

# Introduction

The main aim of this book is to describe a path that goes from the theoretical constructions of metaphysical representations to the ethical implications of an aesthetic life. Before proceeding in this direction, however, it is crucial to define the starting point of this journey by explaining how I use some terms in relation to their etymology. I believe that this is necessary (1) pedagogically and (2) methodologically.

(1) It is necessary pedagogically, because it offers the possibility to compare the origin of these terms with their subsequent or contemporary meanings. This is not to say that etymology gives the *true* meaning of a term, but only that it gives additional information worth appropriate consideration. (2) It is necessary methodologically, because words are not neutral and can refer to different conceptual assumptions in different times and in different contexts. This entails that a precise definition of how terms are used can avoid misunderstandings, especially when the aim is a redefinition and reevaluation of concepts—as I shall discuss soon.

Hence, the analysis of these terms should be seen as a starting point and not as an end in itself. I consider “ethics” and “aesthetics” here and discuss “philosophy”—along with some important Chinese terms—in chapter 1.

At the beginning of the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1103a), Aristotle specifies that the ethical derives its name (*ēthiké* ἠθική) from *ēthos* (ἦθος) “character,” which is formed by a variation of the word *éthos* (ἔθος), meaning “habit,” “custom,” “disposition.” Michel Foucault (1987, 117) explains that, for the Greeks, *ēthos* referred to a way of being and to conduct oneself; it was “a certain manner of acting visible to others.” Before any moral philosophy, before any differentiation between what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong, ethics needs to pay attention to this way of being that is first and foremost a disposition toward the world.

In this sense, “ethics” does not necessarily have a positive or negative connotation if it is conceived as *ethos*, that is, if it defines a habit and not a normative set of moral standards. The contemporary philosopher Jacques Rancière (2010, 184) rightly holds that, before referring to a domain of moral values, the word *ethos* stands for two things: “dwelling” and “way of being”—the way of living that corresponds to this dwelling. Thus, according to Rancière, ethics is “the kind of thinking in which an identity is established between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action.” More than an “identity,” I will consider the possibility of thinking ethics as a *relation* between an environment and a principle of action that *results* in a way of being.

This relation—and its consequent way of being—cannot be stable in the sense of a normative moral standard because while a principle of action can be fixed, an environment is always in transformation. This relation, therefore, cannot be static because actions and environments need to find a constant reciprocal adaptation. Yet, to find a balanced adaptation, one needs to be aesthetically attuned to the world. This means that, prior to any moral theory—and prior to any environmental ethics as well—it is crucial to understand how ethics is linked to aesthetics as a specific disposition toward the world in which one comes in contact with the other at large.<sup>1</sup> But what does “aesthetics” mean here?

The term “aesthetics” derives from *aisthēsis* (αἴσθησις), which refers to the perception of the senses (from *aisthánomai* αἰσθάνομαι “to perceive”). As a specific category for the “theory of liberal arts” (*theoria liberalium artium*), the word was conceived by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the middle of the 18th century. In *Aesthetica* (1961, §1), Baumgarten defines it as “the science of sensory cognition” (*scientia cognitionis sensitivæ*) and specifies that aesthetics is a “lower knowledge” (*gnoseologia inferior*). In this formulation, aesthetics pertains to sense perception and, as a lower faculty of cognition, is related but distinct to logic, the higher faculty of cognition.

Immanuel Kant radicalizes the distinction between faculties.<sup>2</sup> In the first introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* (20: 223), he asserts that “judging (that is, objectively) is an action of the understanding (as the higher cognitive faculty in general) and not of sensibility.” Thus for Kant the expression “aesthetic judgment” is contradictory because “an objective judgment is always made by the understanding, and to that extent cannot be called aesthetic” (20: 222). This implies that aesthetic judgment “affords absolutely no cognition (not even a confused one) of the object, which happens only in a logical judgment” (5: 228).

It is not my intention to offer an overview of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* here. I neither want to analyze how Kant justifies the subjectively universal validity of judgments of taste, nor consider how for Kant "taste, as a subjective power of judgment, contains a principle of subsumption, not of intuitions under concepts, but of the faculty of intuitions or presentations (i.e., of the imagination) under the faculty of concepts (i.e., the understanding), insofar as the former in its freedom is in harmony with the latter in its lawfulness" (5: 287).<sup>3</sup>

Nor yet am I interested in the historical development of aesthetic as theory of beauty.<sup>4</sup> Although I shall consider a specific idea of art in relation to Friedrich Nietzsche, my main intention is to understand, on the one hand, the role that the sensible/supersensible distinction plays in ethics and, on the other hand, the ethical implications of different approaches to sense perception.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004, 36) pointed out that "we are influenced by Kant's achievement in moral philosophy, which purified ethics from all aesthetics and feeling." I assume that "we" refers to the Western philosophical tradition. I will argue that the purification of ethics from aesthetics has a long history in Western metaphysics prior to Kant. This leads me to the question: how is the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in other traditions? In this respect, Daoism can be a valuable element of comparison.

The term "Daoism" (or "Taoism") refers to the concept of *dao* (or *tao* 道), which is generally translated as "way." As shall be seen in the next chapters, the concept is far more complex than this. For now, however, suffice it to say that one of the most significant appearances of *dao* in Chinese philosophy is in the *Daodejing* (or *Tao te ching* 道德經), also known as *Laozi* (or *Lao-tzu*, *Lao-tze* 老子), from the name of the sage who was supposed to be its author.<sup>5</sup> Although the term "Daoism" is of Western coinage, the idea of a cultural tradition that refers to *dao* can be traced back to Sima Tan 司馬談 (died 110 BCE), who conceived the term *daojia* 道家 (literally "dao family").

Besides the *Daodejing*, the other book that is commonly regarded as the foundation of Daoist thought is the *Zhuangzi* (or *Chuang-tzu* 莊子). Similarly to the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi* is not the work of a single author. To refer to Zhuangzi as the author of the *Zhuangzi* is only a convention that I sometimes retain for the sake of brevity or to define the character that appears in the book.<sup>6</sup> Due to the common philosophical ground shared by the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, some scholars refer to them as *Lao-Zhuang* 老莊. This term first appeared in the last chapter of an important text of the early

Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)—the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (139 BCE)—and shows how the books were linked together very early on in China.<sup>7</sup>

I shall use the term “Daoism” interchangeably with *Lao-Zhuang*. This, however, does not mean that these texts represent a defined school of thought already formed in the Warring States (475–221 BCE). It only means that they propose a similar approach to the world.

Harold Roth (1999, 6) criticizes the idea of a *Lao-Zhuang* philosophy, which is not the only philosophical Daoist tradition, the other being the *Huang-Lao* 黃老 (Yellow Emperor and Laozi), “an early Taoist philosophical lineage with Legalist tendencies that was previously known only through historical writings.” With “previously,” Roth refers to the excavated texts discovered in Mawangdui 馬王堆 in 1973. According to him, these discoveries “have led scholars to question the exclusivity—and even the very existence—of a ‘Lao-Chuang’ school of Taoist philosophy in the late Warring States and early Han.” This, however, does not settle the problem and, as Roth himself critically affirms, “some scholars still think in terms of a Lao-Chuang philosophical school that influenced a later Huang-Lao philosophical school.”

Chad Hansen (1992, 371) reverses the problem and argues that it was the *Huang-Lao* dogmatic interpretation of Daoism that came to affect the historical image of the *Lao-Zhuang*. For Hansen, the “superstitious dogmatic ideology” of the *Huang-Lao* became “the ancestor of both religious Daoism and the ruling interpretation’s inherited view [the mystical view] of philosophical Daoism.”

Regardless of the existence of a philosophical school in the Warring States and the elusiveness of the *Lao-Zhuang* Daoism, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* offer an idea of humanity-world relationship that is worth analyzing. Indeed, the *Lao-Zhuang*’s vision of duality is interestingly divergent from the Platonic structure of Western metaphysics.

As discussed in detail in chapter 1, chapter 5, and the last chapter, an important part of Western metaphysics is based on an onto-theological representation of the world in which the sensible and the supersensible are radically divided. On the other hand, in the *Lao-Zhuang* there is an aesthetic approach to the world in which the dualities are corresponding. In the latter, “because of the absence of . . . religious, spiritual pillar and the lack of abstract, metaphysical speculation, nature comes to encompass all things, including God, so that one can simply allow the spirit to rest in nature, as opposed to struggling to transcend it” (Li 2010, 101). This is a problematic statement, and I will discuss its content throughout the book. Only a brief consideration is necessary here.

Although I will not go into the specific debate that questions whether the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* are religious texts, my intention is to tackle the problem more directly by considering the issues of theology and onto-theology in relation to them.<sup>8</sup>

The analysis of Martin Heidegger's philosophy is crucial in this respect insofar as it offers one of the most refined critiques of onto-theology in Western metaphysics. This, however, does not mean that I will consider Heidegger's connections with Asian thought here. This is not only because there are already important books on the topic,<sup>9</sup> but also because I am suspicious of whether this is a viable comparison.

The problem with the comparative analysis of some scholars is that they see the dialogue between the later Heidegger and Chinese thought as a genuine dialogue. Their argument is mostly based on the assumption that Heidegger was influenced by the reading of the *Daodejing*. And this seems to allow scholars such as Katrin Froese to reinterpret Daoist philosophy through the Heideggerian lenses—and more specifically through the idea of nothingness. Although I appreciate Froese's efforts to propose and expand the idea of comparative philosophy, I find her methodology misleading.

First of all, I do not think “there is a strong affinity between Heidegger's notion of Being and the idea of the Dao” (Froese 2006, 55)—even in the forms of *Sein* and *Sein*. Moreover, the supposed influence of Daoist philosophy on Heidegger's thought can hardly justify the interpretation of the *Daodejing* in Heideggerian terms. On this, I agree with Ma Lin, who offers the most lucid analysis of Heidegger's philosophy in relation to Asian thought. According to Ma (2008, 166), “Heidegger's interest in Asian words and verses is limited to the motivation of finding support for his own preconceived ideas,” and this means that “Heidegger has never thought of modifying his central ideas in light of the insight from other traditions.”

In chapter 2, I will show how the impossibility for Heidegger to genuinely engage in a dialogue with Chinese philosophy has roots in his conception of worldview philosophy (*Weltanschauungsphilosophie*). Indeed, more than the fact that for Heidegger the East-West dialogue is secondary to the dialogue with the Greek philosophy and “cannot enjoy the same status as the ‘only one and first beginning’” (Ma 2008, 71; 213), we need to consider how Heidegger defines other philosophies as worldview philosophies.<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence, I am not convinced by comparisons such as the one offered by Steven Burik—who proposes, however, a much stronger and more coherent analysis of both Heidegger's thought and Daoism than Froese's. Burik (2009, 147) avoids the pitfall of overlapping Being and *dao*

by suggesting that “the notion of *Ereignis* (appropriation, event, happening) . . . could compare well with the idea of *dao*.” While it is true that *Ereignis* avoids the *direct* reference to Being, this does not mean that *Ereignis* avoids metaphysical implications.

For Heidegger (2012, §4), the question of Being remains his “*unique* question,” “the question of all questions,” the question that points to “what is *most unique*,” and this is more problematic than it seems—as I shall discuss in chapter 3. I am not saying that Heidegger does not offer a useful possibility of thinking Western philosophy under a different light. Nor am I suggesting that one cannot find any similarity between Heidegger’s philosophy and the *Lao-Zhuang*. My idea is that, by *twisting* (in the sense of *Verwindung*)<sup>11</sup> Western metaphysics, Heidegger offers an excellent example of philosophical self-critique that can help to prepare the ground for the encounter with the other.

And yet, because of this *Verwindung*, Heidegger’s thought retains some fundamental structures of not only metaphysics but also monotheistic theology—even though one can interpret his *Sein* as more akin to becoming than an unchanging substance.<sup>12</sup> This implies that the overall Heideggerian philosophical project is embedded in a tradition that is considerably divergent from that of Daoism—despite some alleged similarities.

I do not believe that the primary task of a comparative analysis is the definition of equivalences between philosophies, and this book does not proceed in that direction. On the contrary, comparisons should advance the idea of philosophy itself and produce a modification in the understanding of both the self and the other. Thus, the critical study of Heidegger’s philosophy is not an end in itself for the comparative analysis but a means to produce such an understanding. This, along with the interpretation of the *Lao-Zhuang*, can lead to a shift of perspectives in the philosophical discourse. And this shift does not mean a mere modification of concepts, but it proposes a different ethical understanding of *being the world*—and not simply *in* the world. We shall see how this ethical understanding is possible thanks to the aesthetic gesture of the corresponding other.

The encounter with the other becomes in this way an ethical endeavor that requires a specific aesthetic attitude not only toward the world at large but also toward one’s own self. In this context, therefore, the self is not by any means a synonym of “subject” because the self does not ground any epistemological certainty—as will become clearer in chapter 2. Besides, the other is not bound to the metaphysical alterity of the Other (*l’Autre*), where “L’absolument Autre, c’est Autrui” in Emmanuel Levinas’s terms (1990, 28),<sup>13</sup>

but it encompasses the corresponding other of the *Zhuangzi*—discussed in chapter 5. Thus, the self–other relationship needs to be considered from the aesthetic standpoint on the experience horizon of the other human being and the world at large—in both the subjective and objective meaning of the genitive.

To see this different perspective, it is necessary to step out of the anthropocentric standpoint and see the relation of the objects in the world under a different light—that is to say, to see humanity not as dominating the world but as corresponding with and to it. On the other hand, to achieve this shift of perspective, it is also crucial to overcome the limitations of the onto-theological nature of Western metaphysics and its hierarchical structure Being–beings, which entails the necessity of breaking the restrictions implied in its terminology.

As a result, a significant part of the book is dedicated to this deconstructive endeavor. That is to say, it is important to contextualize the Western metaphysical standpoint proceeding toward new ethical and aesthetic understandings of the world. The study of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* will be possible only after this preliminary process. Indeed, the philosophical approach to these texts is not without problems.

The confrontation with other philosophical traditions is always a delicate process. This is particularly true in relation to early Chinese texts, which present significant differences in language and, therefore, in thought. For this reason, chapter 1 is dedicated to the definition of “comparison” along with the definition of a “philosophy of comparisons.”<sup>14</sup> Prior to any possible attempt at understanding another standpoint, it is necessary to define the theoretical assumptions that this confrontation brings into play.

Since the issue of comparing concepts is of primary importance, one of the first tasks of this study is the analysis and definition of them. Chapter 1 starts by reflecting on problems of cross-cultural interpretations and translations analyzing how concepts are rooted in theories and philosophical assumptions. Inquiring into the concept of philosophy per se, the chapter discusses key works of Martin Heidegger, who offers one of the most interesting and controversial interpretations of philosophy. After the analysis of extracts from *What Is Philosophy?* (1958) and “What Is Metaphysics?” (1998b), I consider the related problem of the Chinese terms *you* 有 and *wu* 無. The point is that, to translate such terms, it is crucial to revise the onto-theological assumptions of Western metaphysics through which *you* and *wu* are often interpreted.

This revision triggers a process of re-grounding grounds with the consequent possibility of language transformation, which in turn activates

new relations between cultural diversities. Thus, philosophy itself becomes an eminently comparative dialogue between cultures. Without setting a single method for all these problems, the chapter argues that comparisons themselves call for necessarily different methodological approaches. Hence, while Daoism helps to illuminate these issues defining one of the possibilities that a philosophy of comparisons entails, this same reasoning opens a way for an ethical and aesthetic reading of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*.

Thanks to this analysis, it becomes clear that a more precise definition of the theory for the approach to the other is necessary. Chapter 2 discusses this aspect by considering the problem of *Weltanschauung*<sup>15</sup> and by analyzing how one interprets the language and the perspective of the other. The introduction of this concept, however, brings into discussion serious issues, including the doubt that this term—like any other—is not neutral. Although many scholars use the concept of worldview, they employ it uncritically. Considering that there is no substantial study on it, an important part of this book is assigned to its analysis.

The chapter shows that if one uses a tool such as the one of worldview, one also needs to justify this use. In other words, as soon as one defines the other, one needs to clarify how this definition has been possible. This means that if one attributes to the other a vision of the world, this same concept needs to be contextualized and justified. My thesis is that every time one tries to move toward the other one constantly falls back on oneself, which means that the definition of the other is, ipso facto, a definition of oneself. In this sense, the analysis of the concept of *Weltanschauung* leads to a more attentive definition of the Western metaphysical standpoint. Hence, in this chapter I discuss the concept of Being in detail.

The analysis of *Weltanschauung* has the other important consequence of introducing the problem of aesthetics. The idea of worldview is closely related to the concept of world picture (*Weltbild*), which already implies a proto-aesthetics. While chapter 2 lays down the premises of the final conclusions of this book, its section regarding the world picture considers how aesthetics has a connection with the way the world is perceived and is described. As a result, I discuss the concepts of subject and object, as well as the problem of representation.

If chapter 2 introduces the issues of representation, chapter 3 analyzes the problem of value. In order to do this, I consider the Heideggerian perspective in relation to the Nietzschean idea of becoming. This helps us to understand how the metaphysical hierarchical structure of Being—beings



differs from the anarchical structure of becoming.<sup>16</sup> The analysis of becoming leads to the discussion of metaphor and its implicit questioning of the status of truth values, which also implies the possibility of a representation that does not distinguish between sensible and nonsensible. The analysis of metaphor becomes crucial to introducing the possibility of a representation that is not necessarily linked to metaphysical structures.

Chapter 3 concludes the self-evaluative and deconstructive part of the book by bringing to its final implications the issue of language and its relation to Being. But the chapter opens a new perspective as well. There, I propose a more precise idea of how values are embedded in metaphors and, therefore, how the comparative process is not only a matter of translating worldviews but also a matter of translating values. And this allows a more flexible approach to the *Lao-Zhuang* from a philosophical standpoint.

Chapter 4 analyzes the *Daodejing*. After the discussion of the problem of language and the question of metaphor, it is possible to better understand the perspective offered by this important book. The focus is on the question of naming. A more attentive analysis of the opening lines of the *Daodejing* introduces key concepts of early Daoism. Along with the discussion of these concepts, an ethical perspective starts to take shape.

Thanks to the analysis of important passages such as chapters 25, 37, and 64, I argue that the *Daodejing* offers a radical redefinition of the concept of value and reference systems. With this investigation it becomes clear that *dao* 道, far from any metaphysical substance, gives priority to the concept of *ziran* 自然 (“spontaneously” or, more literally, “so of itself”).<sup>17</sup> The introduction of *ziran*, however, entails an important set of other concepts such as *wuwei* 無為, *wuming* 無名 and *wuyu* 無欲.<sup>18</sup> Their analysis brings to the fore not only a different perspective on ethics but also the possibility for a more aesthetic encounter with the world.

Chapter 4 concludes with the last of the *wu* terms, namely, *wuqing* 無情.<sup>19</sup> This, however, is a concept expressed by the *Zhuangzi*. With this term I introduce the issue of *shifei* 是非 as well.<sup>20</sup> In order to clarify the meaning of *shifei*, chapter 5 engages in the analysis of the “Qiwulun” 齊物論, one of the most important chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. With this part, I conclude the recognition of the ethical value of being part of the spontaneous transformation of things (*wuhua* 物化) by defining more precisely the aesthetic attunement to the world. The scope of this chapter is to redefine the idea of experiencing the self, the other, and the world so as to see how ethical values are not necessarily attached to norms but can be developed through a constant changing encounter with the other at large.

The concluding chapter reconnects all the passages of the study, returning to the meaning of the title and giving a precise account of the proposed shift from metaphysical representations to aesthetics life. In this part, I describe in more detail how the aesthetic experience of the world becomes the path through which one can acquire an ethical posture in relation to oneself, the other, and the world. My final aim is to show how the shift from the metaphysical representation of the world—divided in sensible and supersensible—to the aesthetic and undivided experience of the world entails the shift from the separation of subject/object to the spontaneous aesthetic gesture of the world that produces itself.