Eric S. Nelson
Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom
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In *Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom*, Nelson explores the intersection of Heideggerian philosophy and Daoist thought, attempting to trace how Daoism was received and transformed within European intellectual contexts. Its primary mission is to map out Heidegger's explicit and implicit engagements with East Asian discourses concerning the thing, nothingness, and the freedom of releasement (*Gelassenheit*), with the intent of articulating the conditions for a primordial or elemental encounter with them. This endeavor constitutes an important attempt to construct a robust bridge between Heidegger and East Asian philosophy within a broader historical context.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part centers on thing, the second on nothingness, and in the final chapter of each part, the relationship of the respective theme to world is examined, although in Chapter 9, this relationship is further concretized as an ethical issue.

The first part of the book unfolds across five chapters, beginning with the question "What is a thing?"

Chapter 1 traces the evolution of Heidegger's concept of the "thing" in dialogue with early Daoist texts, particularly Laozi and Zhuangzi, offering a *ziran*-centered reinterpretation. Nelson aligns Heidegger's shift – from seeing the thing as a mere instrument to a world-gathering entity – with Daoist poetics. This reading is persuasive, yet his emphasis on *ziran* as "world-naturing" risks becoming overly abstract, without fully addressing the ontological or political tensions embedded in both traditions.

The claim that Heidegger's poetic thinking reflects Daoist influence is historically plausible, especially through figures such as Buber and Wilhelm. However, Nelson's sharp distinction between mysticism and poetic thought may be overly schematic, potentially

overlooking the metaphysical ambiguity that underpins Heidegger's work. His invocation of Zhuangzian freedom as resistance to conceptual fixation is insightful, though the assertion that Daoism is fundamentally incommensurable with Western philosophy (p. 32) raises further questions: does this framing risk reinforcing cultural essentialism, or does it highlight meaningful epistemological divergence?

Chapter 2 explores how Heidegger's 1930s thought absorbs worldly freedom into destiny (*Geschick*), particularly through his rethinking of nature as *phúsis* – defined as self-emergent unfolding. Nelson draws a structural parallel between *phúsis* and early Daoist notions of nothingness, but this analogy risks oversimplifying both traditions. Politically, Heidegger's emphasis on "work and deed and sacrifice" (*Werk und Tat und Opfer*, GA 65:298) aligns less with Daoist non-intervention than with Legalist coercion (wei 为) and strategic manipulation (shi 事), though Nelson stops short of claiming direct influence. Derrida's critique in The Beast and the Sovereign further exposes how Heidegger's concept of *phúsis* as Walten—a commanding sway – can feed into a violent political ontology. In his later work, Heidegger turns explicitly to Daoism through his reflections on das *Ding*, emphasizing *Gelassenheit*, or releasement. Nelson traces this lineage through Dilthey, Driesch, and Carnap, while Derrida reminds us that "the thing itself always escapes", underscoring its Daoist-inflected unknowability. This shift from sovereign control to ontological humility marks a significant transformation – but one that may not fully resolve the tensions in Heidegger's earlier appropriation of Eastern thought.

Chapter 3 examines resonances between Heidegger's conception of thing, Dao, and emptiness and their interpretations in the German context, notably in the works of Victor von Strauss (1870), Martin Buber (1910), and Richard Wilhelm (1911, 1912). Misch's claims in 1926 and 1930 regarding the global origins of philosophy prompted Husserl and Heidegger to reassert its exclusively Greek and Occidental lineage. The chapter refocuses attention on the emptiness of the thing as a site for world-gathering and projects a vision for a future world amid globalization. Heidegger critiques "world-civilization" – a global condition defined by administrative-instrumental dominance of economy, politics, and technology – where all else becomes not only a secondary superstructure but a crumbling annex. In such a world, human existence is rendered homeless, in both Europe and Asia. Heidegger's

later thought identifies the destruction of place and homelessness not merely as technical or theoretical issues, but as fundamental concerns of questioning, building, and dwelling. Here, *ziran*-oriented discourse offers evocative thought-images and models. The following chapters trace how such elemental questioning can inform a more ecophronetic mode of dwelling with things in the contemporary world.

Chapter 4 focuses on the relation between spontaneity and calculation, usefulness and uselessness, as it emerges in Heidegger's references (1945 and 1962) to Richard Wilhelm's Zhuangzi. Nelson highlights Heidegger's engagement with Wilhelm's translation while also delineating crucial differences between the two. Heidegger captures a Daoist understanding of freedom in his statement: "*Freedom rests in being able to let (Lassenkönnen), not in ordering and dominating*" (p. 98). This Daoist perspective includes wuwei (associated with letting-be and waiting in both Chinese and German sources), *ziran* (a spontaneous, non-instrumental unfolding), and the wandering freedom or releasement of things.

Drawing on Zhuangzi's notion of the "useless," Heidegger links uselessness with *ziran* – a concept that defies instrumental logic, though inadequately rendered in translation. His interpretation is also shaped by early 20th-century German cross-cultural discourse, including philosophical contributions by Buber and Misch, the translations of Buber and Wilhelm, as well as the historical conditions of German National Socialism, the failure of the German state, and the rise of technocratic modernity (p. 105).

Chapter 5 explores Heidegger's conception of Dao as it emerges amidst the interplay between thing and world. It unfolds in three parts. The first part investigates how Daoist ideas inform Heidegger's reflections on the way, releasement (*Gelassenheit*), and the nature of the thing. Nelson traces how Heidegger's thinking gradually opens toward East Asian philosophical motifs, particularly those found in Daoism, where the "way" is not a path imposed, but one followed through attunement and spontaneity.

The second part turns to ethics, suggesting that Heidegger's shift in the 1930s – away from the will to power – anticipates a Daoist orientation. Here, ethical engagement is no longer grounded in sovereign decision or duty, but in a responsive mode of dwelling aligned with *ziran* and *wuwei*.

The final section argues that Heidegger's postwar thought,

increasingly influenced by *ziran*, offers a critique of conventional Western notions of action and subjectivity. Instead of sovereign agency, Heidegger proposes a relational mode of acting according to the *wuwei-ziran* model of reverberating attunement and self-naturing actuality (p. 125). In this reconfiguration, human action becomes poetic dwelling rather than domination. The human way of being presupposes an existence in namelessness, whereby one may encounter things in the unfolding of their own truth (p. 129).

Nelson maintains that Heidegger's work centers around the question of the way (p. 108), and his notion of preparatory thinking bears affinity with the Daodejing. However, as the chapter acknowledges, Nelson often reads Daoism through Heidegger's interpretive framework, rather than treating it as a philosophy with its own autonomous logic – an unresolved tension in the chapter's otherwise insightful analysis.

The second part begins from the notion of Nothing and comprises four chapters.

Chapter 6 explores the functional distinctions and historical entanglements between Daoist nothingness and Buddhist emptiness (*śūnyatā*), arguing that their divergence constitutes a hermeneutic condition for any genuine cross-cultural dialogue. Nelson insists these concepts are not interchangeable, pointing to interpretive differences across Buddhist traditions – from the Middle Path to Zongmi – that render the two terms incommensurable, yet productively so.

However, Nelson's existentialist framing of Buddhism – as a tradition marked by therapeutic engagement with suffering, illness, and radical anxiety – risks mischaracterization. Buddhism does not negate suffering but treats dukkha as the starting point for liberation. Its pragmatic orientation seeks transformation, not existential negation. By imposing an existentialist lens, Nelson obscures Buddhism's affirmative and non-dual understanding of life's conditions.

In Chapter 7, Nelson explores Heidegger's entanglement with East Asian philosophies of nothingness, particularly Daoism and Buddhism. He highlights Heidegger's departure from "occidental thinking" via a German-language engagement with the concept of nothingness, shaped in part by Leibniz's metaphysical question and an implicit appropriation of The Book of Changes. While Buddhist thought, according to Nelson, suspends beings in nothingness, Heidegger turns instead toward the ontological question of

Being. His encounter with nihilism, especially through Nietzsche, culminates in his reflections on kū (空) and language in dialogue with Tezuka Tomio.

Nelson suggests that Heidegger's engagement with Zen and Pure Land Buddhism remains filtered through a Daoist lens, given his apparent rejection of Buddhism's religious dimension. Yet this framing underplays the historical synthesis of Daoism and Buddhism in East Asia. From the Tang dynasty onward, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism evolved in mutual resonance, both metaphysically and practically. Nelson's argument thus risks attributing Heidegger's Daoist inflection to a false dichotomy between Buddhist and Daoist sources – Ignoring the hybridized nature of the traditions from which Heidegger's Japanese interlocutors themselves drew.

In Chapter 8, Nelson revisits Heidegger's reflections on nothingness, positioning What Is Metaphysics? as a corrective to readings that equate Heidegger with nihilism. This shift, Nelson argues, prepares the ground for Heidegger's later engagements with East Asian philosophy, particularly through his exchanges with Japanese thinkers. Notably, Nelson traces a movement "from radical nothingness to everyday life" and identifies affinities with Nishida's thought, despite the absence of direct influence. Drawing on Kitayama, he contrasts Japanese wartime philosophies – Infused with Buddhism, Daoism, and bushido – with Heidegger's own evolving conception of the void, ultimately arguing that Heidegger remains embedded within a Greco-German ontological horizon.

However, Nelson's assertion that "nothingness for Heidegger signifies not 'not-beings' but 'Being'" risks conflating the crucial distinction Heidegger makes between das *Seiende* and *Sein*. Moreover, while Nelson emphasizes intercultural entanglement, his framing tends to blur significant philosophical divergences, particularly between Mahāyāna and Daoist conceptions of emptiness. His proposition of "emptiness between subject and world" as a path toward ethical inquiry is provocative, yet it risks reifying distinctions that East Asian traditions often treat as fluid and relational. As the Mahāyāna dictum "言语道断" suggests, the very attempt to fix the meaning of emptiness through categorical language may obscure its experiential and non-conceptual dimensions.

In Chapter 9, Nelson expands his inquiry into the political and ethical stakes of nothingness, exploring its resonances in both

German and Japanese contexts. He traces how European receptions of the Daodejing and Zhuangzi – often libertarian or anarchistic – inform Heidegger's engagements with Daoist thought. Nelson argues that Heidegger's postwar reflections on localism, dwelling, and things articulate an environmental ars vivendi aligned with Daoist *ziran*, promoting a responsive, participatory freedom rooted in mutual co-arising. In this light, Daoism is reimagined not merely as metaphysics but as a therapeutic-political ethos for confronting modern alienation and ecological crisis.

Yet this reading presents notable limitations. Nelson's fusion of Heidegger and Daoism risks flattening philosophical differences, romanticizing *ziran* without clarifying its ethical implementation, and glossing over the metaphysical tensions between ontological difference and Daoist non-duality. Moreover, while gesturing toward ecological urgency, the analysis remains vague on concrete praxis. Finally, defining freedom through "chaos" introduces conceptual ambiguity, weakening its political force. These oversights temper the otherwise compelling vision of intercultural resonance and ecological rethinking.

In conclusion, Nelson's work raises a central question for cross-cultural hermeneutics: should interpretation seek to preserve the conceptual distinctiveness of Heidegger's thought in contrast to East Asian philosophy, or does it rightly embrace a zone of resonance where such boundaries begin to dissolve? Rather than opposing these approaches, one might view them as complementary – both pointing beyond method toward a shared horizon of thinking and dwelling.

However, interpretation across traditions carries risks. Misreading linguistic nuances can compound cultural misunderstandings. For example, Nelson cites Daodejing 56: "Perhaps he is following the advice that those who speak do not know and those who know do not speak" (p. 86). The original line, "知者不言，言者不知," contains multiple valences: "知 (zhi)" refers not only to knowledge or knowing, but also resonates with "智 (zhi)", connoting wisdom. Rendering it in a single register may obscure its layered implications.

For this reason, I propose that non-native readers approach classical Chinese texts through yìhuì (意会) – a mode of intuitive understanding that moves beyond literal translation. Nelson's book, for all its limitations, reveals the generative possibilities of Daoist thought in the present. As the Daodejing 6 reminds us: "绵

绵若存，用之不勤" (presenting subtly, practicing inexhaustibly) – an image not of conceptual mastery, but of attuned and enduring practice.