

Comparative Philosophy

GLOBAL CONVERSATION ON THE SPOT: WHAT LAO-TSE, HEIDEGGER, AND RORTY HAVE IN COMMON

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Today a relatively unified world civilization is being built which is meant to secure the survival of humanity, though it is not that such security could be man's first and last task; in this situation it is imperative to have dialogue between the various traditions. Heidegger has provided a significant stimulus for such dialogue; and yet the task to which he applied himself has not been accomplished, it is being handed down to us as something open-ended.

Otto Pöggeler, "West-East Dialogue: Heidegger and Lao-tsu," *Heidegger and Asian Thought*

Abstract

I explore the supposition that any form of philosophical and cultural difference involves an interplay of both global and local significations, or a peculiar kind of global conversation. I maintain that the recurrence of the global into the local and vice versa is not accidental, as it makes for a much sought difference of significance both in the life of the single individual and in a variety of cultural and practical senses. I explore specifically its philosophical sense within the thought of Lao-tse, Martin Heidegger, and Richard Rorty.

In Lao-tse's Tao Te Ching, this sense is tied to the concepts of the Tao and Te. Tao is the eternal and inexplicable source of all existence; Te is its localized actualization in the life of each and every person. Tao ensures the universal harmony of the world; Te is the principle of one's individual relation to that harmony. The same sense could be identified in the work of Heidegger, who transformed the philosophical thinking of the last century by redefining its knowing subject in existence. The subject, thus rediscovered as Dasein (being-there) and as being-in-the-world (in-der-Welt-sein), could disclose the world (Welt) only via its familiar surrounding world (Umwelt) to gradually become aware of its most general (in-

deed global) epistemic concern of the Being (Sein) of beings (Seinde). Similarly, Rorty, who sees the task philosophy and the rest of culture as set by history on the utilitarian goal of achieving the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, demands starting up locally to achieve it globally. His pragmatic approach also demands utilizing the trustworthy resource of the global cultural tradition, as well as the involvement of the individuals in their locality as problem-solvers (as scientists, artists, engineers, and others).

Keywords: *global, local, Tao, Te, Wu-wei, Ziran, Dasein, Umwelt, Being, beings, poetry, political, conversation, the greatest happiness for the greatest number.*

If we suppose that a form of philosophical and cultural difference involves an interplay of both global and local significations, we can call it a contribution to a peculiar kind of *global conversation*. A conversation is indeed an exchange of differences of significance, whereas a difference never stands alone – it is always in relation with other differences, among which it becomes the difference it is. This conversation is always and inevitably held *on the spot*, as long as such a difference cannot but arise locally. And yet, a difference among *the* differences would be a global difference, and any individual or entity that is in the position to make it could bring a change which is socio-cultural and global.

In order for these lines of thought to be fitting together, it is also clear that the initial supposition, on which they hang on, namely, that a form of philosophical and cultural difference involves an interplay of both global and local significations, must be properly asserted. Here I shall attempt to do just that – I shall maintain that *the recurrence of the global into the local and vice versa* is not accidental but is arguably the condition for possibility of any difference of significance both in the life of the single individual and in culture and praxis as a whole. More specifically, I shall endeavor to detect and explore it within the thought of three thinkers as different as Lao-tse, Martin Heidegger, and Richard Rorty.

Laozi's Tao and Te

In the case of Lao-tse's *Tao Te Ching*,¹ the recurrence of the local into the global is most readily detectable in his notion of the peculiar relation of *Tao* and *Te*. This relation is in many ways complex and convoluted with other key Taoist concepts, but before we move into it we need to acknowledge that important challenges to its discussion are posed by difficulties in authenticating the extant versions of the book and its authorship, by its varied cultural appropriation, by the specificity of its language, and not least by the divergency of its translations. I shall thus briefly consider these challenges prior to embarking on our investigation proper.

Traditionally, the Heshanggong version (dated 2 c. BCE) and the Wang Bi version (3 c. CE) have been used most widely for studies and translations, but there have been more re-

¹ There have been various transliterations of the name 老子, including Lao-tse, Lao-tsu, Lao-tzu, Lao-tze, Laozi, as well as of the title of the book 道德經 attributed to him, including *Tao Te Ching*, *Dao De Jing*, *Daodejing*, or simply *Laozi*. Though there have been attempts towards more uniform transcriptions of the Chinese names, I shall use here Lao-tse for the authorship, and *Tao Te Ching* and *Laozi* for the title of the book, based largely on their popularity. I shall also quote all translations I am using literally, i.e., using their own terms and transliterations.

cent discoveries of versions that also gained importance, such as those from Mawangdui (2 c. BCE) and Guodian (4 c. BCE), as well as the Peking one (1 c. BCE).² As a result, the authentication of the text has currently become more complex than ever and ongoing research and findings could easily lead to substantial changes both in the traditional order of its chapters and in its very content. Likewise, the impact that the book has had on the Chinese culture cannot immediately be used for clearing its authenticity and content, as it has not been uniform. Two distinct approaches to reading and valuing the book have gained prominence throughout history – one more religious and spiritual, and another a more secular and intellectual, known today respectively as *daojiao* (道教) and *daoia* (道家).³ Although these two traditions are inevitably related based on their common source and at times their differentiation has been questioned, even to the point of describing them as “practically synonymous and interchangeable,”⁴ they have only attested to complex philosophic and cultural significance of the book as both a way of life and philosophical doctrine.

Similarly, the language of the text has its peculiarities that have posed a challenge to its understanding and interpretation, and made it a subject to numerous debates and commentaries throughout the Chinese cultural history. Thus, Liu Xiaogan has identified two distinct approaches to understanding *Tao Te Ching*, which he has differentiated with the terms of “linguistic assimilation” and “conceptual focusing,” pointing that the emphasis in the former is on “language patterns and style,” while in the latter on “philosophical ideas and meaning.”⁵ We need to note here that for the purpose of this paper, we can only resolve the language challenge by adopting the conceptual approach, as we aim to identify a common conceptual content⁶ in three different thinkers, which can be designated with the terms *global* and *local*.

Finally, there is also the difficulty of translation – *Tao Te Ching* is currently one of the most translated books in the world, (second only to the Bible),⁷ with translations showing great divergences from one another, including in terms vocabulary, style, structure, and interpretation. This has posed a challenge to the search for and identification of consistencies in both the use and the interrelations of the terms within the text, as it has complicated the access to their original meanings and the motives behind them. However, for the purpose of this paper a targeted hermeneutics will suffice to capture the relevant aspects of the relation of *Tao* and *Te*, as well as of other key concepts that support it, which can be achieved by drawing on

² For a thorough discussion of the state of the extant versions of the text see Rudolf G. Wagner, *A Chinese Reading of the Daodejing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 3-4ff.

³ Alan Chan, “Laozi,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/laozi/>>.

⁴ Kristofer Schipper, “General Introduction,” in Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen (eds.), 2004, *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), p. 6. Shipper has questioned the merits and viability of the distinction noting that it “originated with outsiders and is flawed by the erroneous assumption that *jia* necessarily means ‘philosophy’ and *jiao*, ‘religion’. The distinction has no taxonomic value and serves no other purpose than to divide Taoism into an acceptable and a disdained form—to fundamentalist Confucians.” (Ibid., pp. 7-8)

⁵ Liu Xiaogan, “From Bamboo Slips to Received Versions: Common Features in the Transformation of the ‘Laozi’,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Dec., 2003), p. 339.

⁶ On the notion of ‘conceptual content’ cf. Rossen Roussev, *Philosophy and the Structure of Modernity: Fragments of Actualization* (Sofia, Bulgaria: East West Publishers, 2005) (in Bulgarian), especially 12ff.

⁷ Alan Chan, “Laozi,” URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/laozi/>>.

several select translations. More specifically, I will draw on the translations of Witter Bynner (1944), Bruce R. Linnell (2015), Gia Fu Feng & Jane English (1997), James Legge (1891), Philip J. Ivanhoe (2001), Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (2003), Rudolf G. Wagner (2003), Stephen Mitchell (2015), Derek Lin (2009).⁸

With these stipulations in mind we now focus on the specifics of the relation of *Tao* (道) and *Te* (德). Most generally, in *Laozi*, the eternal *Tao*, literally meaning and most commonly translated as ‘the Way’, is understood as the original source of all existence, whereas *Te* has the meaning of its localized actualization in each thing and every individual. As the source of all existence, *Tao* is ontologically significant but it cannot be properly rendered in words, even as it is ever-lasting and unchanging. This is perhaps more straightforwardly put in James Legge’s translation, but is keenly detectable in the others as well,

The Tao that can be described is not the enduring and unchanging Tao.
 The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.
 (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth;
 (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.⁹

On the more poetic translation of Witter Bynner this is rendered as,

Existence is beyond the power of words
 To define:
 Terms may be used
 But are none of them absolute.
 In the beginning of heaven and earth there were no words,
 Words came out of the womb of matter.¹⁰

Gia Fu Fen and Jane English have it as,

The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao.
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name

⁸ *The Way of Life, According to Lao Tzu*, translated by Witter Bynner (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1986); Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Feng, Gia-Fu & Jane English, Vintage Books (New York, New York, 1989); *The Tào Teh King, or The Tào and its Characteristics*, in *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism*, translated by James Legge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1891); *The Daodejing of Laozi*, Introduction and Translation by Philip J. Ivanhoe, in Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (Eds.), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003); *Daodejing, “Making This Life Significant,” A Philosophical Translation*, English and Mandarin Chinese Edition, translated and with commentary by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003); Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2015); Lao Zi, *Dao De Jing*, translated by Bruce R. Linnell (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018); Rudolf G. Wagner, *A Chinese reading of the Daodejing: Wang Bi’s Commentary on the Laozi with Critical Text and Translation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003); *Tao Te Ching*, translation and annotation by Derek Lin (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2009).

⁹ James Legge, Ch. I.

¹⁰ Witter Bynner, Ch. 1.

The nameless (*wuming*) is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.¹¹

Philip J. Ivanhoe's version is,

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.
A name that can be named is not a constant name.
Nameless (*wuming*), it is the beginning of Heaven and earth;
Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures.¹²

On the more terminologically-centered translation of Bruce R. Linnell, it is,

The Dao that can be spoken of is not the ever-constant Dao.
The name that can be named is not the ever-constant name.
That which is without-name is the beginning of heaven and earth.
That which possesses a name is the mother of the ten thousand creatures.¹³

On the purposely philosophical translation of Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, it is,

Way-making (*dao*) that can be put into words is not really way-making,
And naming (*ming*) that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming.
The nameless (*wuming*) is the fetal beginnings of everything that is happening (*wanwu*),
While that which is named is their mother.¹⁴

Derek Lin's succinct translation is,

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth
The named is the mother of myriad things.¹⁵

Rudolf G. Wagner's elaborate translation is,

A way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way.
A name that can be named is not the eternal name.
When there are not [now] names, it [the Way] is the beginning of the ten thousand kinds of entities.
When there [already] are names, it [the Way] is the mother of the ten thousand kinds of entities.¹⁶

¹¹ Gia Fu Fen & Jane English, Ch. 1.

¹² Philip J. Ivanhoe, Ch. 1.

¹³ Bruce R. Linnell, Ch. 1.

¹⁴ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, Ch. 1.

¹⁵ Derek Lin, Ch. 1.

¹⁶ Rudolf G. Wagner, Ch. 1.

Whereas Stephen Mitchell's translation is,

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao
 The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.
 The unnamable is the eternally real.
 Naming is the origin of all particular things.¹⁷

In the sense in which it “cannot be put into words” and thus explained, *Tao* is *wu* (無) or ‘nothing’, which is its fundamental ontological characteristic that will have its way in its relation to all that originates from it. For its part, the statement that “words came out of the womb of matter” additionally suggests that the ‘words’ themselves are a much latter product of the eternal *Tao* to be able to capture the essence of their own original source. Thus, any attempt to define *Tao* would present us with a *Tao* that is not the real *Tao*, whereas the essence of *Tao* appears as just *wu* or nothing.

As *Laozi* has it, however, the essential nothingness of *Tao* has not prevented it from being the source of *qi* (氣) – the creative power that would move the creation of all beings and become the positive basis for their individual and collective existence. *Qi* is thus said to be the “one,” or in any way it would be the first being that – in our re-constructed ontological order – could be other than *wu* or nothing. *Qi* then produces *Yin* (陰) and *Yang* (陽) – the two opposing powers that would maintain the balance and harmony or *he* (和) of the world. Whereas operating further along *Yin* and *Yang*, *qi* would produce – in a harmonious fashion – also the “ten thousand things” or the rest of the world,

Dao creates one.
 One creates two.
 Two creates three.
 Three creates the ten thousand creatures.
 The ten thousand creatures carry Yin and embrace Yang,
 Pouring their Qi together, thus becoming harmonious.¹⁸

Or,

The Way generates the One. The One generates the two. The two generates the three. The three generates the ten thousand entities. The ten thousand entities [might] carry the Yin on their back [or] embrace the Yang, but they take the ether of emptiness as their harmonizing [factor].¹⁹

Or,

Way-making (*dao*) gives rise to continuity,
 Continuity gives rise to difference,

¹⁷ Stephen Mitchell, Ch. 1.

¹⁸ Bruce R. Linnel, Ch. 42.

¹⁹ Rudolf G. Wagner, Ch. 42.

Difference gives rise to plurality,
 And plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (*wanwu*).
 Everything carries *yin* on its shoulders and *yang* in its arms
 And blends these vital energies (*qi*) together to make them harmonious (*he*).²⁰

Whereas *Tao Te Ching* is likely to be using the terms *Yin* and *Yang* in a less developed form than the one given to them by Zou Yan (鄒衍), (also transliterated as Tsao Yen;) (305-240 BC), it still suggests that the two powers are intrinsically linked to *Tao*, (as well as to each other), and maintain a relation to it. This relation, which has been described as “the rhythm of *Dao*” and as including “change and exchange,” as well as “harmonious mutual complementation,”²¹ is ensured by *qi* and cannot be fundamentally disturbed by any subsequent creation. The same applies also to the “ten thousand creatures,” each of which remains inherently related to *Tao* as the original source of their existence and orientation in the world.

In this sense, every being in the harmony of the world maintains continuously its individual relation to *Tao*, a relation which *Laozi* designates as *Te*. *Te* is most commonly translated as ‘virtue’ but Bynner’s expression “at the core of life” is particularly revealing of its fundamental link to *Tao*, which he has poetically rendered as “The Way of Life.”²² Very indicative of this link is also Legge’s expression “[*Tao*’s] outflowing operation,”²³ which suggests that *Te* in its core meaning is a particular emulation of or orientation towards *Tao* that is essential for all created beings. Whereas Ames and Hall’s expressions “particular efficacy” and “character” point also to its localized and globalized presence respectively.²⁴ As *Laozi* puts it,

All things arise from *Dao*.
 They are nourished by Virtue (*de*).
 They are formed from matter.
 They are shaped by environment.
 Thus the ten thousand things all respect *Dao* and honor Virtue (*de*).
 Respect of *Dao* and honor of Virtue (*de*) are not demanded,
 But they are in the nature of things.²⁵

Or,

Way-making (*dao*) gives things their life,
 And their particular efficacy (*de*) is what nurtures them.
 Events shape them,
 And having a function consummates them.
 It is for this reason that all things (*wanwu*) honor way-making
 And esteem efficacy.
 As for the honor directed at way-making
 And the esteem directed at efficacy,

²⁰ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, Ch. 42.

²¹ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 36.

²² Witter Bynner, Ch. 10.

²³ James Legge, Ch. 51.

²⁴ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, Ch. 51, Ch. 54.

²⁵ Gia Fu Fen & Jane English, Ch. 51.

It is really something that just happens spontaneously (*ziran*)
Without anyone having ennobled them.²⁶

In the sense in which “The greatest Virtue (*de*) is to follow Dao and Dao alone,”²⁷ *Te* can be understood as a localized manifestation of *Tao*. This manifestation, which accords with and “respect Tao” in its “efficacy” and takes place “spontaneously,” also “nurtures” the things and essentially maintains their being. In this sense, *Te* can be understood as the term that “denotes this vital potency for life,” which finds its expression in the cultivation of the nurtured beings.²⁸ The manifestation of *Tao*, however, is always complex and necessitates the actualization of *Te* amidst the circumstances of its occurrence. As Ames and Hall put it, “It is only within the complexity of a contextualizing situation that particular events take shape and assume their productive functions.”²⁹ *Te* is thus the actualized invocation of *Tao*, which is to be sought and emulated in all personal, social, and natural worlds,

Cultivate it [Dao] in the self – your De will then be true and real.
Cultivate it in the family – its De will then be more than enough.
Cultivate it in the village – its De will then last forever.
Cultivate it in the nation – its De will then be abundant.
Cultivate it in the world – its De will then be everywhere.³⁰

Or,

Let the Tao be present in your life and you will become genuine.
Let it be present in your family and your family will flourish.
Let it be present in your country and your country will be an example to all countries in the world.
Let it be present in the universe and the universe will sing.³¹

Or,

Cultivate it in your person,
And the character you develop will be genuine;
Cultivate it in your family,
And its character will be abundant;
Cultivate it in your village,
And its character will be enduring;
Cultivate it in the state,
And its character will flourish;
Cultivate it in the world,
And its character will be all-pervading.³²

We need to note here that, whereas as nonbeing (*wu*) *Tao* can be taken as ontologically un-present, the created beings maintain their link to it – their *Te* – via its creative energy *qi*. In

²⁶ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, Ch. 51.

²⁷ Gia Fu Fen & Jane English, Ch. 21.

²⁸ Thomas Michael, *The Pristine Dao: Metaphysics in Early Daoist Discourse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), p. 63.

²⁹ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, p. 210.

³⁰ Bruce R. Linnell, Ch. 54.

³¹ Stephen Mitchell, Ch. 54.

³² Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, Ch. 54.

the created beings, *qi* is being realized along a harmonious fusion of *Yin* and *Yang*, which in the ways of nature is said to be just naturalness or *ziran* (自然),

Man follows the earth.
 Earth follows heaven.
 Heaven follows the Dao.
 Dao follows what is natural (*ziran*).³³

Or,

Human beings emulate the earth,
 The earth emulates the heavens,
 The heavens emulate way-making,
 And way-making emulates what is spontaneously so (*ziran*).³⁴

It appears that *ziran* (literally ‘self so’, ‘so of itself’, ‘what itself is so’, or ‘what is spontaneously so’) is a non-compulsive, balanced, natural way of *qi*’s unfolding that asserts the relation of *Tao* and *Te* by passing some of the nothingness/quiescence (*wu*) of the former into the being of the latter as maintained in the created beings. Naturalness (*ziran*) thus becomes an archi-model or archetype of the workings of *Tao* in the individual created beings and is to be emulated in every *Te* both within the world of nature and within the human world.

In *Tao Te Ching*, the human world is tightly bound with the natural world. Human individuals, families, communities, societies, and states all have their *Te*, which can ensure their relation to *Tao* and harmonious existence. *Te* can thus take the form of virtue or wisdom of action, governance, and self-creation alike, whereas its usage has also included the senses of “power” and “moral charisma.”³⁵ As the peculiar expression of *Tao* in the natural world – via *qi* – ensures the harmony of nature as *ziran*, its expression in the human world would ensure the latter’s harmony (*he*) by what is called *wu-wei* (無為). The latter is typically translated as ‘non-action’, ‘inaction’, or ‘nonbeing’, whose meaning has been sometimes understood too literally in Western perspectives. Whereas it has been called “the essence of *Daodejing*” and understood as “serving as an ethical or religious ideal,”³⁶ its relation to the Western notion of ethics in the sense of a guiding principle ready for practical application would be a far-fetched notion. Rather, as any theoretical explanation has been cast as out-of-touch with *Tao* (Ch.1), practicing *wu-wei* reappears as a peculiar type of creativity that is ultimately not knowledge-based, purpose-oriented, or will-guided and thus remains mystical. As *Laozi* puts it,

Embracing your soul and holding on to the One, can you keep them from departing.
 Concentrating your *qi*, “vital energies,” and attaining the utmost suppleness, can you be a child?
 Cleaning and purifying your enigmatic mirror, can you erase every flaw?
 Caring for the people and ordering the state, can you eliminate all knowledge?
 When the portal of Heaven opens and closes, can you play the part of the feminine?
 Comprehending all within the four directions, can you reside in nonaction (*wuwei*)?³⁷

³³ Gia Fu Fen & Jane English, Ch. 25.

³⁴ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, Ch. 25.

³⁵ Thomas Michael, p. 112.

³⁶ Lei Xie, “Wu-wei and Wu-zhi in *Daodejing*: An Ancient Chinese Epistemological View on Learning,” *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, Ver. V (Jan. - Feb. 2017), p. 56.

³⁷ Philip J. Ivanhoe, Ch. 10.

Or,

Carrying body and soul and embracing the one.
 Can you avoid separation?
 Attending fully and becoming supple,
 Can you be as a newborn babe?
 Washing and cleansing the primal vision,
 Can you be without stain?
 Loving all men and ruling the country,
 Can you be without cleverness?
 Opening and closing the gates of heaven,
 Can you play the role of woman?
 Understanding and being open to all things,
 Are you able to do nothing (*wu-wei*)?³⁸

We need to note here that, properly speaking, *wu-wei* does not mean a complete refraining from action, but rather an avoiding of actions moved by desire or *yu* (欲) in both practical and intellectual sense. It is a “non-coercive activity,”³⁹ which, when effected in this way, manifests itself as a peculiar refraining from acting and naming, and thus as a kind of accordance of the human world with *Tao* in a way that parallels *ziran* in nature. *Tao Te Ching* most commonly exemplifies *wu-wei* as non-action in socio-political terms with regard to rulers, communities, and societies – “A leader is best when people barely know that he exists”⁴⁰ – but it also applies to each particular individual. Thus, if the latter wanted a properly harmonious life, he or she is bound to establish his or her individual relation with *Tao* as *Te* that consistently curbs one’s desire and ambition for power, pleasure, possessions, and knowledge alike, as these are considered deviations from *Tao*. “Thus, the highest expression of *de* is spontaneous, and is performed without any intended goal. Lowest *de* is also spontaneously expressed, but this is performed with an intended goal – namely, the fulfillment of the formal criterion that defines it.”⁴¹ In this sense, one resorts to a peculiar kind of deliberate inaction or only to a natural or effortless action, which essentially means that one maintains one’s individual harmonious relation with *Tao*, or one’s *Te*.

We can note here that *wu-wei* is essentially an introduction of the essential nothingness (*wu*) of *Tao* within the human world, which ensures the latter’s *Te* or participation in the universal harmony (*he*) as issuing from *Yin* and *Yang*. The proper actualization of *Tao* is thus to be found on every level of the human world precisely as *wu* and in various forms. Calling the latter “*wu*-forms,” Ames and Hall point out that they “are pervasive in the *Daodejing*.”⁴² Thus, *wuzhi* (無知), which literary means “no-knowledge,” is a “knowledge grounded in a denial of ontological presence,” or a kind of “unprincipled knowing”; *wuyu* (無欲), literary “no-desire,” is rather an “objectless desire,” or a kind of “deferential desire”; *wuming* (無名), literally “no-name” or “the nameless,” points to “a kind of naming that does not assign fixed

³⁸ Gia Fu Fen & Jane English, Ch. 10.

³⁹ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, p. 54.

⁴⁰ Bynner, Ch. 17.

⁴¹ Thomas Michael, pp. 77-78.

⁴² Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, p. 92.

reference to things”; *wuxin*, (無心), literally “no heart-and-mind,” means rather an “unmediated thinking and feeling”; *wuqing*, (無情), literally “no-feeling,” is more properly an “unmediated feeling.”⁴³ We can note here that in the overall perspective of *Laozi* the proper function of the *wu*-forms appears to be to neutralize the specifically self-styled human presence in order to give way to the essential nothingness of *Tao* and ensure the harmony of the world.

Laozi's invocation of *wu* in the human world sets the background of an ethical and intellectual culture that secures the harmonious relation of one's individual *Te* with the eternal *Tao*. Unlike in Western perspectives, where the human subject is typically understood as positioned, disclosing, and acting within an objective world, here the relation *Tao* and *Te* is not mediated by specifically identified aspects and achievements of the human nature or subjectivity. Instead, in *Laozi*, the rational and irrational aspects of the human subject, as manifest in its both cultural achievements and actualized presence in world, are kept in constant check by a sense of the essential nothingness of *Tao*, a sense which alone ensures its harmonious co-existence with the rest of the world. This has led Hall and Ames to describe “the classical Chinese” thought as “primarily *acosmotic*,” where by this neologism is meant a philosophizing that is not based on the notion that “the totality of things has a radical beginning or that these things constitute a single ordered world.”⁴⁴ This is indeed in a sharp contrast with the traditional Western worldviews, which have sought to establish certain first beginnings and foundational order, and Hall and Ames believe that such a qualification would enable a suitable separation of the cosmological and ontological discussions of the classical Chinese texts that would facilitate comparisons with Western ones.⁴⁵

The characterization of the classic Chinese thinking as *acosmotic* is indeed fitting and insightful. But in my view, the separation of cosmological from ontological (no just in a comparative but) in any discussion can be done only conditionally. For, it would be generally problematic in perspectives influenced by Heidegger and other postmodern thinkers, where ontology is seen as too fundamental to be dispensed with. Instead, I suggest a comparative discussion of classical Chinese and Western worldviews in a manner that is less conceptually mediated. Such a discussion could draw on core similarities between key notions, which could be terminologically identified, paralleled, and understood only as pointers to aspects of relation of these notions, rather than as definite concepts that would be less immune against the bias of a particular conceptual perspective. Indeed, concepts are arguably identifiable and necessary in any reflective discussion even as we mean to keep them deconstructed, but there should be not obstacle to retain in them a sense of their deconstruction, viz. to treat them simply as pointers to aspects of relation, in any such discussion. For instance, at this point, it has already become apparent to us that one can straightforwardly seek and identify various aspects of *essential nothingness (wu)* in influential Western perspectives as well, including in both classical and more recent ones. Oxymoronic as it sounds, this essential nothingness can be read not only as subverting the conceptual coherency of these perspectives but also as inviting a deconstructive reflection that revisits old dogmas to open up – somewhat paradoxical-

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 84-96.

⁴⁴ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 184, 300.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 300.

ly and out of the blue – new horizons for invention and constitution. Equally, it can be seen as an intrinsic epistemic element of these perspectives, which delimits their innovativeness, value, and contribution, and arguably – of their apperception of knowledge with view to practice.

Thus, an essential nothingness of the kind of the Taoist non-ontological or “unprincipled knowing” (*wuzhi*) can be detected in Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* (as opposed to *sophia*), despite being associated with the ontologically significant notion of truth (*aletheia*),⁴⁶ as well as in Foucault’s notion *savoir* (as opposed to *connaissance*), despite its association with his ontologically significant notion of positivity (*positivité*).⁴⁷ Both of these notions are linked to a practical thinking that bypasses in a peculiar way theoretical thinking and scientific knowledge alike. Similarly, it can be detected in Gadamer’s *hermeneutics*, which reinvents Aristotelian *phronesis* to account for the precedence of practice over theory in knowledge application.⁴⁸ Essentially the same sense could be traced also in Kierkegaard’s *subjective truth* or *passion*,⁴⁹ Nietzsche’s *perspectivism*,⁵⁰ Heidegger’s *Dasein*,⁵¹ Derrida’s *différance*,⁵² Levinas’ *ethics as first philosophy*,⁵³ Rorty’s *philosophy as politics*,⁵⁴ and – in a different way – in the cognitivist notion of *metacognition*,⁵⁵ as well as in the related notion of *philosophical competence* (as opposed to *scientific expertise*).⁵⁶ Overall, we can note that, like *Laozi*, these notions can be seen as introducing a due nothingness (*wu*) or deconstruction within the theoretical thinking, which facilitates or conditions its transfer to practice.

In the same way, we shall draw on the essential nothingness at the core of the views of our three thinkers here, as we seek to identify the interplay of global and local significations as the condition for possibility of any difference of significance in their respective perspectives, as much as in both the life of the single individual and in culture and praxis as a whole. In the case of *Laozi*’s view, we have encountered core similarities, which point to aspects of

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, with an English translation by H. Rackham (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press: 1999), Book VI, iii-xiii (especially xii-xiii).

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), pp. 183ff, 194.

⁴⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 18-20 and especially 310ff.

⁴⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 32-33, 117-118, 169ff, 176-180, 454-456.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §481; cf. *Der Wille zur Macht* (Paderborn: Voltmedia GmbH, 2007), §481.

⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962); cf. with *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemayer Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1993).

⁵² Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁵³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998); *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1999).

⁵⁴ Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics,” *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 17-20.

⁵⁵ Margaret W. Matlin, *Cognition* (Geneseo NY: Harcourt Brace Publishers, 1994), p. 248.

⁵⁶ Rossen Roussev, “Philosophy and the Transition from Theory to Practice: A Response to Recent Concerns for Critical Thinking,” *Telos*, No. 148 (2009), pp. 93ff.

the global and the local, as well as to their specific relation. These can be readily recapped within the terms of our investigation such that *Te* be seen as the localized actualization of the global *Tao*. This assertion must stand even as *Tao* is originally determined as *wu* or – speaking ontologically – as nonbeing, since *Tao* nonetheless remains the ultimate source of all being and harmony. What is more, within our perspective here, it is precisely because of its nothingness (*wu*) that *Tao* could be actualized as *Te*, as the ineffable sense of the former could be only deconstructively, i.e., creatively appropriated within the latter. Thus, *Tao* is the eternal, ineffable, and inexplicable source of all existence; *Te* is its local expression in each being and every person. *Tao* ensures the harmony of the natural and the social worlds; *Te* is the principle of one’s individual relation to that harmony. Within our terms here, this amounts to the assertion that the relation of *Tao* and *Te* exemplifies an inevitable interplay of global and local significations, an interplay whose possibility is rendered with the help of notions like *qi*, *Yin*, *Yang*, *ziran*, and *wu-wei* among others. This interplay is arguably *the condition for possibility of any difference of significance within Laozi, as the sense of the notions just mentioned is, and can only be posited as, one of mediators between the global Tao and the local Te.*

Heidegger on Dasein, Umwelt, Being, and Metaphysics

Martin Heidegger is said to “have more than any other European philosopher initiated dialogue between the West and the Far East,” even as he has done so within the perspective and the necessities of his own thought.⁵⁷ This has made his philosophy most eligible for our comparative investigation, though its support for the point we advance here may not be immediately evident. We shall therefore endeavor to identify the interplay of global and local significations in his thinking by tracing it within the sense of a number of his key concepts.

Heidegger transformed the philosophical thinking of the last century by redefining its knowing subject in *existence*. The subject thus rediscovered as *Dasein* (literary *being-there* or *being-here*) could be no longer separated from the world in the manner of the prior philosophical tradition (including of thinkers like Descartes and Husserl). Instead, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger introduces *Dasein* as Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*), which includes in an inseparable unity also its familiar surrounding world (*Umwelt*) and its social world (*Mitsein*).⁵⁸ Thus, *Dasein*’s encounter with the world (*Welt*) within the familiarity of its *Umwelt* is initial only in a very conditional sense, as, in Heidegger’s view, in the unity of Being-in-the-world *Dasein*, *Umwelt*, and *Mitsein* (being-with) can only be equiprimordial (*gleichursprünglich*).⁵⁹ In this sense, *Dasein* is never completely on its own - *Dasein* is in its *Umwelt*, even when it has left it; *Dasein* is *Mitsein*, even when it is alone.

For Heidegger, the world is essentially *Dasein*’s world, as *Dasein* is the only “world-disclosing” (*weltbildend*) being. In his lectures from 1929-1930, he will claim that without *Dasein* the world would be the “worldless” (*weltlos*) world of the inanimate nature or the

⁵⁷Otto Pöggeler, “West-East Dialogue: Heidegger and Lao-tsu,” in Graham Parkes (ed.), *Heidegger and Asian Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 76.

⁵⁸Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 78ff, 91ff, 149ff; *Sein und Zeit*, SS 52ff, 63ff, 113ff.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 33, 176, 181, 187, 211, 245, 263, 343, 401; SS 13, 137, 141, 146, 168, 200, 220, 297, 350.

“impoverished” (*weltarm*) animalistic world.⁶⁰ As *Dasein* is existence, its disclosure of the world (*Welt*) is inevitably marked by its *Da-* (literary ‘there’ or ‘here’) and its thrownness (*Geworfenheit*).⁶¹ These locus pointers have no privileged (let alone foundational) epistemic status in its Being-in-the-world, but *Dasein* can disclose the world (*Welt*) only via its familiar surrounding world (*Umwelt*). It is a key point of Heidegger’s in *Being and Time* that what we are most familiar with – the beings (*Seiende*) in our *Umwelt* – is inevitably related to other beings and that by establishing the relations between them we actually expand our world. (An artisan’s shop refers to its products, their materials, suppliers, buyers, uses, etc.). In fact, “world” in the key sense in which Heidegger uses it, namely, as “pre-ontological existentiell signification,” is intrinsically related to our immediate environment (*Umwelt*), and it is from there that *Dasein* moves on forming the ontological concept of “worldhood.”⁶² By further expanding its own world by means of environmental pre-ontological significations, *Dasein* becomes also aware of its more general epistemic concerns, including of the questions of the Being of beings (*Sein des Seienden*) and of the meaning of Being (*Sinn von Sein*).

According to Heidegger, the question of the meaning of Being, which has been forgotten in the Western philosophical tradition, has been still implicitly at work in that tradition under the guise of other questions.⁶³ One such question is the question of the being or essence of beings as a whole, which has inaugurated and guided the Western metaphysical thinking from the pre-Socratics to Nietzsche. This question focused on the what-ness of beings (*Seiende*) but not on Being (*Sein*) as such. It asked about the nature of beings as such, with answers throughout the tradition raging from water (Tales), fire (Heraclitus), air (Anaximenes), and God (Medieval theology) to will to power (Nietzsche). Heidegger links this question to “the originary broader sense of *phusis*” of the early Greeks, which denoted “beings, as such and as a whole,” and understood them as having the “essence and character” of “emerging and abiding sway.”⁶⁴ One important characteristic of this sense is that it did not issue from a contrast between “physical” and “historical,” but instead included the latter as a part of the former.⁶⁵ Thus, for Heidegger, the word *phusis* already “means the Being of beings” and the inquiry of “‘physics’ in the ancient sense, is in itself already beyond *ta phusika*, on beyond beings, and is concerned with Being.”⁶⁶ However, as in this way “‘physics’ determines the essence and the history of metaphysics from the inception onward,” the metaphysical tradition has focused on the question of “beings as such,” whereas the question of “Being as such” remained unasked (or eventually confused with it) and thus in oblivion.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, translated by William McNeill & Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 176ff; *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 1983), SS 261ff.

⁶¹ *Being and Time*, pp. 174-175ff, 219-223; *Sein und Zeit*, SS 135-136ff, 175-179.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93, 93n; SS 64-65.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 21; S 2.

⁶⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 14-18; *Einführung in die Metaphysik, Gesamtausgabe, Band 40* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 1983), SS 15-19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.18; S 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19; S 19-20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20; SS 20-21.

For Heidegger, the fundamental question (*Grundfrage*) of metaphysics – “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” – focuses precisely on “beings as a whole and as such” (*das Seiende im Ganzen als ein solches*).⁶⁸ He calls this question “the broadest,” “the deepest,” “the most originary,” the “first in rank,” and “the *question* of all true questions,” which “is necessarily asked, knowingly or not, along every question,” and which is thus the condition for every (including scientific) knowledge and understanding.⁶⁹ But he alleges that this question points to and in a sense “forces us to the prior question (*Vor-frage*): ‘How does it stand with Being?’,” which otherwise put is the question of “the meaning of Being” or of “Being as such.”⁷⁰ Heidegger has indeed speculated whether rather this “prior question” is not the one that is the first in rank,⁷¹ but he ultimately asserts that it is included in the fundamental metaphysical question, which he has thus called “our guiding question” (*Leitfrage*).⁷²

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes Being (*Sein*) as ‘the most universal’, ‘indefinable’, and at the same time a ‘self-evident’ concept, which for him also explains its thematic neglect in the history of metaphysics.⁷³ Despite neglected and veiled under the guise of the question of beings (*Seiende*), the question of the meaning of Being has nonetheless operated within the workings of *Dasein*, which for Heidegger includes the history (*Geschichte*) of both the individual and its cultural community. For Heidegger, *historicality* (*Geschichtlichkeit*) is “*Dasein*’s specific” capacity of “Being-towards-the-beginning” (*Sein zum Anfang*), of “stretching along between birth and death,” and of maintaining the “connectedness of life,” a capacity which is grounded in the unity of *temporality*.⁷⁴ In effect, this capacity makes it possible for *Dasein* to reinvent – via its projective understanding⁷⁵ – past events and to actualize them with view to the future, including to reflect upon itself and beings, as well as to attain resolute visions.⁷⁶ Eventually, it will also make it possible for *Dasein* to identify Being as distinct from beings, to pursue the determination of its meaning, and to find its way to authentic existence.

As Heidegger sees it, the question of the meaning of Being is derivative of the so-called ontico-ontological differentiation of Being (*das Sein*) and beings (*das Seiende*), known also simply as *the ontological difference* (*die ontologische Differenz*). Though at work in the metaphysical thinking since the time of the pre-Socratics, the ontological difference has been masked within it alongside the oblivion of Being. More particularly, it has been masked by the tendencies of the traditional philosophers to take Being either as being amongst other beings (*Seiende*), as a mere property of a being, as an abstract generality, or as presence (in opposition to absence) in permanence.⁷⁷ Now the identification of the ontological difference is possible only as the question of Being is differentiated from, or unmasked at the bottom of,

⁶⁸ *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 3-6ff, 13-19; *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, SS 4-7ff, 14-20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.2-4, 7; SS 2-4, 8. Cf. *Being and Time*, p. 31; *Sein und Zeit*, S 11.

⁷⁰ *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 35, 44; *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, SS 36, 45.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 35; SS 7, 35.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.41; SS 42.

⁷³ *Being and Time*, pp. 21-24; *Sein und Zeit*, SS 2-4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.425-427; SS 373-375.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-188; SS 142-148.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 376; S 328.

⁷⁷ Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford, UK; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), pp. 47-48.

the question of beings. This is essentially a differentiating of Being from beings, which is a key event for the human historical *Dasein* – one that inaugurates the philosophical thinking by making ontology possible,

We must be able to bring out clearly the difference between being and beings in order to make something like being the theme of inquiry. This distinction is not arbitrary; rather, it is the one by which the theme of ontology and thus of philosophy itself is first of all attained. It is a distinction which is first and foremost constitutive for ontology. We call it the *ontological difference* – the differentiation between being and beings. Only by making this distinction – *krinein* in Greek – not between one being and another being but between being and beings do we first enter the field of philosophical research. Only by taking this critical stance do we keep our own standing inside the field of philosophy.⁷⁸

Within the project of *Being and Time*, the ontological difference becomes instrumental for the metaphysical workings of *Dasein*. It is transposed via *Dasein*'s *historicality* into its existence, including within its environment (*Umwelt*), socio-cultural community (*Mitsein*), and overall Being-in-the-world. It is the key for determination of the proper task of the metaphysics, which for Heidegger includes to revisit itself as fundamental ontology⁷⁹ that asks the question of the meaning of Being (*Sein*) as distinct from, and indeed as *nothing* amongst, beings (*Seiende*); to identify the being for which this question is a concern (namely, *Dasein*); to start working it out along the horizon of *time*; and to restore its original cultural force that has eluded the tradition.

We can note here that the ontological difference encompasses the significations of the global and the local under the concepts of *Being* and *beings* respectively, and that its metaphysical usage is indicative of their signifiatory interplay in the whole of Heidegger's early thinking. It is thus precisely within this interplay of the global *Being* and the local *beings* that his concepts of *Dasein*, *Umwelt*, *temporality*, *historicality*, *Mitsein*, *Being-in-the-world*, as well as all others, come to make any difference of significance whatsoever. In this sense, all the differences of significance within his early view can be seen as made possible and determined by the interplay of global and the local significations, within which they now reappear simply as its mediators. In our terms, this means that, as in the case of *Laozi*, the interplay of global and local significations can be seen as the condition for possibility of any difference of significance in Heidegger's early philosophy as well.

Heidegger's philosophy remains relevant to our present discussion, even upon his so-called Turn (*die Kehre*), which took shape in the 1930s and 1940s, and during which he repositioned his view of Being largely by putting it in a new perspective marked by his attempt at a critical overcoming of the metaphysical tradition. In fact, besides divergences in thematics, goals, and style, he himself has acknowledged that his later philosophy is "not a change

⁷⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 17; *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 1975), S 22. From the Greek verb *krinein* ("to separate, decide") comes *kritikos* ("able to make judgments"); hence, Heidegger's "critical stance."

⁷⁹ *Being and Time*, pp. 34-35; *Sein und Zeit*, SS 13-14.

from *Being and Time*,⁸⁰ thus indicating a certain continuation within his thought, which can be legitimately sought throughout his oeuvre, and which makes possible the usage of works from his different philosophical periods in a compatible and complementary fashion. It is remarkable, though, that if one is to search for a continuation in his understanding on the overcoming of the tradition, one can be struck by the realization that his radical revisiting of the Western metaphysics applies to the view of his *magnus opus* as well. Heidegger is well aware that his own thought too is born out of this tradition and likewise is to be duly overcome, for he has recognized that the metaphysical thinking is the source of the Western culture as a whole.⁸¹ For him, overcoming the metaphysics is a direct consequence of the identification of the question of Being and the ensuing need for rectifying the directions of the tradition. In *Being and Time*, this overcoming was associated with a specific “destruction” of that tradition (“destruction of the history of ontology,” “phenomenological destruction of the history of ontology,” “phenomenological destruction of ‘cogito sum’,” or “historical destruction of the history of metaphysics”).⁸² In his later work, it is linked to his notion of *nihilism*. The continuation between them is traceable, though, and it is perceivably centering on his view of *Nothing* (*Nichts*)

According to Heidegger, “the oblivion of Being” has brought within the metaphysical tradition a peculiar kind nihilism which essentially consists in the misrepresentation of Being along the tacit but ultimately flawed notion that Being is just a being amongst beings (“where one clings to current beings and believes it is enough to take beings ... just as the beings that they are”).⁸³ In this sense, overcoming the metaphysics requires an overcoming of the nihilism already at work in it. As Włodzimierz J. Korab-Karpowicz has neatly put it, “Metaphysics cannot be rejected, canceled or denied, but it can be overcome by demonstrating its nihilism.”⁸⁴ Heidegger does it essentially by importing the sense of Nothing (*Nichts*) that has been ignored in the previous understanding of Being (“to go expressly to the limit of Nothing... and to take Nothing into the question of Being”).⁸⁵ Early on, Heidegger had shown the existential inevitability of *Dasein*’s facing of the Nothing in the anxiety (*Angst*) of its experience of both the world (“the ‘nothing’ – that is, the world as such – exhibits itself as that in the face of which one has an anxiety”) and its own self-understanding (“the possible impossibility of its [own] existence”).⁸⁶ But later on, he already speaks about *nihilism* as “the fundamental occurrence of the Western history,” “fundamental feature of the Western history,” and “the lawful-

⁸⁰ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” translated by F. A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray, in D. F. Krell (ed.) *Basic Writings*, revised and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 231; “Brief über den ‘Humanismus’,” *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1967), S 160.

⁸¹ *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 2-4, 7; *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, SS 2-4, 8. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volumes III and IV*, edited by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), Vol. IV, p. 205; cf. *Nietzsche*, 1. Bd., 2. Bd. (Pfullingen: Günther Neske Verlag, 1961). Cf. *Being and Time*, p. 31; *Sein und Zeit*, S 11.

⁸² *Being and Time*, pp. 44-45, 63-64, 123, 444; *Sein und Zeit*, SS 22-23, 39-40, 89, 392.

⁸³ *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 217; *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, S 212.

⁸⁴ Włodzimierz J. Korab-Karpowicz, “Martin Heidegger (1889—1976),” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/>, September 20, 2018.

⁸⁵ *Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 2-3, 25-29, 217-218; *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, SS 4, 25-29, 211-212. Cf. *Nietzsche, Volumes III and IV*, Vol. III, pp. 25, 127, 188-189, 204-205.

⁸⁶ *Being and Time*, pp. 231-232, 321-322, 310, 356, 393; *Sein und Zeit*, SS 186-187, 266, 276-277, 308, 343.

ness of this historic occurrence, its ‘logic’,” pointing to its “affirmative” Nietzschean sense in the revaluation of all values.⁸⁷ In a straightforward passage which can help us recap his view of metaphysics and its nihilism, Heidegger writes,

Metaphysics as metaphysics is nihilism proper. The essence of nihilism is historically as metaphysics, and the metaphysics of Plato is no less nihilistic than that of Nietzsche. In the former, the essence of nihilism is merely concealed; in the latter, it comes completely to appearance. Nonetheless, it never shows its true face, either on the basis of or within metaphysics.

These are disturbing statements. For metaphysics determines the history of the Western era. Western mankind, in all its relations with beings, and even to itself, is in every respect sustained and guided by metaphysics. In the equation of metaphysics and nihilism one does not know which is greater – the arbitrariness, or the degree of condemnation of our entire history heretofore.⁸⁸

The coincidence of metaphysics with nihilism, and indeed its qualification as “nihilism proper,” can be traced to its insufficient consideration of the question of Being, which has resulted in its misguided move in direction of the Nothing. And yet, while coinciding with it, metaphysics does not “show” the “essence of nihilism,” as it cannot bring it forth as being, (no matter how it understands being). As metaphysics is determinative of history, its inability to heed sufficiently the differentiation between Being and beings, that is, to understand Being as nothing among beings, and indeed as delimited only by Nothing, has led to its “arbitrariness” and “condemnation” alike. Thus, it is by demonstrating its nihilism that the metaphysics can be overcome, which in essence would be a (re-)introduction of its nothingness, or resurrection of the meaning of *Being* as fundamentally determined only by *Nothing*.

Later on, Heidegger would trace the metaphysical tradition to the character of our technological age, in which metaphysics, having lost its originary link with Being, has been reduced to instrumentalism and epistemology. The task of the thinker then would be to restore this link by overcoming the currently dominant “mode of revealing,” that of technology, which for Heidegger is essentially an “enframing” (*Gestell*) that ordains nature instrumentally – as “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*) or resource⁸⁹ – while fostering “the idea of technology as metaphysics completing itself.”⁹⁰ Key to this overcoming is the Greek sense of *poiesis*, which Heidegger renders as “bringing-forth” (*Her-vor-stellen*), which is also shared by *phusis* and *techne*, and which reveals that in its originary meaning *techne* “is something poetic.”⁹¹ By opposing the originary poetic meaning of *techne* to the technological culture of our age, Heidegger suggests a direction of philosophical thinking that would be eventually more promising for the future of humanity. While fairly pessimistic on the prospects of our era, Heidegger believed that the overcoming of metaphysics is nonetheless possible because Being, the link to which we have largely lost, is still sheltered in the language of the great poets (such as Sophocles, Hölderlin, Trakl, Rilke, and others), whose greatness has issued from the

⁸⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volumes III and IV*, Vol. III, pp. 204 -205.

⁸⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volumes III and IV*, Vol. IV, p. 205.

⁸⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *Basic Writings*, pp. 324ff; Cf. *Die Frage nach der Technik, Gesamtausgabe, Band 7*, (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 2000), SS 20ff.

⁹⁰ Michael Wheeler, “Martin Heidegger,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/heidegger/>>

⁹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, pp. 317-319ff; cf. *Die Frage nach der Technik*; SS 12-14ff.

close touch they have kept with the immediately emerging world of nature (*phusis*), a touch which has prompted the ancient Greeks' originary quest for Being. Hence, Heidegger will advance the notion of "the thinker as a poet" who would be able to point to, restore, and safeguard in culture the genuine quest with Being.⁹²

Within our terminology, the differentiation of Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seinde*) is indicative of an original and intrinsic relation of what is conceptually most general, widest, and global (that is, Being) to what is most particular, singular, and local (that is, beings). This relation is perhaps best demonstrated by the manner in which the tradition has obliterated the question of the meaning of Being by pursuing answers to the question of the being of beings. For it has sought being amongst beings, amongst the things that are – it has sought what is most encompassing into what is individually present, what is most general into what is particular, what is most global into what is local. Thus, it has also demonstrated that the quest for the global is essentially and substantially intertwined with the local and that the local can be properly understood only on the basis of the global. In a certain sense, it may appear that this quest has started from the local, from the locality of *Dasein*'s familiar proximity (*Umwelt*) (with all the particular beings in it), and has expanded along its social world (*Mitsein*) to the totality of beings as such and as a whole (*phusis*); that is, to globality and to Being as such. But for Heidegger the equiprimordiality of *Dasein*, *Umwelt*, and *Mitsein* in Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) means that *Being* and *beings*, the global and the local, are equiprimordial as well, and that in the interplay of their significations they are essentially inseparable from one another. Likewise, as we already noted, given the fundamental status of the terms of the ontological difference, all other concepts of Heidegger's early view make their difference of significance only within the interplay of significations of the global (*Being*) and the local (*beings*), an interplay by which they are conditioned, made possible, and determined, and within which they assume the role of its mediators.

In this way, the global and the local could be seen in a peculiar exchange (a conversation) that has been inaugurated in *Dasein*'s temporality and maintained throughout its history. As, unlike the Western metaphysical tradition, Heidegger regarded *Being* as delimited only by *Nothing*, rather than as being amongst beings, in his later work he pursued to overcome the metaphysics by demonstrating the *nihilism* inherent to it; that is, by re-introducing in it the *essential nothingness* of Being, which it had heedlessly ignored. Subsequently, the post-metaphysical thinking he demanded was to supplant what he regarded as the modern technological *enframing* of our existence with a poetic revealing of our genuine link to Being, which was to be found in close touch with *phusis* (beings as such and as a whole). In this sense, *poiesis*, as bringing forth and gathering, is understood as ensuring the safeguarding of our originary, authentic, and genuine concern with Being, which in our terms would be ensuring the safeguarding of the most promising link between the local and the global.

We can now point to certain core similarities between Heidegger's view and that of *Laozi*, which have become apparent in our discussion so far, and which allow us to identify certain aspects of relation between them that ultimately render a dialogue between them pos-

⁹² Martin Heidegger, "What are Poets for?" *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), pp. 89-139; "Wozu Dichter," *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe, Band 5* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1977), SS 269-320.

sible. Apart from aligning in our exposition in a correspondent fashion the notions of *Tao* and *Te*, *Being* and *beings*, *global* and *local* respectively, the first terms of these pairs share what we called *essential nothingness* as an intrinsic aspect of their sense and core determination.⁹³ This is largely due to the abstract nature of these notions, whose sense, though essentially universalistic and global, could be only arbitrarily and ultimately – as attested within these views – inadequately determined. The essential nothingness of these notions, however, if properly understood, can be seen as bringing merit to these views, particularly when the relation between the terms in each pair is to be properly established. This merit is carried in by the *particular individual*, whose role is to ensure the local adequacy of this relation – be it by way of *wu-wei*, *resolute vision*, or *poiesis* – which in effect is some form of deconstruction along the way of accommodating knowledge to practice.

We can note here that such a deconstruction appears to be a necessary feature of the interplay of global and local significations within the views of Heidegger and *Laozi*, a feature which issues from the essential nothingness intrinsic to their key notions. And yet, within our perspective, whether or not such a deconstruction will take place within a certain view or a way of understanding, ultimately will not preclude the status of the interplay in question from being the condition for possibility of any difference of significance both in the life of the single individual and in culture and praxis as a whole.

Rorty's Philosophy as Politics

Though perhaps again not immediately obvious, the metaphilosophy of Richard Rorty exemplifies the interplay of global and local significations in its own way and advances the notion of philosophy as conversation which is open to the rest of the culture and which is essentially global, even as it is maintained locally.

Revisiting the role of philosophy in its post-metaphysical stage, Rorty focuses on the metaphilosophical question of “How are we to conceive of our relation to the Western philosophical tradition?” In his view, so far three answers have been given to this question, namely, *scientific* (Husserlian), *poetic* (Heideggerian), and *political* (pragmatist).⁹⁴

Rorty sees the *scientific* answer in the foundationalist quests of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and of the neopositivist philosophy advanced by Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege, for whom philosophy is supposed to facilitate the accumulation of objective knowledge in all areas of “the rest of the culture” by providing them with a “formal scheme” that effectively serves as their “foundation”; that is, grounds them epistemologically and

⁹³ In her discussion of related aspects of Taoism and Heidegger's philosophy, Joan Stambaugh has also juxtaposed *Tao* and *Being*, but she places her emphasis on parallels between Heidegger's latter notions of *Weg* (way) and *Gelassenheit* (releasement), on the one hand, and *Tao* and *wu-wei*, on the other. Stambaugh's discussion is very insightful and provides ideas for further investigations on parallels between the two views. It is also complementary with our investigation, even though most of her findings do not immediately relate to our goals here. See “Heidegger, Taoism, and the Question of Metaphysics,” *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, pp. 79-91.

⁹⁴ Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2* (Cambridge, UK, New York, NY, Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 9.

makes their advancement possible.⁹⁵ The *poetic* answer, on the other hand, Rorty links to Heidegger's critique of Husserlian foundationalism that the very "demand for foundations" is already symptomatic of the "misguided rationalism" of the tradition,⁹⁶ which, as we have seen, needs to be overcome with the help of *poiesis*. Finally, Rorty associates the *political* answer with the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey, for whom science and knowledge were inevitably linked with the "social hope" for emancipation and progress. Adopting a Deweyan attitude to knowledge and a utilitarian political goal, Rorty advances his own pragmatist version of political answer for the post-metaphysical role of philosophy that will characteristically blend also elements of scientific and poetic answers.

In an attunement with the metaphilosophical reflections of the later Husserl, who saw philosophy as leading the effort for cultural renewal,⁹⁷ Rorty assigns to philosophy a broader cultural role that goes well beyond its own re-current self-apperception. And similarly to Heidegger, he sees the role of philosophy as being essentially deconstructive for purposes of safeguarding, which in Rorty's case is a pragmatic safeguarding of a politically viable and socially hopeful societal organization. As Rorty sees it, "the task of philosophy is to break the crust of convention" in a way that can "help achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number by facilitating the replacement of language, customs, and institutions which impede that happiness."⁹⁸ In this sense, he values thinkers like Husserl and Heidegger, as well as all the great figures of the cultural tradition, most of all with regard to the socio-political purpose thus defined, however distant their contribution to it may seem. Thus, for Rorty, philosophy's role here, though not in disregard of its more immediate intellectual tasks, can only be pragmatic. It is one that utilizes the richness of the cultural tradition as the instrumentarium for its lofty purpose and does so in a self-conscious fashion,

The pragmatist thinks that the tradition needs to be utilized, as one utilizes a bag of tools. Some of these tools, these 'conceptual instruments' – including some which continue to have undeserved prestige – will turn out no longer to have a use, and can just be tossed out. Others can be refurbished. Sometimes new tools may have to be invented on the spot.⁹⁹

To be sure, Rorty apperceives the political usefulness of the scientific and poetic answers in different ways. He views the language of the scientific thinkers as confined to the epistemic realm of *perception* and *inference*, which, on his view, bind the thinker to the logic of language and its immediate relation to reality while disallowing a passage beyond the early

⁹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 8. See also pp. 166-169, 269, 369, 390.

⁹⁶ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 11.

⁹⁷ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp.16-18; cf. *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie: eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, herausgegeben von Walter Biemel, *Husserliana*, *bd. VI* (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), SS. 15-17. See also "Renewal: Its Problem and Method," P. McCormick & F.A. Elliston (Eds), *Husserl: Shorter Works* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 326-331; cf. "Erneuerung. Ihr Problem und ihre Methode," *Aufsätze und Vorträge*, *Husserliana*, *bd. XXVII* (Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1989), SS. 3-13.

⁹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 11, 20.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Witgensteinean notion that philosophizing is a ‘clarification of thoughts’.¹⁰⁰ For him, this means that the scientific philosophy remains tied to the foundationalist presupposition that there is a “true, natural, ahistorical matrix of all knowledge and language,” and thus to the task of discovering and offering it to the rest of the culture.¹⁰¹ Consequently, Rorty sees the scientific philosophy as “escaping from history,” as generating “a little influence” and “a little interest” outside itself, and thus as losing its relevance to practice.¹⁰²

On the other hand, Rorty sees Heidegger’s poetic response to the tradition as introducing within the philosophical language the *metaphor* as a “voice from outside the logical space.”¹⁰³ In effect, the metaphorical usage of language allows for revisiting and deconstruction of any foundationalist thinking, by offering a passage outside its logic and its ahistorical perspective into the significations of history. Thus, for Rorty, thinkers like Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Hegel, advance “metaphilosophy... in the form of an historical narrative which places the works of the philosophers within the historical development of culture.”¹⁰⁴ In Rorty’s view, this historical approach to the contributions of the tradition – unlike the ahistorical one of the scientific philosophy – leaves philosophy open to and in close relation with the other areas of culture; it likewise makes it relevant to practice and politically significant.¹⁰⁵

Now, Heidegger, besides his unfortunate political affiliations, never assigned any immediate political purpose to the metaphorical language. He thought of the ‘thinker as a poet’ as having the broader cultural role of safeguarding Being but this role itself remains broadly outlined and lacking on further specifics. Rorty, for his part, endeavors to adopt his ‘poetical’ metaphors for a political goal, which is more specific in terms of purpose but in essence remains broadly defined along the classic utilitarian thesis of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.”¹⁰⁶ The manner of achieving this goal is also fairly broadly defined as “reducing human suffering and oppression” by their “continual exposure” in all their forms.¹⁰⁷ So far as the specifics of the metaphilosophical role of philosophy (including regarding its goal and the manner of its achievement) are concerned, Rorty remains cautious – apparently due to a concern of falling into the trap of the ‘ahistorical’ scientism, which would confer undue objectivity along its justificatory proceedings. Instead, Rorty seeks to apperceive this role in a way that is effectively historical and better immune against the perceptual and inferential limits of the scientific language. Essentially, this means that our relation to the tradition can be better understood if we are able to grasp its historical voice along its peculiar historical exchange of metaphors, rather than if we remain trapped within the ahistorical perspective of the scientific philosophizing. Ultimately, for him, this historical voice is most vividly detectable “in the last two centuries’ attempts to realize the ideals of the French revolution”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 23-24; cf. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *A Comment on the Commentaries and A Fragment on Government*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 393.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 12-25.

and calls for “contribution to social freedom” and for the creation of a world, in which “every human potentiality is given a fair chance.”¹⁰⁸

We need to note here that Rorty’s vision on the use of grasping the ‘voice’ of the exchange of metaphors in history is nonetheless different from that of Heidegger’s. Unlike Heidegger, for whom the thinker as poet aims to revive the forgotten metaphors which still shelter the voice of Being from the contemporary “technological frenzy,” Rorty sees the social contribution of the political pragmatist in providing, giving a chance, and letting “new, vibrantly alive metaphors” become “literalized” or “dead metaphors.”¹⁰⁹ These new metaphors that will arise, fade, and become literalized – on the way to “realizing the ideals of the French revolution” and achieving “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” – will announce the historical, not merely ahistorical termination of the human suffering and injustice. They will announce the historical, not merely the ahistorical, realization of the social hope.

Like other contemporary thinkers, Rorty saw the political role of philosophy as a kind of social critique, which exposes social injustice in order to facilitates social progress and emancipation. Rorty, however, thinks that ‘radical criticism’ is not necessary, because “the contemporary democratic societies are *already* organized around the need of continual exposure of the human suffering and injustice.”¹¹⁰ A key point that he makes in this regard is that the issue of “democracy-versus-totalitarianism” is “as basic as an intellectual issue can get” and we cannot simply negate it as a ‘phenomenon of modernity’, as Heidegger and Adorno did.¹¹¹ Rorty’s stand is clear here - it is democracy and at that social democracy that can serve best the Deweyan “social hope” for ridding our world of “human suffering and oppression”; whereas philosophers – in their task of exposing and reducing them – become “politically useful in the same way as poets, playwrights, economists, and engineers.”¹¹²

Rorty has expressed a general optimism in the capacity of the humanity race to create a world of social justice and emancipation, in which we continuously achieve “the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” including an optimism over the pessimism of thinkers like Heidegger and Adorno regarding the dangers of our relation of technology.¹¹³ But he has also expressed his pessimism regarding the state of the human affairs in our contemporary world, linking their problems to the relations between power and politics across the globe. He has not hesitated to localize various *forms* of “human suffering and oppression,” including “those endured by women as a class,” “the imminent nuclear holocaust, the permanent drug-riddled black underclass in the US, the impossibility of feeding countries like Haiti and Chad.” He has likewise localized various *powers* responsible for them, including “the oilmen of Texas or Qatar or Mexico, the nomenklatura of Moscow and Bucharest, the generals of Indonesia or Chile,” the governments of the “rich or the military” in the Third world, the communist governments of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.¹¹⁴ Still, Rorty would not give in to the pessimistic factology, nor would he to his disillusioning ascertainment that “our political imagi-

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 18, 25.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 19.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 24-25.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

nation has not been enlarged by the philosophy of our century.”¹¹⁵ Instead, by dropping the “metaphilosophical scientism,” he would advance a political role of philosophy that keeps the debate going “in terms of actual problems” that the democratic societies face in order to rid the world of “suffering and injustice.”¹¹⁶ Many of the forms and sources of human suffering and injustice pointed by Rorty have been already eliminated or contained at the present time, at least in part due to our increased capacity of a philosophical socio-cultural reflection of the type he has described. This has likewise vindicated at least in part his point that, together with the scientist, the artist, the engineer, and everybody else, philosopher can effectively give his or her fair share for achieving the *greatest happiness for the greatest number of people*.

Rorty’s metaphilosophy is a result of his pragmatic appropriation of the philosophical tradition. Dropping the scientific metaphilosophy served him to open the area of philosophy to the rest of the culture and indeed to all culture. The Heideggerian ‘poetic’ response served him as an instrument to expand the language of philosophy beyond the scientific ahistorical perspective and into a historical one. Whereas the pragmatist sense of the Deweyan social hope, which he further specified as a realization of the “ideals of the French revolution,” served him to orient philosophy towards a goal that is essentially political. Leaving aside any ahistorical philosophizing while resorting to heeding to the voice of history has made it possible for Rorty to insist that this sense of politics, which advances democracy, and specifically social democracy, has a priority to any other task that philosophy could set to itself.¹¹⁷ He has thus seen knowledge as “solidarity,”¹¹⁸ as “conversation,” and indeed as “the conversation of mankind,” rather than as an essentialist exercise that is justified ahistorically,

If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists and philosophers, but rather as right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood.¹¹⁹

Rorty has thus neatly fitted within our terms here. By rejecting the philosophical scientism in its both positivistic and phenomenological forms he has lined up with *Laozi* and Heidegger in accounting for what we called the *essential nothingness* that lies at the core of any philosophizing. For him, this meant that, rather than searching for an essence, philosophy would be better off maintaining its conversation. In the same way, it also meant adopting a *political* approach to the philosophical tradition, which, while eschewing the ahistorical essentialism of the ‘scientific’ one, retains pragmatically the historicity of the ‘poetic’ one. Consequently, Rorty apperceives the task of the philosophy and the rest of culture as set by history upon the goal of achieving “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹⁷ Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1* (Cambridge, UK, New York, NY, Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 175-196.

¹¹⁸ “Solidarity or Objectivity?” and “Science as Solidarity,” *ibid.*, pp. 21-34, 35-45; cf. Richard Rorty, *Continuity, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK, New York, NY, Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially pp. 141ff.

¹¹⁹ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 389.

We can note here that it is characteristic of this goal that, besides being political, it is also a global one, and that it can be achieved globally only if it is achieved locally. Rorty believes this could be done by dispelling the various forms of human “suffering and oppression” with the help of a pragmatic utilization of the trustworthy resource of the global cultural tradition, as well as with the active involvement of the individual human beings in their capacity of problem-solvers (including as scientists, artists, engineers, philosophers, and others). Thus, the “social hope” that Rorty advances is in its essence a global one, whereas its true realization needs to go through a peculiar type of philosophical conversation that is indeed enacted and operated locally but reaches out globally. Properly speaking, such a conversation could only take the form of a global cultural exchange, whereas the individuals involved in it can be seen as participants in a conversation that goes well beyond its local significance to attain a global one, thus becoming a global conversation.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the terms “the greatest happiness” and “the greatest number,” which I take – within our terms here – to be the most indicative of the significations of, respectively, the global and the local in Rorty’s view. For, the sense of the former refers to what is most abstract, far-reaching, and universal (that is, global), whereas that of latter to what is most particular, singular, and individual (that is, local). As in the case of *Laozi’s Tao* and *Te*, as well as Heidegger’s *Being* and *beings*, these Rorty’s terms delimit the sense and meaning of all the others terms he considers resourceful in his metaphilosophical perspective, such as *metaphor*, *progress*, *poetical*, *historical*, *political*, and others. The latter can be thus seen as being simply mediators in the interplay of the significations of “the greatest happiness” and “the greatest number,” an interplay which we also characterized as mediating between theory and practice. In this sense, the interplay of the significations of the global and the local becomes again the condition for possibility of any difference of significance in Rorty’s view, very much as it does also in the views of Lao-tse and Heidegger.

In conclusion

The above discussion of the three thinkers was meant to show that their philosophical views inevitably involve an interplay of global and local significations. Lao-tse’s notion of the relation of *Tao* and *Te*, Heidegger’s view of *Dasein’s* ascendance from *beings* to *Being* via its *Umwelt*, and Rorty’s pragmatist pursuit of the “greatest happiness for the greatest number” all present us with concepts that express a fundamental and intrinsic relation between what is conceptually most general, widest, and *global* (that is, *Tao*, *Being*, *greatest happiness*), and what is most particular, singular, and *local* (that is, *Te*, *beings*, *greatest number*). Likewise, they presented the human individuals in exchange of differences of significance both in the locality of their own existence and into the global whole of theoretical and practical exchanges, to which they inevitably belonged. These are exchanges of differences in various cultural, axiological, historical, economic, socio-political, intercultural, literary, and other senses. They are indicative of a peculiar type of conversation, which exchanges differences just as the simplest form of dialogical conversation does.

This sense of *conversation* is thus one key conceptual feature that the views of these three thinkers have in common. Their conversationalist character points – in each instant – to a belonging-together of the differences they exchange through and through. For, if “in language there are only differences,”¹²⁰ a conversation is bringing differences together, and bringing them in a way that is meaningful. Thus, each of these views is a conversation on its own that purports to be a meaningful conversation, whereas brought together, as is our purpose here, they must form a yet another meaningful conversation. Any conversation itself is also making a difference, whereas making a difference is a contribution of a viewpoint that provides a better chance for what has been viewed to be properly seen and understood. Indeed, the idea that a yet another viewpoint, and indeed multiple viewpoints, is epistemically significant in knowledge justification has been long since appreciated in our intellectual history. Particularly, in the modern philosophical thinking, it got a rationalistic elaboration in the work of Gottfried Leibniz who designated it as *monadology*,¹²¹ a term that was later on adopted by Husserl, who elaborated on it to insure phenomenology with objectivity and universality.¹²² Our notion of conversation thus includes the sense of monadology, the interrelations of concepts within a particular worldview or theory, the interdependences of theory and practice, as well as the cultural and the intercultural exchange of differences as a whole.

Equally, a conversation in this sense is also a *global* conversation. For a difference never stands alone – it is always in relation to other differences, and indeed to all other differences whatsoever. Being *global* is thus another feature that the views of these three thinkers inevitably have in common. This sense of global, however, does not just mean widespread around the planet. Instead, it signifies global in the transcendental sense - the sense which Kant tied with the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, the sense of his Copernican revolution, which presumed that “that objects must conform to our knowledge,” rather than the other way around.¹²³ The sense of global ‘as widespread around the planet’, the geographical sense, only instantiates the transcendental sense; that is, it exemplifies its sense of abstract universality in the empirical way. For their part, the phenomenological and existential approaches would bypass the empirical experience for the sake of transcendental and existential experience, but will only affirm the status of the *global* as a *condition for the possibility of knowledge* once again. For, in their respective epistemic perspectives, whether as the Husserlian universality of the phenomenon or as the Heideggerian emerging *phusis* of beings as such and as a whole, the *global* would still be indispensable in the construction of knowledge.

¹²⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1959), p. 120; cf. *Cours de linguistique générale*, édité par Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye et Albert Riedlinger, (Paris: Payot, 1971), p. 166.

¹²¹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Leibniz's Monadology: A New Translation And Guide* by Lloyd Strickland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); cf. *La Monadologie*, édition annotée par Émile Boutroux (Paris: Delagave, 2017).

¹²² Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 140; cf. *Husserliana*, *bd. I* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), S 167.

¹²³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1929), B xvii; *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1952), B xvii.

At the same time, this sense of conversation has also a *local* dimension, for it is always re-enacted and maintained *on the spot*. It is not just a socio-cultural occurrence, nor merely an abstract speculative construction, (even though it could be viewed that way when its concept is taken up for deconstruction). It is a conversation that has a concrete and keenly detectable expression, which makes it bound to particular circumstances and context of understanding. It is thus fitting not only within Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* as temporalizing in its *Umwelt*, but also within Wittgenstein's view of the *language games*, where "the *speaking* of language" is understood as "part of an activity, or of a form of life."¹²⁴ Still, in the conversation, the local signifies on a par with the global, and again – not just in a particular geographical sense. It signifies also in the transcendental sense, in which the local is understood as going beyond the immediate environment of its locality to signify as universality, or globality. For, a difference that arises locally is at once also a difference globally, whereas the local and the global are – as significations – mutually implicated. Thus, the local is a *condition for the possibility of knowledge* on a par with the global: they form a fundamental difference which, regardless of its conceptual-terminological expression (*Tao-Te*, *Being-beings*, *greatest happiness-greatest number*), is indispensable for any construction of knowledge.

It is in this sense of *conversation*, *global*, and *local*, that thinkers, as different as Lao-tse, Martin Heidegger, and Richard Rorty, can be seen as participating in a *global conversation on the spot*. Within these terms, they can be also seen as having a lot more in common than it may be initially supposed. However, our contention goes even further than that to assert that this must be also true of and keenly detectable within the work of many other thinkers, including across disciplines and cultures. For, our discussion of these key terms also indicates that, so long as such fundamental philosophical concepts as *Loazi's Tao*, Heidegger's *Being*, and Rorty's *political* are readily representable within them, *any form of philosophical and cultural difference can be represented as an interplay of both global and local significations*.

Our study thus concludes with the purported assertion that *the recurrence of the global into the local and vice versa* is not accidental but is instead the condition for possibility of any difference of significance both in the life of the single individual and in culture and praxis as a whole. A separate study could seek to identify more common aspects of the three views at stake, but in the perspective of the present one two of them, which we consider most fundamental and key to identifying all others, have already become manifest: 1) the *essential nothingness* of the principal concepts of *Loazi's Tao*, Heidegger's *Being*, and Rorty's *political*; and 2) the decisive role of the *particular individual* for the maintenance of the global conversation. What we called the essential nothingness of *Loazi's Tao*, Heidegger's *Being*, and Rorty's *political* stems from their indefinability in positive terms. As we saw, *Tao* as *wu*, *Being* as *nothing*, and the *political* as *non-essentialist* play the principal conceptual part in their respective views but remain beyond the human capacity for determination. It is thus the particular individual that needs to make up for their indefinability by accounting for it and by using crit-

¹²⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe/ *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Oxford, UK; Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 23.

ical thought and creativity in a quest for positivity – be it peace and harmony, the meaning of Being, or the greatest happiness of the greatest number. For, the single individual – whether thinker or doer, theoretician or practitioner, creator or appreciator, writer or reader, performer or spectator, teacher or learner, producer or consumer – is the *modus operandi* of the interplay between the global and the local, who keeps the global conversation going, a conversation that he or she is always and inevitably having on the spot.