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# Deconstruction of a Dialogue: Creative Interpretation in Comparative Philosophy

Steven BURIK\*

## Abstract

It is common knowledge that Martin Heidegger's attempts at engaging non-Western philosophy are very much a construct of his own making. This article in no way seeks to disagree with those observations, but argues two things: first, that Heidegger's "dialogue" with his two main other sources of inspiration, the ancient Greek thinkers and the German poets, is not different *in kind or in principle* from his engagement with East Asia. One can of course quite easily argue that Heidegger's main interest was the ancient Greek thinkers, and then the poets, and only lastly Asia. But this hierarchy in preference does not make Heidegger's approach different in kind or in principle. Second, I argue that there is an important place in comparative philosophy for the type of thinking displayed by Heidegger in this kind of *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) with—and "appropriation" of—Asian (or Greek, or Poetic) thought.

**Keywords:** Martin Heidegger, comparative philosophy, dialogue, Japanese philosophy, *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation)

## Dekonstrukcija dialoga: ustvarjalna interpretacija znotraj primerjalne filozofije

### Izvleček

Splošno znano je, da so Heideggerjevi poskusi vključevanja nezahodnih filozofij v veliki meri rezultati njegovih lastnih konstruktov. Pričujoči članek nikakor ne želi negirati takšnih opazovanj, vendar pri tem izpostavi dva dodatna argumenta. Prvi opozarja na dejstvo, da se tudi Heideggerjev »dialog« z obema najpomembnejšima viroma njegovih navdihov, namreč s starogrškimi misleci na eni in nemškimi pesniki na drugi strani, niti po vrsti ne po načelih nikakor ne razlikuje od njegove obravnave Vzhodne Azije. Seveda bi lahko rekli, da je bil Heideggerjev glavni interes pri tem povezan z grško miselnostjo in šele kasneje s pesniki, medtem ko je bil njegov interes za azijske filozofije šele na zadnjem mestu. Vendar ta hierarhija priljubljenosti nikakor ne vpliva na način ali načela njegovih izhodišč. Drugi argument pa izpostavlja, da pripada vrsti mišljenja, ki jo je uporabil Heidegger v tovrstnem soočenju (*Auseinandersetzung*) z azijsko – oziroma grško ali poetično – mislijo, pomembno mesto znotraj primerjalne filozofije.

**Ključne besede:** Martin Heidegger, primerjalna filozofija, dialog, japonska filozofija, *Auseinandersetzung* (soočenje)

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## Introduction

That Martin Heidegger's "A Dialogue on Language: Between a Japanese and an Inquirer"<sup>1</sup> (hereafter: "A Dialogue") is very much a construct of his own making, rather than the representation of an actual dialogue, is not news. Many scholars have pointed out that in this dialogue Heidegger seems more interested in his own thinking and how he can "interpret" the Japanese contributions in his own way to fit his own programme. One can think for example of Reinhard May's *Heidegger's Hidden Sources* ([1989] 1996) and Lin Ma's *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue* (2008). This article in no way seeks to disagree with those observations, but I want to argue two things: first, that Heidegger's "dialogue" with his two main other sources of inspiration, the ancient Greek thinkers and the German poets, is not different *in kind or in principle* from his engagement with East Asia. One can of course quite easily argue that Heidegger's main interest was the ancient Greek thinkers, and then the poets, and only lastly Asia. But this hierarchy in preference does not make Heidegger's approach different in kind or in principle. We are well aware that Heidegger did not have (the best) access to the languages and thinkers of China, Japan, or India, but I will argue that he also lacked perfect access to the world of the ancient Greeks and German poets, and that he employed just as much "creative interpretation" (much to the chagrin of some philosophers, philologists, and other scholars) with these ancient Greek thinkers and German poets, as he did with East Asian thinkers. Of course, the conceptual world of the ancient Greeks and the German poets was much closer to Heidegger's own than the ancient Chinese world could ever be, but my point will be that Heidegger employed just as much creative interpretation in his readings of all these sources. In all of these "cases" he certainly went beyond what could reasonably be established within the paradigms of his sources. Second, based on these findings I argue that there is an important place in comparative philosophy for the type of thinking displayed by Heidegger in this kind of *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation) with—and "appropriation" of—Asian (or Greek, or Poetic) thought. Might it not be the case that, although we are fairly sure that Heidegger neither had a thorough grasp of Asian thought and languages, nor too much knowledge of their intricacies, he was still very interested in Asian thought and managed to get something out of it that he found worthy of deliberation, or to stay in Heidegger's terms, worthy of thought? Something he may not have found had he stubbornly stuck only to the Western thinkers and traditions? And that comparative philosophy should do well to not frown too hard on such endeavours? In order to argue these points, I

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1 In *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1985a). All references unless otherwise indicated will be to the English translation in *On the Way to Language* (1971). All references will be indicated by OWL followed by the page number.

will first have a closer look at “A Dialogue” itself, its dynamics and intricacies, in section 2. Then in section 3 I will argue that Heidegger’s approach to the Greeks and poets is of the same kind. Section 4 then provides an interpretation of Heidegger’s “A Dialogue” as a form of *Auseinandersetzung* (confrontation)<sup>2</sup> that is relevant to comparative philosophy. Lastly section 5 draws some interesting lessons that comparative philosophy may take to heart from my arguments.

### “A Dialogue” as Comparative Dialogue?

In this section I will first highlight what I take to be the most fundamental ideas from “A Dialogue”. I will argue for seeing this work in a different way from what is the norm. Having once called “A Dialogue” “one of the finest examples” (Burik 2009, 40) of an intercultural encounter, I am now more cautious. However, to inquire into Heidegger’s comparative thinking it is necessary to explore this work in greater detail. The first reason why “A Dialogue” is not necessarily to be understood as an effort in intercultural thinking is that much of it could have been between the inquirer Heidegger and any other person, for example in the parts where the interlocutors discuss Heidegger’s hermeneutics, the lecture series “Expression and Appearance”, and the nature of language as “Saying” (*Sage*). In these sections of “A Dialogue”, Heidegger just tries to clarify his own thoughts *via* an audience or interviewer who could be anyone, much like his other published *Feldweg Gespräche*. The references to Japanese thought in these sections are largely incidental, or merely agree with what Heidegger is saying already.

One could also (partly) defend Heidegger against all the accusations of appropriation and putting his own thoughts into the mouth of his Japanese interlocutor. To do that one can point to the continued humbleness and reticence Heidegger displays on all the occasions he talks about non-Western thought. From his well-documented saying that “Who knows, one day in Russia or in China ancient ways of thinking may come to the fore that can help us in our struggle against Metaphysics” (Heidegger and Wisser 1988, 214, my translation) to the humility he displays in “A Dialogue” and in other places about his inability to follow what his interlocutors were trying to get at. For example, Heidegger writes to Hellmuth Hecker that he “lack(s) the presuppositions” (in Hecker 1990, 91)<sup>3</sup>, to adequately interpret Chinese or Japanese thought. This humbleness can also be explained as

2 The German *Auseinandersetzung* will be translated with “confrontation”, unless it appears in quotations where it is sometimes translated as “con-frontation”. In such instances I will keep to the original translated text.

3 Quoted from the translation of Ma (2008, 150).

a “confession” (May 1996, 49), to use Reinhard May’s term, of the fact that he is *interpreting in his own way*, and not pretending to get Japanese thought right.

If not an exercise in comparative philosophy, then what is “A Dialogue”? Heidegger presents himself not as a philosopher or a Westerner, but as someone who asks questions, an inquirer (*ein Fragender*). “A Dialogue” is not a work where arguments are put forward or positions are taken or defended, but there occurs a reciprocal reaching out to what is other in pursuit of learning from different ways of thinking, in complete realization of the complexities and dangers inherent in such endeavours. There is a constant emphasis on language, both on its possibilities and the seemingly insurmountable problems and difficulties facing a dialogue between very different languages or conceptual schemes. These issues make Heidegger very cautious in his approach to Japanese thought.

In this context, Heidegger emphasizes the idea of “Way” (*Weg*). Thinkers are always underway, there is no fixed abode to stay or positions that are always correct, there is only the continuous movement on the way. With this notion, Heidegger wants us to perceive our own cultural truths and values: they are provisional. Ways can go in different directions, and there is no one way which is the only right or true one. Being provisional, such truths and values are also not closed off to change or interpretation.

Consequently, I believe that Heidegger also shares the idea that there is no one correct interpretation of a text or a thinker. There is no one truth. And we do not necessarily have to get it “right”. Heidegger’s focus in “A Dialogue” is more on interpretation itself. A large part of “A Dialogue” discusses hermeneutics, and specifically Heidegger’s ideas on this term and method. Heidegger explains early in the dialogue that he came to the notion of hermeneutics through his background in theological studies, and based on this his interlocutor offers a broad definition of “hermeneutics”: “the theory and methodology for every kind of interpretation...” (OWL 11). Heidegger then states that in *Being and Time* he has used the idea of hermeneutics in an even broader sense as “neither the theory of the art of interpretation, nor interpretation itself, but rather the attempt first of all to define the nature of interpretation on hermeneutic grounds” (OWL 11). The broadness hinted at here by Heidegger does not mean extension, but means rather “in keeping with that vastness which springs from originary being” (OWL 11). These passages show two things: first, Heidegger’s creative use of terminology, as he is not interested in finding the one and only correct definition of hermeneutics, but in what he can make the term mean for (his) thinking. Second, and more importantly, not only is he quite willing to stretch the meanings of concepts and terms, but the meta-importance of such passages lies in the fact that Heidegger turns the

term hermeneutics back upon itself. It is interpretation itself that is hermeneutics, the topic of the “hermeneutic” exploration that Heidegger and the Japanese are engaged in. This is a hint that we should also read “A Dialogue” as being turned to itself, as the title suggests: a dialogue *of/from* language. Heidegger is adamant that we cannot (or rather: should not) talk *about* language, but are speaking *from or of* language, and “A Dialogue” is an “expression” of this. We always interpret. This we can see as Heidegger’s veiled “confession” or defence of his idiosyncratic interpretation of Japanese thought in “A Dialogue”.

The conversation then leaves the topic of hermeneutics to discuss various other things, among them the danger of language, gestures and Noh theatre, the undefined, hinting and the return to mystery, only to come back to hermeneutics much later. When Heidegger and his Japanese interlocutor do eventually return to hermeneutics, the story and the scene have much changed. Heidegger now says that hermeneutics “does not have its usual meaning, methodology of interpretation, but means the interpretation itself” (OWL 28). Heidegger then discusses hermeneutics as linked to the Greek *hermeneuein*, which conveys

that exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message. Such exposition becomes interpretation of what is said earlier... All this makes it clear that hermeneutics means not just the interpretation but, even before it, the bearing of message and tidings. (OWL 29)

I believe that the mistake one often makes in understanding such passages as these is to think that Heidegger will give us *the correct message* of the ancients, the real version of what they were thinking, or is even interested in finding this correct message. I do not think he is, because the bringing of the message already *is* interpretation, as the above passage shows. After all, Heidegger explicitly mentions that he seeks to “think what the Greeks have thought in an even more Greek manner” (OWL 39). And before one concludes that this means we must get to the bottom of what the Greeks thought, Heidegger explains that he means that we must find what was “unthought” by the Greeks in their thinking, and finding that “unthought” “is in its own way Greek, and yet in respect of what it sees is no longer, is never again, Greek” (OWL 39). The point is pertinently not to try to recuperate or retrieve exactly what was meant. Such historical interests are not what Heidegger sees as worthy of philosophical thinking. He has just stressed that he is necessarily *interpreting* a message, it is he himself who is bringing a message. In short, Heidegger wants us to take extremely seriously the role of the interpreter in any exposition, where I will later in section 4 identify this term “exposition” with Heidegger’s *Auseinandersetzung*. In this context Heidegger says that “Language

defines the hermeneutic relation (*Bezug*)” (OWL 30). We necessarily interpret, and do so through language. But Heidegger then shifts the focus to the words *Bezug* and *Beziehung* (relation). Heidegger explains that *Bezug* and *Beziehung* are not to be thought of in terms of how we normally understand “relation”, as in A has a relation to/with B. Instead, “the word ‘relation’ does want to say that man, in his very being, is in demand, is needed, that he, as the being he is, belongs within a needfulness which claims him” (OWL 32). Without wanting to bother the reader with too much Heideggerian jargon, what Heidegger means is that man does not have relations, but *is* relation. This hermeneutical “relation” in language to Being is then defined as “use” (*brauch*) (OWL 33), which also means “need”.

As just noted, Heidegger’s idiosyncratic jargon can be disturbing and unclear to some. My point with the above discussion of Heidegger’s exposition of hermeneutics is to understand that he is an inquirer whose goal is to deconstruct the texts he engages with. He is willing to take the risk of sounding strange, willing to twist and turn concepts and ideas to suit his programme, and most of all willing to return to the mystery in all its vastness, to leave things open, and to understand ourselves *as* beings defined by open-ended conversation, dialogue, and relation. This is indeed something that defines Heidegger’s work, even before he encountered Daoism. Yet we can safely say that Heidegger’s interest in Daoism stems at least in part from this similarity he found in it.

As a giving up, rigorously, of attempts to solve the riddle, to solve the mystery, to reach a destination, Heidegger then tries to let the thinking journey itself be seen as crucial. The destination of this journey is not so important. In the words of the *Daodejing*, Heidegger seems to urge us to “know when to stop” (Ames and Hall 2003, 127). Or in his own words: “The lasting element in thinking is the way” (OWL 12). Heidegger seeks to take us on a thinking journey, and that journey neither necessarily has a fixed destination, nor is it necessarily the journey of whoever he is dealing or conversing with, be it Greeks, poets, or Asian thinkers.

Yet this journey is fraught with “danger” (*Gefahr*). This danger lies not only in the ongoing Westernization and technologization of the world, a topic frequently brought up in “A Dialogue”. Since his Japanese interlocutor is unable to translate into a Western language key Japanese concepts, and Heidegger is unable to fully comprehend the intricacies of Japanese ideas, he sees the underlying danger in language. It is the conceptual schemes and languages of the West that prohibit access to the ideas found in Japanese thought. But to converse or discuss things in such Western languages is unavoidable. The quest then is to find the kind of language that would not (or only minimally) be tied to the West. Western languages, according to Heidegger, are so infected with metaphysics that any intercultural



dialogue in any Western language necessarily corrupts the thoughts of other cultures. Even German cannot escape this predicament, although Heidegger was more hopeful of its possibilities. The problem has more to do with the metaphysical way of thought and modern technological thinking:

Who would want to dispute that these German words are firmly rooted locutions? Today nothing in us takes root anymore. Why? Because the possibility of a thoughtful conversation with a tradition that invigorates and nurtures us is lacking, because we instead consign our speaking to electronic thinking and calculating machines, an occurrence that will lead modern technology and science to completely new procedures and unforeseeable results that probably will push reflective thinking aside as something useless and hence superfluous. (Heidegger 1991a, 15)

As is also made clear in “A Dialogue”, German is very much counted among the languages which cannot convey these other ways of thinking. These limitations and the ensuing one-sidedness of Western philosophy show themselves in translation. In the words of Richard Kearney:

*Traditore, traduttore*: to translate is always in some sense to betray; for one can never do one’s guest true justice. And this means accepting that we all live East of Eden and after Babel—and this is a good thing. Our linguistic fallenness is also our linguistic finitude: a reminder of human limits that saves us from the delusion of sufficiency, the fantasy of restoring some prelapsarian *logos*. (Kearney 2019, 2)

The point is that, instead of seeing this as an insurmountable obstacle, it should, with Kearney, be seen as a good thing. It may be worth taking a little detour via Jacques Derrida here. For Derrida, the “original” text is never really original, since it cannot refer to its outside (meaning) any more or any better than a translation can. This means the idea of translation as the simple transfer of a univocal meaning from one language to another language is made problematic and hence needs to be reconsidered:

a notion of *transformation* must be substituted for the notion of translation: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We shall not have and never have had to deal with some “transfer” of pure signifieds that the signifying instrument—or “vehicle”—would leave virgin and intact, from one language to another, or within one and the same language. (Derrida 1981, 31)



Firstly, transformation has the implication that there is no original and no derivative, both texts can perpetually be transformed by reading, both are defined by open-endedness. Secondly, transformation better conveys the “violence” of translation in general: transformation indicates something different from what is translated, it transforms instead of merely transfers the “original”. With this rejection of the standing of what is conventionally seen as the “original text”, Derrida does not deny that there is one text being translated or transformed into another, but he is questioning how the relationality between these texts is customarily perceived. This means he denies the suggestion that the “original” would mean anything *outside* of or *without* its ever-expanding context, which involves specifically its interpretations and translations. Derrida has thus said that:

the so-called original is in a position of demand with regard to the translation. The original is not a plenitude which would come to be translated by accident. The original is in the situation of demand, that is, of a lack or exile. The original is indebted a priori to the translation. Its survival is a demand and a desire for translation... (Derrida 1985, 152)

Heidegger uses the term transformation often, including in “A Dialogue”. Although the context is different from what Derrida is talking about, the short detour into the French philosopher is nevertheless instructive to understand the following passage from “A Dialogue” discussing the need for “a transformation of thinking—a transformation which, however, cannot be established as the consequence of an accumulation of the results of philosophical research... The transformation occurs as a passage ... in which one site is left behind in favor of another ... and that requires that the sites be placed in discussion” (OWL 42, modified). A transformation of thinking (which is what Heidegger is after) cannot come about as a result of just accumulating more philosophy, or by putting different philosophies side by side. This is what Heidegger means when he says in the *Spiegel* interview that such a transformation “cannot come about by the adoption of Zen Buddhism or other Eastern experiences of the world” (in Wolin 1993, 113). What needs to happen is that *in* the dialogue both sides are transformed and are turned back towards themselves exactly *because of* the dialogue. This is also why I believe that Heidegger was not so interested in Japanese (or Chinese, or Indian) thought *per se*, but only in the larger question of how a transformation of thinking was to be prepared. But interesting for comparative philosophy is that he thinks such a transformation can indeed happen (at least partly) as a result of a mutual search for it in dialogue between different cultures. This also makes it easier to comprehend Heidegger when he says, for example, that the dialogue needs to be of a very particular kind, and indeed *of/from* language:

Everything would hinge on reaching a corresponding saying of language... Only a dialogue could be such a saying correspondence... But, patently, a dialogue altogether *sui generis*... Wherever the nature of language were to speak (say) to man as Saying, *it*, Saying, would bring about the real dialogue... which does not say ‘about’ language but *of* language... (OWL 52, modified)

We see not only that translation cannot be anything else but corruption. We also see that Heidegger himself had no problem with “corrupting” Western languages (or words therein) themselves. Think only of *Ereignis* (appropriation), *Lichtung* (clearing), *Aletheia* (unconcealment), to name but a few. His goal is to transform thinking, and to do that one cannot be thinking conventionally, trying to get it right. I thus believe Heidegger did not try to get Japanese thought “right” in “A Dialogue”, but was after something else. Heidegger’s real interest therefore lies elsewhere than in Asian thought itself, that much is clear. But it is important to realize that this attitude is not just held with regard to Asia, but also (for example) with regard to the translation of ancient Greek into Latin, which according to him was a major cause for the deterioration of Western thinking into metaphysics. To Heidegger, there is no way out of at least a certain form of metaphysics: “the metaphysical manner of forming ideas is in a certain respect unavoidable” (OWL 25). There is thus no easy way to escape such dangers, yet one way Heidegger tries to do so is by circumventing them by encouraging us into another idea and usage of language, another way of thinking.

## Greeks, Poets, Asians, and Heidegger

We must put Heidegger’s efforts with regard to Asian thought into the context of this other kind of thinking in general. In this section I will focus on how Heidegger approached the ancient Greek thinkers and German poets in his work. We will see that Heidegger was also not really interested in what Heraclitus or Anaximander were actually thinking. He was interested in what their works could mean to us. Even as the German poets Heidegger discusses were rather close in time and culture to himself, he also had no way of tracing exactly what they meant with their poems, and was more interested in how poetry (*Dichten*) and thinking (*Denken*) could be aligned. Let us consider Heidegger’s “forceful” translations of some of the ancient Greek thinkers and some of his statements on the German poets.

In “The Anaximander Fragment” (Heidegger 1975, 13–58), Heidegger turns his attention to what was said in one of the oldest known fragments of Western philosophy:

ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστὶ τοῖς οὐσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰ εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεών. Διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίχην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν. (from Heidegger 1975, 13).

The usual, standard translation of Anaximander's fragment runs as follows:

And from what source things arise, to that they return of necessity when they are destroyed; for they suffer punishment and make reparation to one another for their injustice according to the order of time. (Nahm 1964, 39/40)

Heidegger's translation sounds completely different, having reinterpreted most of the terms and queried the authenticity of part of the fragment attributed to Anaximander, so that only the part "... κατὰ τὸ χρεών. Διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίχην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας" remains under consideration. Heidegger of course translated into German<sup>4</sup>, but in English his translation of the latter part is the following:

in accordance with exigence (brook); for they let enjoining and thereby also reck belong to each other (in the getting over) of disjoining, responding to the directive of time's coming into its own. (Translation by Kenneth Maly in Sallis 1993, 231)

Another translation into English of Heidegger's German version, again only of the part which Heidegger focuses on, runs as follows:

... along the lines of usage; for they let order and thereby also reck belong to one another (in the surmounting) of disorder. (Heidegger 1975, 57)

In these translations of Anaximander according to Heidegger, one can clearly see how he interpreted the Greek author according to his own preferences.

When Heidegger turns to Heraclitus, he examines fragment 53 which supposedly says that "war is the father of all things". Heidegger again reinterprets what he believes is a one-sided interpretation. A more "originary" translation of the fragment, which starts with "πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι", is according to Heidegger: "Con-frontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) is indeed the begetter of all (that comes to presence) ..." (Heidegger in Maly and Emad 1986, 41, German added). The ensuing part of the fragment: "..., πάντων δὲ βασιλεύς, is translated by Heidegger as "... but (also) the dominant preserver of all" (Heidegger in Maly & Emad 1986, 41).

4 Heidegger's German translation is as follows: "... entlang dem Brauch; gehören nämlich lassen sie Fug somit auch Ruch eines dem anderen (im Verwinden) des Un-Fugs entsprechend der Zuweisung des Zeitigen durch die Zeit." (Heidegger 1991b, 101)

Another example of Heidegger's idiosyncratic interpretations of the ancient Greek thinkers is found in his discussion of Heraclitus' fragment 123: "φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ". Conventionally translated along the lines of "nature loves to hide itself", Heidegger's version is: "Rising (out of self-concealing) bestows favour upon self-concealing" (Heidegger 1975, 114).

What I hope to show the reader with these examples is that Heidegger is not different in his "creative interpretation" of these ancient Greek thinkers to how he is with Asian thought. While it is true that Heidegger was both much more interested and well-versed in Greek and the Greek thinkers in general, what we see is that his interpretations here are equally as "liberal" (when seen from the conventional background of some of his contemporaries) as his interpretations of Japanese ideas in "A Dialogue" are.

Turning to the German poets, we find the same story. Heidegger's etymological escapades and liberties in his own time infuriated philologists and philosophers alike. Take Georg Trakl, for example. In *On the Way to Language* Heidegger says in an essay on a work by Trakl:

This [Trakl's] language is essentially ambiguous (*mehrdeutig*), in its own fashion. We shall hear nothing of what the poem says so long as we bring to it only this or that dull sense of unambiguous (*eindeutigen*) meaning ... The ambiguous tone of Trakl's poetry arises out of a gathering, that is, out of a unison which, meant for itself alone, always remains unsayable. The ambiguity of this poetic saying is not lax imprecision, but rather the rigor of him who leaves what is as it is ... (OWL 192, German added)

Here Heidegger clearly enlists Trakl for his own purposes, in the same way as he does with Japanese thought in "A Dialogue". He will take the meaning he wants to find and go with that, using his "interlocutors" only for inspiration.

The same goes for Heidegger's interpretation of Hölderlin. In my book I already noted that:

Heidegger did not concern himself with literary scholarship on Hölderlin, and ... his reading of Hölderlin is not necessarily what the latter thought of his own work himself, but first of all Heidegger's effort to wrestle Hölderlin from the narrow bonds of philology, so as to open his words to a wider understanding, of which the intercultural aspect is an important part. (Burik 2009, 28–29)

In *Elucidations to Hölderlin's Poetry* Heidegger says that “the present *Elucidations* do not claim to be contributions to research in the history of literature or to aesthetics. They spring from the necessity of thought” (Heidegger 2000, 21). As Lin Ma remarks regarding this passage:

Heidegger insists that his lectures on this poet are neither mere commentaries (*Anmerkungen*) nor explanations (*Erklärungen*), but elucidations (*Erläuterungen*). He claims that his elucidations stem from a dialogue of this thinking (*Denken*) with Hölderlin's poetizing (*Dichten*), from the necessity of thinking. (Ma 2008, 78)

While I agree with this point, I wonder why, given the above, Ma wants to draw a firm distinction between Heidegger dealing with the Greeks and poets on one side, and with Asia on the other. As I have argued above, at least for the purpose of understanding Heidegger's “engagements” with his main sources, I do not believe such a firm distinction is defensible. While of course Heidegger was conceptually and culturally much closer to the ancient Greeks and German poets than he was to the ancient Asian thinkers, and as such a distinction is indeed reasonable, I believe to have shown that on the level of his creative engagement with all of these sources, any firm distinction is not warranted.

Because of Heidegger's already mentioned and well-documented confession of his lack of understanding with regard to Asian thought and languages, and consequently his hesitation with regard to doing comparative philosophy, it is thus better to understand Heidegger as doing something else when he does indeed mention Asian thinkers. In the words of Lin Ma: “Heidegger is probably less motivated to understand Laozi than to discover in it what he had already contemplated himself, or to obtain inspirations for alternative expressions” (Ma 2008, 154–55). I think this is correct, but I believe we can take this one step further than Ma and say that Heidegger was also not that interested in *understanding* Heraclitus, Anaximander, Hölderlin, or Trakl. If we read carefully, then we find no indications that he was interested in getting those thinkers and poets historically right, either. He was interested in what he could get out of them. Ma perceives this mostly in a negative way, but while that is possible and again correct, it seems to me also to be one-sided as an approach. For example, Ma claims that the danger of language Heidegger mentions a number of times in “A Dialogue” “always belongs to the Japanese world, not to the European world. The European world unilaterally brings disorder, corruption, and threat, whereas European languages seem to be immune to the ‘danger’ of corruption” (Ma 2008, 173/4). This seems only to focus on one side of Heidegger, as the earlier quotation from Heidegger

on German words has shown. European languages are far from immune to the danger of corruption, in fact much of Heidegger's thinking is about retrieving some possible other meanings of words that have ossified or "metaphysified":

Our Western languages are languages of metaphysical thinking, each in its own way. It must remain an open question whether the nature of Western languages is in itself marked with the exclusive brand of metaphysics, and thus marked permanently by onto-theo-logic, or whether these languages offer other possibilities of utterance—and that means at the same time of a telling silence. (Heidegger 1969, 73)

While Heidegger thus clearly tells us that Western languages have been "corrupted" by metaphysics, he does leave the possibility open that they may also be used to say something else. When Heidegger mentions that he does not know "how" the Japanese translation of *Sein und Zeit* was done (that is how well or adequately or even if it captures what Heidegger wanted to say)<sup>5</sup>, the implied distortion in Japanese of Heidegger's "original" also very much implies the possibility of distortion in Western languages. Distortion is possible both ways. As Ma also notes, on the efforts to translate the *Daodejing* by Heidegger and Hsiao: "Heidegger paid attention to representing the originariness of the text, while Hsiao emphasized faithfulness to the original text, which, to Heidegger, was equal to forcing the original into the system of Western concepts" (Ma 2008, 155). I agree with this, but argue that Heidegger's approach is not necessarily a bad thing in comparative philosophy, but should be seen as a form of "creative interpretation" that can complement our continued efforts to understand non-Western philosophy in its own context, in how far that is possible. Heidegger's "originary" means not going back to the original (trying to get it right), but rather means a way of thinking that is originary. Youru Wang puts this in the following way: "It is impossible to be fixed, since meaning is always context-bound, and context is always on the move in the continuing process of signification and communication" (Wang 2003, 146). In fact, Ma herself seems to acknowledge this when, discussing Heidegger-inspired discourse that bears on comparative philosophy, she states that "such a discourse does not need to be concerned with whether Heidegger would find their theses acceptable, since the essence of a discourse that draws on a certain philosopher lies in application or expansion of a cue found in his writings" (Ma 2008, 4). And Ma and Jaap van Brakel also acknowledge my position when they say that "strictly speaking, there is no such thing as explanation (or understanding, letting speak, etc.) *on its own terms*" (Ma

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5 In Hartig (1997, 269), translation from Ma (2008, 147).



and van Brakel 2019, 9, italics in original). So while one form of comparative philosophy should definitely continue to seek to come as close as possible to letting non-Western philosophy speak ‘on its own terms’ (probably in full awareness that this is an ideal that cannot be reached), there should be room for another form of comparative philosophy, as I have argued for here.

### “A Dialogue” as *Auseinandersetzung*

In “A Dialogue”, Heidegger presents himself as an inquirer. Why this move? Is it because he does not want to be identified with Western philosophy? With metaphysics? Perhaps, but importantly, he also seeks to convey the idea that we are always underway, we never arrive, we must ever remain inquirers, the ones asking questions. There are several passages in “A Dialogue” which indicate this. For example, he admits quite readily that he will always be a beginner, a questioner, on the way (OWL 7). One can “blame” Heidegger for not learning the relevant languages of the East (Japanese, Chinese), but Heidegger himself was both aware of this and saw real “access” as being fundamentally denied to him. Yet some kind of coming together would then still be possible, if only under different conditions. Heidegger calls this “the attempt to walk a path of which I did not know where it would lead” (OWL 6). That path, for which “the fitting word is still lacking even today” (OWL 8), is not a path of traditional comparative philosophy. It is a path that questions about, but mostly from and toward, what Heidegger thought was the single source of thinking, in a thinking dialogue. That source, of course, is “Nothing”, and the form of questioning is what he termed *Auseinandersetzung*, of which the usual English translation is “confrontation”: “The grounding form of confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) is the actual creative dialogue (*wirkliche Wechselgespräch*) between the creators (*Schaffenden*) themselves in a neighbourly encounter” (Heidegger 2002a, 20, my translation).

“A Dialogue” is thus an exercise in trying to overcome metaphysics in the confrontation with other ways of thought, in the full awareness of the futility of doing exactly that, yet still always being attempted anew, and guided by what Heidegger saw as possible other openings for such attempts, besides his own thinking. Such possible openings were of course the ancient Greeks, the poets, and also what he conceived to be the non-metaphysical non-West. One may and probably should disagree at least to some extent with Heidegger’s conception of the “East”, but my argument so far has been that Heidegger *in all three cases* distorts the originals, twists them to fit his purposes, and thereby angers many purists. In my opinion this is firstly because Heidegger is not a historian (i.e. he is not interested in the



“original” as such) and secondly because he believes there is no such thing as the original. Yet, in my opinion, these purists need not be angry. After all, there is indeed no indication that Heidegger really tried to get Laozi, Zhuangzi, or the Zen Buddhists “right”. All he wanted was a rich source of thought, and to leave that source mysterious and open. We can and should of course also criticize Heidegger, as May does, for not revealing any of his sources, especially his Asian sources. Yet this valid criticism does not affect my argument that Heidegger was not interested in getting them right. If anything it would support it, as Heidegger probably knew he would not be able to get away with claiming he was right in his interpretation of Laozi or Zhuangzi, for example.

More importantly, the form and flow of “A Dialogue” itself is specifically geared to luring the audience on a thinking journey, a thinking experience of the *Auseinandersetzung* kind that would not be tied to metaphysics, but Heidegger recognizes that our language constantly pushes us back. This is why Heidegger is so difficult to follow for most people, as they are either unwilling or incapable of letting go of this metaphysical tradition. But again, it is only those who expect from Heidegger the kind of philosophy that he agitates against who will be upset. Heidegger is clearly against the dominance of the Subject-Object distinction and its ensuing hierarchical way of metaphysical thought (OWL 2), and continuously warns against the imposition of Western conceptuality and categorization. Thus, “A Dialogue” should be read more as an exercise in deconstruction, an exercise in recognizing how things might be thought in different directions, in order to develop an attitude of openness in attempts at intercultural *Auseinandersetzung*. Heidegger is not a purist. Purists (at least of the Western variety) tend to think in dualisms, and then in hierarchies. But for Heidegger, Being *is* Nothing, unconcealment *is* concealment. A confrontation is always provisional, there is always retreat and reticence, darkness and silence as well as light and speech. And he finds a welcome audience for that in his Asian interlocutors. So instead of seeing “A Dialogue” as an intercultural dialogue *per se*, we should rather see it as hinting at the (im-)possibilities of saying the “*unbestimmte Bestimmende*”, an exercise in the possibilities and impossibilities of language, where eventually Heidegger hints at “Saying”. Heidegger will not tell us exactly how things are, but will hint at what may be:

A hint beckons away from the one, toward the other. The guide-word beckons us away from the current notions about language, to the experience of language as Saying. Hints hint in many ways. A hint can give its hint so simply and at the same time so fully that we release ourselves in its direction without equivocation. But it can also give its hint in such a

manner that it refers us, from the first and persistently, back to the dubious (*das Bedenkliche*) against which it warns us, and lets us only suspect at first the memorable thing toward which it beckons us, as thought-worthy (*das Denkwürdige*) matter for which the fitting mode of thinking is still lacking. (OWL 95–96)

The *Auseinandersetzung* is what Heidegger is after, and that means interpretation. Confrontation is a

bringing the other and thereby also oneself to what is primary and original. This is the essence of the matter and is automatically the common cause of both parties, so we do not need to make up afterwards or aim at a subsequent alliance. *Philosophical confrontation is interpretation as destruction.* (Heidegger 2002b, 198, modified, italics in original)

Interpretation necessarily “destroys” an original, but this destruction should be understood as de-con-struction. In a work on Nietzsche Heidegger puts it in the following way: “Confrontation does not express itself in ‘polemic,’ but in the manner of interpretative construction ...” (Heidegger 1979, 279). Once understood in this fashion, we can see that “A Dialogue” is exactly such “interpretative construction”. The *Auseinandersetzung* between Heidegger and his Japanese interlocutor is a confrontation seeking to bring together different ways of thinking in an interpretative context that seeks not so much to understand the intricacies of those different ways of thinking, but to focus on their mutual source of nothingness. This does not mean that confrontation is *only* about a bringing together. It is as much a setting apart, which is necessary for the real ‘relation’ to manifest itself:

...only where the foreign is known and acknowledged in its essential oppositional character (*Gegensätzlichkeit*) does there exist the possibility of a genuine relationship (*Beziehung*), that is, of a uniting that is not a confused mixing but a conjoining in distinction (*Unterscheidung*). (Heidegger 1996, 54, German added)

One must see the *Auseinandersetzung* as a process of coming together and drifting apart, both an exploration and exposition of the ongoing movement of “gathering” in Heidegger’s sense of the word. That means we are not looking for a fusion, but for an ex-positioning that recognizes the Sameness in difference and the undefinable source which is Being (or Nothing).

Lin Ma argues that there are three ways Heidegger uses *Auseinandersetzung* (Ma 2008, 103–13). She believes that he sometimes uses it with a focus on the bringing

together and gathering, and sometimes on a setting apart, a struggle or strife. Ma then further claims that *Auseinandersetzung* is used in a predominantly negative fashion when applied to Asia, as an overcoming (*Überwindung*) of the East by the West. But is not Heidegger's idea of "overcoming" in fact not based on denial or defeat, but on "coming to terms with"? Just as his overcoming of metaphysics is not a defeat or denial, but a coming to terms with metaphysics in order to think otherwise. This is how I would understand Heidegger's comment that the greatness of the Greeks came about only by "overcoming" the Asiatic, a comment by the way immediately followed by Heidegger saying that to overcome here means "to bring it to the jointure (*Gefüge*) of a truth of Being..." (Heidegger 1985b, 145–46, German added). It is this kind of "coming to terms with" that is meant in Heidegger's following comment:

... that every reflection upon that which now is can take its rise and thrive only if, through a dialogue with the Greek thinkers and their language, it strikes root into the ground of our historical existence. That dialogue still awaits its beginning. It is scarcely prepared for at all, and yet it itself remains for us the precondition of the inevitable dialogue with the East Asian world. (Heidegger 1977, 157–58)

We need first to come to terms with the Greeks, and then with Asia. Such "coming to terms with" can, if one wishes, be read negatively, but I believe this would be a rather one-sided reading of Heidegger. This is exactly why I believe it is more likely that Heidegger means all three interpretations of *Auseinandersetzung* all the time, in ways similar to what we grant for example some classical Chinese terms like *xin* meaning not "mind" or "heart", but rather both in "heart-mind". Bringing together is always setting apart, conversation or dialogue is always also struggle that is literally a "coming to terms with" an other, just as we saw that unconcealment is concealment, and Being is Nothing. There is no need to choose if we see Heidegger engaged in creative interpretation when he is engaged in *Auseinandersetzung*.

It is Heidegger's conviction that we can only challenge our own metaphysical background through such *Auseinandersetzung*. Heidegger mentions that "in the field in which we are moving, we reach those things with which we are originally familiar precisely if we do not shun passing through things strange to us" (OWL 33). And this *Auseinandersetzung* thus means that we look for ways to also transform our own ways of thinking. The dialogue is meant not to merely appropriate different cues from other cultures into one's own thinking. In fact, since different conceptual schemes cannot be accommodated into our own metaphysical schemes, we need

to upset these preconceived notions and that means we need to look for different forms of interpreting and different forms of understanding language. The goal of doing this is to become more aware of our own conceptual schemes, our own ways of thinking, and to use the non-Western ideas to help us challenge a certain (metaphysical) dominance of interpretations in our own traditions, as Heidegger does with *Logos* for example, and in his rereadings of Hölderlin or the ancient Greeks. But the goal is also to realize the futility of trying to get it right. We are always interpreting from a certain standpoint, and challenging that standpoint does not make us objective. The search for objectivity needs to be abandoned and replaced with an *Auseinandersetzung* that appropriates other thought not in a possessive, but dialogical way. “A Dialogue” is an attempt at showing that.

I shall now indulge in some speculation. Although we know that Tezuka Tomio—the Japanese scholar who visited Heidegger and on whom the Japanese person in “A Dialogue” is loosely based—had his reservations about Heidegger’s interpretations (see May 1989, 60–62), we should also not discard the possibility that the “Japanese” person is based on multiple visitors, some of whom may have been happy to actively play Heidegger’s game with him, so instead of giving the audience an “authentic” account of Japanese thought in his deliberations on *kotoba*, the Japanese person might also be engaged in the creative reinterpreting of his own tradition, in an *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger. For example, consider the Japanese character’s comments on Heidegger’s exposition of *Charis*. Heidegger has him saying: “I would need more time than our dialogue allows to follow in thought the new prospects you have opened with your remark. But *one* thing I see at once—that your remark helps me to say more clearly what *koto* is” (OWL 46, italics in original). A negative reading of this passage might suggest that not only is Heidegger putting words into his Japanese interlocutor’s mouth that sound more like Heidegger himself, but also that the Japanese is influenced by Heidegger in his thinking. But thought of more creatively, it may indeed be that given Heidegger’s remarks his Japanese interlocutor sees “new prospects” in bringing the idea of *kotoba* into the service of a thoughtful confrontation with a different kind of thinking, and indeed with the tradition of Japanese thought itself. He may actually be willing to twist “the” meaning of *kotoba* to seek new ways of thought and expression. Especially since a page later the Japanese asserts that we must be “full ready to give away freely whatever it may be that we attempt on our own, even if it falls short of perfection” (OWL 48–49).

I will of course immediately admit that this still consists of Heidegger putting words into the mouth of his Japanese interlocutor, but the mutual confrontation or exploration is not to be denied so easily. We have seen the same happen, for example, with Chang Chung-yuan’s work, which was explicitly influenced by

Heidegger. This may also explain why Heidegger was reluctant to think that the East understood him, because he may have thought that the Eastern thinkers were also just creatively appropriating his thought, in much the same way as he was creatively appropriating theirs.

I hasten to add that I warned the reader this is speculation, but it is exactly the kind of speculation that Heidegger’s “creative interpretation” might consist of, where something interesting is gained through mutual cross-fertilization, although we did not (and did not attempt to) get it right. In my view, Lin Ma—who interprets Heidegger in a somewhat negative fashion with regards to comparative philosophy—actually suggests something similar when she says that there is

an internal approach to Heidegger. Admittedly, this approach may safeguard one in getting Heidegger right, since that is the way in which Heidegger expects one to read him. However, “the task of thinking,” to use Heidegger’s phrase, may have something that exceeds getting him right. (Ma 2008, 194–95)

The “task” of thinking deconstructively demands that we not necessarily follow what an author may have wanted to say, but search for the possibilities of the text in new ways.

## Comparative Philosophy

Let me start this last section by stating that I do not necessarily endorse all free speculation and/or plain mistaken readings. I do not believe that “anything goes” in this regard. But if my arguments set out above hold any water, then maybe we need to interpret “A Dialogue” not as an exercise in “standard” comparative philosophy, where Heidegger would have, in his eagerness to find similarities between his own thinking and that of the East, (wilfully) misunderstood and misinterpreted his interlocutor. When seen this way, it is natural that in the same way as most philosophers would balk at Heidegger’s reinterpretations of concepts such as *logos*, *polemos*, *Lichtung*, *Ereignis*, etc., they would resist his take on Asia. But that misses the point. Heidegger uses the Asian “creatively”. And one may read that as “stealing what he can use while distorting it”, which is indeed in a way true, but one may also read it in the way that for example Picasso “stole” from African art or used other artefacts out of their context, to create (from out of a different context) something new and very interesting, but not necessarily true to the original. The “original”, as mentioned before, is only interesting historically. As I put it in *Comparative Philosophy and Method*:

While as comparative philosophers we should make efforts not to distort the ideas coming from other cultural backgrounds, such ideas can only be useful if placed in our current context, and for that, historical considerations are less important than what we think we can achieve in our times by looking at the tradition in new ways. (Burik et al. 2022, 208)

Or in the words of Gadamer: “To try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us” (Gadamer 1989, 398). While it is true that we may not be able to completely escape our preconceptions, it is also true that we should endeavour to expand our conceptual apparatus with every new reading of a text. This is one possible way of doing comparative philosophy. As Arindram Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber argue:

What makes it “right” *philosophically* is not the scholarly accuracy of the history of ideas or the “scientific historical” correctness in discovering who said what first, or who influenced whom across the cultures, but “the motivation, the intended next step”—where one wants to go with the comparison. (Chakrabarti and Weber 2016, 28)

Comparative philosophy is, or should be, based on what Chakrabarti and Weber call “the conscious attempt of filling one’s mind in an almost terribly unsystematic manner with whatever one gets out of the study of different styles and traditions” (ibid., 231). Or as what they call “fusion philosophy”, which really is “just doing philosophy as one thinks fit for getting to the truth about an issue or set of issues, by appropriating elements from all philosophical views and traditions one knows of but making no claim of ‘correct exposition’” (ibid., 22). As I wrote myself in *Comparative Philosophy and Method* with regard to comparative philosophy:

We cannot be objective. We should not try, and one of our strengths lies in acknowledging the fundamental limitations of what we do. There are better and worse efforts, but all efforts suffer from incompleteness (never having the entire context available), lack of access to the sources (the impossibility of knowing exactly what Zhuangzi was about), interpretive limitations (where we come from and what our goals are and the language that we use), and, not the least, philosophical limitations (we cannot and should not include everything into philosophy). (Burik et al. 2022, 219)



And if the reader counts herself as one of the purists, whose intent it is to purge Western interpretations from our thinking in order to let other traditions speak for themselves, then I of course applaud and appreciate such efforts, and agree that we must make efforts not to distort what other people say in general. But I *also* believe that such distortions, if they occur, and if they are acknowledged as “not trying to get it right”, can be valuable as (comparative) philosophy. And the purists may be reminded that such interpretative manoeuvres are not a novel phenomenon in philosophy. Again, as I wrote in our recent work on comparative methodology:

misreadings and their productiveness are really nothing new. In fact, one could say that the Chinese commentarial tradition is at least also in part based on misreadings. For example, it is quite certain that Guo Xiang “mis”-interpreted some of Zhuangzi’s words to suit his own project, but that is part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the *Zhuangzi*. Wang Bi’s reading of the *Daodejing* could be considered a “misreading” to those not inclined to see the *Daodejing* as a work of metaphysics comparable to Western metaphysics. (ibid., 216)

Heidegger was not well versed in the philosophies of his Asian conversation partners and creatively reinterpreted them, yet he also protested fiercely against total cultural relativism. All thinking everywhere is based on the universal source of thought, *Being*. But because *Being* itself *is* nothing, it is not something we can identify and thus as source it will remain forever in the background, retreating further the harder we try to expose “it”, because “it” is non-existent, it is nothing other than the play of differences. In mining that source, we must of course take care not to twist and turn. But on the other side, we must also be aware that twisting and turning is what we do of necessity, and that as long as we are able to generate interesting insights from that manoeuvre, then why not? As long as we do not pretend to be getting it right, should we not be allowed to take anything we can as inspiration for interesting philosophy? Deconstruction is about the idea that multiple interpretations are always possible, that there is no one single truth about things, and comparative philosophy would do well to heed that particular insight (in fact, I believe this is one of the key tenets that comparative philosophy should have). Some people may get upset if we do not get them right, but as long as we clarify that that is not our intention anyway, is this really a problem? And if this means we are treading precariously on the boundaries of what is allowed in comparative philosophy, then I believe that “A Dialogue” is an exploration of the boundaries of thought. Comparative philosophy should also be done by, in Heidegger’s words: “he who walks the boundary of the boundless. And on this path ... seeks the boundary’s mystery” (OWL 41).



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