his success in bringing a phenomenological reading to it that eminently accords with the notion of the temporalizing Dao that pervades the Guodian and Mawangdui excavated versions of the early *Laozi*.

4. Poetic Thinking with Heidegger and the *Laozi*

Heidegger's motive in attending to Asian philosophy directly stemmed from his conviction that the pre-Socratic thinkers were the first to think the question of the meaning of Being. By this, he meant that they contemplated the ontological difference between Being and beings, where the interplay of Being intertwined with Nothingness is the original ground from which all beings are brought forth as who or what they are; Heidegger writes, "Bringing-forth brings out of concealment into unconcealment" (Heidegger, 1977c: 317). Heidegger turns to the Greek term *aletheia* ("truth as disclosure") to refer to this authentic truth of this unconcealment.

The question of the meaning of Being thought by the pre-Socratics was, according to Heidegger, forgotten with the rise of Western philosophy beginning with Plato and Aristotle, and he specifically defines this tradition as metaphysics *tout court*. This metaphysics conceives Being as an independent entity, as with the *eidos* of Plato, the unmoved mover of Aristotle, or the God of Western monotheism. Heidegger recognized a distinct destiny for metaphysics that has already reached its completion in the planetary *Ge-stell* ("enframing"), a term Heidegger uses "as the name for the essence of modern technology" (Heidegger, 1977c: 325).

In the *Ge-stell*, beings are taken out of their lifeworld and fashioned into standing reserve for scientific manipulation. The *Ge-stell* signifies a condition in which the possibility for beings to be brought into their own unconcealedness is systematically strangled by "*calculation, speed, and the claim of the massive*" (Heidegger, 2012b: 95). The consequences of this are dire and threaten the well-being and survival of the planet as civilization turns to nihilism; Heidegger writes, "As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve" (Heidegger, 1977c: 332).

When Heidegger often speaks of the overcoming of metaphysics, he refers to a way of thinking that does not wrench beings out of their lived experience "in order to make them objects of investigation and to determine their grounds" (Heidegger, 1977a: 94), but rather allows beings to be brought into their unconcealment. He expects that this way of thinking will offer new paths forward by which humans can find more appropriate relationships to the *Ge-stell* of modern technology, thereby to save the world. Heidegger writes that "only the greatest occurrence, the most intimate event, can still save us from lostness in the bustle of mere incidents and machinations. What must eventuate is what opens being to us and places us back into being and

in that way brings us to ourselves and face to face with work and sacrifice” (Heidegger, 2012b: 46).

Heidegger conceives this “greatest occurrence” in various ways, but it primarily refers to what he names throughout many of his later works as “inceptive thinking” that significantly differs from the scientific attitude. This inceptive thinking has its direct roots in the pre-Socratics philosophers who originally asked the meaning of the question of Being, an occurrence that Heidegger calls “the first beginning.” For its part, the tradition of Western metaphysics was forged from out of the first beginning of the pre-Socratics and took shape as Being became an objectified essence or entity in the hands of the first metaphysicians.

In addition, Heidegger regularly advised a return to the pre-metaphysical thought of the pre-Socratics because doing so can initially direct us in the endeavour to develop our own ability to raise again the question of the meaning of Being within the Ge-stell of modern technology. The dawn of this inceptive thinking that will overcome metaphysics is what Heidegger calls “the second beginning” or “the other beginning.” He writes, “In this decisiveness [of renunciation as the highest form of possession], the open realm of the transition is sustained and grounded; this open realm is the abyssal in-between [where metaphysics reigns] amid the ‘no longer’ of the first beginning as well as of its history and the ‘not yet’ of the fulfillment of the other beginning” (Heidegger, 2012b: 20).

It is within this philosophical context that Heidegger turned to Asian philosophy to inquire if it too had ever raised the question of the meaning of Being. In line with this, Heidegger often discussed the notion of what it means to think the Same, and by this he referred to whether the question of the meaning of Being that he asked was the same as the question of the meaning of Being that the pre-Socratics asked. His turn to the *Laozi* (and Asian thought generally) was motivated by this inquiry into whether it too had raised the same question of the meaning of Being, and if so, whether it too could assist in the task of overcoming metaphysics; he asked “whether in the end – which would also be the beginning – a nature of language can reach the thinking experience, a nature which would offer the assurance that European-Western saying and East Asian saying will enter into dialogue such that in it there sings something that wells up from a single source” (Heidegger, 1971a: 8).

The *Laozi* currently enjoys a renewed position and value in the field of comparative philosophy in large measure due to the prominence that Heidegger gave to it. This is somewhat ironic because he refused to recognize the thought of the *Laozi* (but also of Asian philosophy more generally) as philosophy in the first place; for Heidegger, philosophy in the strict sense is exclusively and appropriately identifiable with metaphysics, and this of a definite Western sort: “The style of all Western-European philosophy – and

there is no other, neither a Chinese nor an Indian philosophy – is determined by this duality ‘beings – in being’” (Heidegger, 1968: 224).

In stark contrast to philosophy strictly understood as metaphysics, Heidegger found in the *Laozi* what he called “thinking,” “poetic thinking,” or even “dwelling poetically” (see, for example, Heidegger, 1971c).⁵ Structurally, this thinking holds the same value as pre-Socratic thought as representing a pre-metaphysical philosophy, but given Heidegger’s definition of philosophy, it is more appropriate to call that thinking pre-philosophical and non-metaphysical while remaining aware of the subtle difference between them.

Heidegger’s resistance or refusal to identify the thought of the *Laozi* as “philosophy” *sensu stricto* might appear to reflect the bias of Western philosophers that leads many of them to dismiss the *Laozi* as non-philosophical and unworthy of their attention.⁶ However, Heidegger’s recognition of pre-Socratic thought as pre-metaphysical only makes sense with the subsequent formation of the tradition of Western philosophy itself understood as metaphysics. Since Heidegger did not recognize the tradition of Chinese metaphysics that was directly forged from the thought of the *Laozi* that was implicated in the substitution of the “eternal Dao” for the “temporalizing Dao,” it could not be considered pre-philosophical, only non-metaphysical. But he indirectly established the structural relation between pre-Socratic thought and the thought of the *Laozi* as “poetic thinking” in the deepest sense as the thinking of the question of the meaning of Being, and he goes on to specifically recognize the *Laozi* as the product of “Laozi’s poetic thinking” (Heidegger, 1971d: 92).

As non-metaphysical, poetic thinking, at least as demonstrated by the pre-Socratics if not also the *Laozi*, is that which alone is capable of thinking being, assisting beings in being brought into unconcealment, and preserving them in their unconcealment. In this sense, poetic thinking differs from metaphysics in that it does not objectify beings but rather allows them to come into their unconcealment. The bringing-forth undertaken by thinking is, according to Heidegger, active and productive as a form of poiesis: “Not only handicraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, *poiesis*” (Heidegger, 1977c: 317). He also states, “By no means, however, may the event [of the appropriation of Being] be represented as an ‘incident’ or a ‘novelty.’ Its truth, i.e., the truth itself, essentially occurs only if sheltered in art, thinking, poetry, deed. It therefore requires the steadfastness of the Da-sein [human being] that repudiates all the semblant immediacy of mere representation” (Heidegger, 2012b: 201).

Poetic thinking is inceptive in that it gives rise to philosophy in the first beginning, but it is also a future activity that incepts the second beginning, which is capable of effectuating the release of beings (*gelassenheit*) from their subjection to the Ge-stell of modern planetary technology that reduces beings

to resources as standing reserve. Poetic thinking is inceptive in that it opens the way to the second beginning which marks the overcoming of metaphysics; as Heidegger writes, "The thinking that is to come is no longer philosophy because it thinks more originally than metaphysics – a name identical to philosophy" (Heidegger, 1977b: 265).

It should be clear that Heidegger's resistance to recognizing the *Laozi* as philosophy is simply the result of his identifying its thought as non-metaphysical. Although one need not agree with Heidegger's definition of philosophy as metaphysics that excludes the *Laozi*, it is important to understand his intent and meaning in making that claim.

5. Interpreting the *Laozi* with Heidegger

The *Laozi* is foundational not only for Daoism but for Chinese philosophy as a whole, largely because of its original introduction of a gathering of profound ideas about the Dao (see Michael, 2015). The *Laozi* conceives the Dao as the fundamental source for the existence of all things, as seen in *Laozi* chapter 25 that states, "The Dao was born before Heaven and Earth" [道]先天地生, and in *Laozi* chapter 51 that states, "The Dao gives birth to the myriad things" 道生之 [萬物].

Laozi interpretation generally takes two forms, metaphysical and non-metaphysical or what can properly be called phenomenological. The stark differences between them can be encapsulated by the following comments by Bo Mou, representative of the metaphysical interpretation, and by Roger Ames and David Hall, representative of the phenomenological (or, as they call it, process philosophy). Bo Mou writes:

We first need to make clear what "*chang-Dao*" (the eternal *Dao*) means. In my view, what "*chang-Dao*" denotes is not something that is separate from the (genuine) *Dao* as a whole but one dimension or layer of the *Dao*: its eternal and infinite dimension that consists in the *Dao* going on forever and continuously transcending any finite manifestations of the *Dao* in "*wan-wu*" (ten thousand particular, concrete, and individual things of the universe) in the course of its developing and changing process (2003: 249-250).

Against this, Ames and Hall note "the absence of the 'One behind the many' metaphysics" of the *Laozi* before writing:

As a parody of Parmenides, who claimed that "only Being is," we might say that for the Daoist, "Only beings are," or taking one step further in underscoring the reality of the process of change itself, "only becomings are." That is, the Daoist does not posit the existence of some permanent reality behind appearances, some unchanging substratum, some essential defining aspect behind the accidents of change (2003: 13-14).

While it may seem that there is no middle ground between the two interpretations of the *Laozi*, in fact neither is incorrect, as judged by the separate historical pedigrees of the early phenomenological *Laozi* and the later metaphysical *Laozi*, both of which stretch back to the third century BC. Still, although the phenomenological reading of the *Laozi* substantially predated the metaphysical, in the course of the second century BC it came, for all intents, to obliterate the phenomenological, in large part due to the loss of the textual basis for the phenomenological reading with the textual substitution of “the eternal Dao” for “the temporalizing Dao.”

While there are some few outlier phenomenological readings of the *Laozi* that do in fact historically appear from time to time,⁷ they enjoyed little momentum in the tradition, and the metaphysical reading was made standard as evidenced in the Heshang Gong and Wang Bi commentaries, both of which taken together played a foundational role in the formation of Wei-Jin metaphysics. Already by the start of the Song Dynasty, the metaphysical interpretation of “the eternal Dao” provided the metaphysical basis for the spread and development of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, whose most important notion, namely *taiji* 太极, was directly derived from “the eternal Dao” of the *Laozi* (see Liu, 2014).

As a term with a particularly loaded content in the history of philosophy and religion in Western civilization, Western scholars have hesitated to directly label the *Laozi* as a work of metaphysics. This is largely because of the failure to perceive any philosophically stable backbone in its thought that could compete with the logical rationality of Western metaphysics. This is according to the assessments of modern philosophers, who typically judge the classics of Asian philosophy and religion against their own conceptions of what grounds philosophy: primarily a metaphysics of Being, as Heidegger argues. Since twentieth-century sinologists, often recognized as those best qualified to speak about the *Laozi*, were not particularly trained in philosophy, they too were unable to appropriately manage its philosophical thought, much less properly introduce it into the circles of Western philosophers.

However, the tradition of Chinese metaphysics is very different from Western metaphysics, even from a linguistic standpoint. Two common phrases for “metaphysics” in Chinese philosophy are *xing er shang* (associated with Heshang Gong’s Nothingness) and *xuanxue* (associated with Wang Bi’s Non-being), however neither is exactly identifiable with typical Western understandings of the metaphysics of Being. The notion of *xing er shang* 形而上 (“above form” or “not-yet formed”) points to the realm primarily characterized by the absence of forms, the not-yet formed, or the formless. This is in distinction to *xing er xia* 形而下 (“below form” or “already-formed”), which refers to the realm characterized by physical forms or the formed. However, such notions are originally at home in the non-early

Daoist writing called the *Yijing*, which anyway does not establish a strictly transcendental divide between the two realms, since both are situated within the same world, only that the former is higher and earlier than the latter. This is insufficient to stand as a metaphysics in any significant sense.

The title *xuanxue* 玄學 refers to a tradition of Wei-Jin thought named with the term *xuan* 玄 (“dark” or “mysterious”) that the *Laozi* uses several times in close conjunction with the Dao. This tradition, which is only sometimes, albeit correctly, recognized as a tradition of metaphysics, was spearheaded by Wang Bi, who identifies the Dao with *wu* 無 as Non-being from which is produced *you* 有 as Being from which in turn are produced the myriad beings. Wang Bi primarily bases his metaphysics on *Laozi* chapter 40, which in the version of the later *Laozi* states: “The myriad beings of the world are produced from Being, and Being is produced from Non-being” 天下萬物生於有，有生於無。

One might therefore ask, if Wang Bi in fact established a metaphysics at the philosophical core of the later *Laozi*, then why is its philosophy not then normally recognized as metaphysics? The simple answer is that Wang Bi's metaphysics of Non-being is not easily managed by the Western philosophical tradition with its metaphysics of Being. It typically understands any metaphysics of Non-being (but also any metaphysics of Nothingness such as conceived by Heshang Gong or even a similar metaphysics such as conceived by Buddhism) as a form of nihilism, which the Western tradition *prima facie* resists entertaining. And Heidegger's philosophy was also often accused of nihilism.

Wang Bi's interpretation of the *Laozi* as a metaphysics of Non-being is not, however, original, since it inherited Heshang Gong's interpretation of the *Laozi* as a metaphysics of Nothingness. Both the metaphysics of Heshang Gong and Wang Bi were grounded on the later *Laozi*'s notion of “the eternal Dao” as referring to a substantive entity, Nothingness for the former and Non-being for the latter, which stands as both the eternal and external source for the production of the world and all of its beings.

Standard interpretations of the *Laozi* were, throughout traditional China, dominated by Heshang Gong's metaphysics of Nothingness. This situation continued to obtain until modern Western sinologists became interested in the *Laozi*, and they chose to direct their attention to Wang Bi's commentary instead, since it was somewhat less foreign to the Western tradition of metaphysics. Still, interpretations of the text based on any sort of metaphysics, whether of Being, Non-being, or Nothingness, have perennially struggled to produce viable readings of the *Laozi*. This is because the notion of “the eternal Dao” is very much at odds with the phenomenology of the *Laozi* upon which the text's comprehensive philosophy is grounded.

Heidegger's interpretation of the *Laozi* was the first decisive Western interpretation that, due to its apparently deliberate rejection of the notion

of “the eternal Dao,” successfully uncovered the text’s fundamental phenomenology that was grounded on the notion of “the temporalizing Dao.” As Zhang (n.d.) writes, “To my judgment, Heidegger’s understanding of Dao is essentially ‘closer’ to the original meaning of ‘Dao’ than any metaphysical interpretations. Dao, as the Way, is ontologically regional-ecstatic rather than conceptual and linear”. This is rather eye-opening because Heidegger had no access to the early *Laozi* that, buried in the earth until well after he had passed away, only ever mentions “the temporalizing Dao” but never “the eternal Dao.”

6. Conclusion

After the discovery of the excavated versions with their original uses of *heng* to describe the primary nature of the Dao as temporalizing before *chang* was used to substitute for every instance of it, scholars insistently maintained that the two words were simply synonyms for permanence/constancy/eternity. This stance allowed them to thereby maintain the traditional metaphysical interpretations of the later *Laozi* exemplified by Heshang Gong and Wang Bi with their notions of the eternal Dao.

Between the Western sinologist’s unwillingness or inability to adequately represent the core philosophy of the *Laozi* and the Western philosopher’s dismissal of it as insufficiently philosophical, Heidegger opened a third path to approach the thought of the text, that of comparative philosophy. Traditional metaphysical interpretations have only recently begun to be overcome, and when they are, it is normally by reliance on the application of the phenomenological interpretations brought to readings of the *Laozi* that were originally carried out by Heidegger.

Over the past forty years, a handful of intrepid scholars of Daoist philosophy have attempted to pursue and develop Heidegger’s path through the *Laozi* in terms of comparative philosophy or East-West dialogue. Important studies that demonstrate this begin with Graham Parkes’ 1987 edited volume, *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, that remains a foundational text of Heideggerian comparative philosophy. The 1992 work of Xianglong Zhang, *Heidegger and Daoism*, also delves into the encounter of Heidegger’s thinking and Daoism, as does the work of Charles Wei-hsun Fu (1976).

More recently, the work of Bret W. Davis (2013, 2016), Eric Nelson (2017), and David Chai (2020) go even further in exploring the Daoist influences on Heidegger’s thought and how this matters for engaging the philosophy of the *Laozi*, but they too have been handicapped by not properly attending to the phenomenology of the early *Laozi* with its “temporalizing Dao,” reading instead the metaphysics of Nothingness or the metaphysics of Non-being into their interpretations of its philosophy.

The several works of James Wang Qingjie (2000, 2001, 2003, 2016), a Chinese scholar of Daoist philosophy who has devoted much of his career to translating the original German works of Heidegger into Chinese, stands out for its incisive success in reading the *Laozi* through the lens of “the temporal Dao,” despite the fact that his work remains preliminary and does not offer a systematic reading of the *Laozi*. Much like Wang’s work that attempts to read the *Laozi* through Heidegger rather than pursue the Daoist influences on his thought, the work of Katrin Froese, Steven Burik, and Daniel Fried also breaks additional ground in this project, but they also base their readings on the later *Laozi* with its “eternal Dao” and, therefore, have not gone far enough into the core phenomenology of “the temporalizing Dao.”

None of these studies have systematically approached Heidegger’s interpretation of the *Laozi* through the phenomenological lens of “the temporalizing Dao” that lies at the core of its philosophy. Still, there are two things that all of them have in common: each completely disregard traditional metaphysical interpretations of the *Laozi*, including those by Heshang Gong and Wang Bi, as well as sinological methodologies, even as they unambiguously announce their direct motivation from Heidegger’s introduction of the *Laozi* to comparative philosophy.

Notes

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- 1. There is a complex ancient history to both of these terms, neither of which originally signified eternity, and the main difference is that the early *Laozi* used *heng* to refer to the temporalizing nature of the Dao, whereas *chang* was used to refer to measurable extension. Due primarily to the influence of the *Laozi* on the philosophical processes that directly led to the creation of Chinese metaphysics, both terms had, by the time of the early second century BC, become synonyms with the meaning of eternity. I do not examine those philosophical processes here and take *heng* as referring to the temporalizing nature of the Dao and *chang* as referring to the eternal nature of the Dao. See my forthcoming monograph (2021) for a sustained examination of those philosophical processes.
- 2. Ma (2008: 11) writes, “Most of the Japanese students who studied with Heidegger were intellectually related to Nishida Kitarō”. John C. Maraldo writes, “Nishida Kitarō was the most significant and influential Japanese philosopher of the twentieth-century. His work is pathbreaking in several respects: it established

in Japan the creative discipline of philosophy as practised in Europe and the Americas; it enriched that discipline by infusing Anglo-European philosophy with Asian sources of thought; it provided a new basis for philosophical treatments of East Asian Buddhist thought; and it produced novel theories of self and world with rich implications for contemporary philosophizing.” See Krummel (2018) for a discussion of Nishida’s and Heidegger’s separate notions of Nothingness.

3. Eric Nelson (2017) provides an excellent historical examination of the early twentieth-century reception of Asian thought and Heidegger’s position therein.
4. Standard resources on Heidegger’s engagement with the *Laozi*, and Asian thought more generally, include Otto Poggeler (1987), Reinhard May (1996), and Ma (2008).
5. Among many detailed studies of Heidegger’s notion of “poetic thinking,” David Halliburton (1981) stands out.
6. Ma writes, “Although Heidegger was not the first to claim that ancient Greece is the sole and authentic birthplace of philosophy, his work has played the most crucial role in promoting the popularity this idea has come to enjoy” (2008:103) Along these lines, two works that examine Western philosophy’s dismissal of the *Laozi* as well as Asian philosophy are Carine Defoort (2001) and Bryan van Norden (2017).
7. Ames and Hall (2003: 116-117) particularly recognize the work of Tang Junyi.

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