

A Comparative Study of Heidegger and Taoism on Human Nature

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Heidegger and early Taoism developed provocative ways of thinking about the human as fundamentally belonging to the world—understood through *being* (Sein) or the *way* (Tao). This essay mainly attempts to deal with the relation between Heidegger's and the Taoist perspective of human nature.

Keywords: Heidegger's perspective of being, Taoism, human nature

Introduction

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a famous German philosopher, is acknowledged to be one of the most original and important philosophers of the 20th century. His thinking has contributed to such diverse fields as phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, political theory, psychology, theology, and postmodernism. His main concern is ontology or the study of *being* (Sein). In his fundamental treatise, *Being and Time* (Sein und Zeit), he attempted to access *being* (Sein) by means of phenomenological analysis of human existence (Dasein) in respect to its temporal and historical character. Heidegger and early Taoism developed provocative ways of thinking about the human as fundamentally belonging to the world—understood through *being* (Sein) or the *way* (Tao). Heidegger unfolded this as the intersection of sky and earth, mortals and immortals in the gathering of the Fourfold (Geviert), whereas Taoism locates the human between “earth and heaven” and in relation to the elemental forces and rhythms of life such as *yin* and *yang* and *qi*.

Previous work on Heidegger and Asian thinking has shown the possible influences of Taoism, especially the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, on Heidegger's thought and it has begun to explicate the many resonances, parallels, and differences between them. Heidegger and Taoism also share in being criticized for promoting “passivity” in the face of “natural forces” or a primordial nonhuman condition, whether it is *Sein* or the *Tao*. This essay mainly attempts to deal with the relation between Heidegger's perspective of human nature and the Taoist one. To do this, however, it is necessary to lay bare the distinctive meaning of “Being” for Heidegger and “Tao” for Taoism.

Being and Tao

Early Taoism and Heidegger emphasized the primacy and primordially of that in relation to which the human occurs, namely the *way* (Tao) or *being* (Sein). As such, both do not interpret the human exclusively from the perspective of human activity and practices. Rejecting Sartre's claim that only human activity matters, Heidegger brings underway in his *Letter on Humanism* a powerful meditation on the location of the human in the

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inhuman. Likewise Taoist texts defy the primacy of the human and especially of the patriarchal father in the Confucian tradition. Besides displacing the priority of the human in Western and Confucian humanism, Heidegger and Taoism do not refer or reduce the significance of the human to a beyond that transcends the world and therefore inherently sets the human in opposition to its world.

Sein and *Tao* consequently resist appropriation to the Western metaphysical conceptualization of “nature” understood as creation or as the raw material of culture and technology. For Heidegger, these moments are inevitably connected in the history of metaphysics as “onto-theo-logy”. These two modes of thought also do not imply “pantheism”, because they do not either separate or identify God and nature. For Heidegger, pantheism is accordingly included within that same history of metaphysics. In classical Chinese thought, however, there is not even a concept of a transcendent monotheistic deity that is absolute and either independent of or identical with the totality of the world. Since the Western onto-theo-logical concept of “nature” is anything but natural, this word fails to name both conceptually and experientially either *Tao* or *Sein*.

Heidegger’s Perspective of Being and Man as *Dasein*

What, then, is Heidegger’s own thinking on Being as such, that is said to be “more rigorous than the conceptual”¹. Certainly, it must be non-representational in the sense that the understanding of Being and man’s essence cannot depend on any conceptual distinction, such as that between universal and particular, changeable and unchangeable, subject and object, spirit and matter, or soul and body. Being is not the presence more abstract and thus “higher” than that of beings. Whenever Heidegger comes to expressing his own thinking, his discourses are full of topological and “ecstatic-horizontal”² terms and metaphors, such as “free space”, “openness”, “region”, “horizon”, “Situation”, “house”, “clearing”, “disclosing”, “dwelling”, “building”, “pervaded”, “standing-out”, “Being-ahead-of-itself”, “gathering”, “the aroundness of the environment”, “ready-to-hand”, etc. He almost never positively uses such terms as “subject (versus object)”, “mind”, “sense data”, “logic”, “idea”, “epistemology”, “ethics”, and even “philosophy”, whose meanings have been already packed by metaphysics. He always tries to uncover the original meaning of a term by identifying its topological etymology, such as “standing-out” (ecstasis) for “temporality”, “letting-something-be-seen” for “logos”, “uncoveredness” for “truth”, “circumspection” for “seeing”, “ready-to-hand” for the mode of “Being-in-the-world”, “projected Being of *Dasein*” for “understanding”, etc. Why is it so? The basic reason is, for Heidegger, Being itself, as non-conceptual as it is, can be understood to be nothing but an ontological horizon-region that appropriates between and beyond all conceptual dichotomies. Being itself cannot be a perceptible being, nor the form of perception; neither is it a category or substance. It must rather be “what” is between them and lets them belong together, so as to bring them into their own.

In Heidegger’s later writings, “language”, in the place of “temporality” for early Heidegger, is “the house of Being” where man dwells in. For language is the most delicate and thus the most suspectable vibration holding everything within the suspended structure of the appropriation. We dwell in appropriation in as much as our active nature is given over to language.

¹ M. Heidegger: “Letter on Humanism”, Basic Writings, p. 203.

² M. Heidegger (1962): Being and Time (p. 19; p. 418). John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.

To sum up, it is clear that for Heidegger, more original than Being of beings, man as a rational animal, language as a communicating means, time and space as the forms of intuition, and categories as the forms of thinking, there are Being as such, man as *Dasein*, language as the house of Being, region as appropriating horizon, and hermeneutic thinking. The formers belong to metaphysical and traditional humanistic views and the latter are the distinctive features of Heidegger's thinking.

Tao and Taoist Perspective of the Essence of Man

The original meaning of "Tao" in Chinese is "way". However, no later than the period of Warring States (475-221 B.C.), "Tao" had obtained the derivative meanings such as "dredging and opening a river", "teaching", "method", "principle", and "saying". In metaphysical tradition, "Tao" is interpreted, e.g., by Fung Yu-lan (1960), as "an all-embracing first principle" or "the invariable law of Nature",³ the highest for a conceptual thinking.

In the first chapter of *Lao Tzu*, for instance, Tao is said to be the Way between "being" and "non-being" and "the nameless" and "the named". In the perspective of Tao, "the two" are appropriationally "the same". This sameness is not a logical and thus in this case meaningless identity, but the "deep and profound" region (*hsüan*), which, as mentioned above, is often carelessly translated as the "mystery". "Hsüan", however, literally means "dark due to the deep depth (of water or air region)", and therefore, is properly translated by Chan (1963) as the "deep and profound", beyond what conceptual thinking can ever reach. It seems "void", "silent", and "dark". But due to its ontological regionalness, it is "where the origin [the nameless] and the mother [the named] come from". Later in the history, Taoism is also called "the learning of *hsüan*" because of the regional and appropriating essence of Tao.

For Taoism, man models himself after earth, heaven, and finally Tao and Nature. Humanity lies primordially not in man's conceptual essence but in the Great, regional, ecstatic, and appropriating Tao. Chuang Tzu compares the thinking entangled in metaphysical humanity with the fishes stranded on the ground:

When the springs dry up and the fish are left stranded on the ground, they spew each other with moisture and wet each other down with spit—but it would be much better if they could forget each other in the rivers and lakes. Instead of praising Yao [a sage emperor according to Confucian standard] and condemning Chieh [a wicked king in Confucian judgment], it would be better to forget both of them and transform [hua, meld or evaporate] yourself with the Way [Tao].⁴

The great water ("rivers and lakes", "springs") here is the image of the horizontal Tao. It is the natural "home" and "house" of the "fishes"—man and his thinking. Leaving or alienated from this ontological region, man and thinking would be like the stranded fishes. No matter how they strive to save themselves from nihilation or nihilism with moral, metaphysical, and even divine concepts and entities, as the fishes "spew each other with moisture and wet each other down with spit", they are in a situation that is much worse than that in which "they could forget each other in the rivers and lakes". Fishes "forget" each other in great water, since the water region is the closest to them. They are fishes because of dwelling in the water. Similarly, men can "forget" the conceptual distinctions and classification in Tao because Tao is the Great region where men naturally dwell in and thus become their own.

³ Fung Yu-lan (1960): *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (p. 97). New York: The Free Press.

⁴ Chuang Tzu: *Basic Writings* (Ch.6).

The Taoist emphasizes that the essence of man is “greater” than man himself, however, it does not lead to the theist conclusion that there must be a substantial and personal God who creates and controls the destiny of man. Neither does Taoism conceptually deny the possibility of divine existence. Lao-Chuang only makes it clear that Tao is too primordial and Great to be confined to any god.⁵

Conclusion

From what have been presented and discoursed above, it is beyond doubt that Heidegger’s thinking on Being and man bears some intimate relation to Taoist perspective of Tao and man. Based on the comparisons made in previous discussions, I am to give a summary of the affinity between the two and also point out some differences.

(1) For both Heidegger and Taoism, the essence of man cannot be truly caught up by any conceptual devices, but found in dwelling in the ecstatic and “Great” region—Being or Tao, like fish dwell in water and birds fly in air;

(2) Being and Tao, is essentially “more” or “greater” than beings and the Being of beings that can be represented or spoken about. But the key point here is that, what is “more” with Being and Tao is itself not a higher substance of abstract principle. Its “Greatness” lies in its “nearness” to man as an all-embracing (mediating), horizontal, and hermeneutic Region. Being and Tao as the essence of man, therefore, are more original than any divine personality, either spirits or God. Due to this natural and horizontal attitude, Taoism became the cradle of Chinese sciences and technology;

(3) For Heidegger, man, as the *Dasein* “Being-in-the-world”, is necessarily involved into both authentic and inauthentic modes of *ek-sistence*. To Taoism, however, it is at least possible for man to become a complete authentic or True Man. Also, Taoism does not emphasize so seriously the special positions of temporality and language in disclosing and maintaining the ontological Region.

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⁵ Lao Tzu (Ch.4); Chuang Tzu (Ch.6).