

Heidegger and Lao Sze-Kwang on Human Finitude

I

At the academic conference held in 2007 as part of the celebration of Mr. Lao Sze-Kwang's 70th birthday, I published an article about my mentor's early thinking on the problem of selfhood; ten years later I wrote another essay about his view on death. I have reread those works recently, and I feel really embarrassed for my inability to truly grasp my mentor's ideas. Lao had a deep understanding of the meaning of life. As early as fifty years ago, he already had deep insights into the finitude of life: the conflict of *li* (理 principle) and *fen* (分 proper place), the inevitability of guilt and suffering—the pathos of life was elaborated and demonstrated in its entirety. If we can authentically face the truth of human existence, there is absolutely no invincible answer to the problem of life. Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity—all these philosophies and religions can certainly show us the direction of finding the finality of life, but none of them can truly solve the problem of finitude. Lao said, “In practical terms, the vitality of an individual is finite, and they cannot be all accomplished at the same time, so guilt must arise. This is the real ‘limitation of freedom in subjectivity,’ the real ‘tragedy of life,’ the real inevitable ‘guilt’ and ‘suffering.’”¹

Lao talks neither about the transcendence of *yuanjiao* (圓教 perfect teaching) in Confucianism nor about *xiaoyao* (逍遙 the carefree state) in Daoism, but he plainly affirms the spirit of *chengdang* (承當 taking on responsibility), accepting the finitude of life along with the inevitability of guilt and suffering: “We are taking on responsibility of all guilt and suffering; in the meantime there emerges a *De* (德 virtue or morality). Here is the manifestation of subjective freedom in its final stage.”² Regarding this virtue of *chengdang*, I think Lao has

¹ Lao Sze-Kwang, *The Punishment of History—Revised Edition* (in Chinese), ed. Leung Mei-Yee, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000, p. 224.

² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

already surpassed the conception of “moral cultivation” in traditional Confucianism, in respect to seeking not only the self-conscious manifestation of *de* beyond success and failure, but also the affirmation of helplessness amidst the pathos of life, ascertaining the meaning of life by guilt and suffering that are inescapable even for the sages. Lao’s spirit of *chengdang* is an idea not so much in Confucianism as in the Stoicism of the Graeco-Roman period or of Spinoza in the early modern period.

It seems that Lao’s philosophical elaboration on the “finitude of life” is restricted to two of his early writings: *On the “Spirit of Chengdang” and the “Highest Freedom”* (1962) and *The Pathos of Life and the Positive Implications of Existentialism* (1963); there was no more discussion on this topic afterwards. In the end of his writing of 1962, Lao proposes a possible development of this idea and he says, “Since a clue dawned on me ten years ago, I have only had a small advancement. After that, I gradually moved towards its full implementation, and I have much more cordial appreciation of *The Punishment of History*. While *The Punishment of History* is a work for the general public, my small advancement is not something easy to understand. Therefore, I have written this epilogue. I hope that someday I could write another book to present the problems I have come across here.”³ Unfortunately, Lao never published this book during his lifetime. Notwithstanding, I believe that Lao has already integrated the spirit of *Chengdang*, with both enthusiasm and pessimism, into his life of the following fifty years. But these two works have touched upon an extremely important philosophical topic concerning the Being of man: the finitude of life. It seems that Lao’s interpretation of finitude from the perspective of individual’s vitality cannot fully reveal its plentiful implications. The finitude of man is not limited to his bodily vitality; it involves deeper life issues such as the death of concrete life and the problem of self-hood. I think that Lao’s thinking is partly compatible with Heidegger’s discussion of the finitude of Dasein. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes about Dasein, death (*Tod*), conscience (*Gewissen*), guilt (*Schuld*), authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) and temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*), all of which are closely related to the finitude of man and comparable to Lao’s thinking on the pathos and finitude of life. The objective of this essay is thus to compare Heidegger’s interpretation of man’s finitude with that of Lao.

³ *Ibid.*

II

As everyone knows, the meaning of Being is the most important question for Heidegger. The analytics of Dasein (*Daseinsanalytik*) is the central theme of *Being and Time*, but it is only a preliminary study for the question of Being. Dasein is man's mode of Being. Heidegger considers the identification of man's Being with that of other beings a fundamental error in metaphysics, for it fails to differentiate man's Being from that of other beings. Therefore, whether man is defined as a rational animal (*zoon logon echon*), an image of God (*imago dei*), a being with Buddha-nature or goodness, a thinking substance (*res cogitans*), a subject (*Subjekt*) or a subjectivity (*Subjektivität*), he is always regarded as something present-at-hand (*Vorhandenes*). In §4 of *Being and Time* Heidegger states clearly from the very beginning the particularity of Dasein which draws the distinction between man and other beings: Dasein is a being that in its Being it is concerned about its Being.⁴ In other words, as an ontological specification, Dasein has a primordial understanding of Being. This specification is the backbone of *Being and Time*; the two closely related aspects of Dasein mentioned in §9, i.e., existence (*Existenz*) and mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*), or its extended meaning as being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*), or the final interpretation of Dasein as care (*Sorge*)—all these are different modes of emergence of the primordial understanding of Being. All these ways of elaboration are equivalent to the assertion that the existence of man cannot be understood through what he is but through his potentiality-of-being (*Seinkönnen*). In other words, I understand my existence through how I am (*Wie-sein*) rather than what I am (*Was-sein*).

Of course, Lao had no interest in Heidegger's existential phenomenology, but he also noticed that "I" cannot be anything determined: "Namely, 'I' is a pure activity, transcending all kinds of determination, so it is indeterminable (since anything determinable must be part of a series of conditions); how 'I' become is not founded upon any conditional determination, so it is illegitimate to say how 'I' must be; 'how I become' is 'how I act'."⁵ According to Lao, neither the objective state of affairs nor the theory of essence in traditional metaphysics can determine my existence. I cannot be a thinker, a Christian or a

⁴ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, §4.

⁵ Lao Sze-Kwang, *Genealogy of Philosophical Problems* (in Chinese), ed. Lau Kwok-Ying, Cheung Chan-Fai. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001, pp. 8-9.

Confucian by the nature I bestow upon myself, whether it is rationality, divinity or goodness; the self is actualized by the three capabilities therein, that is, cognition, morality and aesthetics. The crucial point here is Lao's open-mindedness to philosophy, for the self is not only composed of four states: cognitive self, moral self, aesthetic self and physical self. Lao says, "Moreover, because the self is not situated in a series of conditional determinations, it is unrestricted; and because it is indeterminable, there is no guarantee how it becomes, and it can have a myriad of states. The tripartite composition here is just a method of categorization. I do not think that this is the only possible way, but it is indeed a theory of high efficacy."⁶ In this regard, Lao did not discuss the problem of human nature from a metaphysical perspective; cognition, morality and aesthetics, none of these refer to an essential human nature. The three capabilities are just possibilities for me or men in general. In Heideggerian terms, these are just three possibilities of potentiality-of-being (*Seinkönnen*). The problem with traditional theories of human nature is that they make the affirmation of man's essence the highest criterion of qualifying a man *qua* man, leading to countless debates on human nature. If rationality is affirmed as the essence of man, the realization of its potential becomes the meaning and goal of life while other capabilities will be degraded as secondary. The same holds true for Mencius's theory of original goodness: those who can develop the Four Sprouts of original goodness achieve perfect moral personality. But the problem of essence is ontological—a problem of "having" or "not having," it does not necessarily lead to an axiology that concerns any "should" or "should not." There must be a theoretical leap. I may have rationality or morality, but why must I develop them? Is the realization of rationality or morality necessary?

Lao's theory of self-liberation and his later orientative philosophy happen to be a breakaway from the persistent debate on human nature. "I" is not an object, and there is no a priori essence that can determine what I am. Only through my conscious freedom are the activities of life revealed to me. Heidegger's interpretation of man's mode of Being as Dasein begins with two ontological specifications: existence (*Existenz*) and mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*). "*The essence of Dasein lies in its existence,*"⁷ and "existence" is the very Being to which Dasein can always

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 67.

relate in one way or another.⁸ In Heideggerian context, “Existenz” is neither *existentia*, the opposite of *essentia* in traditional philosophy, nor the conception of subjective existence in existentialism. The interpretation of “existence” here rests on Dasein’s understanding of its being-in-the-world and its associated relations in the world. The Being of Dasein is regarded as a distinctive state of Being because it is a state of existence. Therefore, Dasein is an *existing* being (*existierendes Seiendes*). This distinctive state of existence is “the self-in-its-being-understanding-its-being” (*das sich-in-seinem-Sein-zu-seinem-Sein-verhalten*). The essence of Dasein is not determined by “what”; it is related to Dasein’s modes of potentiality-of-being (*Zu-sein*) rather than being understood as something determined. “And because we cannot define Dasein’s essence by citing a ‘what’ of the kind that pertains to a subject-matter (*eines sachhaltigen Was*), and because its essence lies rather in the fact that in each case it has its Being to be, and has it as its own, we have chosen to designate this entity as ‘Dasein,’ a term that is purely an expression of its Being (*als reiner Seinsausdruck*).”⁹ The Being of Dasein emerges in itself from its ways of Being, that is, Dasein understands Being through its own existence. This is about the constitution of relations from which the structure of Being itself emerges.

Lao’s way of thinking is, of course, different from Heidegger’s, but they share their fundamental understanding of man. Heidegger does not regard the self-conscious activities of cognition, morality or aesthetics as primordial; these are not activities of Dasein as a man in everyday life but are activities of higher dimension. Dasein as being-in-the-world does not self-consciously decide on its daily routine, but most of the time indulges in the “they” self (*das Man*) living inauthentically (*uneigenlich*). The manifestation of Lao’s spirit of *Chengdang* is possible only via Dasein’s authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*). According to Lao, only if I authentically confront the finitude of life along with its tragic aspects, accepting the inevitable guilt and suffering, is the emergence of my “authentic self” possible. Heidegger emphasizes that the discussion of authenticity and inauthenticity has no moral implication; the two are just Dasein’s possible modes of Being. Notwithstanding, Dasein’s authenticity can be withdrawn from the inauthentic world of ordinary people. It can stand out through the confrontation of its finitude of Being, i.e. being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), the call of

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 32-33.

conscience (*der Ruf des Gewissens*) and the nullity of guilt (*die Nichtigkeit der Schuld*).

In everyday life death is concealed from ordinary people—it has nothing to do with me but only concerns others. But Heidegger brings death back into existence. Death is Dasein's possibility of all impossibilities (*die Möglichkeit aller Unmöglichkeiten*). The existential-ontological meaning of death is as follows: "Death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility, non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as Dasein's end, in the Being of this entity towards its end."¹⁰ If Dasein can be aware of death, not as something irrelevant to its life, but as a possibility stipulated by its own Being, then Dasein comes to itself in its authentic Being. Heidegger continues, "Free for its ownmost possibilities, which are determined by the end and so are understood as finite [*endlich*], Dasein dispels the danger that it may, by its own finite understanding of existence, fail to recognize that it is getting outstripped by the existence-possibilities of Others, or rather that it may explain these possibilities wrongly and force them back upon its own, so that it may divest itself of its ownmost factual existence."¹¹ My being-towards-death forces me to come to my own self. Death as my ownmost possibility of impossibility discloses the most primordial finitude of my life and liberates me for my authentic freedom.

Only death has the power that awakens people to their own selves. Two references to this point can be found in Heidegger's interpretation. First, as already stated, death is impassable and insuperable; this perfectly underlines the finitude of life. The possibility of the imminence of death is also unthinkable and unpredictable, making people unable to know exactly when death is coming; in this sense, death is ungraspable. Therefore, explaining the power of death from the negative side, it is the most worrying possibility in man's existential relations. Secondly, if we look upon death from the positive side, then death gives people the greatest individual freedom. Death vitalizes the freedom of living people, thus highlighting the uniqueness of people's lives. Applying Heidegger's argument from a phenomenological perspective, the following interpretation can be made if the above two points are further processed. By understanding the ownmost and insuperable character of the possibility of death, the awakened Dasein "suspends" itself from the

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 303.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 308-309.

stable, accustomed world of the others and becomes the most authentic self. An existential state thus emerges in the most authentic Dasein when facing death, which Heidegger calls the “anticipatory resoluteness” (*vorlaufende Entschlossenheit*): “When the call of conscience is understood, lostness in the ‘they’ is revealed. Resoluteness brings Dasein back to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self. When one has an understanding Being-towards-death—towards death as one’s *ownmost* possibility—one’s potentiality-for-Being becomes authentic and wholly transparent.”¹²

Strictly speaking, in ontological interpretation, only when Dasein confronts the “nothing” (*Nichts*) of death can it resolutely and fearlessly accept and endure death in advance, regarding it as the “truth” (*Wahrheit*) of existence. Heidegger continues:

When Dasein is resolute, it takes over authentically in its existence the fact that it *is* the null basis of its own nullity. We have conceived death existentially as what we have characterized as the possibility of the *impossibility* of existence—that is to say, as the utter nullity of Dasein. Death is not ‘added on’ to Dasein at its ‘end’; but Dasein, as care, is the thrown (that is, null) basis for its death. The nullity by which Dasein’s Being is dominated primordially through and through, is revealed to Dasein itself in authentic Being-towards-death. Only on the basis of Dasein’s *whole* Being does anticipation make Being-guilty manifest. Care harbors in itself both death and guilt equiprimordially. Only anticipatory resoluteness understands the potentiality-for-Being-guilty *authentically and wholly*—that is to say, *primordially*.¹³

Obviously, only in anticipatory resoluteness can Dasein discover from its “self-limitation” the ownmost authenticity and true freedom—a kind of “resolute” freedom on the basis of self-transcendence (*Selbsttranszendenz*). Its own death is a precondition for Dasein’s attainment of true freedom. Dasein understands its ownmost possibility from the call of “conscience” when it faces up to its own death, and the ownmost existential choice is thus disclosed to itself; this is freedom, or more precisely, a realization of freedom to the greatest extent. In conclusion, as being-towards-death, the ownmost self (*das eigenste Selbst*) is disclosed to Dasein through its possibilities, allowing the self to stand

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 354.

¹³ *Ibid.*

out and choose from a myriad of possibilities and thus live out the greatest freedom. Because of this, if freedom becomes most “clear” (*selbstverständlich*) and unrestricted in death, Dasein is freest when it is aware of its being-towards-death. In other words, freedom is not restricted by death; rather, only in death is freedom clearly disclosed. The capabilities of making choices and projecting self-possibilities thus come into view in Dasein’s existence. This plainly reveals Dasein’s authenticity in its existential relations.

Without a doubt, death has the possibility to make people fully comprehend their uniqueness and the fact that they must make their own existential choices—no one else can participate in this process. One must note that facing up to death only reveals world-living man’s authenticity, but it does not mean that man can possibly detach himself from all worldly relations. In other words, those who have lived out their authenticity can only briefly free themselves from the bondage of the others while in silence choosing existential possibilities that are already available to them. But no one can ever become a solipsistic being regardless of the Being of the others. Furthermore, facing up to death does not mean “an existence for the sake of death” (*Um-willen*), compelling people to care about death relentlessly; it is an opportunity of taking a pause from an accustomed, non-reflective existence and of rethinking about the meaning of life. We are thus justified to say that an interpretation of death is valuable because it makes transparent the greatest meaning of man’s existence: understanding that I am in the possibility of death, existing with the resolution to confront my own death, and then disclosing the “light of truth” (*lumen natural*) in the nothing (*Nichts*) of death. This “light of truth,” in ontological interpretation, undoubtedly refers to the disclosedness of Dasein’s clearest authenticity. This means that whenever there is disclosure, there must be concealment; both phenomena demonstrate the actuality of existential relations. That is to say, without the others and the world of the others, Dasein as being-in-the-world and being-with-others cannot live out its own relations nor project (*entwerfen*) the clearest “light of truth” to remove all the concealments in the world. Therefore, the “light of truth” is projected amidst the worldly relations—it is neither the light of God nor a light with any religious implications; ontologically speaking, it is the disclosedness of existence, a phenomenon which discloses Dasein’s authenticity from the concealment of inauthentic everydayness and its capability to choose a self, and thus reveal its own for-the-sake-of-which. In a word: calm down and face up to death so that the self,

which has been dispersed in the “they,” can be summoned and recovered.

My authenticity is disclosed to myself when I face up to death. But what’s next? Heidegger does not offer any guidelines on ethics. Although authenticity discloses my authentic-self, this self has no content—there is neither a genuine direction in life nor a request for moral transformation of the self. Heidegger is not a life mentor, so he cannot teach us how to live a meaningful and valuable life. Heidegger says:

Such expectations (and in part these tacitly underlie even the demand for a *material* ethic of value as contrasted with one that is ‘merely’ formal) are of course disappointed by the conscience. The call of conscience fails to give any such ‘practical’ injunctions, *solely because* it summons Dasein to existence, to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self...The call discloses nothing which could be either positive or negative as something with which we *can concern ourselves*; for what it has in view is a Being which is ontologically quite different—namely, *existence*.¹⁴

The manifestation of the spirit of *chengdang* in the face of life’s finitude does not point to any ethical orientation either. Lao does not thus require us to become a Confucian sage, or to be Buddhists who take refuge in the Buddha, or to live a life as a hermit in the woods or mountains like the Daoists, or to be Christians following Jesus Christ. Lao says, “When I had experienced the conflict of *li* and *fen* and the finitude of man, I suddenly realized that the wisdom of the sages and the culture are no longer regarded as the first priority, and philosophy becomes unspeakable.”¹⁵ In a state of confusion, Lao continues: “But when I throw away all my thoughts and wash away my temperament, a direct understanding suddenly emerges in the lostness. This understanding is: guilt is guilt, suffering is suffering, and I am still me. If I know that guilt and suffering are inescapable, I can still take them on calmly. I know that perfection is unachievable, so I take this as it is. Not only should I go beyond the success or failure in this world, but also beyond the wisdom of the sages. Take on the finitude of life and the *li* and *fen* of regrets, and calmly bear the inescapable guilt and suffering. As long as we are not striving to be, as Jesus says, the one

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 340-341.

¹⁵ Lao Sze-Kwang, *The Punishment of History—Revised Edition* (in Chinese), ed. Leung Mei-Yee, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000, p. 226.

who casts the first stone, we are taking on responsibility of all guilt and suffering and, in the meantime, there emerges a *De*. Here is the manifestation of subjective freedom in its final stage.”¹⁶

Is not Lao’s conclusion referring to Heidegger’s description of Dasein’s freedom? Both Heidegger and Lao do not tell us what the best life is, since there is no absolute truth we can follow and no essential human nature to be realized. When I understand and accept the finitude of life, I only have my own self, my future, past and present, my world, and a myriad of existential possibilities. I can only be responsible for all my deeds. Living without self-deception and being true to myself—this is my authentic mode of existence. Thus, Heidegger and Lao bring us back to the ancient Greek aphorism inscribed in the pronaos of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: γνῶθι σεαυτόν—Know thyself. That is to say: admit that you are a mortal man rather than an immortal god. Admit that you are mortal and take on your finitude.

III

Lao certainly would not agree with the stance of Stoicism that life should be indifferent to desire and pleasure. An affirmation of the spirit of *chengdang* is equivalent to a determination of the direction in life by the finite, subjective freedom. Throughout his decades-spanning, unremitting career as a teacher, a philosopher and a public intellectual, Lao handles matters reasonably and righteously regardless of success or failure. Although things do not always work out as planned, he still calmly accepts the outcome. He is persistently concerned with and critical of culture, politics, and philosophy; the world, the country, and individuals. As a pupil who has been standing by my mentor for more than forty years, I have witnessed his diligent way of living, his pessimistic but enthusiastic, solemn attitude towards life, and his tenacious vitality; I feel deeply embarrassed and ashamed of my inadequacy, and the very slight improvement and success in my learning process. Until his death in 2012 at the age of 85, my mentor still held on to his duties as a finite man. He should be regarded as a model for the younger generation.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*