

## Martin Heidegger and Oriental thought: confrontations

### Heidegger e o pensamento oriental: confrontações

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**Abstract:** Heidegger became interested in Eastern thought, due to his attempt to overcome the conceptual expression characteristic of the Western metaphysical tradition. Everything suggests, however, that this attempt derives from the Christian experience of his early years, which would decisively influence his thinking. In fact, the conception of the human essence as relation to the Being, in terms of comprehension in his Existential Analytic and in terms of thinking in his later work, – has a striking structural analogy to the relationship between the biblical God and his creature. In both cases, the human being is freedom and openness to a gift. In this sense, Heidegger's mature thought displays more differences from than similarities to the Zen-Buddhist mysticism and Eastern thought in general: being X nothingness, finite X infinite, on the way X at the end, acceptance of a gift X identification with the absolute foundation.

**Key-words:** trans-conceptual thinking, Christian experience, Zen-Buddhism, finitude, absolute, gift.

**Resumo:** Tudo indica que o interesse de Heidegger pelo pensamento oriental deriva da experiência cristã de seus anos juvenis, que vai influenciar decisivamente o seu pensamento. De fato, a concepção do ser-humano na sua relação com o ser, tanto na Analítica Existencial, em termos de compreender, como nas etapas posteriores de seu caminho, em termos de pensar, manifesta notável analogia estrutural com a relação entre o Deus bíblico e sua criatura. Em ambos os casos o ser-humano é liberdade e abertura para o dom. Neste sentido, o pensar maduro de Heidegger, ainda que experiencie também a superação de qualquer representação e desejo, apresenta mais diferenças que semelhanças com a mística do Zen-Budismo e com o pensamento oriental em geral: ser X nada, finitude X infinito, caminho X término, acolhida do dom X identificação com o fundamento absoluto.

**Palavras-chaves:** pensamento transconceitual, experiencie cristã, Zen-budismo, finitude, absolute, dom.

Heidegger's interest for Eastern thought is undeniable. His attention was drawn and his meditation stimulated not only by the keywords of the worldview characteristic of Japanese

and Chinese culture – *iki, koto* and, above all, Tao, as can be seen in the text "A dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer", based on conversations with Professor Tezuka –,<sup>1</sup> but also by Chinese ideograms, Japanese paintings and the Noh theatre. Yet undoubtedly larger was the attraction the author of "Being and Time" exerted, since his first courses in Freiburg, upon Japanese intellectuals of the Kyoto School, such as Hajime Tanabe, count Shuzo Kuki, Keiji Nishitani, Koichi Tsujimura and Shizuteru Ueda.

These facts have been widely asserted and discussed,<sup>2</sup> including by UNICAMP Research Group on Japanese Thought<sup>3</sup>. What we intend with this paper is to shed some light on the questions of why Heidegger take an interest in the Eastern tradition and what effect this contact had on his own thought.

Everything suggests that what he most admires and respects in the Eastern way of being is the trans-conceptual character of its essential language. This is expressed by the question addressed to the Japanese interlocutor at the beginning of the text "A dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer", which is repeated in different manners throughout: "Do you need concepts?"<sup>4</sup>. This remark seems commonplace for those who know something of Heidegger's works and his evolution in a path increasingly distant from the representative character of Western philosophical thought.

Therefore, in order to understand the relation between Heidegger's thought and the East it will be necessary to ask once more: whence comes this search of his for a speech that overcomes the limits of conceptual representation, letting things speak for themselves from their setting in the luminous vastness of the world?

As a tentative answer, I would like to suggest that the drive of Heidegger's thought towards the simplicity of origins must be sought first and foremost in the Christian experience of his youth. It is well known that not only did he grow up in an ambience deeply marked by traditional Catholicism, but also that he distinguished himself by the personal assimilation of this spirit, to the point of becoming a seminarist and a theology student, so that his life perspective was built up around the religious sphere and the exercise of priesthood.

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<sup>1</sup> See Heidegger, 1959a, "Hinweise", p. 269; GA, 1985, Vol. 12.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. the collective work. (Parkes, 1987)

<sup>3</sup> See Loparic, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, 1959a, "Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache", p. 86; GA, 1985, Vol. 12.

Cultivating Christian spirituality, particularly in the framework then prevalent, implied a process of interiorising, which led to the encounter with the divine absolute in the depths of the soul. In the masterful words of Augustine, it was described as "*interior intimo meo, superior summo meo.*"<sup>5</sup> This experience of the appeal of the absolute and eternal can be perceived in the final words of the poem which, during the summer of 1916, the nightfall upon Constance Lake, seen from Reichenau abbey, inspired Husserl's young assistant: "And what the shining day yielded to me / rests like a ripe fruit. / from farther eternities / a freight beyond all sense / for me in the gray desert / of a great simplicity."<sup>6</sup>

In the School of Theology, Heidegger had sat a course on the history of medieval mysticism<sup>7</sup> and got into contact with the writings of Eckhart, from which he cites the following sentence as the epigraph of his inaugural speech as an unsalaried lecturer in 1915: (Heidegger, 1916a, p. 173; GA, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 357). "Time is that which changes and multiplies itself; eternity remains simple."<sup>8</sup> Of similar fashion are the words of Novalis chosen for the motto of the research project, which he presented as the conclusion of his thesis for getting the teaching licence: "Everywhere we search for the Uncaused, yet we always find but things."<sup>9</sup> In this programmatic text he insists on the necessity of recovering through a philosophical, or rather phenomenological rethinking, the richness of the mystical, moral-theological and ascetic writings of medieval scholasticism.<sup>10</sup> According to him what does matter is the "propelling force and the permanent vigour that the life of the spirit in its philosophical-theological dimension represents for the global attitude of the medieval man in face of life, whose founding structure consists precisely in the constitutive relation of the soul with God." (Heidegger, 1916b, p. 1; GA, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 135). Only the emphasis on this vertical dimension of the spirit will make it possible to overcome the superficiality of modern man, disperse as he is in the multiplicity of sensible realities. He thus sees no opposition, but rather an intimate connection, between the medieval scholasticism and mysticism. The application in this context of the pair rationalism-irrationalism is hence completely unreasonable.<sup>11</sup> On

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<sup>5</sup> Confessions II, 6, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, 2002, Vol. 13, "Abendgang auf der Reichenau", p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Mystik (1910/1911) by Prof. Josef Sauer. See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 428.

<sup>8</sup> See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 428. The sentence is extracted from the Sermon n.30 (Eckehart, 1977, pp.295ss).

<sup>9</sup> "*Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte und finden immer nur Dingen*". See Heidegger, 1916b, p. 228; GA, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 341.

<sup>10</sup> See Heidegger, 1916b, p. 15; GA, 1972, Vol. 1, pp. 147-148.

<sup>11</sup> See Heidegger, 1916b, p. 241; GA, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 352.

the contrary, the harmony between these two cultural expressions of the Middle Ages offers a good example of the relations that must exist between philosophy and life.<sup>12</sup>

Actually, what is determinant here for the future development of Heidegger's thought is not, as I see it, his esteem for the products of medieval mysticism and philosophy, which he will soon after regard as unsatisfactory. The determinant factor is his own spiritual experience, which at that time led him to value such documents. Obviously without intending to uncover the secrets of the philosopher's inner life, we may consider that in his published writings there are no signs of an immersion in the higher levels of mystical life – i.e., the experience of *unio mystica* or its equivalents, as testified in the various cultural traditions, be it in religious terms or merely natural ones. The available data suggest, though, that during his youthful years he was able to enjoy, in a Christian context, a mystical experience in a wide sense. By this we mean the immediate experience – as, in a certain sense, are all experiences – of the presence of the absolute, notwithstanding its immediacy being dialectically mediated by symbols and affects – a mediation which disappears in the lofts of mystical life. In this sense, the mystical dimension, in general, distinguishes himself from the ascetic one, as presence distinguishes itself from representation, experience from thought, the spontaneous from the voluntary, the received from what was made by one's own initiative.

Anyone who opens himself in such an experience to the call of the absolute, although possibly not even by far reaching the communion with or transformation into the absolute itself, may, when attracted to it in an ecstatic movement away from his own safety and self-assertion, somehow sense the consummation of such process. As we know, "sense" (*ahnen*) is one of the mature Heidegger's favourite terms to designate the attitude of the experienced thinking towards what it seeks to think. In effect, one could not seek that which, by no means, had already been found, nor could have found but that which had somehow been already given. This insight had already been got by the Christian spiritual tradition. Anselm, for example, formulates it in his *Proslogion* with the following prayer "Teach me to seek thee and show thyself to thy seeker, for I cannot seek thee unless thou teach me, nor find thee unless thou show me thyself. Let me seek thee in my desire, let me desire thee in my seeking, let me find thee in love, let me love thee in finding."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> With regard to the appreciation of the life experiences of the medieval man in this moment of Heidegger's philosophical way, see Mac Dowell, 1993, pp. 86-90.

<sup>13</sup> "Doce me quaerere te, et ostende te quaerenti; quia nec quaerere te possum nisi tu doceas, nec invenire nisi te ostendas. Quaeram te desiderando, desiderem quaerendo. Inveniam amando, amem inveniando." *Proslogion*, c.1,

Attributing to the young Heidegger a religious or mystical (in a wide sense) experience, of Christian character, is not a mere hypothesis in face of available data regarding the first phase of his career as a university lecturer. In effect, his so to speak pragmatic objective, recurrently expressed, is to renew philosophical thinking through concrete experiences in order to free it from the prevalent academicism, which bound it to the scientific or historical research networks, keeping it distant from reality and the vital questions able to truly nourish it.<sup>14</sup> It is precisely through the Christian spiritual experience that he intends to lay bare the paradigmatic ontological structures of the human phenomenon. The Christian fact shall provide him not only with a privileged expression of the sense of life, later to be called "factual existence", but also with the conviction of the primal importance of experience as the basis for authentic philosophising – which, by the way, will be confirmed in his adhesion to the phenomenological method.

Having left aside the medieval philosophy and mysticism embodied by Eckhart,<sup>15</sup> not without having learned "many good lessons" (*viel Gutes*)<sup>16</sup> from this "master of thinking and of life" (*Lesen- und Lebemeister*)<sup>17</sup>, he then turns to Augustine,<sup>18</sup> Luther,<sup>19</sup> and Kierkegaard.<sup>20</sup> They were all, however, incapable of providing him with what he searched, since in spite of their vigorous descriptions of the Christian phenomenon, when conceptually interpreting it they could not eschew the categorial system of the metaphysical tradition. In fact, it will be in the New Testament itself, commenting on certain passages of the Apostle Paul's letters, that Heidegger will discover the existential perspective that will guide all of his comprehension of the human being as *Dasein*. In these passages he will discern, in its original purity, the traces of a vision of life in its temporal finitude that, from its end which is death, the day of the Lord, makes each one face the decision of properly assuming life or not.

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in: S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi, Opera Omnia, v.I. Edimburgi: Apud Thomam Nelson et Filios, 1946, p.100.

<sup>14</sup> See Heidegger, 1933, pp. 10-15; GA, 2000, Vol. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger had prepared a course on "The philosophical foundations of medieval mysticism" [Die philosophischen Grundlagen der mittelalterlichen Mystik], for the semester 1919/20, which he did not lecture for lack of time. (See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 430).

<sup>16</sup> See Heidegger, 1959b, "Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit", p. 36; GA, 2002, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> See Heidegger, 2002, Vol. 13, "Der Feldweg", p. 89. For the meaning of *Lesemeister*, which we have translated tentatively by "master of thinking", see the short text "Was heisst Lesen?" in the same band p. 111. It may suggest other translations of the term.

<sup>18</sup> Course Augustinus und der Neuplatonismus (1921).

<sup>19</sup> On Heidegger's interest in Luther's work, see Pöggeler, 1992, pp. 466-468.

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard's influence on the formation of Heidegger's thought is stressed by Pöggeler, 1992, pp. 140-155, 468-469.

Neither the criticism of the metaphysical incrustations present in the traditional interpretation of the Christian fact, nor the shrewd identification of the ontological structure of human existence inserted in the Apostle's exhortations would be possible if they were not taken from his own experience as a Christian.<sup>21</sup> Theodore Kiesel, one of the most knowledgeable scholars of the early Heidegger observed that "we must therefore take into account this reciprocity between biography and philosophy and seek to understand philosophically Heidegger's peculiarly personal engagement with Christianity (...)" (Kiesel, 1995, p. 79s). Though disengaged from any confessional ties with the ecclesiastical establishment, both Catholic and Protestant, he undoubtedly, continues to enhance the human worthiness of the Christian experience.

Actually, the existential interpretation of the human being, which takes form in the Existential Analytic of "Being and Time", unilaterally makes use of but one dimension – the most elementary, although essential one – of the New Testament comprehension of human beings and their salvation. It is the experience of the relativity of all intramundane possibilities, which stumble upon nothingness when anguish emerges imperiously from the depths of existence. The human being is then faced with the fundamental alternative of gaining or losing his own life, of being or not being properly himself, of liberating himself into freedom or falling prey to the dictatorship of every-one – all the while projecting himself through his worldly possibilities. Care, as the unity of the three constitutive dimensions of the openness of *Dasein*, as being-in-the-world, in the last instance means responsibility in face of factual existence itself, which tends to decay into the world. In its radical sense, the essence of care as existential temporality is but the ever-decisive moment of the decision through which *Dasein* comprehends itself as power-to-be, by projecting itself towards its potentialities from what it already is.

Therefore, in keeping with the Existential Analytic, authenticity or inauthenticity of existence, being or not being properly oneself, exclusively result from each one's resolution. Such an interpretation of the human being, according to which the truth of existence depends on the understanding and self-understanding of the *Dasein*, is still entangled in the meshes of

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<sup>21</sup> The remarkable influence of *Nicomachean Ethics* on the shaping of Heidegger's original ideas has been emphasized specially by Günter Figal (See Figal, 2007, pp. 22-60). This influence may be seen e.g. in the practical turn of the existential analysis with the interpretation of being-in-the-world in the light of occupation with and use of tools. Notwithstanding we believe that the understanding of the human being as "factual existence", the decisive insight not only for the Existential Analytic but also for the putting anew the question of the sense of Being and, consequently, for the overcoming of metaphysics, was due to Heidegger's reflection on the proto-Christian experience. It was not Aristotle who led him to the discovery of "factual existence" but this view that brought on the reinterpretation of Aristotle.

subjectivity, despite Heidegger's efforts to overcome the opposition subject-object. Indeed, Heidegger throve to do so, albeit only at an ontic level, with the discovery of the structure of the being-in-the-world. But the sense of Being, which is the purpose of the investigation of "Being and Time," would still be determined from the *Dasein* as comprehension of Being, which would mean that the former prevails over the latter, a conclusion that Heidegger would not endorse and which led him, as we know, to interrupt his project, by not publishing the third section of the first part of his work.<sup>22</sup>

For the New Testament, the attitude corresponding to such a conception of existence would mean the search for salvation by oneself, by one's own means, in the Pauline vocabulary, that is, self-sufficiency, the ultimate sin. The evangelical message does often point to certain and uncertain death, so as to awaken the addressees from the inconsistency of sleep into the vigilant responsibility for their destinies. However, this is not the last word. Salvation is grace, a free gift from the goodness of God, from his love. This does not imply to give up human responsibility, to exclude the participation of man's freedom in the determination of his destiny. It does come to be exercised in an entirely new manner, however. The human being's answer to the offer of salvation is faith. Faith, here, means to believe in the love of God, to let oneself be saved by God, to abandon oneself to him. And nothing is more demanding than such attitude. Every human being seeks to be, to be fully happy, while to believe means to forego what is dearest to each one, the realisation of one's life by oneself, instead handing it over to the care of another – in this case, the divine other. Faith is, therefore, truly a death: a death to pure self-assertion. On the other hand, it is the passage into true life, the condition of resurrection. It is the dialectic expressed in the evangelical phrase "He who wishes to save his life shall lose it, but he who loses his life because of me – says Jesus – shall gain it". How? Because only he who believes that God can and wants to give him life in fullness, only he who believes in the love of God is capable of becoming unpreoccupied with himself, abandoning his own dreams, thus losing his life and, thereby, becoming preoccupied with the other, gratuitously interesting himself in the other, for the sake of this one – i.e., loving in the sense of Christian agape. Faith in the love of God is, consequently, the ultimate foundation of human love, of love, that wants the other's wellbeing and rejoices in the other's happiness. According to the Christian conception, this love of self-

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<sup>22</sup> This third section never issued would be called "Time and Being" (See Heidegger, 1957a, p. 39f). Also the entire Second Part of the work "Basic lines of a phenomenological destruction of the history of ontology having as a clue the problematic of temporality" was not published, but its content has been explained by the author in other occasions.

giving and communion, founded on faith – that is to say, on the renunciation to the self-realisation impulse in order to realise oneself in loving and being loved – is the sense of human life, its true fulfilment.

Eckhart understood it very well, as can be seen in his teaching on detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*) and serenity or release (*Gelassenheit*). Kierkegaard did so too, when he talks about the passage from the ethical to the religious state of existence, which is founded on faith. And at first it seems strange that Heidegger, an acute reader of both, did not catch this message of the Gospel. The strangeness disappears, however, if we bear in mind that such truths are not absorbed merely through reading, but rather with life. When "Being and Time" was published, Heidegger had not passed through the experience of radical death, a requisite for the new life: it is not only the relativisation of all worldly possibilities, but also the renunciation to the very power-to-be only by oneself. On the contrary, in "Being and Time" existence is still seen as a stern will of self-assertion.

This can be seen, for example, in his interpretation of the phenomenon of "willing" (*Wollen*). In "Being and Time", probably in an argument with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, he asserts that "willing" is not the original phenomenon, but rather an authentic way of being, ontologically grounded on "care" (*Sorge*).<sup>23</sup> Years later, reviewing his opinion on Nietzsche in his lectures named "The will to power as art" (1936/37), Heidegger would recognise in the interpretation of life as "will to power" an anticipation, though still of obscure and clumsy formulation, of his own conception of existence as "care" in "Being and Time". "Nietzsche sees something more unitary, more original and, at the same time, richer, behind this coarse word 'will'", he says. While this is not the place for a detailed analysis of the passage, I believe that despite not forthrightly identifying will with "will to power" and care with "search to be", he makes the coincidence clear by using, when interpreting the Nietzschean term, expressions similar or identical to the ones used in the Existential Analytic to deal with "care": to unconceal / to conceal (*eröffnen/verschliessen*), to disclose (*erschliessen*), resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), to overcome oneself (*Über-sich-hinweg*) (Heidegger, 1961, pp. 63-65; GA, 1996, Vol. 6.1). By considering that Nietzsche's philosophy was still part of the Western metaphysical tradition, and actually in its most extreme form, modern subjectivism, Heidegger implicitly recognises that his own interpretation of existence,

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<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, 1957a, p. 194; GA, 1977, Vol. 2. See Mac Dowell, 1993, p. 149

although a decisive step in overcoming metaphysics, is still determined by the subjectivism of *Dasein's* self-assertion regarding the all of being.<sup>24</sup>

This praise of human power reaches its utmost in 1933, in his inaugural address as rector of the University of Freiburg, precisely named "The self-assertion of the German university". According to the new rector, it consists in "the common, original, essential will. It depends on us, on whether and to what extent we truly, and not just superficially, dedicate ourselves to reaching self-consciousness and self-assertion." He continues the address employing emphatic expressions and in a pathetic tone, showing the professors and students the consequences of this "fundamental emotional disposition." (Heidegger, 1933, pp. 6, 21; GA, 2000, Vol. 16). His renunciation to the rectory, with the failure of these ambitious projects, definitely was a radical *tournant* in the trajectory of his life and thought. The consequences of his deception, whatever it is that may have caused it, were felt long before the terrible debacle of German power and the universal condemnation of Nazism, to which he had enthusiastically adhered. In a letter to his friend, the philosopher Karl Jaspers, two years after that episode (*das Misslingen des Rektorates*) he mentions it, together with "the altercation (*Auseinandersetzung*) with the faith of his origins", as the two thorns that remained.<sup>25</sup> "A thorn in the flesh" is the expression Apostle Paul (II Cor 12, 7-10) uses to translate the experience of human weakness and insufficiency.

We do not know how Heidegger existentially interpreted these humiliating and painful experiences. They apparently were not deeply dealt with, neither in the religious nor in the ethical aspect. They did, however, have a decisive impact in his thought. Heidegger will later designate this turnaround in the path of the essential question, which always looked for the same, with the uncommon word *Kehre*, akin indeed to the term used for religious conversion (*Bekehrung*).<sup>26</sup> In fact, in the Christian understanding faith, as the renunciation to the search for self-salvation and the acceptance of the gift of the love of God, implies the experience of one's own impotence. It is generally acquired after the perception of recurrent failures in the search for moral perfection or of a breakdown in the very bases of existence, as happened with Heidegger. Otto Pöggeler remarks that it was in this situation of deep solitude and desolation that Heidegger wrote "Contributions to Philosophy" (*Beiträge zur Philosophie*) in

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<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, 1961, p. 464ss; GA, 1996, Vol. 6.1. See Mac Dowell, 1993, pp. 149-151.

<sup>25</sup> See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 472

<sup>26</sup> We therefore believe that a turnaround occurred in Heidegger's thought, but not in the sense of a rupture and rather of an inversion in how he understood the relationship between the human being and Being itself, which moves from comprehending the sense of Being to thinking the truth of Being.

the years 1936-1938 (Heidegger, 1989). With this work he attempts a leap into the new beginning of thinking, putting anew the question of Being in the context of his complete forgottenness and in the light of the Nietzschean experience of modern nihilism.<sup>27</sup>

But as early as in the year of this letter to Jaspers, 1935, Heidegger had revealed, in his course "Introduction to Metaphysics", his experience of human foundering in the Promethean attempt of self-assertion. Commenting on the first choir of Sophocles's tragedy *Antigone*, he presents human being as the violent one that dares to subjugate Being itself. But his violence must shatter when faced with the Being's superlative power. Going down is the deepest and more complete answer he can give to the Overpowering. According to this perspective, it is no longer man that discovers the sense of Being, but it is rather the Being that have the initiative in revealing his truth. Being needs man in order to appear, so that the latter is thus forced to be the place for the former's manifestation. Just so is man's essence, and his greatness consists in accepting this mission, disclosing the being as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

As time passes, however, the constraint of this first experience of human impotence gives place to release (*Gelassenheit*), which confidently awaits the favours of the Being.<sup>29</sup> Release now stands to thinking as anguish stood to comprehending. Anguish for one's own authentic power-to-be, as the fundamental affective disposition, evolves to this new basic attitude towards being as a whole. Moving away from the individualist and subjectivist perspective, in which the vicissitudes of truth, as unconcealment of reality in its essence, in the last instance depended on the authenticity or not of human comprehension, on the openness of human freedom to the manifestation of Being, Heidegger adopts a universal history of truth. In the latter it is the very Being and its ways of concealment and unconcealment that determine the different epochs of thinking. Thinking is no longer identified with representation, which is but a will, consisting rather in letting-be. Overcoming the traditional opposition between action and passion, he considers the essence of the human being in its relation to Being itself as consent, as letting-be. Being, in order to manifest itself, needs man and asks for his consent; but the capacity to consent is given by the Being itself. *Gelassenheit* in the last instance means, therefore, letting-be, the willing acceptance of truth by the thought, freedom as the hollowing of any will for power and an open space for the manifestation of Being. Thinking the Being means remembering (*Andenken*) with gratitude (*Dank*) the gift (*Gabe*) through

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<sup>27</sup> See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 472.

<sup>28</sup> See Heidegger, 1953, pp. 112-126. See also Mac Dowell, 1993, pp. 151-152.

<sup>29</sup> See Heidegger, 1959b, "Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit. Aus einer Feldweggespräch über das Denken". The text is dated from 1944/45.

which the human being gets into his essence.<sup>30</sup> According to this perspective, the Being has got all the initiative in conducting human destiny. The Being gives, calls forth, orders. It is up to the human being to listen to its voice, devotedly accept its favours, faithfully remember them, and obediently follow its orders, all the while respecting its mystery.

The enigmatic tone used by Heidegger to talk about the Being has aroused perplexity and given way to different interpretations. For now we are only interested in highlighting the impressive similarity not only of his language, but also of his understanding of the relation Being/thinking, to the biblical language and the conception the latter presents of the relation God/human being. I believe it is not necessary here to prove for every term the coincidence of such languages, which can be seen, by those with some knowledge of the Bible, in the citations of Heideggerian expressions above. This confluence of languages certainly does result from similar visions of the very essence of the human being. According to biblical revelation, the history of humanity and the sense of human existence can be summarized as the interaction of two liberties, the divine and the human.<sup>31</sup> God comes into contact with the human being, offering him life and salvation. But this divine communication progressively unfolds through history, which essentially is the history of salvation. The latter happens with the "yes" of human freedom, with the acceptance of the truth revealed by God. For Heidegger the human being also is essentially freedom, understood as openness to the manifestation of the being. This is what derives from the expounded above in relation to the first and the second stages of his work. It is also the way Günter Figal, one of the greatest specialists in his work, interprets him in the study "*Martin Heidegger: Phenomenology of Freedom*".<sup>32</sup> But just as in the Bible, in the works after the turnaround of his thought human freedom is presented as an answer to the initiatives of the Being itself, in a process of concealment and unconcealment that successively unfolds throughout history. It is true that Heidegger does not possess a teleological conception of history, which would be progressively conducted through stages into its culmination and fulfilment, as happens in the Bible. But the correspondences are decisive: the historicity of truth in its epochal coming to be and the association between pre-destination and human responsibility.

The Heideggerian Being clearly cannot be identified neither with the God of the Western philosophical tradition nor with the God of biblical revelation, nor with the divine of the

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<sup>30</sup> See Heidegger, 1954, pp. 91-95. See also Mac Dowell, 1993, pp. 152-153.

<sup>31</sup> See Mac Dowell, 2009, p. 440.

<sup>32</sup> See Figal, 2003.

religions in general. He explicitly denies such equivalence. Moreover, one cannot safely state that Heidegger's language or his thought in the later stage of his work is in part due to the familiarity he had with the Bible. We are not aware of any declarations of his endorsing such a perspective. However, we are led to identify here the same procedure mentioned in relation to "Being and Time", which led him to draw from the proto-Christian experience of life, in its ontical expression, the ontological structure of human existence as such. One should perhaps apply to these similarities of language and thought Heidegger's own confession regarding his Christian origins: "Without this theological provenance I would never have come onto the path of thinking. Well, provenance is always coming destiny."<sup>33</sup> Whatever it is that one may think about such influence in this case, the notable affinity between the two approaches to human reality, the Heideggerian and the biblical ones, remains. This similarity is what is relevant to us in discussing Heidegger's relation to Eastern thought.

This discussion would deal, it seems, with the experience of the foundation of reality and of thinking itself, conceived as the all of being or nothingness, as transcendent or immanent, as divine or merely human. As to nothing, in all of Heidegger's work it is only stressed in the conference "What is Metaphysics?" (1929) (Heidegger, 1965), and is there identified with Being. However, all he intends with this is to show the difference between Being and the beings, i.e., to show that Being is not an existing being. For those who turn themselves only to the beings, as the scientist does, Being, despite the fact that it is the necessary condition for knowing beings, does not explicitly appear, that is to say, appears as nothing. In the text "A dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer" Heidegger admits that emptiness, understood as nothingness, which is characteristic of Japanese thought, is in a certain way equivalent to what he calls Being. Nevertheless, although he recognises the ambiguity of the latter term, due to its metaphysical conception as "being of the being", Heidegger still designates as the goal of his search "Being as such", and not nothingness—and this holds for all of his work.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the metaphor of "emptiness" – with an excuse for using the term "metaphor" – or the concept of "nothingness", convey but one aspect, and a completely insufficient one, of what Heidegger successively calls "clearing" (*Lichtung*) (Heidegger, 1957a, p. 133a),<sup>35</sup> "horizon", "the open" (*das Offene*), region"(*Gegend/Gegnet*),<sup>36</sup> "the

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<sup>33</sup> "Ohne diese theologische Herkunft wäre ich nie auf den Weg des Denkens gelangt. Herkunft aber bleibt stets Zukunft." (Heidegger, 1959a, "Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache" p. 96).

<sup>34</sup> Heidegger, 1959a, "Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache", pp. 108-110.

<sup>35</sup> The term comes back e.g. in the lecture Heidegger, 1957b, "Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik", p. 63a, 68a.

<sup>36</sup> Heidegger, 1959b, "Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit", p. 42.

guarantee"(*das Gewährende*) (Heidegger, 1962, p. 31-32; GA, 2000, Vol. 7) and so on. Actually, Being in its own historicity is what determines the truth of the beings, how each of them manifests itself and can be thought. And from this derives, as we have seen, the paradoxical attribution to Being, which is neither a being nor an underlying principle (*Grund*), of action verbs: to determine, to order, to send etc. These reflections eliminate, as I see it, any attempt of conceiving Being as nothingness. In fact, stripping Being of its metaphysical function as foundation constitutes a thinking leap (*Sprung*) in the abyss or the bottomless depth (*Abgrund*). "This abyss, however – says Heidegger – is neither nothingness nor emptiness, nor a shadowy confusion. It is, rather, the appropriating event."<sup>37</sup> It is that balanced domain in which human thinking and Being are mutually appropriated and reach their essential relationship.<sup>38</sup> Heidegger's path is definitely a step backwards (*Schritt zurück*), going in the direction of the beginnings (*Anfang*) of Western thought – a leap towards the origins (*Ursprung*) of the Being's truth. But in this path he does not ever wish to reach an ultimate fundament, the foundation of the being as a whole or of the human being as a thinking being – this would imply stripping thinking of its character of being a path. In fact, he does not aim at anything with his thinking; there are no goals to be reached, but only to become apt to accept the manifestations of the Being and to correspond to him. Therefore, neither the Being is conceived as foundation, nor even God.

Heidegger frequently refers to God, to the gods, to the divine and to the sacred. In spite of this, he does not ever say how God must be thought, preferring the ceaseless repetition of how God must not be thought – i.e., in the onto-theological manner of metaphysics.<sup>39</sup> Actually, this refusal of the metaphysical God, conceived as the supreme entity and the foundation of all reality, is already present in the beginning of his path, to the extent that he understands philosophical thinking as essentially phenomenological and ontological. According to this perspective, God will only be accessible to thought insofar as he shows himself implicitly, as a phenomenon, just as happens with Being itself. To put him as the cause of worldly reality, due to an exigency of ratiocinating reason, would be an ontical procedure, foreign to philosophical thought. As stated in a very significant passage of the Letter on Humanism, "It is only from the truth of Being that the essence of the sacred allows itself to be thought. It is only from the essence of the sacred that the essence of divinity can be thought. It is only

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<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, 1957b, "Der Satz der Identität", p. 32b.

<sup>38</sup> See Heidegger, 1957b, "Der Satz der Identität", p.28b, 30b.

<sup>39</sup> See Heidegger, 1957b, "Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik", pp. 50-73.

under the light of the essence of divinity that one can think and say what the word 'God' must name." (Heidegger, 1996, pp. 36-37).

In the world of technique the very Being retreats and conceals itself, so that the essential or meditative thought is still on its path, seeking to enter the mystery of the mutual appropriation (*Ereignis*) between Being and the being, between Being and thinking. That is what is shown in, amongst myriad other passages, the ending of the "What means thinking?" conference: "Nevertheless, we still will not think properly as long as it has not been thought where the Being of beings rests upon when it manifests itself as presence (*Anwesenheit*)."<sup>40</sup> Although the Being's thinking must precede that of the divine, as indicated in the above-mentioned "Letter on Humanism", one may perhaps attribute to Heidegger's thought, as such, a certain experience of the sacred or the divine within the world's fourfold horizon, which takes shape in the intersection between heaven and the Earth, between the divine and the mortals. In effect, it is from the world experienced in such a way that he seeks to think the thing as a thing. It would be much less viable, however, to experience and think today god or the God. The divine are but messengers of the divinity that somehow point us to the God, may he reveal himself or may he remain secluded. Actually, the mortals, that is to say the human beings, as long as they assume death as death, cannot but await the clues of the arrival of the divine, without remaining oblivious of the signs of their absence.<sup>41</sup>

We point to these ideas of Heidegger in order to show that his thought does not intend to reach God or the divine. He intends even less to reach an absolute, be it understood as different from the human being or be it identified with complete human fulfilment. We have, however, enough grounds to believe that his thought is impressed by a mysterious sense of the divine. This divine is not an entity, it must not be represented as the foundation of the being as a whole, as happens in metaphysics, and it actually cannot even be thought, at least for as long as it does not manifest himself once more. This accounts for the difficulty of knowing what Heidegger means when he employs the word God. In fact, the tasks he sets himself, from the beginning to the end of his trajectory, is but thinking the Being, in its convenience to thought, and thought, in its correspondence to Being.<sup>42</sup> Both Being and thinking, in their intrinsic co-relativity, which is constitutive of human essence, are in their own ways entirely under the sign of historical temporality and hence under the sign of finitude. This is what Heidegger

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<sup>40</sup> Heidegger, 1967, "Was heisst Denken?", p. 17b.

<sup>41</sup> See Heidegger, 1967, "Bauen, Wohnen, Denken", pp. 23-25.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. Heidegger, 1957b, pp. 28-30, 63-69.

incisively states in, amongst many other occasions, the conference called "The thing" (1950): "We are – in the word's strict meaning –, those conditioned by things (*die Be-dingen*). We have left behind the arrogance of the Un-conditioned."<sup>43</sup> And, in a late reflection named "Indication of a possible determination of the poetic by Hölderlin", he comments on the expressions "the Supreme" or "the highest" (*das Höchste*) and "strict mediacy" (*die strenge Mittelbarkeit*), declaring that "'The highest' is not the Absolute, but rather 'strict mediacy', i.e., finitude. It constitutes the first determination of the poetic language."<sup>44</sup> And we may add, on our account, that finitude also constitutes the first determination of thinking, due to its close relation to poetry in Heidegger's work.

These statements, which apparently preclude any opening of the human being to the infinite, to the eternal, would lead Heideggerian thought, under Hölderlin's influx, to the proximities of the conception of existence present both in religion as in the life wisdom of the ancient Greeks. Rejecting any ambitious excess (*hybris*), the mortals properly inhabit Earth when, recognising their finitude, they conform to the mystery surrounding their existence in the world's space-temporal horizon. In such sense, the divine to Heidegger would consist in the highest, mysterious dimension of the cosmos itself. However, it is worth noting, in this context, his recurrent mentions of "the God" (*der Gott*) as the last term of a ladder which begins with Being and passes through the sacred and the divine. I am not aware of studies about the utilisation by Heidegger – uncommon in German as in English – of the definite article before the word God, even the Christian God. And it is significant that precisely in the New Testament Paul always uses the article "*ho theós*", when he refers to the God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, even though Greek normally also dispenses it. Would then the experience of the sacred in the world really be Heidegger's last word on the mystery of existence, or with such mention would he point to something beyond?

In any case, in accordance with what was already stated about human finitude, I believe we may conclude that Heideggerian thinking, as an expression of the very essence of the human being, does not manifest any pretension of culminating in the identification or the communion with the absolute. In this it would be set apart from both the Zen-Buddhist and the Christian mysticism, insofar as they present, although diversely, the fulfilment of the human being in the unity with the ultimate foundation of reality as the goal and meaning of human existence. My reference to Zen-Buddhism is based on a study by Shinichi Hisamatsu, called "The

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<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, 1967, "Das Ding", p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, 2000; GA, Vol. 75, p. 201. According to the editors these notes are posterior to July 1970.

fullness of nothingness: from the essence of Zen – a systematic explanation" (Hisamatsu, 1980). My statement is based on sentences such as this one: "[The] true Buddha is neither a naive self, nor a opposed other, he is not an objective subject, but only subjective, and, therefore, an absolute subject." Or yet this one: "The creative force of nothingness, in a wide sense, maintains a similarity to the causal relation between the wave and water, in which the former receives its consistency from the latter. The wave that appears and disappears, taken as a subject, is similar to the common self of the human being. That this subject constantly reverts back from wave to water, in this consists the essence of nothingness in Zen-Buddhism." (Hisamatsu, 1980, pp. 46, 55-56).

In the light of these explanations, we might perhaps propose, with the already mentioned caveats, that Heidegger's thought, notwithstanding its differences to both, would be closer to the Christian conception of existence than to that of Zen-Buddhism, in two aspects. Firstly, in Heidegger as in the Christian vision there is no absolute identity of the human being and the whole of being or nothingness. There is no identity indeed in which all differences are eliminated, but rather an intrinsic correspondence, interpreted from the Christian point of view as communion in love. Having said this, two qualifications must immediately be presented. The first point is that for Heidegger the correspondence occurs between thinking and Being, which as we know is not coincident with the reality as a whole, whereas in Christianity it is viewed as man`s communion with God – the infinite reality. Secondly it is interesting to note how Heidegger all but excludes from his vocabulary the terms "love" and "to love", fundamental to the Christian vision. It certainly would not be in accordance with his thought attributing love to Being, which is not an entity, even though he makes such a Being give, send, determine... It is, however, symptomatic that amongst the many ways he expresses the authentic human existence he does not include loving.

Back to the comparison of Heideggerian thought with Christianity and Zen-Buddhism, let us point out a second difference between these two conceptions of existence, which is actually a consequence of the first. In one case the realisation of the human being is a pure gift, which is nevertheless received in freedom, while in the other case it is the result of human effort. Although for Zen-Buddhism the experience of the final union with the absolute comes impromptu, it would not truly be given by another, since there is no other. It is, rather, the outcome of a demanding self-led process of overcoming the particular self, with its representations and desires, in order to serenely enter the fullness of one's own nothingness.

Heidegger, on the contrary, insistently stresses that the truth of authentic thinking is a gift, in coincidence with the Christian experience described above.

These are two common traces, certainly of paramount importance, in the interpretation of human experience – conceiving thinking as a gift and the relation with the giver as identity in difference. It is based on this that I defend the idea that the Heideggerian thought on the essence of the human in its constitutive relation to Being is inspired in his Christian experience of the relation between the creature and the God of creation and salvation. The differences are also evidently notable, as we have seen. They do not, however, invalidate the thesis, since Heidegger's position can be explained, on the one hand, by the transference of the co-relation between the two terms from the ontical to the ontological sphere, and on the other hand by his refusal of the metaphysical interpretation of the Christian experience. In fact, as Otto Pöggeler shows, to the very end of his career Heidegger kept unaltered his differentiated assessment of the Christian experience and its philosophical-theological interpretation. Religion as such constitutes a fundamental possibility of human existence, in the form of myth, as opposed to philosophy.<sup>45</sup> That is why the religiosity of primitive Christianity peaked when it was caught in the web of Greek philosophy. It is true that the familiarity with Hölderlin led the philosopher to consider that the sacred-divine aspect of ancient Greek world, besides the biblical-Christian religious experience, is also at the origin of the tradition that constitutes the present Western man.<sup>46</sup> This is why Pöggeler concludes that "Heidegger remained a son of the Church he had lost, for in his burial, according to his wish, the Psalm *De Profundis* and Jesus's prayer blended with Hölderlin's verses."<sup>47</sup>

But if these are the only two determinant experiences of Heidegger's thought, how could one explain his interest in dialoguing with the Eastern tradition? It is not a matter of having found in Chinese or Japanese thought stimuli for his own thought. He certainly saw in the figurative language of the ideograms a parallel with his own search for an experienced, transconceptual thinking embodied in images, a thought that seeks to overcome not only the representative thought, but also to return to an originating sphere, prior to the metaphysical distinction between sensible and intelligible. Actually, as he moves from Plato to Heraclitus in his investigations regarding the origins of the Western tradition, in the Eastern world he values

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<sup>45</sup> In this sense says Pöggeler, commenting on Heidegger: "Therefore, it is not properly incumbent upon the philosopher to say the name of God or of the gods, although it is he who can bring human beings to a condition in which to speak of God can anew become meaningful." (See Pöggeler, 1992, pp. 475-476).

<sup>46</sup> See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 114 .

Tao over Zen, aware that Japanese Buddhism received its distinctive character from the former. However, his conscience of the historicity of thinking and of its consubstantiality with language in a certain way thwarted any project of integrating Eastern elements into his own thinking. And the failure of both his dialogue with Japanese thinkers and his attempt to translate the *Tao te king* confirmed him in this conviction.

In fact, there are plenty declarations of his in this direction, besides the ones in "A dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer".<sup>48</sup> For example, in a 1949 answer to Karl Jaspers he says, regarding the mentioned translation attempt: "When the language is not the native one, I become sceptical."<sup>49</sup> And in a letter to Medard Boss from 1955, he adds that "The great deficiency is the lack of a satisfactory discussion of the East Asian languages."<sup>50</sup> Or, in relation to Noh theatre: "I have generally got a feeling as though we were left outside, facing the doors."<sup>51</sup> At last, in the interview to the magazine *Der Spiegel*, answering a question regarding the perspectives for a new thinking, he says that "My conviction is that a change can only be arranged in the same place of the world where modern technique originated. It cannot happen by drawing upon Zen-Buddhism or other Eastern experiences. For the change in thinking to come about, the help of the European tradition and its re-appropriation is of utmost importance. Thinking can only be transformed through a thinking of the same provenance and destination (*Bestimmung*)."<sup>52</sup> (Heidegger, 1976, pp. 214-217)

From all that was said, we may conclude that Heidegger's interest in Eastern thought is explained not so much by the hope that it could nurture his own meditations, but by the conviction that the two traditions, the Western and the Eastern ones, were complementary. This persuasion implies that in the vigour of their origins, which are to be permanently re-appropriated by thought in the horizon of each new world, they represent two grand interpretations of the same fundamental human experience. In the hermeneutic perspective, the tradition of Western thought, which begins with Logos, is but one possible approach to the being as a whole. Alongside it are other thought traditions, like that of Eastern civilisation, with the *Tao* as its paradigm. Therefore, the possibility of a future dialogue between these traditions, glimpsed by Heidegger,<sup>52</sup> would imply that, beyond all historicity of truth and the

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<sup>48</sup> See Heidegger, 1959a, pp. 94, 101, pp. 143-146.

<sup>49</sup> See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 108.

<sup>50</sup> See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 109-110. This utterance is from 1961.

<sup>51</sup> See Pöggeler, 1992, p. 109.

<sup>52</sup> In the mentioned letter to Jaspers, talking about the deep strangeness of Chinese language he also says, regarding the attempt to comprehend it, that "Nevertheless there remains something instigating here, and I believe that for the future, centuries after the devastation will have passed, something essential."

diversity of the worlds, configured by the eventual grants of Being, something in common remain as the mark of the human being's essence.

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