

TAOIST PHILOSOPHY
AND
HEIDEGGER'S POETIC THINKING

In one of his recent works Heidegger explains the meaning of *Tao* in the *Tao Te Ching*, the ancient Chinese Taoist canon :

“ The word ‘ Way ’ (Tao) probably is an ancient primary word that speaks to the reflective mind of man. Lao Tzu’s poetic thinking is ‘ Tao ’, which properly speaking means the Way.” (p. 92 : *On the Way to Language*)

Thus we know that Heidegger identifies *Tao* as poetic thinking. When poetic thinking takes place, Being and thinking are one and the same. As Heidegger puts it :

“ We might perhaps prepare a little for change in our relations to words. Perhaps this experience might awaken : all reflective thinking is poetic and all poetry in turn is a kind of thinking.” (pp. 136)

The identity of reflective thinking and poetry is what the Taoists called non-differentiation or “ huan chen ”. The greatest achievement of poetic thinking is the self-awakening of the poet from this aesthetic non-differentiation at the absolute moment. The following Chinese Taoist poem is illustrative of this thought :

“ When the moon rises in the heart of Heaven
And a light breeze touches the mirror like surface of the lake
That is indeed a moment of pure joy
But few are they who are aware of it.”

Purity and Joy are the fruits of meditation and for the Chinese poets they are fundamental to poetic thinking. The more they are cultivated the better the poetry. However, the self-awakening of the poet cannot take place until the poet completely identifies himself with the objective reality of things. This identity is not

sensuous feeling, or symbolic meaning. The sublimity of poetic thinking is far beyond this. Let us review what Lao Tzu wrote in the *Tao Te Ching* :

“ Gaze at it, there is nothing to see
 It is called the formless.
 Heed it, there is nothing to hear,
 It is called soundless.
 Grasp it, there is nothing to hold onto
 It is called the immaterial.
 We cannot enquire into these three
 Hence, they interfuse into one.
 Above, it is not light,
 Below, it is not dark,
 Invisible, it cannot be called by any name.
 It returns again to nothingness.
 Thus we call it the form of the formless,
 The image of the imageless.” (Ch. XIV)

In *The Study of Good*, Nishida Kitaro of Kyoto, the leading philosopher of modern Japan, says :

“ The urge to see the image of the imageless, to hear the sound of the soundless lies at the very foundation of Eastern culture.” (pp. 211)

Chinese philosophers do not search for the image within the image, but rather seek to reveal the imageless in the image.

For, there sound is not expressed in sound, but rather through the revelation of the soundless in sound. Thus sound exists to express the soundless; and the image, the imageless. In the words of Heidegger, “ the soundless gathering call by which saying moves the world-relating on its way, we call it the ringing of stillness.” (p. 108) It is this ringing of stillness that opens the mind of man.

In *The Works of Chuang Tzu* we find an illustration of the soundless revealed in sound. Earthly music is described as the sound which emanates from all the crevices of the mountain forests and the hollows of the huge trees. The music of man is described as that of bamboo flutes and pipes. But within these crevices and instruments, there is the music of Heaven. The man of ignorance can only hear the music of earth and the music

of man. But when man has experienced the essence of *Tao* he will enjoy the symphony of the great nature of Heaven through the music of the earth and the music of man.

A Ch'an master of the eleventh century once said :

“ All things in the universe are activities of a subtle reality, who is capable of embracing this? The four seasons follow each other in succession. The sun and moon shine constantly.”

From the four seasons and the sun and moon this Ch'an master hears the music of Heaven and the ringing of stillness. Based upon this understanding we may read the last poem in the *Experience of Thinking (Aus der Erfahrung Des Denkens)* by Heidegger :

“ Forests gather
Brooks plunge
Cliff lasts
Rain streams.
Fields wait
Springs leap
Wind dwells
Abundance acts.”

What Heidegger sees and hears in this poem is surely not ordinary forests, brooks, rain, wind etc. He hears “the ringing of stillness”. Or in Chuang Tzu's words, it is the music of Heaven in the music of the earth and man that he hears. Moreover, this poem illustrates the identity of poetic thinking with the preontological experience Heidegger achieved.

At the eightieth birthday celebration of Heidegger at Freiburg, September 26, 1969, Professor Koichi Tsujimura, a noted Japanese philosopher of Kyoto University and former disciple of Heidegger, compared his own enchantment with this poem to what he had experienced in the rock garden of Ryoanji in Kyoto. Thus, when we reach the source of identity, the worlds of East and West are also one.

In his recent work *On Time and Being*, Heidegger opens up a new approach to thinking, which is different from the traditional Western philosophical approach to thought. It ceases to be rational analysis. To discuss meaningfully Heidegger's new way

of thinking we must ourselves cease to think conceptually and representationally, or else we will never be able to understand Heidegger's new way of thinking.

What is this new way of thinking? The new way of thinking is poetic thinking or *Tao*. It is to think-back to the origin in order to reach behind "usual and traditional conceptions", it is also "to gain astonishing insights into what has not been thought hitherto," as Glen Grey, the leading follower of Heidegger, describes it. In the *Tao Te Ching* we read :

"The student of knowledge gains day by day,
The student of Tao loses day by day."

We read further :

"Reversal is the movement of *Tao*."

In Heidegger's words this is the step-back.

Heidegger, instead of establishing Being as the ground, conceives of Nothing as the source, and of Being as its manifestation. Being differs ontologically from beings. He moves from this difference, which is what is to be thought, to what has not yet been thought. What has not yet been thought is Nothing. What is to be thought is Being. This process is a move forward in thought by means of a step-back out of the realm of metaphysics into the previously undisclosed realm of truth. Through this step-back, Being is thought, without being made an object of thought. The step-back takes us out of metaphysics into the essential origin, which is Nothing or Non-Being, or *Wu* according to Lao Tzu.

According to both Heidegger and the Chinese Taoists, this Nothing or *Wu* must be experienced in the sense of a pure finding. It cannot be reached through any process of rational or objective thought, which would only dichotomize subjectivity and objectivity into polarities. Rational, objective thought is what Heidegger describes as calculative thinking, which differentiates between things observed and man as the observer. But what Heidegger calls meditative thinking is "the other way of thought". This "other way of thought" is the origin of the identity of man and the universe, or subjectivity and objectivity. It is the aesthetic non-differentiation or *Tao*, or poetic thinking, which was discussed at the beginning of this paper.

Perhaps we would like to know how one may achieve this *Tao*, or poetic thinking, which cannot be measured by parametric time, but can only take place in the mind of the absolute present. We find the answer in the work of Chuang Tzu. He says :

“ The ‘ this ’ is also ‘ that ’ and the ‘ that ’ is also ‘ this ’ not to determine this and that as opposites is the very essence of *Tao*. . . . affirmation and negation alike blend into the infinite one. Therefore, the sage disregards all distinctions and sees things through light.”

In Taoist dialectic there is no elevating moment towards the goal of a comprehensive, rational absolute. Rather, there is the further step which Nishida calls the self-identity of constant contradiction. In the self-identity of contradictions, the opposites of being and non-being, high and low are identified through themselves and not through any higher synthesis. This truth may also be found in Heidegger's words in *Identity and Difference* :

“ From the principle as a statement about identity to the principle as a leap into the essential origin of identity, thinking undergoes a transformation.” (p. 40)

What Heidegger maintains is also what the Chinese thinkers had in mind when they said that the total identity of the knower and the known cannot be thought by abstract or calculative thinking as we have mentioned above. We find a good illustration of this in the development of Chinese thought in the Neo-Confucionists' search for the real identity between man and the universe. They went through such abstract principles as *Li*, or Reason. But this abstract principle could only serve as objective representations of reality for the mind, and could not be directly and spontaneously identified with the mind itself.

In the *Study of Good*, Nishida says :

“ Pure experience is synonymous with direct experience. When one experiences directly one's conscious state, there is as yet neither subject nor object, and knowledge and its object are completely united.” (p. 1)

This identity of subject and object is the self-identity of contradictions which is achieved “ without the addition of the least thought or reflection ”. As Nishida says :

“The present of pure experience is not that intellectual present which at the time that one thinks about it is no longer the present.” (p. 3)

For Heidegger, the event of appropriation is “the belonging together” of man and Being, which is reached by our moving away from the attitude of representational thinking. Thus in *On Time and Being* he says :

“The meditative man is to experience the untrembling heart of unconcealment. . . . It means unconcealment itself in what is most its own, means the place of stillness, which gathers in itself what grants unconcealment to begin with. That is the opening of what is the open.” (p. 68).

The well-founded unconcealment itself is thought as the opening. In the East we say that “the study of subtle Tao rests upon the wonder of awakening.” With this understanding of thought as the opening and the wonder of awakening in *Tao* we might better understand the essence of Taoist philosophy and a new way of thinking of Heidegger.

In conclusion we may, therefore say that the study of Taoist philosophy, combined with Heidegger's new way of thinking, may enable us to find a bridge between the philosophical worlds of the East and the West.

Department of Philosophy,
University of Hawaii.

Chang Chung-Yuan

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