

Conference Report:
Heidegger, Daoism, and Intercultural Thinking Today
21st – 22nd of May 2024, Philosophical Institute of the Slovak
Academy of Sciences v. v. i., Bratislava

The history of European thought provides numerous examples of the mutable nature of knowledge. By overcoming one paradigm after another, attempting in various ways to justify metaphysical foundations or, conversely, to prove their futility, and striving for the reconciliation of reason and experience, we have created our own cultural tradition on the Continent. People used to think that the knowledge developed in this process was self-sufficient and seemingly solid, deriving its content exclusively from the Western historical experience. Acknowledging the relativity of individual knowledge, we could still be convinced that the very path of Western reason, within which this relativity reveals itself, represents something absolute and robust. It seemed that along this path, the cultural tradition would develop concepts and ideas, thus providing us with tools to address new tasks and challenges. This movement turned out to be so rapid that, in its later phases, it became evident that there was a problem in its very self-sufficiency – the content of thinking is sufficient for itself but not always sufficient for the other. Representatives of the self-sufficient Western intellectual tradition find it amusing when reading in a Chinese encyclopaedia about animals that appear like flies from a distance. (Foucault, 2005, xvi).¹ The relativity of knowledge has now extended to the tradition itself. Doubts arise that even with the path of knowledge and thinking we have traversed, with all the inherent internal contradictions of the tradition, we may not be able to justly explain the various phenomena of the contemporary world and of a foreign, yet equally self-sufficient, cultural tradition. This problem gains special significance precisely in a globalized era when individual cultures intensively interact and penetrate each other. It is possible that the rationalistic and metaphysical constructs of

¹ Michel Foucault, in the preface of his work *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses)*, speaks about the amusing classification of animals in an old Chinese encyclopaedia, particularly amusing to Europeans. Animals that “*from a long way off look like flies*” is one of these classifications.

the European intellectual tradition no longer allow us to truly understand the current reality in a situation where there is a need for intercultural thinking.

In order to shed light on this issue, the Philosophical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAS) has turned its attention to the intellectual heritage and biographical moments of one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century – Martin Heidegger. European thought, as embodied by Heidegger, represents a reconsideration of the very path of philosophy – a deconstruction of the history of philosophy and the search for new beginnings. What is particularly noteworthy is that Heidegger's philosophical journey intertwined with East Asian interlocutors and sources. Heidegger, for instance, read Laozi and Zhuangzi, visited Japan in 1919, and even received as a gift the famous *The Book of Tea* by Kakuzo Okakura. This book, in addition to discussing the aesthetics of the tea ceremony, expressed Daoist thoughts on absolute relativity and critiqued the Western view of Japan, which in some measure resonated with the mood of Heidegger's philosophy. Familiarity with Eastern thought allowed Heidegger to find correspondences between pre-metaphysical, i.e., pre-Socratic European thought and Daoism, which undoubtedly aided him in reconsidering the concept of being in the history of European thought (Nelson, 2024, 13 – 22). This combination of facts and questions in Heidegger's biography and philosophy, resonating with the issues of intercultural thinking, thus served as the impetus for organizing an international conference titled "Heidegger, Daoism, and Intercultural Thinking Today." This event, supported by The School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, took place on May 21 and 22 in the library of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The organizers – Richard Šťáhel, Lubomír Dunaj, Peter Daubner, and Katarína Podušelová – invited prominent scholars to Bratislava who have been engaged not only with the study of Heidegger but also with the exploration of the nature and content of Eastern thought in general for several years.

The first day of the conference, following the opening remarks by Richard Šťáhel and Lubomír Dunaj, was declared open under the moderation of the latter. Symbolically, on this day, lectures were given by *Eric Nelson*, a professor of philosophy at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, *Fabian Heubel*, a research fellow at the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy at the Academia Sinica in Taipei, and *David Chai*, a professor of philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This was symbolic because, as a result of their efforts, three prominent monographs exploring Heidegger's philosophy in the context of Daoist philosophy had

been recently published. These works were Nelson's *Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom* (Bloomsbury, 2023), Heubel's *Gewundene Wege nach China: Heidegger – Daoismus – Adorno* (Klostermann, 2020), and the edited collection by Chai, *Daoist Resonances in Heidegger: Exploring a Forgotten Debt* (Bloomsbury, 2022). These works set the thematic tone for the entire event, as evidenced by the frequent references to them during the discussions.

Eric Nelson was the first speaker, delivering a lecture titled "Heidegger, Lao-Zhuang Daoism, and the Freedom of Things." In his talk, Nelson examined the shift in Heidegger's approach to the concept of things. Specifically, he discussed Heidegger's attempt to move from an anthropocentric definition of things – where their meaning is determined by their referential (to humans) relationship with other things and their practical significance – to a more independent and free understanding of them. This reverse approach to the question of the freedom of things in their ontological sense opens up for Heidegger the possibility of revealing what is hidden within them, similar to how Zhuangzi reveals the joy of fish. Nelson demonstrated that, as Heidegger's thought evolved, he arrived at an interpretation of the immanence (freedom) of things akin to Daoism. However, at the end of his lecture, Nelson raised the question of the possibilities and limits of this interpretation, which involves elements of primitivism, in the context of the complexity of the modern world.

The second presenter was Fabian Heubel, who delivered a lecture titled "Double Ontology? Heidegger's and Mǒu Zōngsān's Opposing Approaches to the Lǎozǐ." This talk was particularly intriguing as Heubel highlighted that the tendency to return to ancient philosophical texts and seek new intellectual beginnings in other traditions is present not only in late European scientific discourse but also in late Eastern thought. Heubel illustrates this using the example of Mǒu Zōngsān, a Chinese philosopher and representative of Neo-Confucianism. The speaker explained that the trajectory of Mǒu Zōngsān's search for new beginnings is diametrically opposed to Heidegger's. For the former, the renewal of Chinese philosophy involves demonstrating its metaphysical content, while the latter, conversely, aims to draw on the non-metaphysical perspective of ancient texts. Mǒu Zōngsān seeks to assimilate the noumenal-phenomenal model into Chinese philosophy, drawing on Plato and Kant. Heidegger, finding resonance between pre-Socratic (pre-metaphysical) thought and Daoism, aims to dissolve the subject-object relationship in Western thought. Acknowledging the similarity between the duality of the Path in Mǒu Zōngsān's thought and the duality of Being in

Heidegger's philosophy, Heubel emphasized the incompatibility of these positions. He opened the discussion by posing questions about the potential of these two approaches.

Concluding the first day of the conference, after a brief coffee break, was David Chai's speech titled "The Fieldpath as a Conduit for Genuine Thinking." The speaker focused on Heidegger's 1949 essay "The Fieldpath" (*Der Feldweg*), which presents clear Daoist elements. In that essay, Heidegger in poetic fashion tries to reflect on the essence of thinking, and the very content of his consideration, as Chai argues, is quite similar to the Daoist perception of the Way. For Heidegger, thinking is akin to the understanding of the Way in Zhuangzi's thought. It is shaped simply by walking it. Things, which we can meet during the path, receive their completeness through the self-revealing nature of the Dao – for Zhuangzi, and Being – for Heidegger. In that context, the speaker emphasizes that the Way isn't a path from one point to another, which would make it limited and schematic, much like the narrow grasp of Western thinking. On the contrary, by walking the Way without particular end, the thing within it can be revealed in its freedom and independence, not as a monotonous defined object. Unlike a road, which has rules and fixes the direction of our thinking, the fieldpath liberates thinking by allowing it to grow with the path's changing surroundings. Thus, in conclusion, David Chai points out that the dialogue between Heidegger's thought and Daoism was indeed enriching and enhanced the content of his philosophy concerning the question of thinking and being.

The second day of the conference, moderated by Katarína Podušelová, started at 9 a.m. and lasted until 6 p.m., which allowed for an examination of the connection between Heidegger and Daoism from many other various possible perspectives. It was opened with a presentation by Jana S. Rožker from the University of Ljubljana. In her talk, entitled "Sublating Anxiety: Heidegger's Notion of Angst and Xu Fuguan's Thesis on Youhuan yishi," Rožker pointed out the possibility of a transcultural connection between these two different concepts in the context of overcoming anxiety, as they both address the individual's thrownness into being and the awareness of human existence. Then, Hye Young Kim from the École Normale Supérieure in Paris took the floor with the talk "Middle Voice and Ziran: Heidegger, Dao, and a Geometrical Figuration," in which the speaker, referencing Eric Nelson's book, presented a geometrical model to visualize and resolve the paradoxical nature of the Daoist way of being and the middle voice in Heidegger. After a short coffee break Mario Wenning from Loyola University in Andalusia

captivated the audience with a lecture “Daoism and Heidegger on Technology.” In his presentation, Wenning compared Heidegger’s analysis of technological enframing (*Das Gestell*) to the story of a gardener who refuses to adopt more efficient watering techniques in the Zhuangzi in order to find an appropriate approach to the complex world of new technologies. The first part of the day was concluded by Kristína Bosáková from the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, who outlined the steps of Heidegger’s consideration of the Daoist way in Gadamer’s aspiration to understanding in her talk – “Heidegger’s Way in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics.”

The two-hour lunch break provided participants with a space for informal discussion. After having rested, everyone returned to the premises of the Slovak Academy of Sciences to give the floor to the final three speakers. Rudi Capra from the University of Turin gave a striking presentation – “From Means to an End, To an End to Means: Ancient Daoism and Late Heidegger on Freedom and Dependence” – which was filled with references to films from modern pop culture. He explained how Heidegger and Daoism can be used to argue against instrumental reason and, consequently, how it is possible to restore individual autonomy in the face of an alienating world and its various dependencies. Kurt C.M. Mertel from the American University of Sharjah followed with a talk titled “Mindfulness, Appropriation, and Education as an Emancipatory Project.” Mertel examined the dialogue between Heidegger and Daoism in the context of the educational process, focusing mainly on how it can contribute to the enabling of authentic self-appropriation. The last to speak was Murat Ates from the University of Arts in Linz, with a presentation titled “Nothingness between and amidst the Appearing: Exploring Approaches from Phenomenology, Vedanta, and Daoism.” Within such approaches, the speaker tended to highlight the passively active role of nothingness as constitutive for being.

Thanks to the engaging talks and enriching discussions during and after the conference, we can conclude that the dialogue between Heidegger and Daoism indeed provides us with the possibility of intercultural thinking. Heidegger himself, as a result, emerges as an exponent of late Western philosophy who developed his thought by means of the incorporation of Eastern ideas. We can observe in him an extension of the habitual framework of knowledge and thinking—i.e., the path we discussed at the beginning of the paper crosses the path of another culture and brings the possibility of paving a common, intercultural way. It is now clear that the synchronization of Heidegger and Daoism can address various contemporary problems,

which cross the boundaries of particular cultures and states. Among them are issues such as alienation, the loss of subjectivity, technological dependencies, the search for appropriate approaches to psychological flaws, etc. In this regard, the Philosophical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences expresses its gratitude to all participants who contributed to the conference with their original perspectives, for their insightful observations on the proposed topic, and for the friendly atmosphere that accompanied the entire event, fostering the establishment of new international contacts.

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