

The Tao of Heidegger

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## **Introduction**

Recent scholarship and the testimony of close associates has confirmed what has long been suspected: Martin Heidegger was deeply influenced by Eastern philosophies, including especially Taoism. Much of this work has focused on the connections between Heidegger's ontological and metaphysical thought. But if Taoism strongly influenced these aspects of Heidegger's philosophy, then it is reasonable to surmise that Taoism also held sway with respect to his political thought and in particular his considerations of the role of technology, and whether and under what circumstances it is a bane or boon to human Being. This paper explores the associations between Heidegger's work on politics and technology on the one hand, and Taoist thought on the other, focusing specifically on the influence of the *Tao Te Ching*. It proceeds first to elucidate the evidence that Heidegger was significantly interested in and influenced by Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching*. It then discusses briefly the connections that have been uncovered between Taoism and Heidegger's understanding of Being, before proceeding to explore the influence of Taoism on his theories of politics and technology. It concludes with an examination of what light Taoism might shed on the enduring question of Heidegger's association with German National Socialism, and a brief consideration of how his Taoist-influenced thoughts on technology's role might bear on specific contemporary politico-technological concerns.

## **Heidegger and the Tao**

The *Tao Te Ching* is a collection of eighty-one short verses providing general advice as to how one should live, and occasionally more specific advice as to how one should govern a polity. It is commonly attributed to the Taoist sage Lao-tzu, and indeed is sometimes referred to by the name of its putative author. Lao-tzu may well be a fictitious character, however. At the very least, his

identity as an actual, single person is doubtful.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars believe that the *Tao Te Ching* is attributed to Lao-tzu because it was customary in classical China for authors to sign their works with the name of the founder of the school to which they belonged.<sup>2</sup> Others contend that the *Tao Te Ching* originated from a community of like believers who apparently did not have a nominal founder (not even one named Lao-tzu), rather than a single author.<sup>3</sup>

“On the whole, there are few formal difficulties in understanding the *Tao-te-ching*. The problem is rather one of meaning.”<sup>4</sup> The text of the *Tao Te Ching* is highly allusive, with many of the allusions’ meanings now lost.<sup>5</sup> In large part, this is because it was originally written in Archaic Chinese, which “has no active or passive, no singular or plural, no case, no person, no tense, no mood. Almost any word can be used as almost any part of speech . . . . And there are no inviolable rules.” All of this has provided ample room for interpretation and corruption in translation and copying over the centuries.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as of 1965, no other book than the Bible had been translated into English as often as the *Tao Te Ching*.<sup>7</sup> By current estimates, the *Tao Te Ching* appears in over two hundred versions in seventeen languages.<sup>8</sup> The inherent open-textured nature of the work, together with the uncertainty involved in translating it, has meant that “we have to decide for ourselves what

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 184.

<sup>3</sup> Kirkland, *Taoism*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> Schipper, *Taoist Body*, 186.

<sup>5</sup> Holmes Welch, *Taoism: The Parting of the Way*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Welch, *Taoism*, 9-10. For a general discussion of the difficulty in faithfully translating the *Tao Te Ching*, see Michael LaFargue and Julian Pas, “On Translating the Tao-te-ching” in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, ed. Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue, 277-300. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Welch, *Taoism*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> J.J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought*. (London: Routledge, 2000), 56.

is meant, within more or less broad limits set by the text. To read [the *Tao Te Ching*] is an act of creation.”<sup>9</sup>

This is not to say, however, that the *Tao Te Ching* is completely open-ended. As a text, it forecloses at least some meanings. Thus Taoist scholar and translator Michael LaFargue insists that the *Tao Te Ching* does not embody an “ineffable absolute” but rather contains an “aesthetic center” with a “surplus of meaning,” which is what makes it and many other religious texts “ineffable.” The Tao does not refer in any precisely delimited way to any metaphysical reality or principle.<sup>10</sup> Rather, “[t]he *Tao-te-ching*” actually speaks of all kinds of things at the same time. It detaches these things from their immediate context in order to create an essential and universal form of expression that will apply to all situations.”<sup>11</sup> The method by which the *Tao Te Ching* accomplishes this is ingenious: much of the text comes from maxims rooted in ancient Chinese oral tradition, but these aphorisms, many of which derive directly from popular wisdom, are in the *Tao Te Ching* “skillfully transformed in such a way as to have them say the opposite of the truths they were originally meant to convey.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, “[t]he constant use of paradoxes is indeed primarily intended to detach us from any general idea or prejudice,” leading Kristofer Schipper, the first Westerner ever ordained as a Taoist priest, to speculate that: “[G]enerally speaking, the style of writing of the *Tao-te-ching* sought to convey something about the conflict between our consciousness and that which is unknowable within ourselves.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Welch, *Taoism*, 12. “[I]t is very hard to decide what it means. It is a famous puzzle which everyone would like to feel he had solved.” Ibid. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Julia M. Hardy, “Influential Western Interpretations of the Tao-te-ching,” in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, ed. Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue, 165-88. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 180.

<sup>11</sup> Schipper, *Taoist Body*, 186.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 185.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. xiv-xv, 186-87.

Heidegger's interest in this paradoxical and open-ended text developed in the context of a growing interest in Taoism in Germany that developed around and after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in part as a result of a growing skepticism about the ideal of progress and alarm at the rapid growth of industrial capitalism. In Germany this concern over the moral and spiritual vacuum of modern Western civilization was "closely connected with the *völkisch* movement, a cultural phenomenon that expressed restless nationalist sentiments and sought political and cultural assuagement through a return to an idealist age in the past," and that also stimulated interest in Asian thought.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger's own interest in Taoism appeared publicly as early as 1930, when, in a discussion of intersubjectivity after a lecture in Bremen on the essence of truth, he requested and read from a translation of the aphorisms of Chuang-tzu (second only to Lao-tzu in the pantheon of Taoist sages) in order to make his point.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, a certain Taoist flavor to Heidegger's thought is apparent at least as early as his seminal 1927 work, *Being and Time*. In his insistence on undoing the Cartesian subject-object distinction, and returning to a way of thinking about Being rooted in the pre-Socratics, Heidegger deployed phenomenological accounts that resonate with certain parables in the *Chuang-tzu*. His account of physical objects as – depending upon context and the observational orientation of the humans who observe them – tools ready for use, ordinary and assumed parts of the environment that are barely noticed, or problems to be avoided or solved, resonates with Chaung-tzu's anecdote of the gnarled and knotted *shu* tree that appears useless to carpenters, but can serve as a landmark and shade provider to travelers.<sup>16</sup> In both Heidegger's and Chuang-tzu's phenomenological

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<sup>14</sup> Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Otto Pöggeler, "West-East Dialogue: Heidegger and Lao-Tzu," in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes, 47-78. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 52.

<sup>16</sup> I rely heavily here on Hubert Dreyfus's reading of *Being and Time* as expressed in his 2007 podcast lectures. Compare Hubert Dreyfus, *Philosophy 185: Heidegger*, lecture series given at the University of California Berkeley, fall semester 2007, "The Worldhood of the World II," 12 September 2007, 45:00 to 1:15:00. Audio available via <https://archive.org/>

readings, there is no objectively useful or useless matter, but rather an object's situation with respect to humanity is determined intersubjectively and culturally, not just for humanity in general, but for particular beings depending upon their own frames of reference. In a similar vein, Heidegger repeatedly refers in *Being and Time* to the activity *Umgang*, which Hubert Dreyfus prefers to translate as "handling" rather than "coping," with emphasis on the "Zen-like flow" involved in skillfully using ready-to-hand tools.<sup>17</sup> This kind of skillful, flowing handling of tools and engagement with objects in a manner that transcends Cartesian subject-object distinctions is nicely illustrated in Chuang-tzu's description of how an expert butcher breaks down an ox.<sup>18</sup> We do not yet know whether Heidegger had at the writing of *Being in Time* encountered or consulted the *Chuang-tzu*, but he seems to be traveling along some of the same roads even this early in his work.

It is also not known for certain when Heidegger first encountered the *Tao Te Ching*. We do, however, know that he began but did not finish a translation of at least portions of the work into German.<sup>19</sup> In the spring of 1946, Heidegger suggested to Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, a Chinese scholar then in residence in Freiburg, that they collaborate on a translation of the *Tao Te Ching* that summer. Hsiao "agreed gladly, being convinced that Lao-tzu's ideas would contribute to the reflections of the German people, and indeed of the Western world, after the disastrous World War."<sup>20</sup> Hsiao, like many other Asians, had been surprised by the difficulty many of Heidegger's western contemporaries had in understanding Heidegger's thinking. "What he 'brought to language' has

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details/Philosophy\_185\_Fall\_2007\_UC\_Berkeley (last accessed 29 March 2015), with Chuang Tzu, *The Inner Chapters*, trans. David Hinton. (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1997), 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, *Philosophy 185: Heidegger*, lecture series given at the University of California Berkeley, fall semester 2007, "Spatiality I," 24 September 2007, 4:30 to 7:00. Audio available via [https://archive.org/details/Philosophy\\_185\\_Fall\\_2007\\_UC\\_Berkeley](https://archive.org/details/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley) (last accessed 29 March 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Chuang Tzu, *The Inner Chapters*, 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, trans. Allan Blunden. (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 351 (noting that Heidegger embarked upon a translation of the works of Lao-tzu from his mountain hut at Todtnauberg in 1946-47).

<sup>20</sup> Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, "Heidegger and Our Translation of the *Tao Te Ching*," in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes, 93-103. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 93.

frequently been said similarly in the thinking of the Far East. For example, temporality has always been understood differently in China than in the West. . . . everything is connected with everything else, and in each moment there is concealed the entire past and also the open future.”<sup>21</sup> Hsiao thus viewed the proposed collaboration as a potentially fruitful one that could help clarify similarities between Heidegger’s thought and Chinese philosophy.

By the end of the summer of 1946, Hsiao and Heidegger translated only eight of eighty-one chapters of the *Tao Te Ching*. Though they planned to continue the work the following summer, Hsiao was at that time receiving invitations to lecture throughout Germany on Asian thought, and wished to pursue those opportunities. Hsiao also states in this regard to his decision:

I could not during our work together get free from a slight anxiety that Heidegger’s notes might perhaps go beyond what is called for in a translation. As an interpreter and mediator this tendency unsettled me.

Heidegger had essentially inquired – and asked penetratingly, tirelessly, and mercilessly – about every imaginable context of meaning in the mysterious interplay of the symbolic relations within the text. Only the complete constellation of meanings was sufficient for him to dare to determine the outline of a form of thought capable of rendering the multilayered meaning of the Chinese text into Western language in a clear and comprehensible way.<sup>22</sup>

Hsiao thus pulled out of the project at least in part because he felt that Heidegger was being overly creative in the act of translating the *Tao Te Ching*, though this creativity was informed by the central goal of finding all the meanings in this pluripotent Chinese text.

Heidegger’s manipulation of the text can be seen through an exchange of translations of one of the *Tao Te Ching*’s chapters between Heidegger and Hsiao. At Heidegger’s request, Hsiao wrote out the two lines of Chapter 15 in decorative calligraphy. They read: “Who can, settling the muddy, gradually make it clear? Who can, stirring the tranquil, gradually bring it to life?”<sup>23</sup> Heidegger’s rereading of these lines in a 1947 letter to Hsiao is as follows: “Who can be still and out of stillness

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 93-94.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 100.

and through it move something on to the Way so that it comes to shine forth? Who is able through making still to bring something into Being?”<sup>24</sup> In the vast range of translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, this one – infused as it is with such Heideggerian pet concepts as shining forth and bringing into Being – cannot be said to be out of the mainstream, though this probably says more about the width of the stream than about the fidelity of Heidegger’s translation.

Before their collaboration ended, Heidegger and Hsiao translated Chapters 1, 15, 18, 25, 32, 37, 40, and 41 of the *Tao Te Ching*.<sup>25</sup> These were not published and have not (yet) been found among Heidegger’s papers.<sup>26</sup> Because these translations are (at least for the moment) lost to us, and because they were consciously developed in avoidance of other translators’ works,<sup>27</sup> any attempt to find an existing translation that comes closest to Heidegger’s understanding of the *Tao Te Ching* is doomed: no existing translation will with any certitude match the translations Heidegger produced. This presents a problem for understanding the *Tao Te Ching*’s influences on Heidegger, as the multiplicity of translations (and the multiplicity of meanings encoded therein) necessitates some guesswork as to the content of the specific text(s) he encountered.<sup>28</sup> In addition to those eight chapters that Heidegger translated, scholars suspect that Heidegger was closely familiar with the contents of the *Tao Te Ching* generally.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 93-103. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 103. In Heidegger’s original German, the translation reads: “Wer kann still sein und aus der Stille durch sie auf den Weg bringen (be-wegen) etwas so, dass es zum Erscheinen kommt? Wer vermag es, stillend etwas so ins Sein zu bringen?”

<sup>25</sup> Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*, trans. Graham Parkes. (London: Routledge, 1996), 6 n. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Hsiao, “Our Translation,” 98.

<sup>27</sup> Hsiao, “Our Translation,” 97.

<sup>28</sup> When not relying on other scholars’ comparisons to translations of their choosing, this paper will make primary reference to one of two translations of the *Tao Te Ching*: one published roughly contemporaneously with Heidegger and Hsiao’s collaboration – Yutang Lin, *The Wisdom of Lao-tse*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1948). – and the other a recent translation carefully anchored in the original Chinese text – Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: Making This Life Significant: A Philosophical Translation*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Guenter Wohlfart, “Heidegger and Laozi: *Wu* (Nothing) – on Chapter 11 of the *Daodejing*,” trans. Marty Heitz, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (March 2003): 47.

“Does [Heidegger’s] attempt to attempt to translate Lao-tzu throw aside all standards of scholarship?”<sup>30</sup> In the attempt to translate Lao-tzu, Heidegger was led from a *logos* language to an ideographic language, which necessitated his working through image-words, intensifying concentration on the individual word.<sup>31</sup> Thus

Heidegger “reads” and “translates” the graphemes of a language the spoken words of which he does not understand. But must we not first understand what is really going on when Heidegger speaks and reads as he does? Heidegger demands a language in which it is not primarily a question of univocal concepts and their coherent connection, but rather of images whose meanings are multidimensional and inexhaustible.<sup>32</sup>

In this sense, Heidegger’s attempts to translate the *Tao Te Ching* closely mirror his “unconventional” translations of pre-Socratic Greek thinkers and of Sophocles.<sup>33</sup> It is in this sense that Reinhard May describes Heidegger’s “paraphrasing or poetic rewriting” of the Chapter 15 excerpt as “characteristic.”<sup>34</sup>

Heidegger’s use of the *Tao Te Ching* is also characteristic of his method in its counteranalytical direction. Just as adherents to analytical philosophy have dismissed Heidegger, so too have they been dismissive of Asian philosophy, and at least one key source of their objections to both has been the prejudice that literary forms are not proper for modern philosophical writing, which should be conducted by way of formal treatises working through rational, logical argumentation, rather than by playing with poetic images.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Otto Pöggeler puts Heraclitus and Lao-tzu on roughly the same footing in terms of influence on Heidegger, in the context of the

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<sup>30</sup> Pöggeler, “West-East Dialogue,” 68.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 68.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000, 101 n. 2, 114 n. 13, 117 n. 17, 118 n. 18, 119 n. 19, 120 n. 20, 121 n. 22, 157 n. 52.

<sup>34</sup> May, *Hidden Sources*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Graham Parkes, “Introduction,” in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes, 1-14. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 5.

necessity of “play”: Referring to the winter 1934-35 Hölderlin lecture, Pöggeler asks: “When Heidegger speaks of a play ‘without why’ (*ein Spiel ‘ohne Warum’*) the connection with Nietzsche and Eckhart is clear; and *yet is he still speaking here of the true Heraclitus? It must be asked similarly whether Heidegger does not also adduce from Lao-tzu only what he himself is seeking.*”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, “[t]he form of Heraclitus’ text is especially congruent with that of Lao-tzu’s, both being woven from pregnant utterances couched in an archaic language rich in allusive power and interspersed with lacunae of obscurity.”<sup>37</sup>

Heidegger scholars including William Barrett, Stanley Rosen, Reinhard May, and Otto Pöggeler, have pointed out since the 1960s connections between Heidegger’s thought and core Taoist ideas, and Heidegger’s later philosophy is rife with such Taoist concepts as the Way (Tao), dwelling, abiding, remaining, and returning.<sup>38</sup> Some examples among many that are available should suffice to underline this point. Heidegger’s early work (especially *Being and Time*), completed before he is known to have had contact with Eastern philosophy, is seen as having a “remarkably Taoist tone.”<sup>39</sup> The term “*Tao*” itself is translated into English most commonly as “the Way,” a term that makes frequent appearances in Heidegger. “The theme of the Way is explicitly present in *Being and Time* and runs throughout all of Heidegger’s writings.”<sup>40</sup> In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger states: “Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way . . . . The way is one of thinking.”<sup>41</sup> Heidegger invoked Lao-tzu explicitly

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<sup>36</sup> Pöggeler, “West-East Dialogue,” 66 (emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup> Graham Parkes, “Thoughts on the Way: *Being and Time* via Lao-Chuang.” In *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, edited by Graham Parkes, 105-44. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 109.

<sup>38</sup> Ellen M. Chen, “How Taoist Is Heidegger?” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 2005): 5.

<sup>39</sup> Parkes, “Thoughts on the Way,” 107.

<sup>40</sup> Joan Stambaugh, “Heidegger, Taoism, and the Question of Metaphysics,” in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes, 79-91. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 79.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” reprinted in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, 307-41. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 311.

thus in *On the Way to Language*: “Perhaps there lies concealed in the world ‘Way,’ *tao*, the mystery of all mysteries of thoughtful saying, as long as we let this name return to its unspokenness and are able to accomplish this letting. . . . All is Way.”<sup>42</sup>

Heidegger, in following Taoist leads, may simply have been using them to further his desire to “place philosophy back into the stream of life rather than to perpetuate its role as a detached seeker of objective, foundational truth.”<sup>43</sup> There is strong evidence that Heidegger’s attempt to overcome two thousand years of Western metaphysics, according to Pöggeler by shifting from an analytical to a meditative mode of thinking, was motivated by and found a way of thinking through the problem in Asian sources, including Taoism.<sup>44</sup> Notably, another English translation of the term *tao* is “logos.”<sup>45</sup> Knowing this, Heidegger may well have sought to upend the tradition of Western *logos* and its Aristotelian progeny “logic,” by silently importing Eastern ideas (sometimes grounded in pre-Socratic sources). Heidegger’s antipathy toward Western logic systems is well known,<sup>46</sup> and was apparently connected to his understandings of Eastern thought. In a conversation with Heidegger and an unnamed “industrialist friend” at Todtnauberg, Hsiao answers the friend’s question about apparent contradictions in the *Tao Te Ching*, “Why do the Chinese speak this way?” with the response that it was because the Chinese did not know Aristotelian logic, to which Heidegger responded, “Thank God that they didn’t.”<sup>47</sup> In the “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger states: “We are so filled with ‘logic’ that anything that disturbs the habitual somnolence of prevailing opinion is

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<sup>42</sup> Pöggeler, “West-East Dialogue,” 51.

<sup>43</sup> Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 175.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 174 (citations omitted).

<sup>45</sup> Welch, *Taoism*, 86.

<sup>46</sup> “But how is it with meditation on Being itself, that is, with the thinking that thinks the truth of Being? This thinking alone reaches the primordial essence of *logos*, which was already obfuscated and lost in Plato and in Aristotle, the founder of ‘logic.’” Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” reprinted in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, 213-65. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 251.

<sup>47</sup> Hsiao, “Our Translation,” 99.

automatically registered as a despicable contradiction.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, he argues, the Aristotelian-Cartesian “logic” as it has come down to us is itself already grounded in a particular (subject-object) answer to the question about beings’ relationship to Being, and so cannot properly be applied as a method for answering the question *ab initio*.<sup>49</sup>

Heidegger occasionally even counterposes Eastern thought to Western logic explicitly, as when he claims that “[w]e have still scarcely begun to think of the mysterious relations to the East that found expression in Hölderlin’s poetry.”<sup>50</sup> Or, as he argues in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, “[i]n the seemingly irrelevant division *Being and thinking* we have to recognize that fundamental orientation of the spirit of the West that is the real target of our attack. It can be overcome only *originally* – that is, in such a way that its inceptive truth is shown its own limits and thereby founded anew.”<sup>51</sup> Still, Heidegger was largely, and puzzlingly silent about the role of Eastern thought generally, and Taoism specifically, in his work. Despite the certainty of Heidegger’s familiarity with at least parts of the *Tao Te Ching* (and quite probably more than passing familiarity with the whole), he asserted repeatedly in connection with ideas clearly explicated in that work that until himself they had “never yet at all been able to appear as thinking.” Guenter Wohlfart characterizes this assertion as thoughtless at the least, and unlikely to be the result of carelessness; he also views the similarities between Heidegger’s thought and Lao-tzu’s as very unlikely to have been coincidental.<sup>52</sup> Wohlfart refrains from speculating, however, why Heidegger failed to cite his Eastern source here.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, while in the same conversation criticizing Western philosophy as too much at a dead-end to contribute helpfully

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<sup>48</sup> Heidegger, “Humanism,” 250.

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger, *Metaphysics*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, “Humanism,” 241.

<sup>51</sup> Heidegger, *Metaphysics*, 2000, 123-24.

<sup>52</sup> Wohlfart, “Heidegger and Laozi,” 50, citing, among others, Pöggeler, Parkes, and May.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

to understanding our technological age, Heidegger insists that German thought, at least, cannot be salvaged by “any takeover by Zen Buddhism or any other Eastern experiences of the world.”<sup>54</sup>

Some answers to this puzzle have been attempted. Graham Parkes notes that Heidegger mentioned Taoism explicitly only twice during his fifty years of philosophical publication. When Parkes asked Hans-Georg Gadamer why that might be, Gadamer responded that a scholar of Heidegger’s generation would have been reluctant to say anything in print about a philosophy whose texts he could not read in the original.<sup>55</sup> This concern with original, untranslated, texts is visible in a letter Heidegger wrote to organizers of a conference of Eastern and Western philosophers held in Hawaii:

The greatest difficulty in the enterprise [of a dialogue between Eastern and Western thinking] always lies, as far as I can see, in the fact that with few exceptions there is no command of the Eastern languages either in Europe or the United States. . . . May your conference prove fruitful in spite of this circumstance.<sup>56</sup>

Yet such translation concerns apparently did not prevent Heidegger from importing Taoism into his work *sub rosa*, but rather only from acknowledging publicly that he was doing so. Thus, Taoist scholar J.J. Clarke concludes:

[Heidegger’s] reflections on the globalising *telos* of European language and thought, and remarks such as ‘we Europeans presumably inhabit a quite different house from East Asians,’ must be set alongside comments concerning ‘our inevitable dialogue with the East Asian world.’ But above all, they must be reconsidered in the light of the now inescapable fact that he drew inspiration for some of his major ideas from the East.<sup>57</sup>

Heidegger’s public silence with regard to the role of Taoism in his work may also merely be the result of recognizing that “a true dialogue between East and West is not possible in a world still

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us,” interview by *Der Spiegel*, trans. Maria P. Alter and John D. Caputo, reprinted in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin, 91-116 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 109, 113.

<sup>55</sup> Parkes, “Introduction,” 7.

<sup>56</sup> Parkes, “Introduction,” 12-13 (alterations in Heidegger letter as given in Parkes).

<sup>57</sup> Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 172 (citations omitted).

subject to what he described as ‘the complete Europeanization of the Earth and of Man.’<sup>58</sup> Or it may be a feature of Heidegger’s own attempt to practice Taoism: Heidegger admits in his fictitious dialogue “Conversation” in *On the Way to Language* “that there is a ‘deeply hidden kinship’ between East Asian thought and his own attempts at thinking,” but does not further explicate this: Chapter 41 of the *Tao Te Ching* itself calls for reticence here, for according to it the Way must be left nameless.<sup>59</sup>

## Being and Nothing

The connections between Taoism and Heidegger’s thought on Being and its relation to the Nothing are legion, and are the subject of much scholarship. They will be treated only briefly here. First, however, there is a conundrum worthy of mention. Heidegger seems to have drawn extensively upon very concise, enigmatic sources for his work, especially in *Being and Time*, and did so admiringly: “What we still possess of Parmenides’ didactic poem fits into one slim volume, one that discredits the presumed necessity of entire libraries of philosophical literature,” Heidegger claims.<sup>60</sup> Yet, “[i]n contrast to the ‘book of five thousand characters’ (as the Lao-tzu is sometimes called), which must rank amongst the most profound of the world’s short philosophical texts, . . . the length and architectonic complexity of [*Being and Time*] are formidable.”<sup>61</sup> Was Heidegger engaged in a complex exegesis of Eastern and pre-Socratic thought? *Being and Time* was written before we can be certain that Heidegger had been exposed to the *Tao Te Ching*, and his later works are somewhat shorter. It is possible that this is further evidence that, enamored as Heidegger was of Eastern and pre-Socratic concision, he felt keenly the need to bring these “foreign” understandings to light in a

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 174 (citations omitted).

<sup>59</sup> May, *Hidden Sources*, 46. “Tao is hidden without a name.” Lin, *Wisdom*, 212. “Way-making is so profuse as to be nameless (*wuming*).” Ames and Hall, *Daodejing*, 141.

<sup>60</sup> Heidegger, *Metaphysics*, 102.

<sup>61</sup> Parkes, “Thoughts,” 109.

form that would be at least reasonably understandable to an audience steeped in a substantially more verbose Western philosophical tradition. This mystery must remain open for the present; further work is needed to understand why this admirer of open-textured, short philosophical texts nonetheless himself wrote giant, plodding tomes.

Turning to the substance of Being and Nothing, we can see that there are precise connections between the text of the *Tao Te Ching* and Heidegger's understanding of the interrelationship between these two. As Ellen Chen has recently shown, Taoism answers Heidegger's fundamental question "Why is there any being at all and not rather nothing?":

The world comes to be because Nothing, which is not an entity, is yet a reversive movement: "Reversion is the movement of Tao" (*Tao Te Ching*, chap. 40). Nothing reverts and becomes a world of beings. Nothing not only becomes all beings, Nothing accompanies all beings throughout their careers: it is the internal dynamism that prompts all beings to emerge, unfold, to be spent and finally, to self-destruct. In the being of beings, the nihilation of the Nothing goes on. The *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 51, says: "Therefore Tao gives birth, Te (Nature) keeps, grows, nurtures, matures, ripens, covers and buries."<sup>62</sup>

Heidegger hints at the same process when he claims that Nothing, rather than being detached from what-is-in-totality, rather functions as if at one with what-is-in-totality. Thus, in "The Turning," Heidegger appears to claim, like the *Tao Te Ching*, that Nothing turns and becomes a world of beings, Being bringing itself to pass sheerly out of its own essence of concealedness.<sup>63</sup> Chen is thus in agreement with modern Taoism scholar Norman J. Girardot, who sees early Taoist thought in terms of a mythology of creation, fall, and salvational return, in a cycle that, however, is the inverse of what Western readers tend to expect: "The 'fall' is a fall into order, and salvation is a return back into chaos, not an escape into some heavenly otherworld."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Chen, "How Taoist," 15.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Hardy, "Western Interpretations," 176-77. "The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; The Named is the Mother of All Things." Lin, *Wisdom*, 41. "The nameless (*wuming*) is the fetal beginning of everything that is happening (*wanwu*), While that which is named is their mother." Ames and Hall, *Daodejing*, 77.

Similarly, Chapter 1 of the *Tao Te Ching* directly states that the universe was produced from non-being, i.e. the Tao's nameless aspect, which then gave birth to Being – the Tao that can be named (and is called “Mother”) – which then gave birth (through the opposition of *yin* and *yang*, to the ten thousand things.<sup>65</sup> Chapter 2 restates this idea as: “Being and non-being interdepend in growth,”<sup>66</sup> or “Determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) give rise to each other,”<sup>67</sup> and Chapter 40 confirms: “The things of this world come from Being, And Being (comes) from Non-being,”<sup>68</sup> or “The events of the world arise from the determinate (*you*), And the determinate arises from the indeterminate (*wu*).”<sup>69</sup> This is an “ancient insight” of the “East Asian way of thinking” “to the effect that *yu* (being) and *wu* (nothing) mutually produce one another (*xiang sheng*),” that has been translated variously as “Being and non-being give birth to one another,” and “Being and non-being engender one another.”<sup>70</sup>

Heidegger too sees the nameless – the Nothing – as the source of Being. According to May, these ideas are remarkably similar to Heidegger in *The Question of Being* and “What Is Metaphysics?” in which Heidegger states that Being and Nothing are not beside one another, but rather each uses itself on behalf of the other, and that Nothing and Being are the same. “We have good grounds, then, for supposing that Heidegger elaborated (sometimes verbatim) these kinds of correspondence with the help of [Taoist texts] with which he was familiar . . . and integrated them into his work.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, quoting from the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Chen notes that Heidegger claims that he who

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<sup>65</sup> Welch, *Taoism*, 56. “In equating the ground of beings with Nothing, Heidegger agrees with the *Tao Te Ching* according to which the ultimate is Nothing: ‘All things under heaven are born of Being (*yu*), Being is born of Non-Being (*wu*).’ (chap. 40).” Chen, “How Taoist,” 9, (quoting Chen translation).

<sup>66</sup> Lin, *Wisdom*, 47.

<sup>67</sup> Ames and Hall, *Daodejing*, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Lin, *Wisdom*, 207.

<sup>69</sup> Ames and Hall, 139.

<sup>70</sup> May, *Hidden Sources*, 26.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 28.

speaks of nothing, by making it into a something, contradicts himself, and Chen surmises that perhaps for this reason, Heidegger does not have much to say about the substance of the Nothing.<sup>72</sup>

## Politics

Heidegger also does not have much to say, at least explicitly, about politics.<sup>73</sup> Could this be connected to what the *Tao Te Ching* has to say about governance? Certainly the latter is far from silent on this subject. The *Tao Te Ching* is in two parts: the Book of the Tao and the Book of the Te, with the latter primarily dealing with application of principles in the former, particularly to politics and governance.<sup>74</sup> Schipper claims that as a whole, “the *Tao-te ching* presents itself as a philosophical text which . . . considers the human being in his role as sovereign. The aphorisms take on the appearance of prescriptions in the art of government.”<sup>75</sup> And indeed, “Some versions of Daoist classics have indeed been quite openly populist or explicitly shaped by interests and enthusiasms which go well beyond those of pure scholarship.”<sup>76</sup> This was especially the case during after World War II (when Heidegger and Hsiao were in the thick of their ultimately abandoned translation project) when interpretations of the *Tao Te Ching* as a possible antidote to Western problems came to the fore.<sup>77</sup>

So what does the *Tao Te Ching* suggest about politics? “Lao Tzu recommends government by non-interference. Governments must by-pass the dilemma of action, recognizing in particular

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<sup>72</sup> Chen, “How Taoist,” 9.

<sup>73</sup> In his 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, published posthumously in 1976, Heidegger emphasizes that the questions he addresses in his thought, in particular in *Being and Time*, “in an indirect way affect even national and social [not to say political?] questions.” Heidegger, “Only a God,” 95.

<sup>74</sup> Schipper, *Taoist Body*, 187. Notably, of the eight chapters translated by Heidegger and Hsiao, only two, Chapters 40 and 41, are in the Second Book of the *Tao Te Ching*. Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 53. Clarke notes that Martin Buber, whose translation of the *Chuang-tzu* Heidegger apparently admired, was one of those “translators” who relied on other Western language versions, and Chinese-speaking assistants.

<sup>77</sup> Julia M. Hardy, “Influential Western Interpretations of the Tao-te-ching,” in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, ed. Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue, 165-88. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 173.

the futility of trying to control so complex a thing as a nation.”<sup>78</sup> Bypassing action is accomplished through nonaction, a concept indicated in the *Tao Te Ching* by the term “*wu-wei*” (inaction, spontaneity, or naturalness), which is used in complex ways throughout the text, and is seen as “provid[ing] many conflicting councils for rulers and even war-leaders.”<sup>79</sup> *Wu-wei* literally means “not doing,” but as a philosophical concept is used to indicate spontaneity, naturalness of action without conscious premeditation, and nonintervention in the natural flow of events.<sup>80</sup> The *Tao Te Ching* is both anti-intellectual and antimilitaristic. It advises that the sage govern with great prudence, and treat his country as though it were his own body. Governing through *wu-wei* causes all things to be well ordered.<sup>81</sup> Government attempts at control are self-defeating because they rely on forms of aggression against the nature of man. Thus the country of the Tao is “the land of natural anarchy and inner harmony.”<sup>82</sup>

The teaching of the *Tao Te Ching* as to how to rule the country refers the reader to “this here,” that is “the belly, the empty center, the seat of an intuitive and inner perception,” which one can only apprehend by remaining in inaction.<sup>83</sup> Taoism did not seek to enlighten the people, but to keep them in a kind of “ignorance” constituting a “healthy mistrust of all established ideas and prejudices.”<sup>84</sup> It is also possible to interpret the *Tao Te Ching* as equipping the cunning and canny statesman with the tools that will allow him to bring about the fall of the proud and mighty by giving

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<sup>78</sup> Welch, *Taoism*, 26.

<sup>79</sup> Kirkland, *Taoism*, 60.

<sup>80</sup> Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 84.

<sup>81</sup> Schipper, *Taoist Body*, 188.

<sup>82</sup> Welch, *Taoism*, 26.

<sup>83</sup> Schipper, *Taoist Body*, 189.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

them enough rope to hang themselves, not in order to take their place, but rather to bring the downfall of their threatening presence.<sup>85</sup>

Importantly, however, prescriptions for good government in the *Tao Te Ching* rely upon the action (or nonaction) of a wise ruler – a Taoist sage. The *Tao Te Ching* does not preach anarchy, but rather a state of affairs brought about by a sage-ruler.<sup>86</sup> “The Taoist sage alone can put an end to the artificial projects of civilization and allow the majority of people to return to a state of nonaction.”<sup>87</sup> This ruling sage does not, however, look anything like the famous (or infamous) rulers with whom we are familiar from history. According to the *Tao Te Ching* the best ruler is one who the people simply know is there. He pursues many negative policies, such as not advancing men of worth, emptying the minds of the people of useless knowledge leading to multiplication of false needs, and refraining from war to the extent possible.<sup>88</sup> According to Taoist scholar Benjamin Schwartz,

One might say that in a true Taoist society, the authority of the truly Taoist universal king may be as “natural” as the presence of the dominant male in the group life of many higher mammals. However one may account for the origins of human civilization, it is suggested throughout the text that only Taoist sage-rulers can reverse the pathology of civilization.<sup>89</sup>

It is here, in the person of the sage, that one can find an important link to Heidegger’s relatively sparse political thought. In his posthumously published interview with *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger claims that:

[P]hilosophy will not be able to effect an immediate transformation of the present condition of the world. This is not only true of philosophy, but of all merely human thought and endeavor. *Only a god can save us.* The sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in the time of foundering; for in the face of the god who is absent, we founder.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Benjamin Schwartz, “The Thought of the Tao-te-ching,” in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, ed. Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue, 189-210. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 207.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 206.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 204.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 205.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 204.

<sup>90</sup> Heidegger, “Only a God,” 107 (emphasis added).

Could this “god” be a figure akin to the Taoist “sage”? This would certainly be a more comforting image than that of a reborn *Reichsführer*. One can only speculate whether Heidegger was pointing in this direction. Nonetheless, in the same interview, Heidegger provided this intriguing lead: “And who of us can say whether or not one day in Russia *and China* the ancient traditions of a ‘thought’ will awaken which will help make possible for man a free relationship to the technical world?”<sup>91</sup>

## Technology

Thus the question of politics leads us to the question concerning technology. Here Heidegger produced much published thought, and the connections between it and Taoism are significantly clearer. Two strains of argument can be drawn from Heidegger’s criticisms of modern technology: 1) it uses up the beings in the world, and 2) it does so in such a way as to turn beings into fungible, stored-up energy. Though interrelated, these can be teased out and addressed separately. The first strain might be called the “sustainability” objection, and the second the “fungibility” objection. Both have strong resonance in the *Tao Te Ching*.

Heidegger makes the sustainability objection most trenchantly in the “Question Concerning Technology”: Modern technology challenges nature by making “the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such. But does this not hold true for the old windmill as well? No. Its sails do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind’s blowing. But the windmill does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it.” Contrast mining, which turns fields from something cared for and maintained by peasants in order to produce food, into resources stripped from the earth in a way that renders it unusable in the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 111 (emphasis added). The reference to Russia is puzzling, but the import of ancient traditions of Chinese thought should now be clear. Perhaps Heidegger envisioned a Russian return to pretechnological roots like that he had hoped Hitler would bring to Germany.

future. This is not a setting-in-order to take care and maintain, but a setting-upon nature.<sup>92</sup>

In Graham Parkes's view, among Taoism's attitudes toward technology and nature are these: "Humans thrive when they practice *wuwei*, activity that doesn't disrupt the spontaneous unfolding of natural forces and phenomena. Technology is OK when *wuwei*, suspect when *yowwei* (*yowwei* being activity disruptive of, or not in harmony with, the forces of heaven and earth)."<sup>93</sup> An important component of Taoist understandings of nature and the natural is *ziran*, i.e. "spontaneous self-unfolding" of processes in the context of myriad things that are. Although the *ziran* of any thing higher on the food chain curtails that of those lower, it is limited in its capacity to do so by overconsumption, e.g.: if a herbivore species consumes all of the available vegetation, then its numbers diminish and its self-unfolding ends. "The notion of *ziran* is thus connected with 'natural limits.'"<sup>94</sup> Similarly:

[O]n the Heideggerian view, to take things as to-hand is not necessarily to manipulate or mis-handle them. It is quite possible to take advantage of the power of nature in a way that is quite compatible with the Taoists' *wu wei*. In making use of the wind to propel a sailboat, for example, or of water to drive a mill-wheel, we can contribute to the wind's and water's being what they are 'in themselves.' . . . In making responsible use of fire or in using a tree for shade, we can, by bringing forth their appropriate possibilities, reveal those elements more fully in their being.<sup>95</sup>

Lao-tzu favors a return to natural society as a rejection of ingenious devices – "complex machinery of production and communication, which not only distract the individual from self-cultivation, but represent a form of excessive activity which inevitably defeats itself."<sup>96</sup> Specific modern examples might be farm surpluses resulting from improved (mechanized) agriculture, the population problem resulting from medical advances, and the problem of survival presented by

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<sup>92</sup> Heidegger, "Technology," 320.

<sup>93</sup> Graham Parkes, "Lao-Zhuang and Heidegger on Nature and Technology," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (March 2003): 22.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 22-23.

<sup>95</sup> Parkes, "Thoughts," 130.

<sup>96</sup> Welch, *Taoism*, 45.

knowledge of nuclear physics. Though this distinction implies some difficulty in determining what counts as “complex” machinery, Parkes suggests that one can lay out various implements on a spectrum from *wuwei* to *yowwei*, such that at the *wuwei* end would lie “windmills, sailboats, watermills, and the like: implements that make use of the natural forces of wind, water, and gravity without abusing them or using them up,” and at the *yowwei* end would lie such technologies as nuclear power plants, “which disrupt[ ] natural processes monstrously” in that the reactions that power them require extremely complex technical procedures generating toxic waste on vastly different quantitative and temporal scales than when uranium decomposes naturally.<sup>97</sup> Parkes argues that Taoists would also discourage one from seeking to avoid fated limitations to life or health, e.g., by recourse to expensive, sophisticated technology, such that these medical procedures disrupt the natural course of things, at the expense of the whole.<sup>98</sup> Similarly,

Heidegger describes how nihilism arises from the obsession with beings that attempts to compensate for the emptiness deriving from the broader context of Being (*dao*). As technology manufactures more and more to fill the void, its drive for control and its understanding of the natural world as mere raw material eventually extend to encompass human beings.<sup>99</sup>

As for the fungibility objection, the idea that beings can be turned into stored-up, readily exchanged energy appears to have troubled Heidegger greatly: “Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example; uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be unleashed for either destructive or for peaceful purposes.”<sup>100</sup> This kind of setting upon expedites – unlocks, and exposes – in order to further something else than the fulfillment of the Being of the resources consumed, providing maximum yield at minimum expense, by storing energy so that it can be on call, turned into

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<sup>97</sup> Parkes, “Lao-Zhuang,” 29.

<sup>98</sup> I will return to this argument in my concluding comments regarding technologies ameliorating colorblindness and allowing for changes in physical sex characteristics in order to facilitate gender identity expression.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>100</sup> Heidegger, “Technology,” 320.

something else, and used to power, for instance, a factory. So too, a hydroelectric plant on the Rhine sets upon the river to turn its motion into stored electricity:

In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electric energy, even the Rhine itself appears to be something at our command. The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather, the river is dammed up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier, derives for the essence of the power station.<sup>101</sup>

The river is no longer a river, but stored-up power, just as the air is no longer air, but stored up nutrients for plants that are no longer plants, but stored up food, which is itself fuel for animals (more stored up food) or for humans, who themselves become “human resources” in the mode of available labor.<sup>102</sup> Technology on a mass scale reverses the unfolding of beings by leveling them down to the same common denominator, pure energy (which worse still, can be employed to make even more energy out of even more beings). “Such challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is in turn distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew.”<sup>103</sup> This “circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption is the sole procedure which distinctively characterizes the history of a world which has become an unworld.”<sup>104</sup>

It is possible to connect this concern with the making by technology of the world into an unworld to Taoist thought. One can see why Heidegger might fear the reuniting by leveling down into pure energy of the multiplicity of things – such a development would reverse the direction of the fundamental struggle that allows for the presencing of beings:

As Heraclitus thinks it, struggle first and foremost allows what essentially unfolds to step apart in opposition, first allows position and status and rank to establish themselves in coming to presence. In such a stepping apart, clefts, intervals, distances, and joints open

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 321.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 332.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 322.

<sup>104</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” trans. Joan Stambaugh, reprinted in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin, 67-90. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 87.

themselves up. “In con-frontation, world comes to be.” But confrontation does not divide or destroy, but rather builds unity. “It is the gathering (*logos*).”<sup>105</sup>

It would also reverse the direction of the Tao. According to Chapter 42 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Out of Tao, One is born;  
Out of One, Two;  
Out of Two; Three;  
Out of Three; the created universe.<sup>106</sup>

Or:

Way-making (*dao*) gives rise to continuity,  
Continuity gives rise to difference,  
Difference gives rise to plurality,  
And plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (*wanwu*).<sup>107</sup>

On this basis, technologies that turn beings into stored-up no-thing not only wastefully run through the available beings at an unsustainable rate, but also threaten to bring beings to an end altogether.

On this read, it is not terribly surprising that Heidegger was able to lump together mechanized industrial agriculture, atomic bombs, and “the manufacture of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps.”<sup>108</sup> The last of these may horrify us most because it directly obliterates human beings (and is poorly chosen in light of Heidegger’s former membership in the Nazi party), but in the context of Heidegger’s concerns regarding technology, it is really just one more symptom of the same being-threatening disease.

If Taoism (and Eastern thought generally) inspired Heidegger on this front, however, how can one explain his comment in the *Der Spiegel* interview that

[A] reversal can be prepared only in the same place in the world where the modern technological world originated, and [ ] it cannot happen because of any takeover by Zen Buddhism or any other Eastern experience of the world. There is need for a rethinking

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<sup>105</sup> Heidegger, *Metaphysics*, 65.

<sup>106</sup> Lin, *Wisdom*, 214.

<sup>107</sup> Ames and Hall, *Daodejing*, 142.

<sup>108</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Insight into That Which Is,” quoted in Richard Wolin, “Introduction: ‘Over the Line’: Reflections on Heidegger and National Socialism,” in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin, 1-22. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 15.

which is to be carried out with the help of the European tradition and of a new appropriation of that tradition. Thinking itself can be transformed only by a thinking which has the same origin and calling.<sup>109</sup>

Perhaps the appropriate emphasis is not on “Zen Buddhism” but on “takeover”: if the East (to Heidegger’s mind) was not yet corrupted by technology, then it could not dialectically overcome the technological problematic of the West; nevertheless, its thought might still be borrowed from in order to *inform* the West in an attempt to transform its own thinking concerning technology.

### **The Question of Heidegger’s Politics**

One final question regarding Heidegger remains to be addressed from the vantage of Taoism, and it is the thorniest. Why did Heidegger fail publicly (or so far as we are aware, even privately) to repudiate his involvement with the Nazi party? That Taoism may have something to say about this is indicated by the context and timing of Heidegger’s interest in the *Tao Te Ching*. Heidegger’s interest in Lao-tzu and in translating the *Tao Te Ching* was, according to Pöggeler, connected temporally and substantively with the small book *From the Experience of Thinking* that he wrote while convalescing after a breakdown he suffered during the course of de-Nazification proceedings.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, Heidegger’s proposal to Hsiao that the two collaborate on a translation of that work came at the end of a conversation on a chance meeting on the streets of Freiburg. There Heidegger, in the midst of the interviews he was obliged to give to French forces as part of the process of his mandated de-Nazification, confronted Hsiao with a question as to what Hsiao would say if people made contradictory assertions about the same piece of Hsiao’s writing. Heidegger explained that the Nazis had accused him of being non-Aryan based on a passage in *Being*

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<sup>109</sup> Heidegger, “Only a God,” 113.

<sup>110</sup> Pöggeler, “West-East Dialogue,” 51.

*and Time*, and that the French had now presented him with the same passage as evidence that he was a Nazi true-believer.<sup>111</sup> Hsiao reports that he responded thus:

Professor Heidegger, you ask me what I say to the statements of the Nazis and the Allies. I can only give you a Chinese answer. I find that the surely false interpretations of the Nazis and the Allies attest to the same thing: in the future one must surely study your philosophy more assiduously and carefully. If it is understood properly, it will have great relevance for the future. Mencius said: "If heaven wants to impose a difficult task on someone, it first fills his heart and will with bitterness, rots his sinew and bones, starves his frame, imposes great poverty upon his body, and confounds his undertakings, so that his heart will be inspired, his nature stimulated and his deficiencies remedied. . . . From all these things we learn that life arises out of anxiety and care, misery and privation; and that death on the other hand is the product of comforts and pleasure."<sup>112</sup>

This is a sympathetic response, to be sure, and one that may have helped convince Heidegger that his political entanglement would be a life-long test. He apparently chose to respond to the test by refusing, consistent with Taoist practice, to answer the question.

George Steiner believes that only conjecture is possible with regard to Heidegger's silence on his involvement with National Socialism, but himself guesses that though Heidegger was a towering genius of philosophy, "he was, at the same time, a very small man. . . . It may well be that he did not have the courage or magnanimity needed to confront his own political past."<sup>113</sup> What follows is certainly not a refutation of Heidegger's potential for smallness. But at the same time his stance was not entirely unprincipled, and certainly is not inconsistent with his work in general. Throughout Heidegger's thought, there is a tendency to denigrate judgments of value, at least facially. For instance, in *Being and Time* Heidegger presents two kinds of being: authenticity and inauthenticity, but insists that the latter "does not signify a 'lesser' being or a 'lower' degree of being."<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Heidegger introduces the concept of "unmeaningful" Dasein, and then insists that the term does not

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<sup>111</sup> Hsiao, "Our Translation," 94-95.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 96.

<sup>113</sup> George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 124.

<sup>114</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 40.

imply “a value judgment, but expresses an ontological determination.”<sup>115</sup> Likewise, Heidegger, in discussing the notion of “idle talk,” claims that the term “is not to be used here in a disparaging sense.”<sup>116</sup> This tendency to eschew judgments of value is more fully explained in the “Letter on Humanism” thus:

To think against “values” is not to maintain that everything interpreted as “a value” – “culture,” “art,” “science,” “human dignity,” “world,” and “God” – is valueless. Rather, it is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as “a value” what is so valued is robbed of its worth.<sup>117</sup>

This radical rejection of values would seem to follow directly from the assertion in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* that:

As maintaining, *logos* has the character of pervasive sway, of *phusis*. It does not dissolve what it pervades into an *empty lack of opposites*; instead, by *unifying what contends*, the gathering maintains it in the highest acuteness of its tension.<sup>118</sup>

Likewise, the *Tao Te Ching* “positively discourages us from making moral judgments.”<sup>119</sup>

Though this idea pervades the text, it is perhaps best illustrated by Chapter 2, which states that all values are simply constituted by their opposites, and thus apparently do not have independent existence or meaning:

When the people of the Earth all know beauty as beauty,  
There arises (the recognition of) ugliness.  
When the people of the Earth all know the good as good,  
There arises (the recognition of) evil.

Therefore:  
Being and non-being interdepend in growth;  
Difficult and easy interdepend in completion;  
Long and short interdepend in contrast;  
High and low interdepend in position;  
Tones and voice interdepend in harmony;

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 142.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 157.

<sup>117</sup> Heidegger, “Humanism,” 251.

<sup>118</sup> Heidegger, *Metaphysics*, 142-43 (emphasis added).

<sup>119</sup> Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 101.

Front and behind interdepend in company.<sup>120</sup>

Or:

As soon as everyone in the world knows that the beautiful are beautiful,  
There is already ugliness.  
As soon as everyone knows the able,  
There is ineptness.

Determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*you*) give rise to each other,  
Difficult and easy complement each other,  
Long and short set each other off,  
High and low complete each other,  
Refined notes and raw sounds harmonize (*be*) with each other,  
And before and after lend sequence to each other –  
This is really how it all works.<sup>121</sup>

Such a radical rejection of value might seem fine on paper, but in connection with the Nazi regime it tends to stick in the craw. In this sense, perhaps, Heidegger's refusal to "own up" to his role, however small, in Nazism represents not smallness, as Steiner suggests, but rather a kind of foolish if oddly courageous insistence upon living according to his own belief that good and evil have no independent significance.

## Conclusion

This paper is hardly the first attempt to use the connections between Heidegger and Taoism to ask whether one can see in the latter any light that can illuminate the ideas of the former. Nonetheless, it has attempted to demonstrate that behind the sometimes seeming illogic of Heidegger's thoughts and deeds lies a refusal to engage in logic, in a Western sense, at all, and that this refusal is readily understandable according to certain strains of Eastern philosophy. There are still substantial puzzles: why Heidegger did not adequately publicly acknowledge his debt to Taoism, whether Taoism provides an adequate explanation of his (limited) published thoughts on politics,

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<sup>120</sup> Lin, *Wisdom*, 47.

<sup>121</sup> Ames and Hall, *Daodejing*, 80.

and whether Taoism's rejection of values properly explains Heidegger's unwillingness to "own up" to his Nazi past. As Pöggeler put it:

Was [Heidegger's] excursion [wandering away from his time] – as legend has it of Lao-tzu's – forced by the decline of the age and environment, or was it not also an escape from the context of guilt in which the wanderer had become entangled through his own doing and which he was unable to tolerate? Are experiences and motives which must belong to the thinking of our time not being unfairly set aside? The experience of guilt and of evil become also for Meister Eckhart, for Nietzsche, for Lao-tzu, and for Zen Buddhism something of second rank.<sup>122</sup>

But while these puzzles may be of historical and bibliographical interest, what is perhaps most important politically about a Taoist reading of Heidegger's thought is its relevance to understanding the role of technology with respect to the Being of humans and other beings. I close with a provocative example from a contemporary controversy. Bear in mind that as we have already seen, Heidegger raised strong objections in "The Question Concerning Technology" to unthinking use of technology on both sustainability and fungibility grounds. These objections surface as well in his interview with *Der Spiegel*, in which he admits to being "frightened when [he] saw pictures coming to from the moon to the earth," as this was an example of "technology tear[ing] men loose from the earth and uproot[ing] them," a fright he links as well to nuclear weapons.<sup>123</sup>

Recently, no less a figure than Pope Francis characterized three specific technologies as "destroy[ing]," "plot[ting] designs of death," and "disfigure[ing] the face of man and woman, destroying creation," identifying these technologies, in turn, as "nuclear arms," "genetic manipulation," and "gender theory," where the last has been understood specifically as a reference to gender reassignment surgery, often undergone by people who desperately desire that their bodily

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<sup>122</sup> Pöggeler, "West-East Dialogue," 75.

<sup>123</sup> Heidegger, "Only a God," 105.

sexual attributes be consistent with their expressed and deeply felt gender identities.<sup>124</sup> At first blush, these comments might seem consistent with Heidegger's concerns regarding technology as something that uproots beings from their Being. And of course there is no way to be certain what Heidegger might have had to say about transgendered persons. But think Heidegger through Taoism: does gender reassignment surgery implicate sustainability? Trivially at most: only if we assume that transgendered persons would otherwise have engaged in reproductive sexual relations absent the possibility of becoming physically who they are in spirit is there even colorable sustainability concern. More significantly, does gender reassignment surgery implicate fungibility? Not at all: instead, it facilitates transgendered beings' Being, rather than consigning that being to (arguably technologically based) norms of gender expression and behavior.

Instead, it seems to me, this technological innovation mirrors the recent development of glasses that can allow the colorblind to see color.<sup>125</sup> Arguably such technologies do not uproot humanity, but make humans more fully human. In contrast, providing so-called bionic devices to humans to give them superhuman capabilities might be, for Heidegger, more like moon shots and atomic bombs – a distortion of Being uninformed by any attempt to think through its consequences. If Pope Francis was channeling Heidegger at all in his comments, it was in an entirely vulgar way. What follows from this is space for a more nuanced evaluation, in light of Taoist thinking, of technological change in light of environmental and ontological concerns – a space that is urgently in need of further exploratory thought.

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<sup>124</sup> Joshua J. McElwee, "Francis Strongly Criticizes Gender Theory, Comparing It to Nuclear Arms," *National Catholic Reporter*, 13 February 2015, available online via <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-strongly-criticizes-gender-theory-comparing-nuclear-arms> (last accessed 29 March 2015).

<sup>125</sup> Rachel Feltman, "Watch Awestruck People Seeing Color for the First Time," *Washington Post*, 24 March 2015, available via <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2015/03/24/watch-awestruck-people-seeing-color-for-the-first-time/> (last accessed 29 March 2015).

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