

Auseinandersetzung: Heidegger's Black Notebooks and Intercultural Engagement

STEVEN BURIK, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore

BURIK, S.: *Auseinandersetzung: Heidegger's Black Notebooks and Intercultural Engagement*
FILOZOFIA, 81, 2026, No 1, pp. 85 – 99

Heidegger's relation to Asian philosophy should be guided by the notion of *Auseinandersetzung*. Often translated as con-frontation, this term plays a pivotal role in understanding Heidegger's engagements with Asian philosophy. *Auseinandersetzung* (and related terms) can help us realise the changed perspectives on our own thinking that we derive from engagements with culturally and/or historically other types of thinking. Heidegger warns us against facile endeavours of comparing and contrasting, which, as a form of comparative philosophy, he sees as a kind of dialectics unworthy of true thinking. Thinking through the term *Auseinandersetzung* allows us to reflect more meaningfully on comparative philosophy.

Keywords: Heidegger – *Auseinandersetzung* – Engagement – Comparative philosophy – *Black Notebooks* – Daoism

I. Introduction

Heidegger's relation to Asian philosophy should be guided by the notion of *Auseinandersetzung*. Often translated as con-frontation, this term plays a pivotal role in understanding Heidegger's engagements with Asian philosophy. This introduction sets out how I approach "Heidegger and comparative philosophy" in this article and the sources I use. Section II argues that Heidegger was not as interested in Asia as we are inclined to believe, contrary to the more common emphasis on influence, copying, or fusion that one finds in comparative philosophy. This latter emphasis has been in vogue since Heidegger was incorporated into the comparative philosophy camp a long time ago and is exemplified by the work of Reinhard May. In section III, I discuss what Heidegger does and does not mean with *Auseinandersetzung*, since the term,

understood as “confrontation,” easily leads us to believe that Heidegger thought of comparative endeavors as “polemic.” Section IV shows the relevance for comparative philosophy of these findings. *Auseinandersetzung* is meant to warn us against facile endeavors of comparing and contrasting, which, as a form of comparative philosophy, Heidegger sees as a kind of dialectics unworthy of true thinking.

Heidegger echoed a famous quote from Leibniz: “*qui me non nisi editis novit, non me novit*” (GA 97, 325), translated as: “those who only know me through my publications, don’t know me.” I deliberately focus this article almost exclusively on Heidegger’s ruminations or ponderings in a number of volumes, specifically GA 73.1 and 73.2 (*Zum Ereignis-Denken*), GA 91 (*Ergänzungen und Denksplitter*), and GA 94 to GA 102,¹ containing the *Black Notebooks*. These works all consist of notes, ponderings, clarifications, and other thoughts from throughout Heidegger’s career (1920s – 1970s). Together these previously unpublished works amount to more than 5,500 pages where Heidegger gives us insights into his thinking. I say “ruminations” or “ponderings” because there are no sustained essays in these volumes; they consist mostly of scattered thoughts, short notes, and short “essays” in the sense of “try-outs.” This is where Heidegger sought clarifications on his own work while positioning himself with regards to other thinkers and traditions, and discussed basically everything he found important.

Of course, the *Black Notebooks* are infamous for another reason: Heidegger’s perceived connections to the National Socialist regime in the 1930s and beyond. Terms like *Kampf* and *Streit*, which I use in relation to *Auseinandersetzung*, are indeed sometimes used in the context of Heidegger’s National Socialist period. But I show that Heidegger rarely uses such terms conventionally. Rather, he almost always reinterprets such concepts, especially when they have philosophical connotations. I believe studying these works specifically is especially useful for comparative philosophy, for a number of

¹ GA 71.1: *Zum Ereignis-Denken*; GA 71.2: *Zum Ereignis-Denken*; GA 91: *Ergänzungen und Denksplitter*; GA 94: *Überlegungen II–VI* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1931 – 1938); GA 95: *Überlegungen VII – XI* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1938 – 1939); GA 96: *Überlegungen XII – XV* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1939 – 1941); GA 97: *Anmerkungen I – V* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1942 – 1948); GA 98: *Anmerkungen VI – IX* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1948/49 – 1951); GA 99: *Vier Hefte I und II* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1947 – 1950); GA 100: *Vigilae und Notturno* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1952/53 – 1957); GA 101: *Winke I und II* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1957 – 1959); GA 102: *Vorläufiges I – IV* (*Schwarze Hefte* 1963 – 1970). In what follows these works are referred to as GA number, page number. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

reasons. First, they are not the usual sources comparative philosophers tend to go to, maybe because they have been put in this negative spotlight. Second, they provide new material that was not available to May and others at the time. Third, the old material of Heidegger's lifetime publications has been used over and over again since the 1970s. Lastly, May's argument is that Heidegger was insincere by not admitting his debt to the East. I contend that if Heidegger was truly influenced but did not want to admit it, these private ruminations of a more "honest" Heidegger would contain (direct or indirect) indications of this influence. I have, however, inserted some quotes from Heidegger's published works in his lifetime to show his ideas in my sources are consistent with those works.

II. Was Heidegger Really Interested in Asia?

My first argument is about the lack of Heidegger's philosophical engagement with non-Western thought. Many scholars (including myself) have written about perceived connections between Heidegger and the East, and Reinhard May (1996) (together with Graham Parkes), have suggested that Heidegger more or less copied many of his "original" ideas from non-Western sources. I submit that if this was indeed the case, one would expect a substantial number of references in these works that might suggest such an influence, and / or we would find similar instances of Heidegger "stealing" ideas or "confessing" influence, but we find neither. On the contrary, we find an extreme scarcity of direct or indirect references to anything Asian, a scarcity that rivals and even falls short of the scarce mentions of non-Western thinking in Heidegger's published works. To me this suggests that to claim Heidegger copied from or appropriated Asian thought, really amounts to not giving him enough credit, especially given these new resources.

We indeed perceive *parallels*, but it does not follow that Heidegger took those thoughts or ideas *from* the East. It is correct to say that there are *resonances* between Heidegger's work and Daoism, but increasingly difficult to claim that Heidegger was deeply influenced by or even indebted to Asian thought. More correct is that Heidegger was deeply influenced by some of the ancient Greek thinkers, and that he sometimes saw good to corroborate these influences with snippets of Asian thought mostly taken out of context, translated dubiously, not attributed correctly, and without taking any real sustained interest in them.

The enthusiasm for the connection between Heidegger and Daoism needs to be tempered. These works do not display the least interest in the East. Almost every page mentions some Greek concept, and (mostly German) poets

and other Western philosophers are frequently and extensively discussed. There are numerous passages on Western metaphysics and on Heidegger's own published and unpublished works. Yet, these works have *almost no references to Asian philosophy at all*. In over 5,500 pages of Heidegger's private philosophical contemplations we have, as far as my count is accurate, 33 brief mentions of Asia. Most of these are simple observations of a sentence, and mostly in connection to Asia being under the influence of Western thought and technology. Some are positive, most are neutral, some quite negative: "the Chineseness of machination" (GA 94, 432). None of them lasts for more than a short paragraph, many are just quotes without any elaborations, or function as mottos for certain sections where no further mention of Asia occurs. None elaborate on a philosophical point or idea. In short, in these pages we find *not a single sustained engagement with the East*.

May's argument of course is not about direct references, but hidden ones. But I have also not detected any serious cases of stealing / plagiarizing / paraphrasing, or anything serious that could be considered a "confession," in May's sense of the word, from Heidegger as to the influence of Asia. Aside from a handful of direct quotations and the occasional occurrence of locutions such as "the world worlds" or "the thing things" or variations thereof, I find nothing in these pages that leads back to an appropriation of Asian thought. There are countless passages dealing with *das Ding* (the thing), but only a few where the thing things. This suggests that Heidegger was trying out numerous ways of saying Being or *Ereignis*, where one of those ways may indeed have been influenced by Asia. There is a passage which goes "Those who speak, don't think....Those who think, don't speak." (GA 97, 277). Although this reminds us of ch. 81 of the *Daodejing*, Heidegger says this in the context of his own lectures and their perceived "success," not to make a philosophical point. Elsewhere Heidegger says, "the soft overcomes (*verwindet*) the hard" (GA 100, 105), reminiscent of *Daodejing* chapter 78. Aside from the fact that the German *verwinden* does not really mean "overcoming" (Heidegger's *Verwindung* of metaphysics does not seek to literally overcome it), nothing else comes from this locution that would indicate Heidegger sees this as something other than just an interesting turn of phrase. In fact, the rest of the sentence has little to do with Daoism, reading "Patience / Forbearance enters into the commencement."² GA 101 and GA 102 are singular: there are more mentions of "Asia" than in

² The German reads: "Das Sanfte verwindet die Härte, Die Langmut gelangt in den Anfang."

any other of the *Black Notebooks* or other sources here. These were written in the 1950s and 1960s when Heidegger met with Asian thinkers, when the "Dialogue on Language" was composed and published (GA 12), and where, if at all, we can locate his "interest" in Asia most concretely. Consequently, we have at least 5 instances in these volumes where Heidegger (mis-)quotes and then re-invents Daoist phrases. Two of these concern "mottos" before new sections, but I do not think they count as "confessions," since there are other mottos for the same sections which have nothing to do with Asia. Importantly again, nothing more is done with these quotes, and before and after, it is all about the Greeks, the German thinkers, and poets again. Essentially, there are also no other signs of indirect influence in these volumes (i.e., Heidegger does not change his way of writing or presenting his ideas).

Instead, many key terms of Heidegger's own thinking are discussed and at least some of these would easily lend themselves to comparison or clarification via the East. Heidegger does not take that route. There are many discussions of *logos*, *Weg*, *Gespräch*, *Sagen*, *Abendland*, *Heimat*, technology, to name some examples. Take the notion *Weg*: there are countless deliberations focusing on the nuances of *Weg* and *Unterweg*, *Bewegen*, *Holzweg*, *Feldweg*, the *be-wegende Denken*, but not once does Heidegger mention *dao* or Daoism or any other Eastern philosophy. We find numerous discussions on *logos*, *Sprache*, *sprechen*, *Sage* and *sagen*; not a single mention of how Laozi or Zhuangzi perceived language. Comparative philosophers are fond of using those rare quotes where Heidegger mentions *dao*, and we use them over and over again, but it seems clear that Heidegger himself showed no sustained interest in seriously engaging with non-Western sources.

Let me share some more specific examples where discussion of Asian parallels would have been very appropriate. First, consider the notions of *das Nötige* and *das Unnötige*. Much has been made of the connection to the *Zhuangzi* based on the *Feldweggespräch* that ends with a reference to a *Zhuangzi* passage from chapter 26 (GA 77, 239), discussing the useful and the useless. But in GA 97, 30 for example, and many other passages, Heidegger discusses these terms without feeling any need to refer to the *Zhuangzi*. Second, there are countless mentions of the *Abendländische Denken*, but no reference to or thoughts about how Asian thought (as *morgenländisch*) might relate. Third, in GA 73.2, from page 1268 to at least page 1324, one finds endless reflections on the theme of Way and *Holzweg* (wood path), but not a single mention of *Dao* or Asian thought. A similar picture emerges in GA 100, 109 – 111, where Heidegger does

mention the East and talks about *Be-gegnung* or “meeting as encounter,” but only in a repetition of the “not yet ready” for an encounter context. Yet, when Heidegger extensively discusses *Weg* a few pages later, no more mention of the East. Fourth, GA 100, 214 discusses Europe’s planetarising destiny and possible self-reorientation without so much as mentioning Asia or any other non-Western philosophy for that matter. Fifth, in GA 91, 572, in his critique on Heisenberg, Heidegger neglects to take up the reference to Zhuangzi that Heisenberg makes. Lastly, in GA 73.1, 683 – 712, we read endless thoughts on *Gespräch*, not a single mention of Heidegger’s own dialogue on language or of the *Gespräch* with non-Western thinking.

To say, with May, that Heidegger was nevertheless deeply indebted to, or even plagiarized from Daoism, denies both complexity and context. As we saw before, it is entirely possible and even plausible that for some phrases (mostly one-liners) Heidegger was inspired by similar locutions in Daoist works he had access to. But the deeper philosophical import of these phrases when put into context show that Heidegger’s main ideas were much richer and complex than he would have been able to glean from the Daoists. His ideas surrounding language or *Weg* for example, are much deeper, more complex, and importantly different from anything he might have found in Daoism. In short, we just do not find any direct or indirect evidence of this purported influence in the works under discussion.

These examples form just a small sample among numerous others. Taken together with the lack of indirect locutions and “confessions,” they surely establish that Heidegger had no real philosophical interest in Asian philosophy. This should not surprise or disappoint us: Heidegger equally had no interest in historically or philologically getting the Greeks correct, or the German poets he discussed. The difference is that philosophically, he does extensively contemplate and discuss the relevance of the Greeks, poets, and other Western thinkers in relation to his own work, but not Asia.

In these 5,500 pages Heidegger agitates against superficial thinkers, against anything that makes philosophy a mere reckoning, calculating enterprise of publishing an endless stream of useless papers on trivial problems. As such, it should come as no surprise that he was not into comparative philosophy, as he would (possibly incorrectly one hopes) have seen that enterprise as the meaningless comparing of concepts. Instead, Heidegger’s thinking seeks entry into what is. Words or terms are given other, non-metaphysical meanings, are twisted etc. He is more interested in taking us on a trip, to urge us to follow the

experience of *Auseinandersetzung*. But he did not feel the need either to engage his ideas with Asian concepts, not even to illustrate.

It is not that Heidegger was not aware of the need of a “conversation” with the East, of this we have ample evidence. I also have no reservations about a more moderate indirect influence of Daoism for *some* of Heidegger’s concepts, as Lin Ma argues for example, while sharing some of the same reservations on whether Heidegger was really all that interested in Asia (Ma 2006, 1 – 9). Even then I would be hesitant to say that those concepts were *solely* influenced by Asia, since we have ample evidence that those same concepts are deeply indebted to ancient Greek thinkers.

Reinhard May, then, may have overplayed his hand, but sparked a movement that agrees, sometimes out of enthusiasm, sometimes more to discredit Heidegger. David Cooper (1997) concurs with and blindly takes over May’s findings, thereby influencing readers of Heidegger in a certain way. Others, like Robert Bernasconi, take a different view:

Historiographical omissions are an issue for Heidegger’s history, but it should be recognized that this history was designed to disclose what was systematically omitted from philosophy itself because it was unthinkable within the bounds of the tradition (Bernasconi 1995, 336).

Bernasconi makes the important distinction between the historical omission of the East, and the philosophical one. Heidegger was not guilty of the first: there are many instances where he says that the Greeks rose to greatness exactly through an *Auseinandersetzung* with the Asiatic (mostly understood as Asia Minor).³ For Bernasconi, the philosophical omission occurred because, as is well documented, Heidegger believed that a “solution” to the problems of Western metaphysics should come from thoroughly thinking through the unthought of that history and not by incorporating another (Asian) philosophy. And when Parkes in his accompanying essay to the translation of May discusses the possible influence of Tanabe and Nishida, it now seems clear (in hindsight maybe) that these are exactly the things Heidegger wished to avoid: a Buddhist resignation and overcoming of the self via death in the ideals of *bushido* and *akirame* (May 1996, 94 – 95), or a philosophy of absolute religious nothingness (Nishida) (May 1996, 99 – 100) are far removed from what Heidegger thought. I submit it is quite possible, and given the evidence seems much more likely, that Heidegger was influenced more by Hegel, Schelling,

³ See for example GA 13, 20 – 21. For more on the “Asiatic” in Heidegger, see Bernasconi (1995).

Scheler, and Nietzsche, and that like them, he thought (maybe wrongly) that Asian thought pure and simple was too esoteric. Evidence for this point of view comes from Heidegger himself:

The resonances [between Heidegger and Asia] presumably have a quite different root: since 1910 I have been accompanied by the master of learning and life Eckhardt; this and the ever-renewed attempt to thinking through the *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai* of Parmenides; the constant question of the *auto*, which is neither *noein* nor *einai*; the lack of the subject-object relationship in the Greeks brought me – along with my own thinking – to something that looks like a turn-around [*Umkehrung*] and yet is something different and prior (Heidegger 1990, 280).⁴

Contrary to May and Parkes, I take this more as Heidegger's "confession" that he may have found some inspiration and some interesting phrases and passages in Asian thought, but on the whole did not engage with it beyond the well-known and worn-out instances, exactly because he thought that (1) the language was too foreign for him; (2) Asian thought was in the end too esoteric, too religious sounding for him, and that was something he was continuously striving away from, and (3) because in the end it was the question of Being (a very Western question) that interested him most. Heidegger almost invariably chooses the Greeks, Germans, or Poets over anything Asian. This is not disingenuous but attests to the fact that in the end he thought the former more in line with his own work than the latter.

III. The Meaning of *Auseinandersetzung* for Heidegger

Now that we have a better understanding of how Heidegger thinks about philosophical encounters between his own thinking and non-Western philosophical traditions, I turn to the term *Auseinandersetzung*. It has a few meanings. First, there are its normal meanings of exposition, explanation, expounding, to account for, and confrontation. In this context, it also means a philosophical exchange of views or debate, in short a "Philosophising explanation, that is '*Auseinandersetzung*'" (GA 91, 12). Heidegger uses the term like this often: for example in GA 94, Heidegger discusses the *Auseinandersetzung* with the Greeks. Also, we find *Auseinandersetzung* with technology (GA 94, 357); with Plato (GA 94, 366); with Descartes (GA 94, 368); with Parmenides (GA 73.1,

⁴ Quoted in May (1996, 102). The translation is by Parkes.

137); with Nietzsche (GA 94, 178); with Christianity (GA 94, 178); with *Sein und Zeit* (GA 73.1, 293) etc. The list is seemingly endless, but again, not so for the East.

Thinking of the term in its usual translation of “confrontation,” we tend to see it as a negative term in the sense of a clash between two identities in opposition and unwilling to change. This is *not* Heidegger’s intention, not even in the traditional meaning. There is a deeper philosophical meaning to the term. *Auseinandersetzung* as ex-position means to expose something as what it is in distinction to other things. An exposition shows.

Since “confrontation” suggests polemic or dialectic, I propose “engagement” as a better translation. “Engagement” has the benefit of being able to cover the “positive” and “negative.” Engagement means coming together of loved ones, but one can also engage the enemy. One can be engaged to be married, and there are rules of engagement. Engaging means interesting, and also “coming to terms with.” In engagement we open up to the other, not to defeat or wage war, but to learn from the other without either complete synthesis or losing the self in “going native.” An engagement includes oneself as both open to change and more *into* the process than “confrontation.” “Confrontation” sounds like a refusal of the other.

But even this philosophical use does not exhaust what Heidegger means with *Auseinandersetzung*, since he uses the term to indicate a bringing together in difference. *Auseinandersetzung* then is not about “discussion of propositions and texts” or about “ideological positions,” but rather “the struggle for the essence of truth and thus for the essencing of Being” (GA 73.1, 77). To see this engagement as polemic misses the point. Heidegger argued that *polēmos* is not just polemic, it is really “clearing” (*Lichtung*) (Heidegger 1975, 119), a key idea in his later thinking, referring to the opening that makes the unconcealment of things possible.

Heidegger is adamant that *Auseinandersetzung* cannot be understood in the framework of dialectics. The related philosophical concept of struggle (*Streit*) in Heidegger is not between things or persons, or viewpoints, or between subjects, or between a subject and an object, or between philosophies. Instead, “strife (*Streit*) among thinkers is the loving quarrel (*Streit*) concerning the matter itself. It assists them mutually toward a simple belonging to the Same” (Heidegger 1993, 239, German added). If we translate *Streit* instead with “engagement” the picture of oppositionality changes. There is no dialectic sublimation of thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis, as that stays within the subject-object thinking Heidegger seeks to overcome: “so not to slip away into a flat

‘dialectic’ of opposites” (GA 73.1, 249). *Auseinandersetzung* is more a bringing into an originary relationality, indicated also by the word *Ver-Hältnis* (relationality): “The away-from-each-other and towards-each-other – relationality...is the holding-apart”⁵ (GA 102, 314). These terms are about making things “appear” in the interplay of *Entbergung* and *Verbergung* (unconcealment and concealment). The idea is not to resolve, or sublimate the tension, but to stay in its inter-play.

Equally, “war” is not on Heidegger’s mind, even when using terms such as *Kampf*. Heidegger believes that Heraclitus’ fragment 53, often translated as “war is the father of all things” is better understood in a more originary way, and he accordingly translates it idiomatically as “Engagement (*Auseinandersetzung*) is indeed the begetter of all (that comes to presence)...” (in Maly – Emad 1986, 41, my translation). In GA 97, 39, he says that in this fragment, *polemos* “does not mean ‘war,’ also not ‘battle,’ but decision, that is engagement; decision: to let emerge from differentiation, to let appear in essencing distinction – to merge into the distinction of essencing.” So yes, Heidegger uses terms such as *Streit* and *Kampf* and even *Krieg*, but nowhere in the “beating of an enemy” sense. He says that out of war, or pure polemic or battle, “there will never arise a reflection” (GA 96, 113). And a bit further: “In the age of absolute ‘wars’ the last remnant of a knowing of the essence of *Kampf* fades: that as engagement it does not destroy, but saves the opponent in the higher possibility of his essence” (GA 96, 227). *Auseinandersetzung* does not have a winner, but is itself seen as relationality which allows things to be themselves.

To derive a fuller understanding of what Heidegger means by *Auseinandersetzung*, we must refer to a number of related terms he employs. The first set of related terms are those of *Unter-schied*, *Austrag*, *Verhältnis*, and *Fug*. Like *Auseinandersetzung*, *Unter-schied* (dif-ference) is not meant to be understood as separating identities. Heidegger uses the terms *Differenz* mostly for the dualistic and metaphysical separating activities and instead prefers *Unter-schied* for his own thinking.⁶ *Auseinandersetzung* is thus not one-way traffic, it is what takes place in-between. This *in-between* is a constant focus of Heidegger, evident from the following passage from *Unterwegs zur Sprache*:

The intimacy of world and thing is present in the separation of the between; it is present in the dif-ference (*Unter-Schied*). The word dif-ference is now

⁵ The German reads: “Das Aus- und zueinander-Verhältnis...ist der Auseinander-Halt.”

⁶ The term *Unter-Schied* is central to GA 97 – GA 99. See, for example, GA 97, 419 and GA 99, 10.

removed from its usual and customary usage....The intimacy of the difference is the unifying element of the *diaphora*, the carrying out that carries through....The difference does not mediate after the fact by connecting world and things through a middle added on to them. Being the middle, it first determines world and things in their presence, i.e., in their being toward one another, whose unity it carries out (Heidegger 1971, 202, German added).

In my sources, this takes shape as in-between-play, if we can call it that, also called *Austrag*, usually translated as "disposition," Heidegger's translation of the Greek *diaphora*. As he says: "*dia-phora*. Not a mere back and forth – of a relation" (GA 73.2, 929). *Austrag* is before any relation, instead it makes relations possible in the first place. Heidegger says: "*Austrag (diaphora)*: originary keeping-apart: relationality..." (GA 102, 324).⁷ *Verhältnis* is usually translated as "relationship," but again this would suggest separate identities coming together. Heidegger really thinks the other way around: *the relationality is the origin of any possible separate identity in the first place*, so I prefer to translate it as "relationality." Elsewhere Heidegger says: "Movement is relationality" (GA 100, 36).⁸ As *Dasein*, we are the "*Auseinander-Zwischen*" (GA 73.1, 372).

This "in-between" comes back in the term *Fug*. In Old German *Fug* has the meaning of connection, contact, link, jointure, it is what keeps things together in their apartness. Away from the subject-object distinction, it is not I who is having an *Auseinandersetzung* with something (that would be the normal meaning), rather it is *Auseinandersetzung* that creates the I and the other in the first place. *Fugen* in German (as *voegen* in Dutch) indicate the mortar connections, the "glue" that keeps things together. Again, Heidegger does not think of separate things needing to be "glued" together, but from an originary relationality as primary. Heidegger's is a thinking of the in-between, for which *Auseinandersetzung* and its related terms are placeholder names. Or as he puts it: "*strife (Streit)* is essential being (*Wesung*) of the 'in-between' (*Zwischen*)."

(Heidegger 1989, 265, my translation).

But why should we think like this? For Heidegger, this is the only way to become open to our finite existence as being in the world (*Dasein*), free for Being to "overcome" (the dominance of) metaphysics: "We must fundamentally come to terms with the thrownness of *Dasein*, have engaged ourselves (*Auseinandergesetzt*) with it, have become free from it – that is, with it" (GA 73.1, 12). *Auseinander-*

⁷ The German reads: "*anfänglicher Auseinander-halt: das Ver-Hältnis.*"

⁸ The German reads: "*Das Bewegende ist das Ver-Hältnis.*"

setzung means to become free from and thereby open to something. It is the freeing of things to themselves in relationality. For Heidegger this means we become free from the thinking of subject and object, free from dualism, and open to inhabiting the tension inherent in existence, in Being. The task is to see *Auseinandersetzung* as “the separating – release – opening” (GA 73.1, 50). In and through *Auseinandersetzung* we become free for, and part of, the interplay of differences (*Unterschied*) that we are. Elsewhere I have argued similarly that the notion of *Gelassenheit* (releasement) is not to be understood as a certain approach to the world from a subject, but again as relationality itself (Burik 2025).

IV. What Can Comparative Philosophy Learn from This?

Comparative thinkers have been caught up in the game of similarities and differences for a long time. From Heidegger’s *Auseinandersetzung* we can learn to first properly engage with the “other” while resisting the temptation to be drawn into the same kind of representational philosophy that we so hard seek to enlarge. We saw that Heidegger was not as interested in Asian thought as we might like. The works I use here also show no interest in comparative philosophy as a form of comparing and contrasting; in fact, Heidegger sees this as being stuck in metaphysics. While maybe still valuable in some way, it is in the end not what or how we should think:

To set forth singular epochs of the *Geschick*, in the way of the always attempted conversation with their thinkers. In this way we can point to the other thinking and its possibilities. But it remains within the purview of representational thinking” (GA 100, 13).

If that is the case, we do not actually learn how to think differently about our own predicaments from comparative philosophy. “At no point will the universal-historical flee into foreign religions and interpretations of all that is and their moral teachings bring us into what is our ‘own’” (GA 98, 101). And that in the end was Heidegger’s main concern.

But having no interest *in* comparative philosophy does not equate to no interest *for* comparative philosophy. In fact this last quote shows us that maybe the “traditional” type of comparative philosophy as “comparing and contrasting” is not what we should aim for. The term *Auseinandersetzung* has connotations beyond the West, with Heidegger suggesting “a creative engagement [*Auseinandersetzung*] with the whole of earlier history – in its essential forms and epochs” (GA 80.2, 681). This means there is still a role for

non-Western thought. While Heidegger's *Auseinandersetzung* is with metaphysics, *Auseinandersetzung* equally stresses opening up philosophy to what is beyond metaphysics. Even if his own focus was on the West, *Auseinandersetzung* can teach comparative philosophy something about opening to the other, about the in-between. This cannot be the comparing and contrasting of 'standard' comparative thought:

As long as we do not find our way into the more original, foreshadowing beginning of Western European destiny, no area will open up in which a true encounter between the "West" and the Far East could be prepared....People take refuge in the business of "replacing" and "balancing" (GA 100, 109).

This "business of replacement and balancing" is basically what comparative philosophy does according to Heidegger. We should not focus on comparing and contrasting on the level of "*Weltanschauungen*" (GA 96, 101), because this treats cultures as "objects" and keeps us in the metaphysics of identity and thus cannot reach the proper thinking of relationality: "All comparing is bogged down in the level of the identical and is thus refused insight into the 'same,' that is into the singular unfolding of the differed..." (GA 100, 41).

Heidegger thinks relationality, not relations. He seeks a paradigm shift from comparisons of differences to thinking of *Unterschied*. Comparing in Heidegger's opinion means equalising or balancing different identities, where we should think difference and relationality. To do that, we must stop thinking in terms of subject and object. When we compare, we tend to represent different cultures in our own ways of thinking and categories. The paradigm shift means a transformation from representational thought to something else (see GA 100, 144 – 150). This "something else" is indicated by *Auseinandersetzung*, itself suggesting interplay and in-between, but which does not turn everything into one, but keeps apart. Relationality is my word for that. There are of course already comparative philosophers who try to think beyond the "comparing and contrasting," evidenced, for example, in Eric Nelson's intercultural hermeneutics, Stephen Angle's rooted global philosophy, and Hans-Georg Moeller's post-comparative philosophy. We still form the minority though.

Summed up: *Auseinandersetzung* is both the mode of Being and Dasein's corresponding attitude which frees things to be themselves in *Gelassenheit* (releasement). Things can really only be themselves in context, in engagement with what they are not. We are always in-between, but we do ourselves a disfavour by denying that:

where it remains only a matter of refuting, or even of annihilating the foreign, what necessarily gets lost is the possibility of a passage through the foreign, and thereby the possibility of a return home into one's own (Heidegger 1996, 54).

Auseinandersetzung read here as the passage through the foreign is crucial for an understanding of what is one's own. But this "passage" is of a specific character, because

...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).

The other *as* other is not to be overcome; it is the engagement that matters, so that "the law of the engagement (*Auseinandersetzung*) between the foreign and one's own is the fundamental truth of history" (Heidegger 1996, 49, my translation). The (intercultural) engagement for Heidegger is eventually not so much a simple passage to understand one's own better, but a *lingering in* the engagement, a taking home of the engagement, to remain in the jointure of *Auseinandersetzung*. As Heidegger says: "The appropriation of one's own *is* only as the engagement (*Auseinandersetzung*) and guest-like dialogue with the foreign" (Heidegger 1996, 142, my translation). While Heidegger's *Auseinandersetzung* was originally intended for the Western tradition, it need not be so restricted and can be applied to teach us something of value for engaging other traditions, in much the same way indeed as Heidegger's work on the foreign through Hölderlin can teach us something about comparative philosophy. The point of this article has been to show that it is not Heidegger's own engagement, but *our engagement with Heidegger* that can be valuable for understanding comparative philosophy better.

Bibliography

BERNASCONI, R. (1995): On Heidegger's Other Sins of Omission: His Exclusion of Asian Thought from the Origins of Occidental Metaphysics and His Denial of the Possibility of Christian Philosophy. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 69 (2), 333 – 350.

BURIK, S. (2025): Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, Daoist *Wuwei* 無為, and Non-Willing. *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 16 (2), 1 – 22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2024.2437342>

COOPER, D. E. (1997): Review of "Heidegger's Hidden Sources." *Asian Philosophy*, 7 (3), 242 – 244.

HEIDEGGER, M. (1971): *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. by A. Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row.

HEIDEGGER, M. (1975): *Early Greek Thinking*. Trans. by D. F. Krell – F. Capuzzi. New York: Harper & Row.

HEIDEGGER, M. (1989): *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*. GA 65. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.

HEIDEGGER, M. (1990): *Martin Heidegger/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel, 1920-1963*. Ed. by W. Biemel – H. Saner. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.

HEIDEGGER, M. (1993): *Basic Writings*. Ed. by D. F. Krell. London: Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

HEIDEGGER, M. (1994): *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Stuttgart: Günther Neske.

HEIDEGGER, M. (1996): *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister."* Trans. by W. McNeill – J. Davis. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

HEIDEGGER, M.: *Gesamtausgabe*, 102 Bände. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.

GA 12: *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (2018).

GA 13: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens 1910-1976* (1986).

GA 73.1: *Zum Ereignis-Denken* (2013).

GA 73.2: *Zum Ereignis-Denken* (2013).

GA 77: *Feldweg-Gespräche* (1944 –1945) (2007).

GA 80.2: *Vorträge (Teil 2: 1935 bis 1967)* (2020).

GA 91: *Ergänzungen und Denksplitter* (2022).

GA 94: *Überlegungen II-VI (Schwarze Hefte 1931 – 1938)* (2014).

GA 95: *Überlegungen VII-XI (Schwarze Hefte 1938/39)* (2014).

GA 96: *Überlegungen XII-XV (Schwarze Hefte 1939 – 1941)* (2014).

GA 97: *Anmerkungen I-V (Schwarze Hefte 1942 – 1948)* (2015).

GA 98: *Anmerkungen VI-IX (Schwarze Hefte 1948/49 – 1951)* (2018).

GA 99: *Vier Hefte I und II (Schwarze Hefte 1947 – 1950)* (2019).

GA 100: *Vigilae und Notturno (Schwarze Hefte 1952/53 – 957)* (2020).

GA 101: *Winke I und II (Schwarze Hefte 1957 – 1959)* (2020).

GA 102: *Vorläufiges I-IV (Schwarze Hefte 1963 – 1970)* (2022).

MA, L. (2006): *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue; Anticipating the Event*. New York and London: Routledge.

MALY, K. – EMAD, P. (eds.) (1986): *Heidegger on Heraclitus, a New Reading*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press.

MAY, R. (1996): *Heidegger's Hidden Sources*. Trans. by Graham Parkes. London: Routledge.

Steven Burik
Singapore Management University
School of Social Sciences
10 Canning Rise #05-01
Singapore 179873
e-mail: stevenburik@smu.edu.sg
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7323-0427>