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Martin Buber's Phenomenological Interpretation of Laozi's *Daodejing*

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1. Introduction: Buber's Daoism

Martin Buber's engagement with Chinese philosophy, religion, and culture is a significant example of intercultural encounter and dialogical exchange in early twentieth-century philosophy.¹ His early interpretations and selected translations of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and the literary work *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi* 聊齋誌異) of Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), were informed by his own philosophical, cultural-political, and religious context and concerns.² His approach to Chinese thought is structured by questions of mystical and dialogical experience, natural spontaneity and technological mechanization, and the this-worldly corporeal spirituality disclosed in Hasidic and Daoist sources. His intercultural engagements in turn informed the development of his own dialogical philosophical project, as Buber himself recognized and as is evident from the Daoist traces visible in his classic work *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*, first published in German in 1923).³

Buber is primarily remembered as a thinker of Jewish religious experience, an advocate of ethical personalism, and a philosopher of dialogical communication. Additionally, furthermore, Buber practiced a preliminary form of intercultural philosophizing, did not limit the sense and range of the ethical to human persons, and interpreted communication through a phenomenology of interpersonal and embodied encounter, engagement, and conversation.

First, in contrast to his friend and collaborator Franz Rosenzweig, as well as later thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Buber did not explicitly reject

(Rosenzweig) or casually dismiss (Levinas) Asian and other so-called “non-Western” discourses.⁴ He engaged from his early to late works with mythic, religious, poetic, and philosophical sources and what they taught and transmitted (their teaching, *Lehre*) through image, word, and concept.⁵ Buber’s vision of “Daoism” is as a “teaching of the way” that is taught through a full range of communicative media.⁶

Second, Buber’s “ethical personalism” does not rely on or entail a limited concept of the person that only includes other humans. His experiential and dialogical models, developed in part in relation to the *Daodejing* 道德經 attributed to Laozi 老子 and the *Zhuangzi*, encompass the “myriad things” (*wanwu* 萬物): stones, trees, animals, other humans, and spiritual realities.⁷ Buber’s expansive model of the “thing” and the possibility of ethically encountering it diverge from other accounts of “ethical personalism.” Buber’s relational approach to the thing and the other are linked with his assessment of these two early pre-Qin Daoist sources.⁸

Third, Buber conceives of dialogue as corporal, experiential, and personal. It occurs through (insofar as they can be distinguished) interpersonal and “interthingly” encounters, engagements, and exchanges. This phenomenological and to an extent semi-Daoist description and interpretation of communicative events continues to be a radical alternative to the abstract formalistic paradigms that dominate the philosophy of language and communication. Buber is not a practitioner of phenomenology understood as following the phenomenological school and methods inaugurated by Edmund Husserl. He does, nonetheless, practice phenomenology in the sense of describing and interpreting what is revealed in and what exceeds experience. These descriptions draw on his own personal experience, self-reflection, and a variety of global philosophical and non-philosophical sources and discourses. Of these, the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* play a noteworthy role, particularly in the 1910s and 1920s.⁹

2. The *Daodejing* as Natural Philosophy, Cosmology, and Ontology

Buber’s initial systematic interpretation of Daoism is articulated in his 1909 essay “The Teaching of the *Dao*” (“Die Lehre vom Tao”) that became part of his afterword to his 1910 edition of the *Zhuangzi*.¹⁰ In this early account, the *Daodejing* is portrayed as the more embryonic beginning of the teaching of the Way, and the *Zhuangzi* as its communicative culmination.¹¹ Laozi is taken here to be a more primitive and less perfect teacher of the Way, because the *Daodejing* lacks the fuller use of language and the communicative fulfillment of the Way that Buber attributed to the *Zhuangzi*. However, in discussions in 1924 (“Besprechungen mit Martin Buber über Lao-tse’s

Tao-te-king”) and 1928 (“China und Wir”), his translation of selected political passages into Hebrew in 1942 (“Lao Tzu al hashilton” [Laozi on Governing]), and references in later works, it is the *Daodejing* that occupies Buber’s attention.¹²

Buber offered a seminar devoted to the *Daodejing* to a private group in Ascona in southern Switzerland from August 10 to 31, 1924. The transcripts for this seminar were published in 2013 in volume 2.3, *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie und Literatur*, of the new on-going edition of Buber’s collected works.¹³ The archivally accessible yet previously unpublished 1924 manuscript has received considerably less attention than his other writings concerning Chinese philosophy and literature. It unfolds striking threads for elucidating Buber’s interests in Daoism and phenomenological interpretation of the *Daodejing* that he based on Victor von Strauss’s 1870 translation and commentary and, rarely in this text, Richard Wilhelm’s 1921 edition.¹⁴

Buber commenced his philosophically oriented commentary on this Chinese classic with an introduction that considers two reoccurring themes: (1) the Chinese conception of heart (*xin* 心) identified as the feeling of taste and sensuous contact with the external world that is both directional and relational, in contrast to the Western notion of interiority; and (2) Laozi as a thinker of return.¹⁵

This introduction indicates that the *Daodejing* is not a form of mysticism in at least two senses: it does not maintain a radical submersion into interiority and subjectivity, the depths and dark night of the soul, or an otherworldly mysticism directed into a transcendent super-sensuous realm. Instead, the *Daodejing* teaches the relational interconnection of heart and world. Accordingly, in commenting on the first chapter of the *Daodejing* that Strauss entitled the realization or fulfillment of the *dao* (“Verwirklichung des Tao”) and Wilhelm the embodiment of sense (“Verkörperung des Sinns”), Buber defined the Chinese word *dao* 道 as path (*Bahn*) and way (*Weg*) and as change/exchange (*Wechsel*) and change/transformation (*Wandel*).¹⁶

Already in his reading of the first chapter, Buber traces three dimensions of Laozi’s way: (1) It is a natural philosophy of the regularity of nature, the movement of the stars, the change of seasons, the growth of plants, and rhythmic return; (2) It is a cosmology of the structuring whole of circles within circles, cycles within cycles, that is a chaos of transformations and an interconnected structured cosmic order; and (3) It is an ontological teaching distinguishing (a) the *dao* that can be spoken, the *dao*’s finitization as pathway and manifestation as transformation (cosmology), and (b) the unsayable and limitless *dao* that exceeds it.¹⁷

It is at this point in his commentary that Buber enters into a reflection on naming and encountering that reflects a significant *topos* in his own path of thinking.

3. Naming, Encountering, and the Thing

A standard theory of language construes names as arbitrarily designated conventional terms that are reified when taken to indicate the actual essences of things. This account is often applied to early Daoist texts in contemporary philosophy, and Daoist words are classified as conventions and its philosophy of language as nominalist. Buber, in this commentary and in *I and Thou*, contests this abstract epistemological and impersonal model of language with the counter-argument that such conventional names are not genuine names. There is a distinction in the *Daodejing* between inconstant conventional names, associated with fluctuating finite paths, and so-called “eternal” or “constant” names (*changming* 常名) mentioned in chapter 1 of the text.

Buber sketched an intriguing phenomenological interpretation of Laozi’s “constant name.” Eternal names are those that are “not constructed but discovered” in encounter (*Begegnung*) and in “the reality of the relation.”¹⁸ The mutuality of “the thing and the I” is necessary for this relation in which the name operates as the being-between (*dazwischen*) *this* specific being and myself. This sense of “self” is what Buber described in *I and Thou* as the relational participating self. Things search for words through us as participatory intermediaries. The movement from things to names requires their being encountered by me from and in themselves. There is accordingly, Buber notes, an “interiority of the name that arises from things themselves.”¹⁹

Buber offers a phenomenological description of the encounter with the tree, an illustrative example that is also deployed in *I and Thou*.²⁰ In the latter classic text from 1923, he distinguishes perceiving and representing the tree as an object, as an “it,” from encountering the tree as a relational other, as a “thou.” “Relation is reciprocity” (“Beziehung ist Gegenseitigkeit”) with respect to the encountered tree, and consequently other “non-human” beings. In the *Daodejing* commentary from 1924, he recognized how the tree, insofar as it is encountered as *this* being, is not subsumed under a conceptual category or regarded through a nominal conventional name. On the contrary, the tree is encountered as “*this* tree” and “something for itself” “insofar as it is something for me.”²¹

The description of the I–thou relation between human and thing in *I and Thou* corresponds in word and tone with his portrayal of the thing, encompassing both animate and inanimate beings, in the *Zhuangzi* in 1910 and the *Daodejing* in 1924. Relation signifies an ethical relation and naming is an ethical response to the thing’s own path and way of being itself (that is, its self-so-ness or *ziran* 自然).

To draw a preliminary conclusion at this moment, one that will receive further contextualization in what follows, Buber’s “interpersonal ethics” draws in part on his analysis of the relationality of and responsiveness toward things, does not exclude the “interthingly” and non-human from

the ethical encounter and interbodily relationship, a problem that places into question the appropriateness of other overly anthropocentric varieties of “personalist ethics” that neglect the non-human in the ethical encounter.²²

4. Broken Words and Namelessness

Buber has been criticized by Levinas, who endeavored to distance his own project emphasizing asymmetrical responsibility from Buber’s ostensible idea of “symmetrical reciprocity,” for inadequately attending to the alterity, asymmetries, and distances between self and Other in the I–thou relationship.²³ However, this critique is off the mark to the extent that Buber appears deeply concerned with the singularity of the thing and the other in the encounter, the asymmetries between the myriad things (including the non-human) rather than only the human other, and indeed the non-encounters and distances between I and thou, and between name and named. These dimensions of Buber’s thought are apparent in *I and Thou* and in this introduction to the *Daodejing*.

Continuing to comment on the initial verse of the *Daodejing*, Buber draws on Western religious thought, such as the notion of divine glory and human distance from it, in introducing questions of the name’s distance from what it would name. His clarification of the mutuality of name and thing in the *Daodejing* is accordingly reoriented with a reflection on human inadequacy in each encounter with the thing and the brokenness intrinsic to names and words. Buber specifies the limitations of naming and language that transpire even in the modality of the encounter: “our names do not deliver the consummate essence” of the thing and, restating the opening lines of chapter 1 of the *Daodejing*, “the name that can be named is the broken name.”²⁴

Buber noted how: “Every image contains an element of brokenness.”²⁵ But not only the image is broken: broken words and mutilated bodies, such as the disfigured bodies of the *Zhuangzi*, reappear in Buber’s discussions of Jewish and Chinese sources, and Buber compares Judaism to a body disfigured by its wandering from the Orient to the Occident and persecution in his 1915 essay “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism.”²⁶

Buber’s deployment of the language of fragmentation, brokenness, and human alienation from naturalness is not the conclusion of his analysis, as it is linked—as it is in the *Zhuangzi*—with transformation. Human brokenness is a point of transition and allows a pivot from the cosmological world of names and things to what Buber designates the ontological: “the name is a step toward the consummate name, the many a hint of the one, and the broken an indication of the unbroken.”²⁷

Line four of chapter 1 of the *Daodejing* discloses that this transition is interconnected with the questions of the status and appropriate role of the

human. Buber differentiated three fundamental themes of the *Daodejing* from which all the others are constructed.²⁸ These three spheres exhibit a process of alienation from and return to nature and the nature of things: (1) The law (*das Gesetz*), the *dao* of heaven that consists of things happening from themselves; (2) The human (*der Mensch*), as estranged from nature; and (3) The kingdom (*Reich*), as the construction or formation (*aufbauen*) of a realm in which natural order is recreated,²⁹ or—as he clarified later—a community.³⁰ The third sphere is the sphere of the good (*das Gute*) to which we will turn in the next section. In the daily renewal of creation,³¹ humans emerge, as evident in his other writings on Zhuangzi and Judaism, as ethical beings who are co-creators of creation through formative participation in it.³²

The formative recovery of the natural in the third sphere is associated with the ontological truth of the nameless. Victor von Strauss translated the third line of chapter 1 of the *Daodejing*, “無名天地之始；有名萬物之母，” as “Das namenlose ist des Himmels und der Erde Urgrund, Das Namen-Habende ist aller Wesen Mutter.” Buber focused in his remarks on this originary ground (*Urgrund*): the consummate, the one, and the unbroken intimate the nameless originary ground that is the mother of all things through the emergence of names—identifying rather than distinguishing the nameless (*wuming* 無名) and name-having or forming (*youming* 有名).

The nameless exceeds all designations, thingliness, and serial causality, including being posited as a beginning or first cause. Buber did not explicitly mention the Chinese character *shi* 始 that is often translated as beginning or origin. Following Strauss’s translation, *shi* 始 is interpreted as not signifying a causal or ontic beginning or origin in any sense. Antedating Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological elucidation of “ground,” Buber explicates the originless “originary ground” as a necessarily non-causal ontological truth through which name and thing, language and world, become possible.³³ In the *Daodejing*, this ground appears as an abyssal lack of ground (*Abgrund*), a swirling groundless depth (“schwingende, grundlose Tiefe”), as indicated by the key Daoist image of water.³⁴

Even though Buber’s depiction primarily relies on Strauss’s rendition of the *Daodejing*, he did not exclusively rely on it. For instance, in his portrayal of line four of the first chapter of the *Daodejing*, he rejected Strauss’s translation of *xuan* 玄 as “deep,” noting that it means “dark” (*dunkel*) and secret or mystery (*Geheimnis*).³⁵ Wilhelm, for example, speaks of *Geheimnis* and wonder in his rendition of this chapter. The German word *Geheimnis* used to translate *xuan* means secret as well as mystery. This deeper secret within the secret, the depth deeper than depth, Buber noted, is the genuine gateway (*Pforte*). The threshold or the portal is a pivot and point of transition. The *Daodejing*’s “return” (*Rückkehr*) is not as a recovery of a primitive past or repetition of a previous state, but—as will be addressed further below—the turning around (*Umkehr*) of transition and transformation.³⁶

5. The Law, the Human, and the Kingdom

Buber presented the *Daodejing* in his 1924 lectures as a teaching of the law, humanity, and the kingdom that he defined as community (*Gemeinschaft*).

First, the sphere of the law, as mentioned previously, is the immanent self-regulating self-occurring of things. The thing is transformed into a mere object of desire and use when they are broken from the encounter and taken out of the fullness of their relational context.³⁷

Second, the human sphere has distanced itself from the life of things. It has alienated itself from the law (the cosmological functioning of the *dao*) through non-genuine life, which includes morals, rituals, political regulations, and other fixations. This *Daodejing* repeatedly problematizes ordinary Confucian virtues and the conventional morality of good and evil: the posited good is complicit with the evil that is necessarily co-posed along with it, the relative good is interdependent with the bad, and the stated propositional and moralistic good cannot adequately grasp the *dao*'s originary richness and fullness.³⁸

Buber did not conclude that this problematization of morality entails amorality, immorality, or attitudes of ethical indifference, skepticism, and nihilism. Such interpretations of Daoism, which have become prevalent in contemporary Western philosophical approaches, are opposed to Chinese commentarial transmissions as well as Buber's assessment that the Daoism of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* is a radical teaching of the good. The fullness of the *dao* is not opposed to the good; it is originary goodness itself—linked with images of the mother and the feminine—in contrast to non-genuine, broken, and partial ways of enacting it associated with the partiality of the masculine.³⁹

What about the third sphere? Buber designated it the kingdom, realm, or empire (*Reich*), evoking Jewish and Abrahamic conceptions of the “kingdom of God” (Hebrew: *malchut* מלכות). In his 1928 essay “China and Us,” Buber contends in the face of the increasing destructiveness of modern technological civilization and its self-assertive will to power that Western humanity needs to relearn in its own terms and situation the Daoist teaching of “non-action.” In this 1924 context, Buber elucidates how one cannot do the good but how the good transpires through “doing-non-doing” (*tun nicht tun, weiwuwei* 爲無爲). The holy or sagely person, through whom the good is enacted and the third sphere of the kingdom fulfilled, neither imposes nor withdraws, and is neither active nor passive in relation to the world. Rather, the sage is spontaneous and responsive, responding in being called (*angerufen*).⁴⁰

In this discussion, in addition to the 1928 essay, Daoism appears to offer a unique and significant philosophical and religious response to the problematic of modernity and the human condition. Hence, first, whereas Buber portrays the Buddhist ideal as one of self-redemption, the Daoist ideal is one of world-redemption through the happening of the *dao*, of the good, which is neither in nor reducible to time and history.⁴¹ Daoism does not

demand the denial and the de-individuation of the self (*Entselbstung*); it points toward the constitutive relationality and sociality of the individual and the individual's fulfillment (*Vollendung*) in the *dao*.⁴²

6. The Anarchy of the Good and the Fulfillment of the Kingdom

Buber construed the Daoist good as fundamentally ethical and social; it is equally both interthingly and interpersonal, as no absolute distinction can be drawn between things, organisms, and persons.⁴³ The good is fulfilled in the kingdom, interpreted as a free relational community. Moreover, the Daoist good becomes messianic (that is, it concerns the genuine king to come) and prophetic (that is, it concerns the earthly fulfillment of the good) in this elucidation. These are “weak,” intercultural and secularized (as primarily ethical), delineations of the messianic and prophetic moments: (1) The messianic is glimpsed in the figure of the sage-king (*shengren* 聖人) who lets the self-generating self-relating community become itself through *weiwuwei*; and (2) The prophetic is apprehended in the originary ethics of the enactment and practice of the good.

The *Daodejing*'s message is neither mystical nor monistic absorption into the totality of the one.⁴⁴ It does not offer a phenomenology of experience, consciousness, or Dasein, but suggests a different phenomenological strategy of tracing encounters within relational reality. Buber's reconstruction of Daoism resonates with his own ethical and this-worldly interpretation of Judaism, in particular in its Hassidic forms that share a more intimate affinity with Daoism in Buber's early works. Buber's Hasidic Judaism and Daoism enact the divine in everyday communicative and corporeal life. Second, however, crucial differences remain: Buber states that Daoism teaches through nature itself, through encountering immanent reality, what Judaism and early Christianity attempt to teach through ethical prescriptions.⁴⁵

Daoism (or at least its pre-Qin variety) is neither primitive nor pagan, according to Buber's response to these monotheistic criticisms in his correspondence with Rosenzweig.⁴⁶ Buber, as an intercultural theopolitical philosopher, can recognize it as a teaching of fulfilled life, evoking the Jewish conception of a restored world (Hebrew: *tikkun olam* תיקון עולם) that encompasses both the natural and the human.⁴⁷

Buber's *Daodejing* is a teaching of the good as messianic or prophetic anarchism.⁴⁸ The social fulfillment of the good, the teaching of the kingdom is in a non-doing and letting in which the ruler lets the people come to themselves and to life.⁴⁹ The non-coercive sage-king is a messianic figure in embodying the authority of a teacher and an exemplary model, as well as the “lonely one” called to responsiveness and responsibility to and for others.⁵⁰

The distinction between authority and freedom governs Buber's juxtaposition of Confucius and Laozi in his depictions of the two in 1924,⁵¹ 1928, and in 1951. Buber's Confucius teaches human politics consisting of intentional, calculative, judgmental, and moralistic ritual and justice based on distinction (rank) and distance. In contrast to Confucius, who appears limited in Buber's Daoist-oriented perspective, Laozi communicates the originary ethics of the good: the radical intentionless spontaneity of proximity and love.⁵² This assessment is reconfirmed in his 1951 essay "Society and the State." Buber continued to distinguish between Confucian authoritarian and statist rule by elites and the self-generating self-organization of the people in love and proximity.⁵³ Buber's Daoism is communitarian and anarchistic.

While Confucius is an educator through externally imposed prescriptive laws and life-rules, in which the dead dominate the living, Laozi is a teacher of the internally motivated, self-generating, and living incalculable good. This good and its community do not occur through my own action, deliberation, and judgment. The partial and non-relational masculine human self damages and destroys itself and others through self-assertion.⁵⁴ Absorbed in itself and its own anxieties, calculations, and concerns, the self of the second sphere (humanity) is estranged from the law and the kingdom. It is in this context that the estranged self should become again like the newborn child through non-intentional non-coerced non-doing. The good occurs through the freedom of naturally and relationally being what one is in doing-non-doing understood as non-assertion, non-imposition, and non-striving.⁵⁵

The *Daodejing* appears to intimate a utopian ideal of an ethical community motivated by love and oriented toward the self-generating good instead of the self-assertive willfulness and external regulations that lead to estrangement and destruction.⁵⁶ However, this is not an empty speculation for "beautiful souls" for Buber.⁵⁷ In his discussion of *Daodejing* chapter 20, Laozi emerges as a prophetic witness speaking from out of the truth of the *dao* in the abandonment, brokenness, and suffering of the human sphere.⁵⁸ Daoism, as a consequence of this prophetic witnessing, has a social-critical dimension to it in relation to the suffering and injustices of the present.⁵⁹

7. Origin, Movement, and Fulfillment

The fulfillment of the *dao* transpires immanently in the midst of earthly human life through the transition from human partialness, lack, and deficiency to balancing in the grace and other-power of the *dao*.⁶⁰ The *dao*'s grace (*Gnade*) and nourishing power is taken to be "religious" in the sense of its being independent of individual willing and willfulness.⁶¹ The *dao* that nurtures and nourishes all things (sphere one) also heals (sphere three). Playing on the etymological kinship between the German words *heil*

(healing) and *heilig* (holy), Buber identified the “holy” with that which heals the wound, and with a restorative becoming whole in the face of brokenness.⁶²

This “turning” is a process of transformation: in the movement through negativity and opposition, there is no “return” to or pure reproduction of the condition of the spontaneous automatic law that is enacted in things. Buber maintained that the law’s fulfillment occurs in the genuine love and responsiveness of the living communicative kingdom.⁶³ Buber’s *dao* proceeds from the law to love via the moment of human brokenness. The *dao* is an anarchistic originary ethics of the good in and for itself.⁶⁴

What is the logic of the *dao*’s motility? Laozi’s Daoism does not promote a return as a reduction to the primitive in Buber’s account. The *Daodejing*’s language of return is a discourse of transitions and transformations that does not abandon humanity in the movement toward fulfillment in the *dao* nor multiplicity in the return to the one.⁶⁵ Given this attention to transitions and transformation, and resting in mobility, the *Daodejing* offers models of dynamic relational wholes instead of a monistic static unitary oneness.

How then should the notion of “return” be interpreted? *Fan* 反 (return, reversal) only appears four times in the standard version of the *Daodejing* (chapters 25, 40, 65, and 78). Due to its being identified with the movement of the *dao* itself in chapter 40 (反者道之動; 弱者道之用), it serves as a central concept in interpreting the *Daodejing*’s logic or dialectic. As noted previously, in Buber’s exposition return (*Rückkehr*) signifies turning. It is misinterpreted when taken as a mere arrival back at a prior or previous point in a series; it is a point of transition, a turning around (*Umkehr*) as culmination.⁶⁶

Thus to briefly introduce the examples of the newborn and the seed considered in Buber’s commentary: (1) The *Daodejing*’s images of the flexibility, spontaneity, and vitality of the newborn baby do not entail a return to that initial state; and (2) Nor is it a return to the state of being a seed in the origin. Comparing it to the primordial light (*Urlicht*) described in the *Talmud*, “return” is a resting in the origin and the movement of the whole relational nexus of things.⁶⁷ “Return” is for that reason not a reduction to an embryonic or primeval original condition. The movement of the *dao* through reversals and returns is the formation by humans (sphere two) of a fulfilled life in the good (sphere three) that is no longer merely law (sphere one).

8. Conclusion: Intercultural Philosophy and the Phenomenology of the Encounter

It is noteworthy that Buber adopted this notion of return in his intercultural assessment of the significance of Daoism. This interpretation of turning in

the *Daodejing* is employed as a model for how the West can encounter and learn from the teaching of the *dao*.⁶⁸ As in his other works examining early pre-Qin Daoism, Buber repeatedly—in 1909, 1924, and 1928—connects the Daoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi to the dilemmas of modern technological civilization, contending that the teaching of the way addresses the contemporary European precisely in this sense of “turning around” rather than demanding a return to a supposedly more primitive and primordial way of living.⁶⁹

Further, as Buber noted in reflecting on chapter 29 of the *Daodejing*, this “turning around” toward the thing and the other is a practical question. The possibility of genuine community is not only confronted with individual self-absorption and estranged separation. Buber presciently noted that it is all the more needful given the willfulness and sickness of peoples in nationalism and racism.⁷⁰

Can classical Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism and Daoism resolve the destructiveness of the modern West, as experienced by Buber in the crisis-ridden Weimar Republic? Buber explicitly began “China and Us” with the argument that they cannot.⁷¹ Nevertheless, he added, Daoist *wuwei* is the teaching that Western modernity, in its willfulness and will to dominate persons and things, lacks and is in need of learning in its own sense and context in dialogue with this Chinese discourse.⁷² To this extent, intercultural dialogue is a moment in this “turning around,” revealing previously unrecognized paths. This is not a return, in the narrow sense of the concept, as the path is to be encountered and enacted anew.

In addition to intercultural communication and philosophizing, a turn to a phenomenology of the encounter and the communicative relational event is required. Buber described in his 1924 discussion, explored in this chapter, how the *Daodejing* provides a model of the encounter. This poses us with a significant question in Buber’s analysis: how can we encounter what the *Daodejing* is modeling? Buber concluded his 1928 essay with the demand to encounter for ourselves the reality exhibited in the *Daodejing* and that is indicated by expressions such as “non-doing.”⁷³ What is called for to “turn around” is the encounter with things and persons themselves, and therefore a philosophy that is a phenomenology of the encounter itself. Buber’s classic work *I and Thou* is such a phenomenology of the encounter in which self and other are recognized as fundamentally relational realities.

In conclusion, Buber’s interpretations of the *Daodejing* (examined in this chapter) as well as the *Zhuangzi* (which was not discussed here) remain an evocative historical example of intercultural hermeneutics. His readers can trace how Buber honed his own unique philosophical project in intercultural dialogue with Daoist and a diverse variety of philosophical and religious discourses. His art of philosophy, as an interculturally informed phenomenology of the encounter and the communicative event, can itself be interpreted as an exemplary model to be enacted and transformed anew.

Notes

- 1 As I demonstrated in my book: Eric S. Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).
- 2 Originally published as: Martin Buber, *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-tse* (Leipzig: Insel, 1910); and Martin Buber, *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten* (Frankfurt: Rütten und Loening, 1911).
- 3 See Martin Buber, *Werke I: Schriften zur Philosophie* (Kösel: Lambert Schneider, 1962), 8. There are a number of works exploring Buber's engagement with Daoism and Chinese thought: Irene Eber, "Martin Buber and Taoism," *Monumenta Serica*, 42.1 (1994): 445–64; Maurice Friedman, "Martin Buber and Asia," *Philosophy East and West*, 26.4 (1976): 411–26; Jonathan Herman, *I and Tao: Martin Buber's Encounter with Chuang Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); and, in this volume, Jason Wirth, "Martin Buber's Dao." On the fascination with China among Central European Jewish intellectuals, see Shuangzhi Li, "'Wenn ich ein Chinese wäre': The Austrian-Jewish Imagination of China around 1900 revisited," *Austrian Studies*, 24 (2016): 94–108.
- 4 See Israel Aharon Ben-Yosef, "Confucianism and Taoism in *The Star of Redemption*," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 1.2 (1988): 25–36; Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, 213–15.
- 5 Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, 115.
- 6 Although Buber did not accept the artificial and ahistorical division between a "philosophical" and "religious" Daoism, he does distinguish "early" and "late" Daoist texts. His few remarks on later Daoist sources such as the *Book of Purity and Rest* (*Qingjing Jing* 清靜經) indicate that he considered them limited and narrower in their understanding of the Way and language. See Martin Buber, *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie und Literatur*, ed. Irene Eber (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 117.
- 7 Note that I examine these issues in the early Daoist context further, and contest the dichotomy of humanism and anti-humanism, in: Eric S. Nelson, "Questioning Dao: Skepticism, Mysticism, and Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*," *International Journal of the Asian Philosophical Association*, 1 (2008): 5–19; Eric S. Nelson, "The Human and the Inhuman: Ethics and Religion in the *Zhuangzi*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 41.S1 (2014): 723–39.
- 8 On early Daoist notions of the thing, see the helpful analyses of David Chai, "Meontological Generativity: A Daoist Reading of the Thing," *Philosophy East and West*, 64.2 (2014): 303–18; Sai-Hang Kwok, "Zhuangzi's Philosophy of Thing," *Asian Philosophy*, 26.4 (2016): 294–310.
- 9 Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, 109–29.
- 10 See Irene Eber's introduction in Buber, *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 23.
- 11 Compare Jeffrey S. Librett, "Neo-Romantic Modernism and Daoism: Martin Buber on the 'Teaching' as Fulfilment," in *China in the German Enlightenment*, eds. Bettina Brandt and Daniel Purdy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 181–98.

- 12 “Besprechungen mit Martin Buber über Lao Tse’s *Tao-te-king*” (hereafter, BMB) and “China und Wir” (hereafter, CW) are published in Buber, *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*; Martin Buber, “Lao Tzu al hashilton,” *Hapo’el Hatsa’ir*, 35 (1942), 6–8.
- 13 Buber, *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*.
- 14 Victor von Strauss, *Lao Tse’s Tao Te King* (Leipzig: Verlag von Friedrich Fleischer, 1870); Richard Wilhelm, *Tao Te King: Das Buch des Alten vom Sinn und Leben*. (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1921).
- 15 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 227.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 228.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002), 7–8.
- 21 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 228.
- 22 On the concept of ethical personalism, see Cheikh M. Gueye, *Ethical Personalism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011); for a more extensive interpretation of the interpersonal ethics and the inhuman in Levinas, see part one of Eric S. Nelson, *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).
- 23 For Levinas’s critical assessment of Buber, see the first three chapters of Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). On Levinas’s conception of asymmetry and alterity, see Nelson, *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other*.
- 24 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 229.
- 25 Ibid., 273.
- 26 “Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum” has been republished in volume 2.1 of the *Werkausgabe*: Martin Buber. *Mythos und Mystik: Frühe Religionswissenschaftliche Schriften*, ed. David Groiser. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013, 187–203. See my discussion of the broken body in Buber and Zhuangzi in Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, 127.
- 27 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 229.
- 28 Ibid., 230.
- 29 Ibid., 229–30.
- 30 Ibid., 259–61.
- 31 Ibid., 247.
- 32 On co-creation and nourishing life in Buber’s interpretation of Daoism and Judaism, see Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, 115–17.
- 33 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 229.
- 34 Ibid., 232, 256.
- 35 Ibid., 229.
- 36 Ibid., 263.

- 37 Ibid., 232.
- 38 Ibid., 230, 270.
- 39 Ibid., 230, 234.
- 40 Ibid., 230.
- 41 Ibid., 231.
- 42 Ibid., 235.
- 43 Ibid., 243–4.
- 44 Ibid., 234.
- 45 Ibid., 231, 235.
- 46 Martin Buber, *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 275.
- 47 On Buber’s “theopolitics” or “political theology,” see Samuel H. Brody, *Martin Buber’s Theopolitics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).
- 48 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 255.
- 49 Ibid., 231.
- 50 Ibid., 254–5, 266.
- 51 Ibid., 255.
- 52 Ibid., 251.
- 53 Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, ed. and trans. Maurice S. Friedman (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 163. See also Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, 36.
- 54 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 235, 238.
- 55 Ibid., 238.
- 56 Ibid., 242.
- 57 Ibid., 250.
- 58 Ibid., 242–3.
- 59 On Daoism and social critique, see Mario Wenning, “Daoism as Critical Theory,” *Comparative Philosophy*, 2 (2011): 50–71.
- 60 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 247, 250.
- 61 Ibid., 250.
- 62 Ibid., 257.
- 63 Ibid., 247–8.
- 64 Ibid., 250–1.
- 65 Ibid., 240.
- 66 Ibid., 263.
- 67 Ibid., 240–1.
- 68 Ibid., 263.
- 69 See chapter four of Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, for an account of the thematic of Daoism and technology in Buber and Heidegger.
- 70 Buber, “BMB” in *Schriften zur Chinesischen Philosophie*, 261.

71 Buber, "CW" in *Ibid.*, 285–6.

72 *Ibid.*, 288.

73 *Ibid.*

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