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*An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy*

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*Comparative Philosophy* is a peer-reviewed international journal of philosophy, with emphasis on the constructive engagement of distinct approaches to philosophical issues, problems, themes from various philosophical traditions/styles/ orientations of doing philosophy for the sake of their joint contribution to the common philosophical enterprise, and/or on general theory and methodology of comparative philosophy. [For further information about the emphasis, coverage and orientation of the journal, see the homepage of its website.]

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# COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

**An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy**

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**SPECIAL TOPIC**

**Constructive Engagement of Analytic and Continental Approaches in Philosophy: From the Vantage Point of Comparative Philosophy**



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# EDITOR'S WORDS

The current issue of the journal focuses on one special topic, "Constructive Engagement of Analytic and Continental Approaches in Philosophy: From the Vantage Point of Comparative Philosophy", and consists of three peer-reviewed research articles that, in my opinion, have well illustrated the philosophical point and significance of the topic. Let me briefly explain why the journal focuses on the topic and how it would contribute to the concern and emphasis of the journal.

Especially since the first decade of the 21th century, comparative philosophy, as understood and practiced in a philosophically interesting way, has undergone significant development in its identity, coverage and mission. Comparative philosophy is no longer limited exclusively to the East-West comparative dialogue; it is neither restricted to the cases of apparent culture/region-associated traditions nor stops at a mere historical description of apparent similarities and difference of views under examination, but penetrates deeper and wider philosophically. Comparative philosophy, instead of being a local subfield of philosophy, has become one exciting general front of philosophical exploration that is primarily concerned with how distinct approaches from different philosophical traditions (generally covering both culture/region-associated and style/orientation-associated philosophical traditions[1]) can learn from, and constructively engage, each other to jointly contribute to the contemporary development of philosophy on a series of issues or topics of philosophical significance, which can be jointly concerned through appropriate philosophical interpretation and/or from a broader philosophical vantage point.

It is known that contemporary philosophical studies have been divided into two blocs or traditions concerning methodological styles or orientations of doing philosophy,[2] which are often conveniently labeled 'analytic' and 'Continental'

[1] Understanding the identity of philosophical traditions in this reflectively broader way is not a mere verbal difference but is in serious reflective need for the sake of sophisticated appreciation of the internal structure of each of the closely related multiple identities of philosophical traditions and of the cross-tradition character in some important and relevant dimension and layer of each of these related identities.

[2] It is controversial how to define or exactly characterize the identities of the analytic and "Continental" approaches in philosophy, and the division is not clear cut. However, the features of the two generic methodological styles and orientations by virtue of which their relevant figures, works or basic orientations can be identified are relatively clear and unambiguous, although some of these characteristic features per se also deserve explanation and clarification. Roughly speaking, as far as methodological style and orientation (at the surface level) are concerned, the analytic approach emphasizes conceptual analysis, logical analysis or linguistic analysis of philosophical argumentation and key terms; it stresses logical argument, coherent explanation, clear and precise presentation and

approaches or traditions in philosophy, although both labels tend to be misleading and inaccurate (especially the latter label). What is the relation between the two? Could they learn from each other and make joint contributions to the common philosophical enterprise? How could we carry out critical reflection on both instead of indiscriminately taking each of them for granted in treating philosophical issues and concerns? These related questions address the central concern and objective of the special topic of the current issue, that is, how the constructive engagement between the two is possible. As the constructive-engagement goal and concern is one central strategy of comparative philosophy, it constitutes the vision-crux dimension of the vantage point of comparative philosophy. Tieszen's article explicitly gives a systematic exploration of how the interaction between the two traditions on the relation of natural science to philosophy can help foster further constructive engagement between the traditions. In contrast, O'brien's and Wenning's articles implicitly address the issue of the relation between the two traditions by examining how some valuable resources from both traditions can jointly contribute to our understandings and treatments of some fundamental issues of philosophical significance that are jointly concerned. All three articles look at the issue from the constructive-engagement-vision crux of the vantage point of comparative philosophy in their distinct ways.

There is another significant feature of the vantage point of comparative philosophy in understanding and treating the relation between the two philosophical traditions. Indeed, historically speaking, the two labels have been used by many to refer to the two styles and orientations of doing philosophy *within* the Western philosophical tradition, especially contemporary (post-Kantian) Western philosophy, as suggested by the label '(European) Continent(al)'. The exploration of the relation between the two is not new. Within the Western philosophical tradition (or the contemporary Western philosophical circle) there are conferences or workshops in Europe and in the US that focus on the relation between analytic philosophy and 'Continental' philosophy understood as two contemporary movements of thought in the Western tradition. However, as the primary interest and purpose of this special issue of the journal on the topic does not consist in doing history but *philosophical* inquiry, and as some characteristic features of the two distinct types of methodological styles and orientations of doing philosophy can be traced back to ancient sources in the Western and *other* philosophical traditions and have also

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rigorous assessment; it tends to focus more on the stable, definite, constant, consistent or universal aspect/dimension of (the conceptual characterization of) an object of study instead of identifying its historical situation or cultural setting as a prominent focus. In contrast, 'Continental' approaches tend to rely more on literary (sometimes poetic) expressions and imagination of their ideas while having less reliance on formal logic; they are more interested in actual political and cultural settings and implications of an object of study. It is noted that the division does not lie in their having totally different concerns or topics. Both share many jointly-concerned issues or topics. Many of their originally identified 'unique' concerns turn out to be distinct aspects or layers of jointly concerned issues or topics under appropriate philosophical interpretation and/or from a broader philosophical vantage point. As a systematic explanation of the identities of the two is not the purpose here, I will not explore this further but give this brief note for the sake of minimal clarification and understanding.

manifested themselves in (some) other philosophical traditions in distinct philosophically-interesting ways, the current issue as a whole thus examines the issue of how their constructive engagement is possible in a double cross-tradition (cross-Western-tradition as well as cross-both-target-traditions) way, as addressed by Tieszen's article and as well illustrated by Wenning's article, though one can still focus on their manifestations within the Western tradition (but retaining the vision of the constructive engagement of comparative philosophy), as treated in O'brien's article.

The constructive-engagement goal and cross-tradition character (in the foregoing double sense of 'cross-tradition') of the exploration presented in the current issue as a whole is thus highlighted in the sub-title of the special topic, i.e., "from the vantage point of comparative philosophy".

Bo Mou
July 2011

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# ANALYTIC AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, AND GLOBAL PHILOSOPHY

RICHARD TIESZEN

**ABSTRACT:** *Although there is no consensus on what distinguishes analytic from Continental philosophy, I focus in this paper on one source of disagreement that seems to run fairly deep in dividing these traditions in recent times, namely, disagreement about the relation of natural science to philosophy. I consider some of the exchanges about science that have taken place between analytic and Continental philosophers, especially in connection with the philosophy of mind. In discussing the relation of natural science to philosophy I employ an analysis of the origins of natural science that has been developed by a number of Continental philosophers. Awareness and investigation of interactions between analytic and Continental philosophers on science, it is argued, might help to foster further constructive engagement between the traditions. In the last section of the paper I briefly discuss the place of natural science in relation to global philosophy on the basis of what we can learn from analytic/Continental exchanges.*

**Keywords:** *analytic philosophy, Continental philosophy, natural science, sciences of mind, global philosophy,* Dao-De-Jing, *Buddhism*

There are many references in the philosophical literature to the division between analytic and Continental philosophy but it is not easy to provide a simple formulation of what it is that distinguishes these approaches to or styles of philosophy. There have been significant subdivisions within what has been considered analytic philosophy, such as that between formal philosophy, ordinary language philosophy, and conceptual analysis, and there have of course also been many variations within the general grouping of Continental philosophy, extending from eidetic phenomenology, existential phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism and semiotics, and neo-Freudian analysis to deconstruction. Philosophers who have written about the split between the analytic and Continental traditions have often focused on the work of particular figures who seem to embody much of what is involved in the division. In *The Origins of Analytic Philosophy*, for example, Michael Dummett looks to Frege

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and Husserl and holds that Frege took a turn into the philosophy of language but that Husserl did not, thus initiating a split in modern philosophy. Michael Friedman, to take another example, writes a book entitled *A Parting of the Ways* in which he focuses on Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger.

Over the years I have heard or read a host of characterizations of the two traditions, such as the following: Analytic philosophy strives for clarity, exactness, precision and Continental philosophy does not. Continental philosophy instead tends toward the use of poetic or dramatic language. The methodology of analytic philosophy is argumentation while Continental philosophy, if it has a methodology at all, is concerned with description or narrative or literary quality. Analytic philosophy is, in many domains, reductionistic in nature and Continental philosophy is not. Analytic philosophy tends to be ahistorical while Continental philosophy does not. Analytic philosophers seek to naturalize or formalize or mathematize but Continental philosophers do not. Analytic philosophers have, more often than not, taken the 'linguistic turn', while this is not true of Continental philosophers. The general idea of the linguistic turn is that, instead of analyzing X (e.g., Being or obligation) we are to analyze the language of X. I have also heard it said that analytic philosophy places a premium on reason but Continental philosophy does not. Continental philosophy is instead concerned with basic issues of human existence, such as anxiety, authenticity, death, boredom, identity, and so on.

One has to be careful about all of these characterizations. I do not think that any one of them, as it stands, is accurate. In this paper I want to consider what I think is one source of disagreement that does run fairly deep in dividing the traditions, especially in connection with efforts in recent times to 'naturalize' philosophy in one way or another. Although the contours of the issue are shaped in certain ways by the division between analytic and Continental philosophy, it is an issue that certainly has implications for the broader vision of comparative philosophy that takes in cultures and systems of thinking from around the world. The source of disagreement I have in mind concerns the relationship of science, especially natural science, to philosophy. The issue might be formulated in different ways: Is natural science to be a model for philosophy or not? Is it, in some sense, foundational, so that philosophy should be measured against it or, rather, is philosophy, properly conceived, a foundation for science? Is natural science limited and one-sided as a model for philosophy or does it represent just the sort of regimentation we need in philosophy? One might put it in this way: Is natural science a condition for the possibility of legitimate philosophy or is philosophy in some sense a condition for the possibility of natural science? What is the proper way to think about the relation of philosophy to natural science? It is these kinds of questions, I think, that have a direct bearing on comparative philosophy in a broad sense, and on the prospects for constructive engagement between widely varying philosophical traditions.

Several major Continental philosophers have thought deeply and carefully about natural science, while others have had little to say about it one way or the other. Those Continental philosophers who have presented extensive critiques of the sciences have typically argued that philosophy or metaphysics provides a foundation

in some sense for the sciences, while many (but not all) analytic philosophers are inclined to a kind of scientism according to which our best efforts to understand reality and knowledge are to be found in the natural sciences. Just think of the various pretensions of philosophers, they might say, that have been undermined by good solid scientific work. Think of the revelations that have been made possible by natural science that would not have been possible on the basis of philosophy alone.

In most of this paper I compare some ideas on the relation of natural science to philosophy that have emerged from the traditions of analytic and Continental philosophy. It will of course not be possible to do justice to the many strands of thinking about natural science in analytic and Continental philosophy. One could ask general questions, for example, about the understanding or knowledge of Being (or non-Being) in natural science, or one could focus on the work of particular philosophers in either tradition. In order to make the project somewhat more manageable in the space available here I will focus on the philosophy of mind in particular, and especially on issues about human consciousness. In the final sections of the paper I make some remarks on how constructive engagement between different philosophical traditions in the world might benefit from what has transpired in the analytic and Continental encounters over the relation of natural science to philosophy. These other traditions might of course also inform the ongoing disputes that seem to separate analytic from Continental philosophy.

## 1. ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATIONS ON THE PLACE OF SCIENCE IN ANALYTIC AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

A number of the characterizations of the difference between analytic and Continental philosophy that I mentioned above, especially those centering around clarity, precision, use of argumentation, reductionism, formalization, mathematization, and reason, are I think directly related to this issue of how we are to view the relation of philosophy to natural science. Let me provide a few illustrative quotations on both sides of the issue from some major figures in philosophy, starting with some early comments of Martin Heidegger and Rudolph Carnap that express an animosity that persisted for many years. Heidegger wrote extensively on science and technology, and many philosophers know his remark that "science does not think". Already in his 1929 lecture "What Is Metaphysics?" Heidegger says that

> Science would like to dismiss the nothing with a lordly wave of the hand. But in our inquiry concerning the nothing it has by now become manifest that scientific existence is possible only if in advance it holds itself out into the nothing. It understands itself for what it is only when it does not give up the nothing. The presumed soberness of mind and superiority of science become laughable when it does not take the nothing seriously. Only because the nothing is manifest can science make beings themselves objects of investigation. Only if science exists on the base of metaphysics can it advance further in its essential task, which is not to amass and classify bits of knowledge but to disclose in ever-renewed fashion the entire region of truth in nature and history.

> Metaphysics is the basic occurrence of *Dasein*. It is *Dasein* itself. Because the truth of metaphysics dwells in this groundless ground it stands in closest proximity to the constantly lurking possibility of deepest error. For this reason no amount of scientific rigor attains to the seriousness of metaphysics. Philosophy can never be measured by the standard of the idea of science.

In his infamous paper "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language" (1932) in which he attacks the lecture of Heidegger from which I just quoted, alleging that it is filled with meaningless pseudo-sentences, the logical positivist Carnap says the following:

> The development of *modern logic* has made it possible to give a new and sharper answer to the question of the validity and justification of metaphysics…In the domain of *metaphysics*, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result *that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless*.
>
> But what, then, is left over for philosophy, if all statements whatever that assert something are of an empirical nature and belong to factual science? What remains in not statements, nor a theory, nor a system, but only a method: the method of logical analysis. It is the indicated task of logical analysis, inquiry into logical foundations, that is meant by '*scientific philosophy*' in contrast to metaphysics.

In *The Logical Syntax of Language* (1934), Carnap goes on to claim that

> Philosophy is to be replaced by the logic of science – that is to say, by the logical analysis of the concepts and sentences of the sciences, for the logic of science is nothing other than the logical syntax of the language of science.

The engagement between analytic and Continental philosophy that developed around these kinds of claims was not often not very constructive.

An interesting response to Carnap, in turn, can be found in the remarks of one of the greatest logicians of all time, Kurt Gödel. Gödel, who attended meetings of the Vienna Circle on a regular basis, says that

> Mathematical logic should be used by more nonpositivistic philosophers. The positivists have a tendency to represent their philosophy as a consequence of logic -- to give it scientific dignity. Other philosophers think that positivism is identical with mathematical logic, which they consequently avoid. (Kurt Gödel, as cited by Hao Wang in Wang 1996, 174.)

It is known that Gödel began to study Husserl's work in 1959.[1] Writing about his interest in Husserl in a lecture manuscript from 1961, "The Modern Development of the Foundations of Mathematics in the Light of Philosophy", Gödel says

[1] For more on Gödel and Husserl, see Tieszen 2011.

> ... not only is there no objective reason for the rejection of [phenomenology], but on the contrary one can present reasons in its favor.

Gödel comments on one of the central concepts in Husserlian phenomenology, the concept of intentionality:

> One fundamental discovery of introspection marks the true beginning of psychology. This discovery is that the basic form of consciousness distinguishes between an intentional object and our being pointed (directed) toward it in some way (willing, feeling, cognizing). There are various kinds of intentional object. There is nothing analogous in physics. This discovery marks the first division of phenomena between the psychological and the physical. (Wang 1996, 169)

Finally, I note a remark by Quine (1960, § 45) about this same concept of intentionality:

> The Scholastic word 'intentional' was revived by Brentano in connection with the verbs of propositional attitude and related verbs [such as] 'hunt', 'want', etc. The division between such idioms and the normally tractable ones is notable. We saw how it divides referential from non-referential occurrences of terms. Moreover it is intimately related to the division between behaviorism and mentalism, between efficient cause and final cause, and between literal theory and dramatic portrayal.
>
> One may accept the Brentano thesis either as showing the indispensability of intentional idioms and the importance of an autonomous science of intention, or as showing the baselessness of intentional idioms and the emptiness of a science of intention. My attitude, unlike Brentano's, is the second.

It would of course be possible to provide many more quotations to show that differences over the relationship of (natural) science to philosophy continue to divide analytic from Continental philosophers. It is an issue that has at times clearly interfered with constructive engagement between the two traditions. Skirmishes of this type even receive a lot of attention in the popular press on occasion, as happened several years ago with the so-called 'Sokal hoax', which led to the book by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont titled *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* and to the more recent *Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture* by Sokal.

## 2. PHILOSOPHY OF MIND AS AN EXAMPLE

The relationship of science to philosophy in analytic and Continental philosophy is a large issue. I would like to limit the scope of the discussion somewhat, as I indicated, by considering as an example the differing views in the case of the philosophy of mind, especially as this concerns human consciousness. The twentieth century saw a succession of efforts, championed by many analytic philosophers, to develop a

natural science of the human mind. The natural sciences involved were of different types but what they had in common, as I will argue in a moment, is a set of features that has to be in place if natural science is to exist at all. Neuroscience played the central role in identity theory, while behaviorists focused instead on trying to develop a science at the level of observable human behavior, dispositions to behave, and operant conditioning. Since the time that identity theory emerged there have been various forms of neuroscientific reductionism. From a different direction, linguistics was being linked by some thinkers with the effort to develop a natural science of the mind. Functionalism then emerged in response to problems with behaviorism and identity theory. Computational or Turing machine functionalism was the main contender. It was at this stage that computer science entered into the effort to develop a natural science of the mind. This approach itself splintered into 'symbolic', serial models of minds, parallel distributed processing (connectionist) models of minds, or various hybrids of such models. At an even later stage such models were criticized for their lack of biological realism. Evolutionary biology, it was argued, should figure into any science of the mind. Perhaps we are, for example, 'Darwin machines' of some kind.

Every one of these efforts to develop a (natural) science of the mind in the twentieth century, however, was faced with the same problem: leaving out or failing to do justice to consciousness. This "problem of consciousness" has been invariant through all of these positions, as well as a number of other positions, and at present it is just as troublesome for natural science as it has ever been. From the point of view of a number of Continental philosophers, however, it is obvious why the problem of consciousness has persisted throughout all of the efforts to develop a natural science of the mind. I think that some of Husserl's work, in particular, makes this especially clear. In order to see why the problem has persisted I will start by considering some of the conditions that have to be met in order for modern natural science to be possible.

## 3. THE ORIGINS OF MODERN NATURAL SCIENCE

Science, as we understand it today, did not always exist. There are deep analyses of the origins of modern natural science, especially from the side of some Continental philosophers. What we need to do is to consider some of the general features involved in our understanding the world on the basis of the natural sciences. In speaking of 'natural sciences' in this paper I have in mind primarily what have been called the 'hard' sciences, such as the various areas of mathematical physics, chemistry, computer science, and the like. A distinction is sometimes drawn between the natural sciences and the human sciences. There are features of the natural sciences that are not always present in sciences or areas of investigation that focus on human beings and their activities, such as the social sciences. The following aspects of our experience, aspects that can overlap and condition one another, are involved in making the natural sciences possible:

(1) The central epistemic idea of empiricism or naturalism is that all knowledge is derived from sensory (external or outer) experience. Evidence in natural science is based on sensory experience. Natural sciences often seek to determine causal relations and proffer causal explanations in domains of inquiry that are based on sensory experience of objects and processes in nature, although there are some anomalies about this in domains such as quantum physics. Hypotheses in natural science need not always be causal. They can be merely correlational.

(2) The distinction between quantitative and qualitative aspects of our experience of the world, and the use of calculational or mechanical techniques with the quantitative aspects.

(3) The distinction between formal and "material" aspects of our thinking and understanding (where calculation can also be used with the formal aspects) along with a related distinction between form and meaning.

(4) The role of idealization and abstraction.

(5) The related distinction between the universal and the particular, or between the general and the specific, with the idea that natural *science* is to seek generalities, uniformities, or universal laws concerning natural phenomena in different domains.

(6) The fact that there are prereflective and immediate forms of experience and also more reflective, mediate forms of experience.

(7) The fact that science requires 'objectivity', so that some way of separating the objective from the subjective is called for by modern science.

I will not say much here about point (1). Hypotheses of natural science are sometimes correlational and not causal, and some theories of natural science are mostly, if not entirely, descriptive in nature. The claim that that all knowledge is derived from sensory (external or outer) experience, however, establishes a baseline for *natural* sciences. Sense experience is perfectly appropriate for and is required by empirical sciences. Concerning point (2), one of the central features involved in many of the natural sciences is calculative thinking. Not all types of thinking appear to be calculative but calculative thinking is a condition for the possibility of many of our sciences. One simply cannot engage in vast domains of natural science without calculative methods and concepts. It can of course take a great deal of training and specialization to master and develop these methods and concepts, and the methods and concepts will themselves take on more or less value as a function of how much work they do, the range of their application, how efficient they are, and so on. Calculative thinking requires that we be able to distinguish quality from quantity in phenomena. One must be able to quantify phenomena to make them amenable to calculational techniques. This emphasis on the mathematization of experience is clearly present at the beginning of modern natural science in the distinction between so-called primary and secondary qualities. Such a distinction can be found in the work of Galileo, Descartes, Locke, and others. It has been argued that the distinction is present even in ancient Greek philosophy. In Galileo's work, for example, number, shape, magnitude, position, and motion are taken to be primary qualities and colors, tastes, smells, and warmth/cold to be secondary qualities. The former properties are seen as objective features of experience while the latter are viewed as subjective.

Indeed, the primary qualities are just those that are mathematizable and, in Galileo's view, are absolute and immutable, while the secondary qualities are sensory, relative, and fluctuating. Knowledge is concerned with primary qualities, but opinion and illusion are generally associated with secondary qualities. One might hold that the primary qualities inhere in the objects themselves while secondary qualities do not. The primary qualities are tightly linked with third-person, empirical observation. They are the "objective" features of the world of causes and effects.

The features of quantification and calculation are attended by the feature involved in scientific understanding mentioned in point (3): the shift from "contentual" or "material" aspects of thinking and understanding to formal aspects. The quantifiable aspects of our experience are represented in mathematical and logical formulas. Mathematics, mathematical physics, chemistry, engineering, and many of the other pure and applied sciences require that we discern the form or structure of phenomena. In attempting to determine the form or structure of a phenomenon a kind of formal abstraction takes place. What we abstract from, what is not needed, is what I have called the 'content' or 'matter' associated with the phenomenon. One of the interesting outgrowths of mathematization is that once we have worked out the appropriate mathematics for the scientific treatment of a phenomenon we can often mechanize the mathematics.

What we have said thus far is that with the modern understanding of the world in natural science there is often a focus on quantitative aspects of our experience, where computational techniques are used with the quantitative features abstracted. The understanding of the world in natural science, in a similar vein, involves a shift to formal or structural features of experience in which we abstract from content or certain aspects of meaning. These shifts, as indicated in point (4), are attended by a kind of idealization. Everyday experience is inexact and imprecise in a variety of ways. With the shift to quantification and formalization we obtain a kind of precision and exactness that is otherwise not available to us. This move toward the more exact and precise involves us in various idealizations. We leave behind some of the complexity and richness but also the imperfection of the plenum of everyday experience. The scientific understanding of the world is thus typically an understanding in which various idealizations of the world are at work.

Points (2), (3) and (4) are closely related to some issues about the language of science and the language of philosophy. It is not possible to quantify and calculate in just any language. The languages in which we quantify and calculate in many of the natural sciences are exact, formal languages. In the sciences one attempts to eliminate ambiguity and vagueness. This is a prerequisite for testing and confirming theoretical hypotheses, and for making predictions. If we cannot minimize the number of possible interpretations of the expressions of the language of a science then we cannot obtain definite results that can be corroborated. Scientific language is thus generally characterized by a kind of exactness and rigor that we do not find outside of the sciences.

According to point (5), natural science requires that we be able to distinguish universal from particular features in our experience. Natural science is all about

finding regularities, generalizations, or lawlike features of the world on the basis of our particular sensory experiences. Points (2), (3), and (4) are all involved in making this possible.

As I have been indicating, the understanding of the world provided by natural science involves various kinds of abstraction. It requires us to abstract from a larger whole, i.e., the whole of our experience. It is common in certain theories of wholes and parts to distinguish "pieces" (independent parts) from "moments" (non-independent parts). What makes a part of a whole a piece is just that it can exist independently of the whole of which it is a part, while this is not possible in the case of moments. Moments are abstractions that are "founded" on larger given wholes. Now quantification, formalization, generalization, variation and the like are moments of our experience. They are founded on our experience as a whole, where this experience also includes qualitative, contentual, non-calculational, "meaningful", referential, and particular or specific aspects. The modern understanding of the world in natural science would therefore count as a founded understanding of the world. This means that there is a deeper, founding whole on which it depends and of which it is a part. In a book that is of some interest for comparative philosophy, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Edmund Husserl calls the deeper founding stratum of everyday practices and perception the "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*). This notion of the lifeworld had a significant impact on subsequent work in the Continental tradition of philosophy. A conception such as the lifeworld can also be found in the work of other philosophers. Wilfrid Sellars, for example, distinguishes what he calls the 'manifest image' of the world from the "scientific image". Sellars would probably be considered by most people, by the way, to be an analytic philosopher.

This leads us to point (6). The founded understanding of the world that is present in natural science and modern technology requires the various kinds of reflective activities we have been discussing. The modern scientific understanding of the world is, I would like to argue, a more reflective form of understanding that involves us in various abstractions and idealizations. There are, however, also prereflective and more immediate forms of understanding or awareness. These are forms of understanding or awareness that do not involve all of the abstractions and scientific theorizing that are in the background of the understanding of the world in natural science.

To abstract features of our experience is not itself to be engaged in experience in the same way that we would be were we not abstracting. Abstracting features of experience already requires, as we said, taking a more *reflective* stance on our experience. Indeed, we might draw a general (albeit relative) distinction between reflective and prereflective modes of experience. Prereflective modes of experience would be more *immediate* forms of experience. They would not involve the kind of mediation that attends higher levels of generalization, abstraction, imaginative variation, and theory construction. So the features we abstract from our experience are founded on some larger whole of experience. As Husserl says, there is a founding level of experience and then also founded forms of experience. The natural sciences

must count as providing us with a founded form of experience. Modern natural science is built up over time out of abstractions that involve more reflective, mediate and theoretical stances on our experience. There are, as it were, layers of thinking, directedness, and experience. Various Continental philosophers have pointed out that there can be and has been lifeworld experience without natural science.

What this higher-level interpretive scheme yields, however, is just the kind of distinction noted in point (7). Points (2)-(6), which are concerned with quantification, calculation, formalization, idealization, exactness, precision, and generalization, all involve a more reflective, mediated perspective on the world. Along with point (1), they are all features that allow us to separate what is objective from what is subjective. The scientific understanding of the world involves us in a higher degree of objectification of the world. It is thanks to these features that other commonly recognized aspects of objectivity are possible, such as intersubjective agreement on methods and results and repeatability of calculations, experiments, procedures, and the like. As mentioned earlier, it was the intention of Galileo and other founders of modern natural science to distinguish what was absolute and immutable from what was relative, fluctuating and due solely to subjective sensory experience. Knowledge is then supposedly concerned with the former characteristics and the rest is a matter of opinion and illusion. It is a corollary of our earlier analysis that this search for "objective" characteristics itself involves a kind of abstraction from our experience. The point is precisely to excise the subjective aspects of experience. What we obtain with natural science is a kind of objectivity that would otherwise be lacking in our epistemic enterprises. We can leave behind the inner sensings, feelings, thoughts, and subjective perspectives and focus on the outer observable phenomena that would, in principle, be available to all. What natural science yields is just the third-person stance on the world. In short, the intention behind it is precisely to abstract from human subjectivity, to minimize subjectivity and maximize objectivity.

With these seven points we can therefore specify some of the central elements of the scientific understanding of nature, an understanding that has set the tone for a lot of thinking in analytic philosophy. The features I have discussed, taken as a whole, give us a particular perspective on the world. They provide a way of interpreting the world. Science reveals the world to us in a certain way. It is by these means that we approximate an exactness, clarity, and distinctness in our knowledge that is not part of our everyday, informal understanding of the world. Indeed, an interpretive scheme comprised of these components has a normative character. In light of the successes of mathematical natural science and modern technology we might come to believe that we *should* quantify, formalize, and idealize. This kind of interpretive scheme is routinely applied to nature and everything in nature. We can see how it is at work in the various natural sciences. It conditions what is revealed to us and the revelations of natural science have indeed been very successful, yielding predictions, control, and hence a remarkable kind of power over nature in many domains. Great advances in science and technology have been made on many fronts.

Before moving on to the next section, it should be noted that I do not mean to deny that there are sciences that lack some of the features mentioned in the seven

points above. Several of the points are necessary conditions for natural science but some parts of natural science might be non-quantitative, might be primarily descriptive and not focused on providing causal explanations, or might not engage formalization to any significant extent. I will make some further comments about this below.

## 4. LIMITATIONS ON NATURAL SCIENCE IN PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

The distinctions that lie behind the empiricist, scientific worldview and modern mechanism that are indicated in our seven points allow us to separate the subjective from the objective. They are in fact used for just this purpose. With quantification, calculation, formalization, idealization and exactness we obtain intersubjective agreement on methods and results, including repeatability of calculations, experiments, procedures, and predictions. We obtain a kind of objectivity, and objectivity is what we seek everywhere in the modern sciences.

Now here is the point that is made by a number of Continental philosophers: what happens when this kind of interpretive scheme is turned back around on human beings in particular? What happens is that the very methods required in order for the natural sciences to be possible are methods that abstract away from subjectivity, consciousness, intentionality, and other features of experience itself. Positions that have been favored by many analytic philosophers, such as behaviorism, computational functionalism, connectionism, and neuroscientific reductionism about the mind, all tend toward or even promote a kind of eliminativism about consciousness, intentionality, qualia, and the like. It is not surprising that what is "revealed" to us is that the nature of human being is quantifiable, formalizable or computational.

When we turn natural science back around on ourselves we thus find that, true to our intentions to eliminate human subjectivity, we have eliminated human subjectivity with all of its complexity and detail. Instead we have a purely objectified subject, merely the outer shell as it were. Consciousness, the very essence of subjectivity, disappears. At earlier stages in the development of the modern sciences the human body was interpreted as a machine, with the effect that the "lived body" and bodily intentionality were ignored. The distinction between the human body as a purely material thing (*Körper)* and the lived body (*Leib)* as a source of intentionality and meaning conferral was covered over (see, e.g., Husserl 1970). The mind/body problem develops at the point at which the body is seen as an object of natural science, as purely objective, but the mind is not yet seen as an object of natural science. If the mind is still seen as subjective, even as a soul, then how could it possibly be related to the body? As the natural sciences are extended and augmented the human mind also comes to be seen in purely objective terms in various "sciences of the mind", e.g., as a machine.

Thus, we develop in the sciences an interpretive scheme the goal of which is to absolutely minimize subjectivity and to maximize objectivity and when we apply this interpretive scheme to the human mind we see that we achieve just this effect. The

problem is that we are forgetting what this interpretive scheme abstracts from or leaves behind in the first place. It is not a foundation but is rather already a *founded*, reflective scheme that depends on making the abstractions we have noted (e.g., quantitative from qualitative features, primary from secondary qualities, form from content) and then forgetting about the whole from which they were abstracted. Hence, it can become a limited or one-sided view that conceals much that is important about human cognition. The key point is this: the claim that the human mind or body is the "object" of one of these sciences *depends* on the fact that human beings whose cognitive acts exhibit intentionality have developed a particular interpretive scheme in the first place, a scheme which they have then applied to themselves. We have, in effect, taken an important and fruitful interpretive scheme and applied it beyond its legitimate boundaries. In so doing, we substitute parts of what we are for the whole. At the founding level of all of this, however, we have human subjects with intentionality who build up ways of understanding the world through their manifold capacities for interpretation. The claim that human minds and bodies are to be understood only through such natural sciences rests on a development that presupposes the human capacity for meaning conferral, intentionality, directedness, acts of abstraction, and so on. Science itself is just a kind of directedness. It is a type of intentionality. Our awareness of our own consciousness, however, does not depend on building up layers of scientific theory, abstraction, idealization, and so on. At the prereflective, pre-scientific level humans are already conscious interpreters of the world who are directed toward various goals.

Among the features of human consciousness that should presumably be considered in the philosophy of mind but that tend to be concealed by the filtering required for natural science are the following: more detailed structural features of the intentionality of consciousness, the meaning-giving character of conscious experience, the perspectival character of consciousness, the inner and outer horizons associated with acts of consciousness, the figure/ground structure of consciousness, qualia, the temporal structure of consciousness with its retention-protention and secondary memory components, the underdetermination of perceptual observation by sensation, and so on.

Focusing on this example in the philosophy of mind, let us now come back to the questions posed I posed earlier on the relation of science to philosophy in analytic and Continental philosophy. Is natural science to be a model for philosophy of mind or not? Is it, in some sense, foundational, so that philosophy should be measured against it or, rather, is philosophy, properly conceived, a foundation for science? Is natural science limited and one-sided as a model for philosophy of mind or does it represent just the sort of regimentation we need in philosophy? Is natural science a condition for the possibility of legitimate philosophy or is philosophy in some sense a condition for the possibility of natural science?

The argument is that if we are to see things whole then we must keep both objectivity and subjectivity in the picture. The interpretive scheme involved in natural science provides us with a founded understanding of the world and there is a deeper, founding whole on which it depends. This deeper founding stratum of everyday

practices and perception, as noted above, is called the "lifeworld" in Husserl's philosophy. There are prereflective and more immediate forms of understanding and knowing. These are forms of understanding and knowing that do not involve all of the abstractions of the interpretive scheme we have been discussing. Natural science has not always existed but it does not follow that human beings had no understanding or knowledge of anything prior to the development of natural science. On the view I am describing the interpretive scheme of the natural sciences is not foundational but is itself founded on our lifeworld experience.[2] Natural science can make us blind to our own subjective experience. Thus, I am arguing against reductionism in this sense.

Skepticism about the claim that human consciousness is real or that human subjective qualitative states are real, for example, is skepticism gone too far. I think it is a false dilemma to claim that we must choose between pure objectivity and pure subjectivity. Surely there can be some objectivity about human subjectivity. We can presumably even arrive at objective claims about human consciousness that are not based on natural science. These would be claims about the structures of human consciousness that make natural science possible in the first place. For example, it seems to be invariant across different human subjects that human consciousness is perspectival, or that human beliefs exhibit intentionality. In the case of intentionality, what could it possibly mean to say that humans have beliefs but the beliefs are not about anything? Objective claims about human consciousness that are not based on natural science, such as statements about intentionality, the perspectival character of consciousness, the horizons of conscious acts, qualia, the temporal structure of consciousness, and so on, might very well involve generalization, abstraction, and perhaps even some idealization, but this seems to be inescapable if there is to be any theory or any philosophy of anything. The point is not to abandon theory or philosophy but to exercise a kind of skepticism about one-sided or reductionistic theorizing or philosophizing. We should also put a somewhat finer point on our remarks about science here. Some phenomenologists, for example, have followed Husserl in thinking that there can be an eidetic, apriori science of human consciousness, where the model of science does not stem from empiricism but rather from the tradition of rationalism. Objectivity about subjectivity on such a view would certainly involve abstraction, material a priori generalization from particular individuals, making essences salient through imaginative variation, and so on. Phenomenology, on this view, would not be a natural science but would be a material a priori science that is descriptive, primarily non-quantitative, not in search of causal explanation, and not engaged in formalization to any extent. It was already noted above how there are even parts of natural science that are descriptive, primarily non-

[2] Thus one can also see why Continental philosophers who reflect on science often use language that differs from the language of science. Should we expect that which is presupposed by a science to be expressed in the language of that science? Generally, should we expect a statement of the conditions for the possibility of science to use the language of science? It is a further matter, however, just what kind of language is appropriate at the founding level. One sees wide ranging differences on this matter within Continental philosophy. My own view is that obscurantism in philosophy is not very helpful, but I won't go into the issues here.

quantitative, not in search of causal explanation, and not engaged in formalization to any extent. Natural science, however, cannot be construed as a material *a priori* or *eidetic* science.[3] Many Continental philosophers in Husserl's wake, however, abandoned his idea of phenomenology as eidetic science. Indeed, the model of 'scientific' philosophy in any form was rejected.

## 5. CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF ANALYTIC AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY?

Although I have focused on some particular issues about natural science and consciousness, one could consider many other kinds of examples. Suppose we ask, for example, whether biological evolution makes the human mind possible. According to our best scientific theory on the matter, the theory of evolution, the answer of course is 'yes'. The argument we are considering can be construed as agreeing with this and then adding that we should nonetheless not forget that the human mind makes the *theory* of evolution possible in the first place. Certain features of human cognition, as just suggested, are presupposed by the existence of any theory whatsoever. These features are, in this sense, a condition for the possibility of theory construction. What would these prior ('*a priori*') conditions be? It seems to me to be perfectly legitimate to hold that it is the business of philosophy to explore this question. We can say the same thing about each of our best scientific theories.

I think there can be no doubt that the engagement between analytic and Continental philosophy has at times been destructive. It has had its episodes of bitterness, exclusion, power politics, and so on. Do I think constructive engagement between analytic and Continental philosophy on the relation of science to philosophy is possible? Yes. This is possible not only in philosophy of mind but also in other areas in which differences have been manifest. It may not be an easy problem to overcome (consider again the quotations in Section 1 of this paper), but if we can see more clearly into our own philosophical past in the twentieth century then we can perhaps make more progress in fostering constructive engagement and balance between at least some elements of these traditions. Indeed, a number of the featured speakers in the Center for Comparative Philosophy Symposium for which this paper was written have fostered such constructive engagement over the years: Dagfinn Føllesdal has done this in connection with ideas of Quine and Husserl, Hubert Dreyfus is known for his work on the relation of Heidegger to artificial intelligence and cognitive science, and John Searle has worked on intentionality and philosophy of language. There are now many other instances of such cross-tradition engagement. In the past few decades there has been a significant postanalytic turn within analytic philosophy as well as an analytic turn in parts of Continental philosophy. This signifies progress, in my view. Not only is it good to try to prevent wars but the interactions have been fruitful in many ways.

[3] For more on the distinction between material a priori science and material a posteriori science see, e.g., Chapter 1 of Tieszen 2005.

## 6. THE PLACE OF NATURAL SCIENCE IN GLOBAL PHILOSOPHY

The split between analytic and Continental philosophy is a relatively recent phenomenon in the tradition of Western philosophy. What bearing, if any, does it have on comparative philosophy in a broad sense, and on the prospects for constructive engagement between widely varying philosophical traditions? What implications might it have for philosophy in traditions such as those associated with China, India, the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and so on? I think that the issues that have been raised about the relation of natural science to philosophy in analytic and Continental philosophy are certainly relevant to and important for comparative philosophy in a broader sense. Western philosophy has been deeply influenced by science and technology but there have also been reactions against this influence in some quarters in Western philosophy. This dynamic is still being played out. Philosophy in other parts of the world has arguably not yet engaged with science and technology to the same extent, although this is happening more and more as time passes. What is the appropriate relation of natural science to philosophy? Some interesting and important answers to this question have already been thematized and developed in the interactions between analytic and Continental philosophy.

Science and technology have affected our world profoundly and they will continue to do so. The investigation of relation of natural science to philosophy in a global context is a large topic in its own right, but let me just briefly mention two further examples to give an indication of what I have in mind. It would be possible to choose many such examples.

*Example 1 -- Daoism Meets Natural Science*. One of my favorite texts in Chinese philosophy is the *Dao-De-Jing*. Now what is the appropriate relation of natural science to philosophy when natural science meets a philosophical and poetic text such as the *Dao-De-Jing*? The Wing-Tsit Chan translation of Chapter 1 of the *Dao-De-Jing* reads as follows[4]:

> The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
> The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
> The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
> The Named is the mother of all things.
> Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety,
> And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome.
> The two are the same,
> But after they are produced, they have different names.
> They both may be called deep and profound.
> Deeper and more profound,
> The door of all subtleties!

[4] The English translations of the *Dao-De-Jing* vary widely. For an interesting perspective on this, with an alternative translation of the first sentences of Chapter 1 of the *Dao-De-Jing*, see my colleague Bo Mou's 2003.

I think that many philosophers would take this passage to have more in common with certain types of Continental philosophy than it does with types of analytic philosophy. Be that as it may, what is the appropriate relation of natural science to this kind of philosophy? Presumably natural science should not be or is not in a position to dismiss such a philosophical text with a lordly wave of the hand. Perhaps we need to exercise some skepticism about science as "the Grand Narrative" (in Derrida's colorful but derisive phrase). One might be worried about what remains of the passage if we measure it against the standards of natural science that were spelled out in Section 3 above, such as empirical verification, limitation to primary qualities that can be quantified and formalized, preference for form over content, preference for exact language, and so on. As we argued in Sections 3 and 4, the conditions (1)-(7) provide a founded interpretation of the world that starts with sense experience and then abstracts, idealizes, quantifies, formalizes, and possibly mechanizes. It is an interpretation that provides a certain perspective on the world. It has been argued that such an interpretive scheme reveals many remarkable facts about the world but that we must also be careful about what it might conceal. The interactions that have taken place between analytic and Continental philosophy suggest that we need to take care not to forget about the whole from which the interpretation was abstracted. Are there important perspectives on the world that might be concealed or forgotten if we adopt the interpretive scheme of the natural sciences? Should we not be careful about slipping into an eliminative reductionism here? These are all points have been made and discussed in the literature on the place of science in analytic and Continental philosophy. Heidegger even says at one point that "...perhaps ancient traditions of thought will awaken in Russia or China which will help man achieve a free relationship to the technological world" (Heidegger 1977). It is known that Heidegger studied the *Dao-De-Jing*.

*Example 2 – Buddhism Meets Natural Science*. What happens, for example, when philosophical views such as logical positivism or neuroscientific reductionism meet Buddhist philosophy? It is not clear to me that one could expect the engagement in this case to be constructive. Is Buddhist philosophy to be measured by the standards of science? Is natural science to be dismissed in Buddhist philosophy? The point is that Buddhism would do well not to be subject to natural science in the way that some forms of analytic philosophy have become subject to natural science. I am not arguing that Buddhist philosophy should forget about or turn its back on natural science. On the other hand, the strong anti-scientific or obscurantist aspects of some types of Continental philosophy are also not very helpful. A good example of an effort to find the right balance here can be found in the some of the work of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, such as his book *The Universe in a Single Atom*.[5] The Dalai Lama is very open to science but he evidently feels that while science can perhaps correct Buddhism in certain respects (e.g., Abhidharma cosmology) it is not in a position to overrule

[5] I am thinking also of his participation in the "Mind and Life" conferences, and spinoffs such Hayward and Varela 2001.

Buddhist ideas on all matters. On Buddhist views on consciousness, for example, he says

> Even from this brief discussion, it is, I think, clear that the third-person method–which has served science so well in so many areas–is inadequate to the explanation of consciousness. What is required, if science is successfully to probe the nature of consciousness, is nothing short of a paradigm shift. That is, the third-person perspective, which can measure phenomena from the point of view of an independent observer, must be integrated with a first-person perspective, which will allow the incorporation of subjectivity and the qualities that characterize the experience of consciousness.
>
> A comprehensive scientific study of consciousness must therefore embrace both third-person and first-person methods: it cannot ignore the phenomenological reality of subjective experience but must observe all the rules of scientific rigor. So the critical question is: Can we envision a scientific methodology for the study of consciousness whereby a robust first-person method, which does full justice to the phenomenology of experience, can be combined with the objectivist perspective of the study of the brain?
>
> Here I feel a close collaboration between modern science and the contemplative traditions such as Buddhism, could prove beneficial. (The Dalai Lama 2005, 133-4)
>
> In my view, the combination of the first-person method with the third-person method offers the promise of a real advance in the scientific study of consciousness. (The Dalai Lama 2005, 142)

These ideas are remarkably similar to some of the points about science that have emerged in interactions between analytic and Continental philosophers.

## 7. CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR BALANCE

Our brief reflections on analytic and Continental philosophy, science, and global philosophy show how we can avoid the view according to which the sciences and technology provide the fundamental or only ways of knowing, understanding, and being in the world, and that value natural science and technology above all else. If we should avoid such a scientism it does not at all follow that we should avoid science. It is rather just a matter of keeping it in its proper place. Natural science reveals and conceals. I think the idea would be to retain and develop what is revealed by the sciences, subject to critical scrutiny, responsibility, and broader values, but also to cultivate our understanding of the fundamental features of experience that are concealed by the sciences, where this is also subject to critical scrutiny, responsibility, and broader values.

What we arguably need, therefore, is a kind of balance. We do not want to reject science but, rather, we would like to develop the right kind of relationship to it. We need to get it in perspective. To put it in perspective is at the same time to see its limits. On the one hand, there is a tendency toward scientism in many forms of analytic philosophy. If scientism is the view that it is *only* through science and technology that we have knowledge or understanding of anything then it is an

exclusionary view. There is a kind of reductionism at work in some quarters of science in which anything not reducible to scientific knowledge is to be rejected. Of course one can be more or less hard-nosed about this but there are in fact some very hard noses out there. A scientific understanding of Being (or non-Being) on which one embraced the abstractions inherent in the scientific worldview and then either forgot about or covered over what was left behind by the abstractions is, by intention or not, a kind of eliminative reductionism. It is a reductionism that can be understood in terms of the part-whole scheme outlined above.

On the other hand, the ideas I have expressed do not imply that we ought to rebound into an anti-scientific or anti-technology stance. Science and technology, in addition to having the potential to provide enormous practical benefits to humanity, can provide an important corrective to the many possible interpretations of the world that involve superstition, credulousness, religious intolerance, and the like. Science and technology can instill a healthy skepticism. Skepticism about the claims that the earth is flat or that the universe is only several thousand years old, for example, is a healthy skepticism. A scientific worldview can also, however, issue in an unhealthy skepticism that would have us deny a place for other important features of our world.

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# THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY: HEIDEGGER, PERSONHOOD AND TECHNOLOGY

MAHON O'BRIEN

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper argues that a number of entrenched posthumanist positions are seriously flawed as a result of their dependence on a technical interpretive approach that creates more problems than it solves. During the course of our discussion we consider in particular the question of personhood. After all, until we can determine what it means to be a person we cannot really discuss what it means to improve a person. What kinds of enhancements would even constitute improvements? This in turn leads to an examination of the technical model of analysis and the recurring tendency to approach notions like personhood using this technical model. In looking to sketch a Heideggerian account of personhood, we are reaffirming what we take to be a Platonic skepticism concerning technical models of inquiry when it comes to certain subjects. Finally we examine the question as to whether the posthumanist looks to apply technology's benefits in ways that we have reflectively determined to be useful or desirable or whether it is technology itself (or to speak as Heidegger would – the "essence" of technology) which prompts many posthumanists to rely on an excessively reductionist view of the human being.*

**Keywords:** *Heidegger, posthumanism, technology, personhood, temporality*

A significant number of Posthumanists[1] advocate the techno-scientific enhancement of various human cognitive and physical capacities. Recent trends in posthumanist theory have witnessed the collective emergence, in particular, of a series of analytically oriented philosophers as part of the Future of Humanity Institute at

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[1] The term itself [posthumanism] would clearly have troubled Heidegger, and without getting ahead of ourselves, he would, no doubt, insist that the very term was another symptom of the unshakeable dominion of *Gestell*/Enframing. The term "posthumanism" is an umbrella term covering a series of related movements. The key arguments in this paper are aimed, predominantly, at the movement within posthumanist theory which is often referred to as "Transhumanism". At the forefront of that movement are a series of analytic scholars working at The Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford. However, since a number of our arguments can be thought to apply to other types of posthumanism, especially when it comes to the question of technology and "Enframing", we will use the term "posthumanism" rather than switching back and forth between posthumanism and transhumanism.

Oxford. According to one of the most well known of these philosophers, some of the gravest problems that beleaguer us as human beings involve our *shortcomings* as physical and emotional creatures susceptible to unhappiness, senescence and death. These posthumanists are committed to finding, in short, a *cure* for the human condition.[2] And yet, the human *condition*, that is, what it means to be a human, more specifically, a human *person*, is precisely what they fail to address[3]:

> With continuing advances in science and technology, people are beginning to realize that some of the basic parameters of the human condition might be changed in the future. One important way in which the human condition could be changed is through the enhancement of basic human capacities. (Bostrom and Roache 2007, 1)

Some of the "basic parameters" that posthumanists have in mind here relate to our mortality while they advocate the extension of human lifespan indefinitely. In the same paper it is noted that

> Were it not for aging, our risk of dying in any given year might be like that of somebody in their late teens or early twenties. Life expectancy would then be around 1,000 years….In other words, retarding senescence would enable us to grow older without aging. Instead of seeing our health peak within the first few decades of life before gradually declining, we could remain at our fittest and healthiest indefinitely. For many, this represents a wonderful opportunity to experience, learn, and achieve many things that are simply not possible given current human life expectancy. (*Op.cit*., 4)

This aspect of posthumanist theory, in particular, shall concern us in what follows. What the posthumanist routinely overlooks in their refutation of objections to their proposals is the question of *where* one's sense of personhood would come from were the temporal backdrop of our radical finitude to be omitted from our reckoning. In suggesting that there are aspects of the human condition that may well change at our current rate of technological progress, posthumanists fail to address the question as to what makes the human condition meaningful or worthwhile to begin with. At best, they pay lip service to the importance of our emotional well-being without acknowledging the role played by temporality in shaping our affective experience. In focusing on various aspects of human well-being, all of which are aspects of our emotional well-being in some shape or form, they fail to look at the temporal context within which affectivity occurs and look on the various aspects of being human in an atemporal vacuum. For instance, if someone suggests that part of what gives our lives meaning are the attempts to complete certain projects within a certain time-frame, the post-humanist suggests that if one were to exist indefinitely, one would simply have more time to complete more projects. This misses the point hopelessly; our various

[2] This condition, moreover, is all too often described in terms of an affliction to be treated rather than a gift to be celebrated.

[3] Some of the features of our *condition* which they wish to overcome are in fact constitutive of any conception of the human condition and concomitant account of personhood or human flourishing to begin with.

projects are in significant part infused with meaning and urgency *because* of the fact that there are very distinct temporal limits to what we can achieve. That is not to say that a life without temporal limits cannot have meaning, but surely that is one of the things which needs to be looked at. That is, if the lives we currently lead are run through with a temporal character, then what we have to think about are not the specifics of particular enhancement technologies, as Bostrom and others recommend, rather what should concern us is the question as to where a non-temporal account of personhood would come from, or upon what it would be based. And, before we can even begin to address that question, more time needs to be devoted to the question of how temporality conditions any *current* conception of personhood we may have.

The analytic approach to the question of posthumanism then, though the analysts have yet to realize it, has run aground; they are at something of an interpretive impasse, one that was inevitable given some of their presuppositions. One of the most problematic of the posthumanist's presuppositions, one which we will concentrate on in this paper, is the belief that the notion of personhood is well established as part of the backdrop to their own recommendations concerning a series of improvements to human persons which will issue in a *post*-human person. By ignoring the inescapably temporal constitution of personhood/personal identity, however, the posthumanist leaves their recommendations for the improvement of human persons open to the charge of being arbitrary.

The general strategy in this paper is indebted to a certain theoretical skepticism (with respect to morality) clearly evident in a number of Plato's dialogues. Questions as to what it is to be virtuous or just or good remain those for which Plato seems to harbour the least theoretical confidence in the dialogues, at least when it comes to subjecting them to the theoretical or technical model of the exact sciences. We redeploy this Platonic skepticism then, arguing that the technical language of the exact sciences (which Plato undermines with respect to its effectiveness when it comes to ethics, for example) simply is not suited to many of the problems and dilemmas raised by the issue of posthumanism. This can be characterized then as an attempt to offer a deconstructive, continental response to a series of analytic arguments, since the advocates of contemporary posthumanist theory we are targeting (again, specifically in the transhumanist sense) operate self-consciously within the analytic tradition. That does not reflect any inveterate bias or preference for the continental over the analytic approach in general.[4] Rather, in this instance, the deconstructive purgative of a continental critique unearths a major blind-spot in the analytic treatment of posthumanism. Our efforts here may issue in a kind of Platonic *aporia*; nevertheless, we should be understood as at least trying to assist future efforts to pick a path out of the theoretical morass which currently benights this debate by

[4] It would be disingenuous to suggest that my own philosophical background is *straightforwardly* neutral since my most significant work to date has been largely devoted to Heidegger interpretation. Notwithstanding, I would argue that my attitude is more inclusive than many of the hardliners on either side would countenance. The stand-off between the continental and analytic traditions is a rather unfortunate intellectual development while the champions around which these partisan adversaries rally are often not nearly so easily pigeon-holed!

identifying some of the unhelpful theoretical detritus which may clutter such paths. If the posthumanist can absorb some of the criticisms we offer regarding their failure to recognize the temporal constitution of personhood and the problematic nature of contemporary conceptions of technology, they might yet be able to offer more reflective arguments against the backdrop of an intuitively plausible, reconsidered account of personhood.

There are a plethora of questions and considerations that the notion of posthumanity brings to the table that remind us of just how prescient Bernard Williams was in his conviction that returning to the work of the ancient Greeks might well be the only way we can begin to appreciate the depth and difficulty of certain contemporary philosophical problems:

> This is not just the piety of philosophy toward its history. There is a special reason for it…The idea is certainly not that the demands of the modern world on ethical thought are no different from those of the ancient world. On the contrary, my conclusion is that the demands of the modern world on ethical thought are unprecedented, and the ideas of rationality embodied in most contemporary moral philosophy cannot meet them; but some extension of ancient thought, greatly modified, might be able to do so. (Williams 1993, v)

The very notion of "enhancement" involves significant presuppositions. When we speak of "improving" people, or making the kinds of improvements that might lead to a better person, we presuppose an account of personhood beyond the mere classification "homo sapiens". After all, being human on its own, in *that* sense, would appear to be a morally neutral notion; in the context of what is right and wrong – the ability to suffer or feel pain would seem to be more relevant. And the capacity to suffer is one shared by all kinds of non-human animals. The posthumanist might look to immediately forestall these kinds of reservations, and some indeed have, insisting that the fact that such notions (e.g. personhood) are difficult to nail down is no argument against the relevance of future humanity's enhancements being viewed from an ethical perspective every bit as much as the current human model. The problem for the posthumanist here is that that type of move issues in something of a pyrrhic victory. The fact that we may fail to offer a comprehensive, axiomatic definition of personhood, which Jane English (1975) famously described in another context as a "cluster concept", is not in fact a good reason for choosing any arbitrary cluster of concepts whatsoever! Moreover, if one grants as much but then attempts to come up with a viable definition, then one is back in philosophy's proverbial gutter of explanatory poverty trying to find a place to start. And of course, all too often, critics have looked to begin in the wrong places and with the wrong kind of language. So while we may concede that one needs to begin to appreciate that change is coming and that we are required to think about such change – arbitrary, makeshift foundations for evaluating change are no foundations at all.[5] Plato's dialogues represent a salutary

[5] Nick Bostrom's *Future of Humanity Institute* professes to be the intellectual centre that will serve this important function. However, in the main, the arguments and findings that have emerged from the

reminder of the perils of trying to transpose the theoretical/technical template of the more exact sciences onto questions which don't admit of that sort of treatment.[6] We routinely transpose the *techne* model of the exact sciences onto questions that do not have the same rationalist/idealist backdrop and we end up philosophically marooned. What is needed, however, is an entirely different approach, not variations on the technical one. And such an approach, I would submit, is part of what Heidegger is trying to pave the way for. Granted, Heidegger never sees himself as answering questions such as "what is virtue?", but he certainly *can* be credited with an attempt to undermine the ratio-technical approach to human life from the very beginning;

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institute lack objectivity in that the dice are heavily loaded against critics of posthumanism. In paying the merest lip service to the concerns of critics of posthumanism and annihilating straw-man arguments, they routinely dodge the more serious philosophical problems that need to be addressed. Most problematic is the institute's failure to address the question as to what personhood itself entails. Moreover, Bostrom repeatedly points to the fact that the difficulties involved do not, of necessity, constitute an argument against the enhancements proposed by posthumanists: "In order to decide what changes in a person's mood or personality count as improvements, then, we must confront questions like: By what standard do we assess improvements or the reverse in cases where a person's mood or personality does not have a serious adverse effect on their life? Is it even plausible to claim that there could be such a standard? If so, what is the best guide to what the standard is and how it applies in a particular case: the opinion of the subject, the opinions of those who interact with the subject, or something else? The importance of addressing such questions does not entail that mood and personality enhancement is impossible or inadvisable; but a certain amount of philosophical reflection and analysis is required if we are to gain genuine benefits from such technology." (Bostrom and Roache 2007) The problem however is that, in the same paper for example, Bostrom and Roache proceed to describe various different types of enhancement individually in the context of a rather nebulous, undefined notion of human flourishing without ever actually offering any account of what it means to be a person such that we could begin to see what it might mean to improve such a person – what it would be for a person to flourish in the first place. Rather they simply look at the mind and body through a somewhat hackneyed technological, reductionist lens which creates more problems than it purports to solve. That is not to say that the Institute is engaged in a dead-born enterprise. Bostrom and his colleagues should be commended for looking to tackle some of the most pressing questions of our time. Notwithstanding, there are a series of underlying presuppositions shared by scholars at the Institute that reflect a disappointingly inflexible ideological platform of their own.

[6] Plato's *Meno*, for example, can be read as a sustained meditation on the shortcomings of the *techne* model when it comes to the messy matter of the "science of human affairs". A number of commentators who subscribe to what David Roochnik (1996) dubs the SAT view (standard account of *techne*) insist that Plato changed tack through the middle and late dialogues and became a theoretical skeptic with respect to morality thereby supplanting the programmatic, optimistic and idealistic moral outlook of the early dialogues. Other commentators, including Roochnik, argue that Plato maintained a consistently skeptical stance concerning the suitability of the *techne* model for questions pertaining to the good life from the very beginning. This of course is to advance what some might call a continental interpretation of Plato. But, in a sense, such characterizations are unavoidable since the *way* we read Plato, in itself, reflects the fault line that has seemingly sundered our tradition in the shape of an interpretive series of choices we make when reading even the great inaugurators of that tradition. In other words, a version of our analytic – continental stand-off is evident in our attempts to divine the meaning or implications of Plato's dialogues. That is not to suggest that Plato, for example, should be read as a continental philosopher. That kind of anachronistic approach to Plato or Aristotle is nonsensical but it is one imposed on us by the intransigence of analytic Plato scholars. What a number of recent Plato scholars have tried to show is that much of Plato's work can fruitfully be read as presaging some important, putatively continental approaches to philosophical questions.

indeed the account of authenticity in one of his first major philosophical publications, *Being and Time*, can justifiably be described as such. We need an alternative launching pad for the notion of personhood to the technical/reductionist model which typically leaves us with a hopeless and grotesquely vivisected scrapheap where once there was, albeit vaguely outlined, a more holistic sense of personhood. Admittedly, Heidegger repeatedly insists that nowhere does he offer an ethics (and he is keen to remind us that neither does he offer a philosophical anthropology, even as early as *Being and Time*).[7] We might say that this is due to his belief that a term like "ethics", generally speaking, already carries a metaphysical legacy which he is trying to overcome. But that is not to say that in outlining Heidegger's account of what it is to be an authentic being, interacting with other beings as similarly authentic in the truth of their *own* being, *we* cannot begin to trace the basis for an alternative conception of personhood, albeit one which Heidegger himself refuses to sketch.

## 1. PROBLEMS WITH THE ANATOMICAL APPROACH TO PERSONHOOD

Personhood, like other notions that are close to us, is taken so much for granted as to seem invisible; the familiarity of such concepts breeds a collective indifference or insensibility.[8] And yet, when it comes to properly examining the question of personhood, as Jane English argues, we struggle to come up with an exhaustive list of necessary and sufficient conditions. The mere fact of being human will not suffice since many people justify abortion to a point on the grounds that the fetus is not yet a person and yet they would hardly deny that the same fetuses are human. For those familiar with the debates surrounding the question of animal rights and the concomitant charge of speciesism, this is also straightforwardly problematic. Given the diversity of individuals that constitute the set of humanity, if all that was required to be a person was to be human, then all kinds of animals that we would typically avoid calling persons would be precluded from being called as much for the simple and rather arbitrary reason that they do not happen to belong to our species; there would be no further morally significant distinction in terms of intellectual ability or emotional intelligence, the ability to suffer and so on. This, of course, entangles us in the question of speciesism and without moving down that road, one can already anticipate the enormous difficulties we might face here.[9] Pain and suffering on their

[7] Heidegger could not be clearer on this issue in *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. In the "Preview" he repeatedly dispels what he variously refers to as moral-anthropological and existentiell-anthropological misreadings of *Being and Time* and bemoans the fact that the "temptation is still close at hand to take the entire deliberation in the first half of *Being and Time* as confined to the range of an anthropology, only with an other orientation." (Heidegger 1999, 48) There are other comments concerning his efforts to steer clear of ethics in "Letter on Humanism". (Heidegger 1998, 268).

[8] Indeed we could line this posture up with what has been called the "false conceit of knowledge" of the interlocutors that Socrates faces in a number of the dialogues. (See Benson 1990)

[9] This raises the question, for instance, as to whether the enhancements that the posthumanist advocates with respect to humans should be made available to animals. That is, suppose we have a scenario whereby a medical breakthrough is made such that we can enhance the brains of human individuals that would otherwise be left severely mentally handicapped. Presumably, many of us would be willing

own will not prove definitive either since too many non-human creatures share this capacity as well. Eventually we are forced to concede that the notion of personhood is a somewhat elusive concept.

Be that as it may, part of the reason that personhood appears to be a "cluster concept" that resists attempts to define it relates to the technical, reductionist approach itself. The anatomizing of personhood does a certain amount of violence to the structural integrity of the *whole*. We cannot be broken down so easily into parts, nor can we be simply reassembled from those discrete elements; but that does not mean that we are non-coherent amalgams of disparate elements. It is not just the posthumanist who looks to dissect our personhood in this way of course – they rely on a technical interpretive approach that is already entrenched. However, in advocating specific enhancements of discrete components, divorced from any holistic context, they are essentially prescribing treatment and improvements for severed limbs rather than intact bodies. The presuppositions that undergird the analytic approach to this kind of question then are in fact *the* major source of their own theoretical confusion.

The attempts to define personhood (as is seen repeatedly in debates concerning abortion or the treatment of animals) tend to founder on the issue of limit cases. In other words, various creatures that fit the bill as/answer to the description "human beings" often fail to meet all of the criteria that supposedly constitute personhood. In a way, we are dealing with the kind of problem faced by anyone pushed to provide Socratic definitions for non-analytic subjects. For example, when it comes to what a tree is or what the definition of a tree is, we will find that no list of criteria will ever prove definitive. However, we seem to remain, for the most part, epistemically and practically unfazed by this *shortcoming*.[10] There is little or no moral significance, for

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to concede that there is nothing morally dubious in intervening in such cases and enhancing these same individuals. The posthumanist might go further and suggest that there is no morally significant difference between that kind of intervention and those that they are discussing regarding the cognitive enhancement of humans with what we might currently deem median cognitive capacities. We are faced however with a possible question concerning speciesism in a different setting. If scientific research could potentially lead to the cognitive transformation of dogs, for example, into creatures that would be as sophisticated cognitively as a human being with what is currently an average IQ; would we see fit to enhance any dog we could in the same way we would the handicapped humans and, if not, why? I suspect that this is the kind of dilemma that the future humanist would be willing to concede but would rather avoid. Notwithstanding, I don't see it as an argument against posthumanism *per se*.

[10] Though, this same difficulty with respect to trees reveals again how the search for technical definitions is not always the best strategy; and yet we cannot simply decide that trees can no longer be spoken of. Socrates repeatedly exhorts his interlocutors to offer technical, analytic definitions of ethical terms in Plato's dialogues, but one wonders what his interlocutors might have said if they were discussing whether or not a forest of trees was aesthetically pleasing and Socrates refused to be drawn on the subject before they had offered a comprehensive and exhaustive definition of the word "tree". As it happens, this issue *has* led to legal headaches from time to time since finding an overarching definition of a tree proves next to impossible. I recently discovered a newspaper article which reported on a case where a presiding judge had taken twelve thousand words to "define a tree". Justice Cranston was interested in the legal definition of a tree in terms of tree preservation orders and ruled in the case in question that a sapling clearly counted as a tree and that a previous ruling which determined that a tree's trunk had to reach a certain minimum diameter in order to count as a tree was erroneous: "with

example, riding on the question as to what constitutes a tree. And, if Socrates himself were to push us for the definition of a tree, we might concede eventually that we cannot offer a definition of a tree in the same way that we might be able to furnish a definition of something in geometry which deals with self-evidence or analytic truths. All of Socrates' vexations concerning the definition of a tree would not stop us from saying whether a tree in our garden is green or tall or deciduous and so on. We would continue to speak of trees rather than passing over them in silence even though we could not offer the definition of a tree which Socrates would wish to identify before proceeding. The same is *not* true when it comes to the question of personhood, which has been the subject of some of the more hotly contested debates in contemporary moral philosophy. We have continually struggled and failed to provide *exact* and *exhaustive* definitions of personhood and we don't seem content to accept the notion of personhood as loosely defined or non-technical. And, to make matters worse, the posthumanist, incognisant of this difficulty it would seem, routinely proceeds with a half-baked, pseudo-technical understanding of personhood as though it were indubitable.

Granted, we typically don't need to distinguish between terms like "human being" and "person" in order to make sense of experience. We are not normally crippled with perplexity when someone uses these terms; indeed, most of us would tend to treat the

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tree preservation orders there are no limitations in terms of size for what is to be treated as a tree. In other words, saplings are trees". (Adams) From there I began to scan through various textbooks and studies of trees, as I could lay my hands on them, only to find that, for the most part, the subject of these various studies – the tree/trees, remained undefined or rather loosely defined. Eventually, I found the following insightful and, dare I say it, philosophically penetrating entry in *Colliers Encyclopedia*, Vol 22:

> TREE**,** a perennial woody plant that *typically* [not necessarily] has a single upright stem, or trunk. *A more precise definition is difficult to formulate because of the range of sizes and the diversity of habits of plants considered by various people to be trees*. For example, banana plants often are referred to as trees, but they are herbaceous rather than woody. Many previous definitions have included the condition that the trunk of a tree divides into successively more numerous and smaller segments, called branches and twigs, which bear leaves, or that trees have distinct crowns of foliage. A palm tree, however, has an unbranched trunk topped by a cluster of large leaves; and the woody trunk of the giant tree cactus, or saguaro, may have one or a few thick branches but is leafless.
>
> *Most definitions include a statement on height, but the minimum height to qualify as a tree ranges from 8 to 20 feet in the view of different authors. Some definitions pertain to individual plants, but others pertain to species.* Thus, a low plant at timberline on a high mountain or in the Arctic may be considered a tree because it belongs to a species whose individuals usually grow to large size. In a favorable site the plant has the inherent capacity to grow to large size, but adverse environmental conditions at timberline limit its height to a few feet. Other plants ranging from a few inches to several feet tall, particularly many forms propagated by nurserymen, and bonsai dwarfs, are considered trees because they have single trunks and conspicuous crowns. *A large plant that would be recognized as a tree by any of the many definitions began growth as a seedling and gradually grew to large size. Was it a tree from the time it germinated, or from the time it reached a height of 8, 10, 12, 15, or 20 feet? While these are legitimate questions, they have no scientific answers. Although rigid definitions may be required for certain undertakings, 'tree' is a concept that always will be interpreted more liberally by some people than by others*. (McCormick 1972, 448; my emphases).

terms more or less synonymously. But when faced with the moral dilemmas alluded to above, we have persistently looked to determine the meaning of "personhood" in the same way that Socrates' interlocutors try to satisfy the latter's demands for technical definitions. The reason we have found ourselves dissatisfied with the biological definition of a human being as sufficient for personhood, for instance, relates to the fact that that definition is of little use when it comes to the moral positions that look to stake their claims with varying standards or accounts of personhood.[11] We find that we can offer a suitably adequate definition of the term "human being"[12] then, but we will begin to struggle when it comes to the term "person". Most likely, we would begin with the assumption that a person is a human being. But, without moving too far in any particular direction, we already know that the mere fact of being human will often not do enough work for an account of personhood, enough work, that is, such as to resolve all of the difficulties that emerge in moral debates. To put things rather simply, any attempt to define personhood typically moves in one of two directions: commentators either try to lower things down to such widely held common denominators of human experience that the classification personhood cannot justifiably be thought to not apply to all kinds of non-human animals, or else, in the attempt to avoid this result by establishing the exclusively human character of personhood, commentators propose criteria which would ultimately preclude all kinds of human beings whose personhood we are loath to relinquish. There are many human beings that, for one reason or another, do not have the capacity to function, for example, as moral agents and yet we would still classify them as "persons". For example, a severely retarded human being, or a very young infant would not qualify as a moral agent and yet we still count them as persons. So, while many people are moral agents, there are lots of people who are not, thus moral agency is certainly not the criterion required.

Jane English demonstrates effectively how attempts to come up with an exhaustive list of necessary and sufficient conditions regarding the notion of personhood are bound to fail and characterizes the notion of personhood as a "cluster concept", which is a useful enough image. English stops short of suggesting, however, that the attempt to find a technical/theoretical definition is a major source of the relevant difficulties to begin with. In other words, she seems to simply accept that we begin with a concept (personhood), of which we have a vague, average understanding before then attempting to offer a more technical, comprehensive, scientifically adequate account when pushed. In demonstrating how these efforts typically unravel, however, we also need to address the question as to where the vague, average understanding of personhood comes from, and whether or not there are other ways of thinking about the concept that do not require us to simply render it a murky puddle of notions, or a cluster concept without any cohesive agent. In other words, what if it is the technical approach itself that renders the notion of personhood

[11] For a discussion of this issue, among others, in the context of a critical overview of the notion of personhood in moral philosophy see S. F. Sapontzis 1981.
[12] Presumably we will offer some generic account of what the term 'homo sapiens' involves.

as such? What if this is the wrong type of approach? What if we *do not* simply accept the Socratic challenge at the outset? Is that perhaps what Plato was trying to suggest in some of his dialogues? That is, that sometimes the technical approach (*i.e.* the conviction that we must begin with a technical definition) simply won't work when it comes to certain types of questions. Then how *might* we begin?

## 2. A *NON*-ANATOMICAL ACCOUNT OF PERSONHOOD

We seem to have some basic sense of what being a person means, it is perhaps imprecise, it maybe begins to creak if we try to establish moral principles of inclusion and exclusion upon it which typically involves trying to beef up the technical side of the definition. But before trying to supplement the definition in that fashion, what if we examine where our immediate, non-technical, average sense of personhood comes from? Clearly being biologically human, in and of itself, doesn't seem to *necessarily* play a major conceptual role at the pre-reflective stage; we are not interested in the biological backdrop to personhood in this context. We are usually thinking more in terms of a site of experiences, in short, our emotional experience. Take, for example, the frequency with which we personify all kinds of non-human creatures. Even in our fantastical conjectures regarding extra-terrestrials in science fiction we tend to personify them in some way. When we personify an alien, for example, for the most part, we tend to focus on their affective capacities, that is, we usually take it as a given that they are cognitively advanced, but we are interested in whether or not they would have an affectivity that would allow for empathy or mutual identification. The kinds of questions we seem inexorably drawn to involve how they feel about things. In other words, will they respond affectively to situations as we do? Our tendency is to speculate about them as *emotional* beings. A similar trend is noticed in other popular science fiction genres, for example, cinematic treatments of artificial intelligence. In movies that tackle the question of Artificial Intelligence, the overriding concern of the narratives typically relates to the issue of emotional experience. Much of what we might once have been impressed by in terms of computation and physical strength can be understood readily enough in terms of computers and machines with painted faces. What ultimately fascinates us is the idea that something that is not human could have something comparable to our *emotional* experience and thereby the ability to experience the world in all of its affective depth the way we do. The focus is nearly always on the personhood of these non-human entities which is both measured and attested to by their capacity for emotional response. Ultimately, fascination with superhuman mental or physical prowess is a response to novelty and is rarely the focus of these stories; the meat of these stories involves emotional relationships and how we in turn come to identify machines as people and no longer as mere machines. Again and again writers, film-makers and story tellers return to this theme of human emotions as being central to any account of *humaneness* and empathy, in short, the ability to treat others as persons deserving of respect in their own right. The specifics of their genetic or biological or material composition are deemed irrelevant to the question of personhood, the issue of

personhood relates exclusively to the idea of an awareness that appreciates and *feels* what we ordinarily call human emotions. Of course, from a Heideggerian standpoint, there is a fundamental misapprehension on the part of those who speculate in these ways concerning affectivity in that the temporality or possibly non-temporal nature of these creatures is largely ignored, where, for Heidegger, this is central to any account of our affective understanding, self-identification and projection. As such, the supposition that commensurate emotional awareness would develop in suitably *intelligent* non-human machines, for example, misses the historical constitution of human interpretation, understanding, in short, how time conditions the way we feel. Leaving this important criticism to one side, for the moment, we simply wish to establish that affectivity, however it is understood, is central to any account or understanding of personhood. The question as to how time or temporality *should* be brought to bear on any account of affectivity is something we will treat of shortly.

Consider our fascination with the biographies of famous people. More often than not, what intrigues us most is the possibility of a glimpse inside their mind, and this usually means that we are interested in them as emotional beings. When reading accounts of Beethoven's life, for example, we wonder what kind of person he was? What must it have been like to *be* Beethoven? How did Beethoven experience a world which, in certain respects, we share? One might object that this is not necessarily the case when one reads about Hitler, for example, and yet, in attempting to render Hitler as a creature we *cannot* empathize with, a *non*-person, if you like, who lacks the personhood that *normal* people identify with, we are simultaneously acknowledging the primacy of the affective in how we relate to and interpret the world and other people. It is through the *affective* that we relate, that we *interpret*. This goes some way toward explaining, perhaps, the recurring tendency to depict figures like Hitler as diabolical creatures that lack any vestige of personhood. We sidestep many of the discomfiting issues involved by simply suppressing or denying the personhood of such figures.

So, what can we discern here? Well, in short, the central role occupied by the emotions – the affective. It is at an emotional register that we have our most immediate sense of something like personhood and perhaps that should also be our clue when it comes to figuring out how we should proceed. If we begin to think of ourselves, or of persons, as the beings that *feel* in various ways, then we might begin to see a way forward. As with the attempts of Platonic characters responding to the Socratic challenge, the attempts to use the technical model are frustrated when we look for axiomatic definitions of personhood. The analytical incisions of the technical approach will not uncover the hidden glue of personhood after dissecting its 'pieces' anymore than the surgeon's scalpel will fix a plethora of psychological problems that ail us. To dis-integrate something is not necessarily to understand how it is integrated, particularly if it is not a machine of our own design or construction and indeed is not well captured by the machine analogy to begin with.[13] One can already anticipate a

[13] As Schechtman writes, when discussing the shortcomings of psychological-continuity theory: "The pieces that make up a person's psychology, must, to fulfil this purpose, be viewed to be as discrete and

move that is available here whereby the posthumanist concedes this and says, "okay, what if we only deal for now with conditions that are either necessary or sufficient or both and determine whether or not we can improve them in ways that are uncontroversial?" And of course one can quickly turn a slippery slope around and suggest that from there it is an easy, well-lubricated slide toward the more fantastical interventions advocated by many posthumanists. But this is merely an example of what we shall discuss below regarding Heidegger's worries over our commitment, if not enslavement, to a technological filtering lens through which we view, or perhaps, *process* the world. Looked at in a technical way, if we take any one of the necessary or sufficient conditions of personhood on their own, we cannot identify any particular one of them as definitive or constitutive of personhood and no particular assembly or arrangement of a list of conditions taken collectively would be either exhaustive or definitive either. That is, any particular feature of personhood which the posthumanist would look to enhance or improve would be either a necessary or sufficient condition of personhood as part of an account that actually lacks a definition of personhood. This lack, moreover, is a result of the reductive, technical approach to a subject that requires a rather different one that takes note of the pre-reflective, affective backdrop to our ordinary, everyday sense of personhood.

## 3. HEIDEGGER, HISTORY AND PERSONHOOD

The question of history was one that Heidegger had *already* identified as crucial before his earliest encounters with Husserl or his confrontation with Kant's critical philosophy. In letters to his then fiancé, Elfride, Heidegger (still only in his mid-20s) was already quite critical of two of the most important influences on his early philosophical vision for what he took to be a fatal shortcoming: their entire neglect of the question of history. Of course, Heidegger does not mean something so simple as knowing the events that make up one's own external life in chronological order, much less significant facts and dates in school books. Rather Heidegger means a more primordial notion of history for a creature that lives in the liminally projected certainty of its temporal limits at any given moment. In 1915 the young philosopher was already critical of certain aspects of Kant's critical philosophy as evidenced in a letter to Elfride:

> Today I know that there *can* be a philosophy of vibrant life [*des lebendigen Lebens*] – that I *can* declare war on rationalism right through to the bitter end – without falling victim to the anathema of unscientific thought – I *can* – I *must* – & so I'm today faced by the necessity of the problem: how is philosophy to be produced as living truth & as creation of the personality valuably and powerfully.

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detachable as are the planks of a ship or the grains of sand in a heap. It is because psychological-continuity theorists are trying to force the insights gained from consideration of questions of self-knowledge and responsibility into the mold of questions of the persistence of material objects that they are forced to view psychological states as atomic, isolable, and in principle independent of the subject who experiences them – a view that I have argued to be highly implausible." (Schechtman 1990, 89)

> The Kantian question is not only *wrongly* put – it fails to capture the problem; this is much richer and deeper.
> We must not give our heroes stones instead of bread when they come back hungry from the battlefield, not unreal and dead categories, not shadowy forms and bloodless compartments in which to keep a life ground down by rationalism neat and tidy and let it moulder away. (Heidegger, 2008: 17)

A couple of years later, revealing his earliest impressions of Husserl, Heidegger has the following to say to Elfride in a letter dated Whit Sunday, 1917:

> I cannot accept Husserl's phen[omenology]. as a final position even if it joins up with philos. – because in its approach & accordingly in its goal it is too narrow & bloodless & because such an approach cannot be made absolute. Life is too rich & and too great – thus for relativities that seek to come close to its meaning (that of the absolute) in the form of philos. systems, it's a question of discovering the liberating *path* in an absolute articulation of relativity....Since I've been lecturing, up to now I've constantly experienced these sudden reversals – until 'historical man' came to me in a flash this winter. (Heidegger 2008, 33)

In both of these passages Heidegger emphasizes the lack (in Kant and Husserl) of what he was to see as central to his own project: the historical situatedness of the human being. Our history, in Heidegger's sense, is constitutive of the way we perceive and interpret and allows us a multi-dimensional vision of life as opposed to the overly contrived, lifeless nature of other accounts. And, we might say, it should form part of any conception of what an authentic person is like and what their life involves.

For Heidegger, what is constitutive, at bottom, of the way we experience existence is the fact that things matter to us; that we have aims and desires infused with varying levels of affective urgency. At the heart of the dynamic structure of our existence are affective moorings which are conditioned by the ultimate existential anchor, time or temporality. The fact that being for us is set against the backdrop of the possibility of not-being, that is, of a previous having been and not having been and a future to both *be* in and eventually *not be* in, is the ultimate determining condition behind our entire interpretive apparatus. We are facing an important question in this regard with respect to the ultimately tragic nature of existence and how much of what we currently hold dear and value as rudiments of existence are conditioned by our appreciation of a tragic fate which we dread.[14] There are a whole

[14] I am thinking here of Heidegger's treatment of the tragic, inexorable nature of our situation in *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Take for example passages such as the following: "There is only *one* thing against which all violence-doing directly shatters. That is death. It is an end beyond all completion, a limit beyond all limits. Here there is no breaking forth and breaking up, no capturing and subjugating. But this un-canny thing, which sets us simply and suddenly out from everything homely once and for all, is not a special event that must also be mentioned among others, because it, too, ultimately does occur. The human being has no way out in the face of death, not only when it is time to die, but constantly and essentially. Insofar as humans *are*, they stand in the no-exit of death. Thus

range of emotions that we cherish as colourful threads in the tapestry that is our identity which are conditioned by the limits of our existence. They do not seem to be demoted or diminished by medical advances that allow people to live longer now than they did, for example, in Shakespeare's time. When we read Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 60, which opens with the lines "Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore/So do our minutes hasten to their end;" we are moved by the *familiarity* of sentiments that echo our own rueful reflections on the transient nature of life.[15] Granted, when faced with the imminent loss of life, or indeed our projection of a future where we will quite possibly face our demise knowingly, the fact that that same feature of our historical identity (namely its temporal limits) is part of what makes life as special or significant as it is comes as rather meagre comfort. When we reflect on the fact that we are all essentially on death row, we tend to be less prone to cavalier, devil-may-care attitudes toward our continued existence. The very notion can be deeply, deeply disconcerting. The prospect of being reprieved from so grim a fate as the erasure of one's own ego or identity can be *enormously* appealing[16]; but we have to be clear on what life would *mean* for such a creature, not least since such a creature would *not* be one of *us*. We are left with the question then: *if* history is a part of our dynamic existential identity, then *is* the posthumanist *ideal* one where

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Being-here is the happening of un-canniness itself. (The happening of uncanniness must for us be grounded inceptively as Being-here.)" (Heidegger 2000, 168-169).

[15] The fact that life expectancy has increased significantly beyond what was typical in Shakespearean times then has not altered the fundamentally temporal constitution of our personhood. That is, whether the average life expectancy is 30 or 60 or 90 years does not seem to alter the fact that temporality/finitude plays a central role in our sense of personhood. The issue of continued attempts to improve quality of life and life expectancy then must be distinguished from the fantasy of enhancing the species beyond its temporal limits through technology such that the resulting creatures would no longer be susceptible to death. That is, they would be temporally limitless creatures, and indeed would no longer be human but *post* or *trans* human.

[16] The question as to what ramifications the belief in an afterlife might have for Heidegger's account of temporality could be seen as bearing directly on our argument. Heidegger argues that our entire experience of the world and ourselves, as well as our ability to understand, interpret and project is filtered through a temporal lens. The more we examine our projects and the hidden and not so hidden structures of our project-oriented lives, the more we see in all of them the constitutive influence of our temporality. So how do we reconcile this conviction on Heidegger's part (one of his most important and enduring insights for many) with the fact that so many people profess to be theists and supposedly subscribe to the notion that their ego, or spirit or soul, that thinking and feeling part of themselves, doesn't vanish as soon as they have shuffled off this mortal coil? If they have such a non-finite view of themselves, then how can radical finitude be operative in the way that Heidegger proposes? The fact remains, however, that no matter how often we are told of the consolations of faith or religious belief – that same, faith-based type of belief does not seem to diminish the fear of death in the great majority of people. One might say that people merely fear the unknown in such cases, but I would suggest that that is a little obtuse. When it comes down to it, our temporal awareness seems unaffected by any beliefs in an afterlife or a life beyond temporality since it is outside the manifold of experience for us. We are rather firmly earthed when it comes to our ability to interpret and understand and whether or not we hold out hope or belief in some kind of existence subsequent to this one, we are *epistemically* entrenched in the finiteness of this existence – the temporal structure seems ingrained! For an example of the ill-conceived lengths some thinkers have gone to in trying to undermine the priority Heidegger affords finitude as part of our ability to interpret and understand the world, see Frederick Sontag 1967.

history has no *end* for us and thus loses its essence insofar as our future becomes an anchorless horizon of endless existence? Is that the aspiration? I do not pose these snidely as rhetorical questions, rather the gravity of such questions and their ramifications for how we understand personhood can scarcely be overstated!

That is not to suggest that very different types of creatures living very different sorts of lives might not have a dignity and worth all their own. But we do have to face the question as to what it is that makes *this* life worthwhile or meaningful and, I would submit, our historical situatedness and our finitude are ultimately a major part of what constitutes its significance and worth for us. Our existential history is affectively and interpretively constitutive. Some may aspire to a ceaseless euphoric existence at a level of extreme cognitive functionality[17]; but one wonders as to the all too familiar utopian ring to such aspirations. Notwithstanding, even leaving the well-rehearsed criticisms which typically accompany such suspicions aside – it seems to me that we need to get clear on how much of what we currently *do* take as fundamental to our dignity would be made obsolete by certain enhancements. The quest for the Holy Grail, the magic elixir or gift of immortal life have ever been mainstays of human fantasy, but what kind of effect would such a change *actually have*? Death, that is, our projected temporal finitude, is one of the interpretive anchors to our existence. It sets our affective field of vision if you like, sets the manifold into limits of sorts. If coming-to-an-end no longer is the converse of coming to be, then what kind of effect would this have? It would certainly involve a radical change in how we experience life; but of course, we cannot say that it would *of necessity* be bad. The fact that things *are* this way does not mean that they *ought* to be this way. Nevertheless, a description of what makes life *matter* to us in such a scenario is still

[17] And yet even moments of intense ecstasy, I would submit, owe part of their allure to their contrast with the less intense quality of our daily life. John Stuart Mill himself is critical of the excessively hedonistic conception of happiness that utilitarianism was sometimes erroneously characterized as aspiring toward. Instead, happiness for him involves a realistic and realizable balance where the high points of ecstatic existence are weaved into a life where one is able to maintain something of an even keel, a predominance of the active over the passive and the good fortune not to have to endure the trials of Priam. Mill is, in this sense, a good old Aristotelian: "If by happiness be meant a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident enough that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name happiness. And such an existence is even now the lot of many, during some considerable portion of their lives. The present wretched education and wretched social arrangements, are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost all." (Mill 1991, 143-4). Of course, we are always going to struggle to offer strictly delimited boundaries or cut-off points with respect to these kinds of issues. Asking questions like "how much pleasure is too much pleasure?" doesn't really make much sense. However, a cognitive enhancement that would allow us to walk around the world in a state of unrestrained euphoria…does that strike us as desirable? Surely a part of ecstasy involves its rarity and this seems to be something that we collectively cherish.

lacking on the posthumanist's account. Furthermore, any 'values' that *might* be espoused as life-affirming or worthwhile are all currently supervened on by our thoroughgoing sense of our limited, temporally historical nature; if we were temporally limitless creatures, then the *way* these values retain their significance would undoubtedly change as well. Our ability to 'be' and our concomitant temporal limits are constitutive of our ability to feel, to value, to both love and hate!

A more realistic immediate possibility, of course, is that we will begin to see the continued extension of human life expectancy. We can expect that centenarians will no longer be so few and far between with multiple generations within the same families managing to co-exist. But we must preserve our ability to distinguish between the various attempts to improve the basic quality and longevity of our lives from the desire to improve and enhance beyond any sense of what it is to be a person in the first place, in other words, creatures who have little or no concept of ending or dying since it is a massively diminished possibility for them.[18] Again, that is not to say that a radically mortal life is a superior one, but it is central to any conception of personhood and existential significance. One might wonder as to whether the entirely natural desire to increase one's well-being and life-expectancy could lead to a situation where we move beyond humanity to 'posthumanity'? At what point are we moving away from life–extension to something which is beyond that human aspiration? The posthumanist suggests of course that we are dealing with differences of degree or that we are trying to put a road block on a slippery slope. In other words, there is ultimately no difference in kind between offering someone the latest medical treatments and in fact the desire for immortality. To want not to die prematurely then is seen as consistent with wanting to live a life with no temporal horizon. Admittedly, this is a difficult place to draw a line in the sand, as it were, since the sands of human life-expectancy are constantly shifting. Notwithstanding, part of a person's self identity is anchored in a sense of their finitude and the fact that they fear their own earthly demise does not eliminate or undermine that aspect of their conception of themselves as people. While many of us may well want to live past tomorrow or next year, it is not ultimately clear that any of us would genuinely want to live forever.

## 4. SUBJECTIVITY AND PERSONHOOD

So what role does subjectivity play in all of this – in a person's conception of themselves or their identity? The dominance delusion or, if you like, the illusion of autonomy under which we typically labour seems to dupe us into the belief that our lives and existence are completely within our control. First of all, given our temporal moorings, as discussed above, we can see that that is ultimately not the case. Heidegger vitiates this operative assumption in Western philosophy (and no doubt this is his great attraction for students of Eastern thought), which was cemented in

[18] "If we learn to control the biochemical processes of human senescence, healthy lifespan could be radically prolonged. A person with the age-specific mortality of a 20-year-old would have a life expectancy of about a thousand years." (Bostrom 2007, 16)

early modern stone, according to Heidegger, with the Cartesian cogito, where everything is seen ultimately as a condition of our own cognition and action. Heidegger calls instead for releasement to things (*Gelassenheit*). He is not so much calling for a diminishment of responsibility or a subjugation of one's will – rather he is criticizing erroneous conceptions of autonomy and selfhood. We cannot ignore our historical, cultural and social embeddedness. And in acknowledging these facets of our daily lives, we are relinquishing our hold on a phony subjectivity with pretensions to absolute self-sovereignty in a world where technology is interpreted as a mere means to further our ends. One can, however, learn to live in harmony *with* our world and to find our authentic rhythm within it. We can first manage this by getting clear on what it means to be one of *us*; we begin by acknowledging our true potential as temporal creatures, thrown into historical and cultural traditions with an open but limited future lived out amongst those who are like us and who are similarly determined in advance. We have possibilities available to us, but they are limited by our capacities, the environment we are in, the mores and laws we are governed by and the fact that we have limited opportunities in a limited amount of time within which to get anything done; if we had eternity then the sense of urgency would diminish from our various projects. And this in turn, paves the way for a richer sense of what it is to be *another* also.

Heidegger is often excoriated by commentators for his failure to provide an account of the other as part of his account of authenticity. (See Gadamer 2003, 22-3 and Carman, 2003, 268-71.) It could be argued however that treating others as we treat ourselves, from the standpoint of authenticity, would involve seeing the truth of our *own* situation and realizing that others are in the *same* situation. As Nietzsche wrote in a letter to Franz Overbeck: "what is this our life? A boat that swims in the sea, and one knows for certain about it that one day it will capsize." (Nietzsche 1881) And we might say then that the ultimate ground for sympathy emerges from a realization that we are all in the same boat, so to speak. Or, if we are to be strictly Heideggerian, we are all in our *own* boats, but in the same sea awaiting a similar fate. That is, we share *structurally* identical existential situations, and, thus, we recognize the similar situation of others, their existential potential and treat them accordingly, as we in turn hope to be treated ourselves in order to constitute a community of authentic intersubjectivity. Heidegger's adumbrated discussion of the notion of "leaping-in for" as opposed to "leaping-ahead for" clearly has something like this in mind! In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes what he sees as the conditions for the possibility of inter-subjectivity. Genuine inter-subjectivity involves not leaping-in for but leaping-ahead for another person. (Heidegger 1962, 158, 159) In other words, to leap-in for is to close off the potentiality or possibilities for another person by assuming control of their future in some immediate sense or other and determining a course of action on their behalf. This can happen in all kinds of immediate, quotidian ways. The example sometimes used is of someone trying to help a child solve a mathematical puzzle or problem. There are two approaches that might be adopted; one person might simply ignore the child's latent capacity to figure the problem out. Another person might try and nurture their fledgling analytical capacity to wrestle

with the problem and through a series of progressive steps begin to allow them to realize their intellectual potential such that they can solve these problems by themselves. This kind of approach would be more in line with leaping-ahead for the child, appreciating their potential and allowing it to blossom and develop. The lazier approach is to suppress their potential and to leap-in for the child removing their authentic future in this sense by simply telling them the answers or showing them how to get the right answer without having to fulfill their own critical/analytical potential. This would be the inauthentic correlate of authentic inter-subjectivity. These varying approaches to other people correspond with either a more general leaping-in for another or a leaping-ahead for another, that is, taking someone else as a temporal creature with an horizon of possibility and an historical situation in their own right or else simply taking them as some kind of creature that is present and denying their future in that sense, that is, taking them as simply relevant to some objective or other; they are looked at, in that case, in purely functional terms as someone that can facilitate some project or other. The condition for the possibility of sympathy then would be to acknowledge the temporality of another person, the being-toward-death of another person, in short, their authentic potentiality for being.

## 5. TECHNOLOGY AND ENFRAMING

Finally, but no less important for all that, we have to wonder as to our unquestioning confidence in technology (especially computer technology) and the way it has shaped our understanding of personal identity and the mind. Why is it that our minds and identities are almost exclusively described in the techno-speak of, for example, information processing? Bostrom himself uses the term technocentric to describe this tendency; remarkably, Bostrom uses the word positively and sees it as an unproblematic feature of his approach: "Given the technocentric perspective adopted here, and in light of our incomplete but substantial knowledge of human history and its place in the universe, how might we structure our expectations of things to come?" (Bostrom 2007, 9) First, of all, as Bostrom confirms, the perspective of he and his colleagues is technocentric and it is a technocentrism which they endorse unquestioningly but one which we characterize as problematic in its own right and, in fact, as being highly symptomatic of Enframing. Moreover, he invokes, in this context, the important role to be played by human history and yet proceeds again with the fundamental role occupied by temporality and historicity in terms of human history left unaddressed. It is as if history is to mean nothing more than a static chronicle, a repository of past events which we can access with a view to acquiring useful information instead of seeing its active, dynamic role in shaping our self understanding.

Perhaps one of the most disconcerting examples of this technical prejudice/ technocentrism is to be found in the following description of "uploading" which, to my mind, is so self-evidently problematic that it scarcely necessitates further comment:

> Uploading refers to the use of technology to transfer a human mind to a computer. This would involve the following steps: First, create a sufficiently detailed scan of a particular human brain, perhaps by feeding vitrified brain tissue into an array of powerful microscopes for automatic slicing and scanning. Second, from this scanning data, use automatic image processing to reconstruct the 3-dimensional neuronal network that implemented cognition in the original brain, and combine this map with neurocomputational models of the different types of neurons contained in the network. Third, emulate the whole computational structure on a powerful supercomputer (or cluster). If successful, the procedure would [sic] a qualitative reproduction of the original mind, with memory and personality intact, onto a computer where it would now exist as software. This mind could either inhabit a robotic body or live in virtual reality. In determining the prerequisites for uploading, a tradeoff exists between the power of the scanning and simulation technology on the one hand, and the degree of neuroscience insight on the other. (Bostrom 2007, 22)

Bostrom defends this kind of technical reductionism throughout his work arguing elsewhere, for example, that

> Cognitive enhancement is based on the unity between the biological brain and the mind, and the unity between different kinds of information processing. Changing biological processes enables changes to the mind (and vice versa). Information processing is the same whether a brain or a computer does it. It hence lends itself well to the vision of converging technology. (Anders Sandberg and Nick Bostrom, 2006, 215)

N. Katherine Hayles responds to such proposals in *How We Became Posthuman*:

> I was reading Hans Moravec's *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*, enjoying the ingenious variety of his robots, when I happened upon the passage where he argues that it will soon be possible to download human consciousness into a computer. To illustrate, he invents a fantasy scenario in which a robot surgeon purees the human brain in a kind of cranial liposuction, reading the information into a computer. At the end of the operation, the cranial cavity is empty, and the patient, now inhabiting the metallic body of the computer, wakens to find his consciousness exactly the same as it was before. [H]ow, I asked myself, was it possible for someone of Moravec's obvious intelligence to believe that mind could be separated from body? Even assuming such a separation was possible, how could anyone think that consciousness in an entirely different medium would remain unchanged, as if it had no connection with embodiment? Shocked into awareness, I began to notice he was far from alone. (Hayles 1999, 1)

Neil Badmington, who discusses this passage in "Theorizing Posthumanism", notes the irony here: "the seemingly posthumanist desire to download consciousness into a gleaming digital environment is itself downloaded from the distinctly humanist matrix of Cartesian dualism." (Badmington 2003, 11) Of course the concerns of both of these critics are well taken and the issue of embodiment in particular is a crucial one. However, there are other problems which surface again here that relate to the central arguments of this paper. Yet again, there is the problem of the absolute

temporal invisibility involved; under this type of technocentric reductionism, no allowance is made for the affective and thereby temporal backdrop to human consciousness. Furthermore, this kind of technocentrism is a symptom of a corrupted type of interpretation, not a neutral or indeed necessary way of understanding ourselves and others. Reducing the human mind to the processes of a computer is a highly problematic, tendentious and presupposition-laden move.

Why have we allowed this technocentric language to hold sway in such a monopolizing, eliminativist fashion? The *less than* obvious problem, then, as a result of its universality, pervasiveness and thus familiarity is technology and the role technology plays in our lives. The posthumanist may well argue that this is a phoney problem. If someone has a problem with their heart, we do everything in our power to fix it – what is so different then about enhancing someone's brain such that they are capable of thinking at the level of an Einstein or Newton? No doubt people from a couple of centuries ago would be astounded at the positively Frankensteinian notion that today we can replace one person's heart, for instance, with someone else's. As Nick Bostrom points out, someone from a previous historical epoch might well be astounded at our current life-expectancy, among other things: "life-expectancy is three times longer than in the Pleistocene….In the eyes of a hunter-gatherer, we might already appear 'posthuman'." (Bostrom 2005, 213). Our own resistance then to the proposed improvements of the posthumanist, according to Bostrom, are the mere prejudices of a certain intellectual provincialism or traditionalism! Aside from the unforgivably speculative nature of that kind of criticism through an unwarranted (and thereby false) analogy[19], there is the question as to whether or not there is something a little different involved which *should* give us pause. Part of the difficulty here relates to what Heidegger, I believe, would see as the loss of an ability to identify differences, to make distinctions, to avoid a monochromatic view of ourselves and the world we inhabit. Depending on one's interpretive filtering lens, the differences between certain events, objects or actions can *seem* relatively inconsequential. For example, if we were to describe the activity of plunging a knife into a mattress with, say, the carcass of a pig, and if we are to describe things on a purely molecular level, the differences might appear to be simply matters of degree and not kind. However, if the pig is alive, we might find ourselves baulking at the idea that the only language which is relevant here is the one that describes things on a molecular level. The difference involved when one brings suffering into the equation, and perhaps loss of life, seems inadequately treated under the rubric of molecular change. We don't necessarily have to make the further leap to human beings for the difference to appear to be one of kind and not degree which demands that we speak with a language which *does not* restrict us to mere changes of degree in this example. The language is

[19] It is merely presumed that the changes being postulated will be accepted as commonplace by future generations. There are two problems with this. First, the mere possibility that future generations would be unfazed by something that we might find problematic does not in itself mean that there is nothing problematic. We might call that a "will/ought" argument. Secondly, there is no guarantee that the changes being spoken of would *ever* be deemed acceptable by a future society. Thus there are two unwarranted presumptions buttressing this particular objection/rejoinder.

inadequate to the scenario; restricting us rigidly to this language then would be wrongheaded – the strategy of an eliminativist[20] in this type of situation is erroneous. Who is to say that a language which seems counter-intuitive at best when we're looking for the most comprehensive description of the killing of a live animal with a knife compared to the plunging of the same knife into an inanimate object is the only acceptable one? It would seem hamstrung by an explanatory poverty of its own. In a way, we're back to the Platonic problem we invoked at the outset – the wrongheaded attempt to use the technical/theoretical model of the exact sciences to make intellectual progress in inquiries where the language of that model simply doesn't work! One approach, one Plato in fact anticipated,[21] is to insist that these issues then cannot be spoken of rather than seeing that different kinds of language are needed for different kinds of subjects.[22] For example, a mathematical account of music may well be interesting, enlightening or illuminating; but it hardly exhausts the topic. The eliminativist approach suggests that other languages and descriptions are really just superfluous or arcane and anything which cannot be expressed in their own predetermined, technical terms is really just nonsensical. Indeed, on some issues, I am sympathetic to that view and the concomitant critiques of certain examples of folk-psychology for example. The problems begin with the extension of that eliminativist conviction to *every* issue faced by humans when, in fact, they cannot *all* reduce to the same technical discourse; that fact alone does not make them superfluous or nonsensical. After all, how many of us would be willing to concede that someone analyzing data in a sound laboratory and recording the frequency of sound waves with computer equipment understands Beethoven's Ninth Symphony *better* than the composer himself? There is something deeply, intuitively implausible about that idea! Beethoven may not have had any proficiency with the technical language of the

[20] I use the term "eliminativist" in the context of this paper to refer to the kind of reductionist attitude so prevalent today. I am not thinking solely of the eliminative materialist, but rather of the extension of that attitude to many facets of human existence whereby the technical narrative is taken, more or less unquestioningly, as the only legitimate one.

**[21]** I take this to be, in part, the implication behind Meno's articulation of an apparent paradox in the middle of the eponymous dialogue. Socrates' resolution of the paradox and the more general strategy of the dialogue demonstrate the necessity of the nature of inference with respect to mathematical problems when it is in fact the question of virtue and where and how one begins to make inferences with respect to virtue (which they fail to even define) which is at issue. Meno had initially concluded that one cannot speak of virtue at all when all that is shown is that one cannot speak of virtue using the theoretical model.

[22] We are again pointing here to what we have characterized as the Platonic conviction that the theoretical model is inappropriate to the "science of human affairs" and thereby call into question the eliminativist positivism of, for example, the early Wittgenstein who concludes his early masterpiece with the famous asseveration: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." (Wittgenstein 1974, 74) What we are trying to suggest, conversely, is that it is not so much that we *cannot* speak about ethical issues, rather, when treating of ethical issues, we should not try to use the language of logic, as delineated by Wittgenstein for example. The reductionist language of logical exactitude cannot properly account for our ethical lives and so Wittgenstein recommends that we pass over ethics in silence. The sign language of Wittgenstein's logic is an abstraction from ordinary language with a philosophically purgative application. It is not, however, the *only* language with which we can deal with the world.

laboratory, but that language really only goes so far when it comes to the range of things we wish to discuss regarding a symphony. Granted, the non-technical languages we use might well be overly sentimental and susceptible to misuse, but that is *no* argument in favour of using a language which was *never* appropriate for the subjects we are trying to discuss in the first place. The eliminative approach then is both insidious and erroneous; it suggests that because we can document countless notorious cases where human intransigence or intellectual indigence or attachment to folk psychology or bad science impeded intellectual and scientific breakthroughs, that *any* resistance to a new proposal is *ipso facto* flawed. What is overlooked by this type of criticism is the possibility that we might refuse to make something obsolete on the basis of a new proposal because it has less explanatory success than the old model; being more recent surely does not *necessarily* betoken more successful or accurate. Enframing dupes people into the belief that the technical language of the exact sciences must be adopted at the *expense* of all other languages. Yet nowhere is it demonstrated that there is *one* language appropriate to human experience or life at the expense of every other mode of discourse *and* that it is the language of science or mathematics. And, if that much is *not* conceded, then the high-ground that the eliminativist claims to stand on would seem to suddenly sink to the level of one among many interpretive molehills on a vast plain of experience.

Lest we be misinterpreted here, these are not the concerns of a thoroughgoing traditionalist or sentimentalist. We are not advocating a world stripped of the scientific description. Much of what we have achieved in science and technology has made the world we live in and the lives we lead wonderful. But there are limits to what we can deem improvements. Not everything in our lives today seems to be an improvement and not because what we can avail of is *per se* bad, but because we live in a world where we seem forced to relinquish so much of our lives to a technological existence that we *do not* have a free relation to. Our relationship to technology is not what Heidegger would call a free one, one where we have the capacity to be "released" to things and take or leave technology as people who are *not* constrained to revealing the world for ourselves and others through a technological lens. The point is not to try and overcome or surmount technology; that was not and never will be possible. The point is to not be so enslaved to it as to think that the way it renders the world and we who live in it is the *only* way that we can relate to or understand ourselves, others and the world around us. The challenge still remains then for the posthumanist to try and see how much of what they advocate is merely the expression of a burgeoning and eliminative technological interpretive scheme which feeds exponentially on its own momentum and how much can justifiably be classed as reflective measures which we might think of *using* technology *for*.

On the one hand, we seem to intuitively go along with progress in medicine and so on, that is, the rate of progress when it comes to life-enhancement is something that society seems to be able to keep up with. The question is whether or not the progress being touted by the posthumanist is progress of *this* kind? It is certainly not *necessarily* the case! No one, to my knowledge, ever objected to someone receiving cancer treatment using the best methods and procedures available. The question is

again as to whether or not there is a difference in kind between such measures and the technologies being touted for cognitive and physical enhancement and the answer to that question is neither as necessary nor obvious as the posthumanist suggests. All we can seem to do is point to the fact that for some reason, the technological stranglehold that currently grips our attitudes and understanding seems to be forcing us to contend with and accept radical shifts at an ever increasing rate. Moreover, we have to ask ourselves whether or not it is becoming increasingly difficult to make distinctions in this regard because of our improved understanding or because of a constriction of the discursive parameters involved. Many of the working assumptions concerning the meaning of the word technology reduce to what Heidegger describes as the instrumental, anthropological definition. (Heidegger 1977, 4-5) Technology then is simply understood as something that we (human beings) use instrumentally in order to further various ends. Heidegger wants to undermine this interpretation completely. Indeed, by the time one has wrapped one's head around his discussion of technology and its "essence" (Enframing), one might be forgiven for supposing that Heidegger would reverse things, that is, rather than we/human beings using technology, he might argue instead that technology uses us. And preposterous as that may sound *prima facie*, it is not, in the end, a million miles from the truth once one gets at what Heidegger really means by being human and what technology and, in particular, the essence of technology are manifestations of. Heidegger, as it turns out, has no desire to demonize technology, indeed, he famously proclaims in "The Question Concerning Technology" that "There is no demonry of technology". (Heidegger 1977, 28) Heidegger is not looking for some reactionary countermovement to technology nor does he think we can live our lives stripped of technology; to advocate such a move is to misunderstand the role of technology with respect to our lives and how we understand our existence and the world around us.

Heidegger might well concede that the lines have become blurred between earlier and later technologies! But far from this being something that Heidegger was enthused by or celebrated, this is something he perceived with some trepidation. Given the eliminativist bent of the technological frame of reference, everything we describe can be reduced to expressions of more and less sophisticated examples of technology. However, this is perhaps not so much because there *are no* differences, but because we have expunged our capacity to make any such distinctions. We no longer seem to allow for any narratives/interpretations to mean anything substantive in the language of human progress beyond the eliminativist language of technological Enframing where everything is reduced to resource and standing-reserve – to be manipulated, broken down, and either made obsolete, maintained or indeed enhanced!

## 6. CONCLUSION

In looking at our vague, quotidian sense of personhood, we managed to identify the notion of affectivity as fundamental. Any legitimate conception of personhood entails a rich emotional life, one which we can empathize with and share. Our emotional life, our affective understanding, in short, our ability to experience, according to

Heidegger, is run through with a temporal character. That is, the manner in which any kind of experience can occur for us must be temporally filtered. Our radical finitude is constitutive, even at the subliminal level, of the way we experience, interpret and respond to the world we find ourselves thrown into. The technical approach to personhood tends to take an anatomical view of the person/human being and thus misses the narrative glue which holds the person together, namely, our historicity – our temporal limits. The tendency is to look at the various components outside of any such context and to simply apply the criteria of optimum functioning. This failure to pay any attention to the temporal glue that holds our narrative, affective identities together is a critical one for the posthumanist position. Moreover, as part of that reductionist view of the human being, the posthumanist unquestioningly advocates the ideal of life extension to the nth degree, that is, their ultimate aspiration involves the vanquishing of our temporality altogether – the ultimate fantasy of corporeal and egocentric immortality. However, to achieve as much would essentially render our current sense of being human, our affectivity, our values, in short, the way we interpret and experience the world, obsolete. In other words, the ultimate aspirations and goals of posthumanism would result in the complete debasement and erasure of any current sense of humanity/personhood.

Much of what we have been trying to argue here might be dismissed as a kind of intellectual provincialism, but that is not at all the aim of this inquiry. We have no normative agenda, nor are we trying to preserve an ideal of human existence which stands as the backdrop to some kind of moral ideology. Rather, what we have been trying to suggest is that whatever way one wants to look at things, the question as to the temporal backdrop to our personhood is something that needs to be addressed. And before we can begin to consider the details of the posthumanist's position and the kinds of enhancements of cognitive and physical capacities that they discuss, we have to ask where our sense of personhood, value, or identity will come from in an age where we have gone beyond humans to posthumans. We must push the posthumanist for some further clarification as to where their criteria for evaluating enhancement come from.[23] What conception of humanity or posthumanity, with overused but under-defined attendant phrases like "human dignity" and "human nature", do they in fact have? In other words, we must ask how much of their own vision and programme for improvement is a symptom of the holding sway of Enframing. How much of what they currently recommend is actually an expression of their own unquestioned acceptance of an eliminative technical interpretive scheme which currently holds sway at the expense of any other form of interpretation or understanding vis a vis human beings?

It is not so much that these concerns demonstrate the moral turpitude of posthumanism. The concern of this paper is more epistemological than normative.

[23] Needless to say, reductionist, pseudo-scientific iterations like the following definition of enhancement do little substantive work, instead they reflect the reductionist interpretive prejudices of the author: "*Enhancement*: An intervention that improves the functioning of some subsystem of an organism beyond its reference state; or that creates an entirely new functioning or subsystem that the organism previously lacked." (Bostrom 2008, 7)

Indeed, the posthumanist might well riposte that the fact that our current sense of personhood has a temporal character is no argument for proposing that it *ought* to be this way. In the same way that we criticized an implicit version of a *will*/ought fallacy in the posthumanist defence of various measures they call for, we can hardly defend a status quo stance on the basis of an is/ought argument. The fact that our values and our sense of identity are currently conditioned by our temporal limits, does not mean that they *must always* be so conditioned. But with this, we are on the threshold of some very difficult questions; questions which posthumanists have thus far failed to identify, never mind answer. And, this is where the continental and analytic commentators need to pool their resources in the interests of moving forward. The analyst cannot resist the deconstructionist's critique without making a number of presuppositions which are not philosophically viable, not least, the supposition that it is unproblematic to proceed with an account as to what is preferable in terms of being a person, whether human or posthuman, without ever actually offering even a minimally defensible account of personhood which, for the time being, still requires an acknowledgement of the temporal constitution of identity/personhood. Nevertheless, we must still be willing to offer something substantive following the deconstructive critique; these issues, as Bostrom has convincingly argued, do and will continue to affect us all and we must develop the philosophical resources to begin to deal with them adequately. This may well be where some direction or guidance could be found in traditions outside of our own somewhat self-absorbed Western, technocentric tradition; and, while the positive possibilities seem more than encouraging, they also belong to a project to which we could pay only the most paltry lip service here and must therefore be left to future endeavours.

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# DAOISM AS CRITICAL THEORY

MARIO WENNING

**ABSTRACT:** *Classical philosophical Daoism as it is expressed in the Dao-De-Jing and the Zhuang-Zi is often interpreted as lacking a capacity for critique and resistance. Since these capacities are taken to be central components of Enlightenment reason and action, it would follow that Daoism is incompatible with Enlightenment. This interpretation is being refuted by way of developing a constructive dialogue between the enlightenment traditions of critical theory and recent philosophy of action from a Daoist perspective. Daoism's normative naturalism does neither rest on a primitivist call for a return to the past, nor does it suggest future-directed activism. By way of reconstructing its descriptive, explanatory and emancipatory dimensions, it is shown that Daoism constitutes an alternative form of critical theory. In contrast to future-directed purposive action or blind rule-following, Daoism's key normative concept of "wu-wei" emphasizes effortless non-calculative responsiveness in the present. Drawing on recent insights in the philosophy of action, a reconstruction of wu-wei allows to conceive of a promising form of emancipatory agency.*

**Keywords:** *Daoism, critical theory, wu-wei, instrumental action, effortlessness, temporality of action*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The legend of the origin of the proto-Daoist text *Dao-De-Jing* (道德經) dates back to the historian Sima Qian (145-85 BC). It is likely to be more fiction than fact.[1] However, even though the legend remains historically unverifiable, it is nevertheless important to recount since it has given rise to a philosophically rich effective history. Daoist philosophy is said to rest on an act of exchange. The sage Lao Zi was determined to leave the middle kingdom after a long and, despite dissatisfaction with the norms of his day, saturated life. He approached the Western border of the kingdom of Zhou where he encountered Yin Xi, who was the ancient version of a

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[1] Most recent scholars agree that the different versions of the *Dao-De-Jing* were probably collections of aphorisms edited by various people in the 4th and 3rd centuries AD. We do not possess any reliable information about the historical person Lao Zi.

customs and border control officer. Yin Xi asked Lao Zi to pay his dues. Since the sage was not an affluent man and did not possess anything dispensable, he was politely asked to pay for his passage by writing down what he had discovered during his philosophical wayfaring. After giving in to the request, Lao Zi left the kingdom to move West where he died much later at the magnificent age of 160. According to this legend, it is thus only by accident, or, to be more precise, through a generous act of exchanging the right of passage for the codification of Daoist philosophy, that the 5000 words divided into the 81 chapters we know under the title of *Dao-De-Jing* have been passed down to us.

During his exile from Nazi Germany, the Marxist poet Bertholt Brecht carried a painting depicting the scene of Lao Zi riding a water buffalo towards the border with him. Brecht's captivating poem from 1938 about the "Legend of the Origin of the Book *Dao-De-Jing* on Lao Zi's Road into Exile" was circulated widely among those persecuted by totalitarian regimes. The poem sparked a sense of hope in the midst of historical catastrophe. Did Brecht's adaptation of the legend simply present an unwarranted and sufficiently exotic consolation for the victims of an atrocious history who, if they were lucky, could escape, or does it indeed contain a philosophically significant content, an explosive message in a bottle? When the boy accompanying Lao Zi was asked by the pragmatic gate keeper in Brecht's poem what the sage had discovered, the boy responds: "he learnt that soft water, by way of movement over the years, will grind strong rocks away. In other words: that hardness succumbs."[2] Drawing on the at the time common trope of the power of water to overcome the seemingly greatest of obstacles,[3] what Brecht's border-crosser Lao Zi had discovered was an understanding of what could be called "liquid resistance." In contrast to firm materials, formless water does not overcome obstacles by way of direct confrontation, but through seemingly unintended, effortless and unpredictable processes of emulation and changing course whenever necessary. Rather than provoking resistance through acts of direct engagement, water is efficacious in overcoming obstacles by way of yielding and acquiescing to them. It purifies itself by standing still and finds its way by floating to the lowest point. The captivating poem by Brecht and its equally rich effective history poses the vexing question: what is the critical potential of Daoist philosophy that motivated Brecht and other social critics identifying with the fate of the most abject, degraded and precarious forms of existence to be swayed

[2] Bertolt Brecht (1981, 660-663). The cited quotation from stanza 5 reads in the original: „Daß das weiche Wasser in Bewegung/ Mit der Zeit den mächtigen Stein besiegt. / Du verstehst, das Harte unterliegt." See also Heinrich Detering (2008).

[3] The water imagery is developed in chapters 4, 7, 43 and, most extensively, in chapter 78 of the *Dao-De-Jing*: "In all the world, nothing is more supple or weak than water/ Yet nothing can surpass it for attacking what is still and strong./ And so nothing can take its place./ That the weak overcomes the strong and the supple overcomes the hard/ These are things everyone in the world knows but none can practice." (chapter 78, 81). Sarah Allan (1997) persuasively traces the way in which water serves as a root metaphor to illustrate the principles governing human conduct in classical, pre-Qin Chinese philosophical traditions.

by its message, a message that seems radically different from the typical Marxist call to arms in the service of historical struggle for the sake of the worst-off?

Brecht's adaptation of Daoism seems all the more perplexing given the conception of Chinese philosophy in the West. One common critique leveled against Chinese philosophical traditions goes something like this. Rather than providing another alternative foundation for Enlightenment reason, Confucianism and Daoism are essentially incompatible with individual autonomy and equality, the pillars of the Enlightenment project. The alleged deficit is then attributed to a difference in philosophical outlook. The age of critique, announced in a tone of philosophical audacity from the Neo-Copernican Kant, claims philosophical singularity and superiority with regard to his East Asian contenders. While Western philosophical traditions in the Enlightenment tradition call into question established webs of authority, the emphasis on cosmic harmony in Confucianism and Daoism is said to rest on an acceptance of unquestioned relationships of power. In other words, harmony is emphasized at the expense of a capacity for individual resistance and critique. If autonomy and equality are the pillars of enlightenment reason, the capacity to resist is its muscle. If Daoism just gives in to established authorities, it does not possess the capacity of resistance, thus making it unsuitable for emancipation emphasized in the wake of the Enlightenment.

Following this line of critique, two specific strains of objections against Daoism's emancipatory potential and enlightenment deficit thus need to be addressed up front before discussing in what sense Daoism can be interpreted as a critical theory. One line of critique is addressed at Daoism's primitivist naturalism while the other set of objections focuses on the proposed technique of emulation. The first group of critics conceives of Daoism as a reactionary movement propagating a return to nature. Such movements claim that the present is fallen when compared to an allegedly earlier, blissful state in need of being restored once again. The emulation of a constantly changing yet static environment envisioned by Daoists is criticized as a form of imitation of, or a call for a return to, a primary state of nature. The natural world is being romanticized, critics contend, as idyllic and ethically superior. This line of critique, clearly mirroring Christian conceptions of a myth of the primal fall as one finds them in Western romanticism, hardly does justice to the gist of the normative ideals we find in the oldest Daoist texts. Rather than advocating a return to a simplicity that allegedly existed in some prior historical period, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi draw on what they describe as "natural" processes in order to delineate structures of present flourishing in the midst of "historical" crises. Nature is not what happened prior to the fall from paradise to civilization, but the spontaneity which is ever again threatened to be covered up by webs of social domination and misguided authority.

That the pervasive reference to nature in Daoist texts is not the kind of naturalism the first group of critics take it to be becomes clear if we turn to the first readers of the classical Daoists who stressed that emulation is not to be misunderstood as imitation. Guo Xiang already emphasized in his commentary on the *Zhuang-Zi* (莊子) that blind imitation of an allegedly natural condition is useless, fruitless and harmful.

Imitation is useless because the world is in constant flux and different times require different responses. Imitation is also fruitless since the very act of imitation presupposes a conscious effort, which stands in the way of achieving the naturalness that is being attributed to what is being imitated. And, finally, imitation is said to be harmful in that it manifests a constant striving to overcome one's limits. This overcoming rather than acknowledging stands in the way of optimal, we could also say, non-reified practices of self- other- and world-relationships.[4] The term '*zi-ran*' (自然), which is translated as 'natural', offers itself as a denominator for such processes of spontaneous flourishing. Just as optimal forms of action seem to be performed as if by themselves and without an ulterior end, nature also is not equipped with a fixed trajectory while revealing a sense of flourishing and fittingness. The reference to naturalness serves as a critique against artificial forms of "second nature" in the form of reified conceptions of morality and straining activism.

In the case of an occasional reference to an allegedly better past, for example to the utopian village in chapter 80 of the *Dao-De-Jing*, what is depicted is not a historical past of perfected human beings who live in harmony with nature. Rather, the images serve as mythic or utopian evocations of a mode of being and power-execution which is significantly different and more sophisticated than that found in societies which use up all resources in acts of instrumental activism.[5] In the case of the utopian village, what is depicted is not a primitive community before the fall. The city possesses tools such as ships and carts, armor and weapons, but they "have no reason to deploy them."[6] This city consists a group of people, which is technologically highly advanced while preserving the freedom to not use the technology at its disposal, to live a decelerated life in the present while leaving the technological choices at their disposal unused whenever their application is not absolutely necessary. They live in relatively small communities in order not to be governed by a distant government they do not have an obvious connection to. The imagination is used here as a laboratory to provide impulses in order to enrich conceptions of chosen, communal and sophisticated passivity in the present rather than primitive innocence or unreflective activism directed at the future.

Apart from the charge of primitive naturalism, a second, perhaps more forceful strain of objections against Daoism's critical potential concerns what is seen as the opportunistic strategy or set of techniques arising out of the ethics of emulation. While the first group of critics object to Daoism's alleged primitivism, the second group object to the proposed forms of emulation. This second strain of objections contends that Daoism essentially reconciles actors to the pathological structures of their age rather than empowering them to understand, oppose and, ultimately, transform or abolish these structures. This critique reflects a long tradition of

[4] Fung Yu-Lan (1976, 226-227).
[5] Viktor Kalinke (1999, 90) writes, "it is apparent that the emphasis of what has been does not aim at an objective historiography, but at the decelleration (*Verzögerung*) of action. A reflection and comparison with what is comparable is being called for. It has a psychological function, which is expressed in the German word '*nachdenken*' (re-membering or after-thought)".
[6] *Dao-De-Jing*, trans. Ivanhoe (chapter 81).

accusing Daoism of promoting a problematic form of quietism. Rather than resisting problematic processes of change, they are said to accept these phenomena as unchangeable. The best one can do, Daoists seem to suggest, is to use what is problematic but here to stay to one's advantage. The *enfent terrible* of contemporary philosophy Slavoi Zizek puts it as follows:

> The recourse to Taoism or Buddhism offers a way out of this predicament which definitely work better than the desperate escape into old traditions: instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of the technological progress and social changes, one should rather renounce the very endeavor to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination - one should, instead, "let oneself go," drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference towards the mad dance of the accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances which do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being... One is almost tempted to resuscitate here the old infamous Marxist cliché of religion as the "opium of the people," as the imaginary supplement of the terrestrial misery: the "Western Buddhist" meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in the capitalist dynamics, while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. If Max Weber were to live today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his Protestant Ethic, entitled The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of the Global Capitalism.[7]

While Zizek agrees that Daoism is not a form of primitivist romanticism, he argues that contemporary appropriations of Eastern thought, in particular Daoism, are a psychic symptom of neoliberal capitalism rather than promising conceptual and practical tools to understand and transform it. Rather than coming to terms with the accelerating logic of late modern societies, Daoist patterns of action, on Zizek's account, at best help to wander at ease within these pathological structures. They keep up the illusion of equanimous mental sanity in the midst of catastrophic madness.

Just as the charge against Daoism's alleged primitivism, Zizek's interpretation seems mistaken to me. It might be a legitimate response to certain "Eurodaoist"[8] forms of lifestyle philosophies and new age wisdom literature propagating that a spiritual change will automatically lead to a transformation of the environing system parameters. What the objection fails to acknowledge and do justice to, though, is the emancipatory impulse behind Daoism. Rather than opposing one's changing environment with outdated images of bliss, by emulating this environment in constantly readjusting ways like a river adjusts its course, actors reclaim naturalness in their action and become empowered. Such an empowerment does not proceed by mastering the world through one's purposive efforts, but emancipates itself by

[7] Slavoi Zizek (2001). Zizek missed the fact that Max Weber (1989) did indeed write a second less known sequel to the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in which he explicitly addresses Confucianism and the heterodox dimensions of Daoism while arguing for their responsibility for the precarious condition of China around the turn to the 20th century.

[8] Peter Sloterdijk (1989).

responding to the environment in the form of adjusting to dynamic processes in refined and often subversive ways.

Perhaps the most prominent and promising critical concept of Daoism is the guiding conceptual metaphor of *wu-wei* (無爲). It captures what this liquid resistance means in terms of concrete actions. *Wu-wei* is commonly translated as "non-doing" or "non-action". Following Liu Xiaogan, we can say that "naturalness is the core value of the thought of Lao Zi, while *wu-wei* is the principle or method for realizing this value in action."[9] This essential action-theoretical concept fills an important lacuna in contemporary critical theory. A charitable reconstruction could be immensely productive in contemporary debates in critical theory and the philosophy of action developed in the contemporary analytic and continental traditions.[10] Such a reconstruction would free philosophical Daoism from its alleged enlightenment deficit.

Even a cursory look at the writings of the classical Daoists Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi suffices to reveal their emancipatory potential. Due to their hermeneutic openness, Daoist sources have been interpreted at different times as primitivism, religious mysticism, military strategy, advice to emperors, manuals for religious initiation and self-cultivation, normative and epistemic relativism, precursors of postmodernism, anarchism, linguistic skepticism or simply as a collection of incoherent poetic sayings which defy the systematizing and rigorous logic common to mainstream contemporary philosophy.[11] In what follows I would like to add one more reading and suggest that the spirit of Daoism is captured best when it is understood as a form of critical theory. Daoists propose a *different* enlightenment and a *different* critical theory, thereby presenting us with what Bert Brecht called a device of bringing forth a defamiliarization and estrangement (*Verfremdungseffekt*). This interpretative hypothesis can serve as a prolegomena to a future research project. To make such a project not only plausible but also fruitful, I would like to show that Daoism, understood as a distinctly *other* form of critical theory, is capable of providing impulses that could be taken up in addressing one of the most pressing issues facing critical theorists today.

Daoism, I argue, can be helpful in conceiving of a form of non-instrumental action and reawaken a sense of potentiality, which helps to uncover a blind spot at the basis of conceptions of time and action as we find it in contemporary critical philosophy. A charitable reinterpretation of the Daoist concept of *wu-wei* allows us to

[9] Xiaogan Liu (1999, 211).

[10] Edward Slingerland (2006) interprets the conception of *wu-wei* understood as effortless action. It might be argued that certain theories of action in the European canon point into similar directions. Aristotle's conception of *praxis*, for example, and its reception by Hannah Arendt and others come to mind. I will show at a different occasion that these conceptions retain the temporal framework governing purposive actions, motivating a more radical break such as the one provided by an updated account of Daoist effortless action.

[11] For a detailed account of the history of Daoism see Livia Kohn (2000), as well as Russell Kirkland (2004). For a systematic introduction see Hans-Georg Möller (2001).

conceive of a form of practical reason and action, which embodies a promising alternative to instrumental rationality. A reorientation of critique resulting from a constructive engagement with Daoism would have to arise out of an acknowledgment that one of the underlying ideologies of modernity consists precisely in a problematic preoccupation with either the past or the future at the expense of acknowledging perfecting forms of effortless action as they reveal themselves in the present. To make this claim intelligible it is necessary to call to mind the basic structure of critical theory.

## 2. THE THREEFOLD STRUCTURE OF CRITICAL THEORY

First, it is necessary to outline what is meant by "critical theory" before pursuing the question whether, and in what sense, Daoism can legitimately be understood as *another* critical theory. Critical theory usually combines *diagnostic*, *explanatory* and *emancipatory* dimensions. In analyzing societies in times of crises and destitution, deeply seated pathologies are uncovered. These range from exploitation of underprivileged strata of the population and consumerism to the environmental and social costs of neoliberal market economies. Not only are these pathologies revealed, but their root causes and social functions are also being traced and, if possible, means of practically overcoming them are pointed out.

Pathologies are social and psychological deformations on a structural level manifesting themselves in social institutions, individual patterns of beliefs, motivations and practices. The pathologies which critical theory has been diagnosing can be summarized, following Marx, Lukacs and Weber, as a combination of reification, disenchantment and acceleration. In the process of increasingly understanding intersubjective-, self- and world-relationships primarily from the perspective of exchanging equivalent commodities on a market governed increasingly, and sometimes exclusively, by a competition for these commodities, individuals become systematically estranged from the objects they produce, the process of production, themselves, and from the community of fellow human beings.[12]

The pathology of reification (*Verdinglichung*) arising from the exchange principle governing ever more dimensions of society has been analyzed, drawing on the early Marx and Lukacs, from a variety of perspectives.[13] Originally reification referred to the process of making singular human beings and experiences similar and exchangeable by abstracting from their unique qualities. While the concept seemed outdated for a long time due to its implicit assumption of a human essence from which one could become estranged, it made an astonishing comeback. Whether it is a critique of the reification/distortion of communication,[14] the reification of relationships of intersubjective recognition,[15] the reification of gender roles[16] or the

[12] Karl Marx (1973, 108-111).
[13] See for example Axel Honneth, (2005).
[14] Jürgen Habermas (1984).
[15] Axel Honneth (1996).

reification of conceptions of the self,[17] what is being criticized are relationships primarily controlled by a fixed logic of instrumental reason and strategic bargaining processes rather than mutual understanding, recognition, care for the self, love and other preconditions of leading a good life within the constraints of justice.

Apart from the attempts to shed light on reification as a major form of pathology in modern societies, it is a significant success of recent work in critical social theory to emphasize that not all pathologies of modernity can be reduced to intersubjective pathologies of communication and reification.[18] People in late modern societies do not just suffer from being used rather than understood or being invisible rather than recognized. They also suffer from what Max Weber called 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*). In the process of increased rationalization, traditional sources of meaning that were sedimented in inherited religious traditions, social institutions and customs have lost their power in orienting lives.

Finally, the process that reification and the vanishing of resources of meaning have been engaged in is one of an increasing acceleration (*Beschleunigung*) in which, as Marx puts it, "everything that is solid melts into the air". We witness a progressively increasing speed not only of technological innovation, but of social change since the late medieval period. While there was an intergenerational speed of change in the early modern period, and a generational speed of change during classical and high modernity, late modernity is characterized by an intragenerational speed of change in which the basic parameters of coordinating one's life change within a lifetime. In this latest stage of acceleration, the only thing that is certain is that what was taken to be certain today might not be certain tomorrow.[19] This acceleration is both subjectively experienced and corresponds to objective modes of accelerated life ranging from processing information, the transportation of goods and people, voting behavior to the change of significant others and professions. Increased change of environments and values undermines traditional forms of identity formation since actors are forced to constantly reassess and readjust their forms of life, practices and sets of convictions.

All three pathologies constitute forms of social injury. While the psychological impact of reification leads to systematic forms of forced inclusion or exclusion, of being restricted to or being left out of fixed identities, and the process of disenchantment corresponds to a sense of existential absurdity in a world devoid of binding resources of meaning, the pressures of increasing acceleration are experienced in terms of existential exhaustion and anxiety. As a consequence, there is an increased sense of superfluousness and being antiquated, a fear to be left behind in, or fall outside of the rushing hamster's wheel of late modern societies.

However distinct these pathologies might appear, it is crucial to notice that there is a close linkage between these three briefly outlined pathological tendencies of modern societies. Not only are reification, disenchantment and acceleration

[16] Judith Butler (1999).
[17] Michel Foucault (1977).
[18] See J.M. Bernstein (2001); Nikolas Kompridis (2006).
[19] Hartmut Rosa, (2005, chapter 5).

historically connected, they also imply each other on a conceptual level. Reification consists in seeing the world primarily from the vantage point of being a means or a toolbox from which means can be utilized in order to bring about a desired end. In this objectifying process, the end justifies the variable means and is the only factor taken to be intrinsically valuable. This end, then, is understood as not presently realized but as a future possibility the reality of which depends on the implementation of one's plan of action. Bernard Williams, the eminent British moral philosopher, stresses this point by arguing that without projecting an aim into the future, life would become meaningless. He argues for "the idea of a man's ground projects providing the motive force which propels him into the future, and gives him a reason for living."[20] If it were the case that our very existence would be safeguarded only as long as we intentionally pursue future-directed goals and projects in increasingly rationalized ways, it would mean that actors would be doomed to be increasingly alienated from a present they could at best regard as offering instrumentally useful, but intrinsically insignificant means for a supposedly meaningful future. Seen from the temporal horizon of the actor engaged in instrumental reasoning and action, the present events, actions, objects and subjects lack any intrinsic value. They are regarded as merely "useful for" certain projects rather than significant in virtue of what they are. The moment a project is realized, the satisfaction vanishes since it is not futural anymore. By presupposing such a restricted conception of projective action as the reason for living, the present environment an actor navigates in is transformed into pure immanence in which prediction becomes possible to the point of resembling an analytic judgment: assuming that we know what we want, and if we can do what we want while nobody keeps us from doing it, what we want will become realized. Novelty is being reduced to the discovery of new implications of what has already been familiar. Effort is generated once we see the end of our action as external to our spontaneously generated attachments. It grows out of the attempt to realize the stipulated end in ever more innovative, efficient and predictable ways in which spontaneity is, at best, forced towards a goal. The goal at which effort is directed often drops out of focus during the acceleration process or it loses its appeal. It seems external to the actor who has been trapped in a means-ends apparatus. This rationalization process increasingly becomes independent from the specificity of ends pursued and impossible to get out of. With every rationalized act the actor moves deeper into the quicksand of a world of suppressed spontaneity.

The consequence of this seemingly autonomous rationalization process famously described by Weber as an "iron cage" is that the present is being downgraded as insignificant on its own terms when compared to the future gains one promises oneself as the payoff of one's actions. Processes of innovation become the norm and speed up because actors hope to do and achieve ever more goals in increasingly

[20] Bernard Williams (1982, 13). Harry Frankfurt objects to Williams on this point by arguing that "our interest in living does not commonly depend upon our having projects that we desire to pursue. It's the other way around: we are interested in having worthwhile projects because we do intend to go on living, and we would prefer not to be bored." *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting it Right* (2006, 36-37).

shorter segments of emptied time. Actors rush to a future, which can in principle never be actualized. Paul Virillio fittingly describes this blind acceleration process of chasing structurally elusive future goals in increasingly higher speeds of innovation adequately as a "rushing standstill". From within the "iron cage" of modernity true innovation, which would have to be different from mere acceleration or enhancement and would require deliberating about alternative present ends, seems increasingly impossible.[21] The new is transfigured into the only variable that is to be expected. Instrumental action as the reified forgetfulness of the meaning resources of the present for the sake of the projected future thus seems without alternative. The consequence is what Hermann Lübbe refers to as a '*Gegenwartsschrumpfung*', a continuing shrinking of the present under the complimentary pressures of the tendencies of melancholic musealization of irretrievably lost pasts and forced innovation to run after structurally elusive futures.[22]

The dilemma with which critical theorists see themselves confronted is that whatever emancipatory tendencies – be they introduced as forms of resistance, mutual understanding, recognition etc. – are being proposed as means for a future end, instrumental action is reenacted under a normative guise and the domination of the future over the rest of time is thus further sedimented. As soon as instrumental actors propose or just point to emancipatory forms of action, they replicate and reenact the same temporal logic that it originally diagnosed as the problem of modernity, i.e., the belief that the future can be mastered through acts of projective planning. The problem of this projective planning mentality is not that things often turn out differently than planned, but that the actor sidesteps and thereby undermines the significance of the present and sees it simply as something to be used for future ends. In other words, by downgrading the present including its modes of action to being "for the sake of the future," critical theory denigrates the present to the status of a pre-future, a state of emptiness that is used as a resource rather than lived in.

A theory exposing and explaining social pathologies is keen on pointing to the inescapable mechanisms preventing the emancipatory use of reason through action. Such an exclusive focus on the diagnosis and emergence of pathologies coincides with developing an ethics of melancholy that emphasizes the inescapable specter of instrumental reason. Looking back in a melancholy state of mind over the long history of failed revolutions, it only sees what has been irretrievably lost in the wake of histories of catastrophes.[23] The present is now seen as an appendix to a past larger than life, an after-past. By replacing the search for an alternative mode of present potentiality with a focus on the traumatic experiences of history, it forecloses the possibility of emancipatory action in the present and thereby reverses the temporal logic of modernity. By replacing the infatuation of the projected future over the present, a new domination – that of the past over the present – is being introduced and sedimented. While the former domination – that of the future over the present -

[21] Paul Virillio (1999).
[22] Hermann Lübbe (1994).
[23] Gillian Rose (1979); Gregg M. Horowitz (2001).

corresponded to forms of blind activism, the latter – that of the past over the present - leads to a state of passivity, an inhibition, which replaces the engagement with the present for the contemplation of mnemonic art. The consequence is not a liberation of the past (which is in principle impossible) or a liberation of the present, but an extension of the temporal pressure put on the present. While the classical modernists only had to justify themselves with respect to the future, late modernists also have to justify themselves with respect to the past.

This detour was intended to show that the instrumental actor finds himself in a dilemma that seems impossible to get out off. The shrinking of the present arising out of instrumental action constitutes a theoretical as well as practical impasse. A transcultural engagement with Daoism understood as another critical theory could turn out to be fruitful given that it emerged within a cultural context in which instrumental action has not been the only or even primary form of action. First, however, it needs to be asked whether it is at all legitimate to interpret Daoism as *another* critical theory.

## 3. DAOISM AS ANOTHER CRITICAL THEORY

In the second part of the paper I will first show that Daoism can be understood as a critical theory and then discuss whether it offers an insight that could overcome the uneasy relationship between critical theory and emancipatory action with a focus on the present. The goal is to show that the proto-Daoists Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, commonly referred to as "Lao-Zhuang", provide a promising path which points to an alternative approach of addressing the vexing problem of instrumental action expressing itself in the pathologies of reification, disenchantment and acceleration. At the risk of engaging in anachronistic hermeneutics by applying texts from a different tradition which date back two and a half-millennia, the benefits of tapping rich conceptual sources providing a new insight into entrenched philosophical preconceptions seem overwhelming. Compared to European traditions, Daoism's long history of addressing phenomena of reification and change in theoretical, as well as practical ways, provides an immense richness not only for a reorientation of critical theory, but also in terms of envisioning emancipatory practices. The insight into the fluidity of social dynamics and the fluid subjectivity of actors anticipates many of the developments of late modern societies. At the same time Daoism offers us correctives to these developments. The early Daoist acknowledgment of the value of idling and uselessness, for example, allows us to level a critique of the pathologies of reification, disenchantment and acceleration deriving from a reduction of action to instrumental action. A critical theory in the spirit of Daoism would not simply disclose pathologies. It would also offer constructive resources which allow us to critically address and, as far as possible, overcome these pathologies without providing yet another reifying project that sells out on the potentiality of the present for the sake of the future.

Before focusing on how Daoism could help to address the connection between suffering from reification, disenchantment and acceleration, let us first step back and

consider the all but self-evident proposal to conceive of Daoism as a form of critical theory. I will only briefly mention the diagnostic and explanatory dimensions for the reasons that they are the weakest and least developed parts in Daoist thinking, while the emancipatory dimension offers a way to address the question concerning the difficulty arising from the attempt to overcome instrumental rationality without replicating its underlying temporal logic.

First, Daoism is critical in the most obvious and widely acknowledged sense in that it presents a response to the destitution of China during the late Zhou dynasty in which war and social disintegration threatened the stability of society.[24] Apart from this historical reason, exposing certain parallels with today's crises-ridden global order, both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi are critical of the philosophical attempts to address this destitution, especially the attempt of Confucius and his successor, Mencius. Whereas Confucius and his followers propagated the cultivation of the virtuous human being with the goal of integrating him or her into a hierarchically ordered social organism through the subjection to principles of love and filial piety, the Daoists pursued a conscious retreat from commonly accepted social norms and rejected the starting point of normative theory understood as outlining universal, context-independent principles of social obligation and cultivation more generally: "Filial piety, brotherliness, benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, trust, honor, integrity-for all of these you must drive yourself and make a slave of Virtue."[25] While the Confucians aim at cultivating the individual to fulfill the duties springing from his or her fixed position in the web of social relationships, the Daoists propagate an unlearning process with the indirect goal of interrupting webs of social integration, including the desire for social recognition, for the sake of cultivating spontaneity. The individual is strengthened in his or her capacity to resist with regard to commonly accepted values of the community. However, the liquid, readjusting self propagated by Daoism is not an autonomous, deliberative firm subject commonly known in the Western philosophical traditions. Rather, it is a flexible or liquid self, which refuses to adhere to context-independent moral principles while responding to its environment in emancipatory ways.[26]

By focusing on outlining context-independent moral obligations, Confucian benevolence only addresses the pathologies of the age at the surface level, while leaving the deeper causes of alienation from the *dao*, the patterns of spontaneous flourishing, untouched: "When the great Way is abandoned, there are benevolence and righteousness. When wisdom and intelligence come forth, there is great hypocrisy. When the six familial relationships are out of balance, there are kind parents and filial children. When the state is in turmoil and chaos, there are loyal ministers."[27] As a form of proto-ideology critique, Daoism thus reveals how moral systems of belief serve as justifications of the underlying pathological practices rather

[24] Hubert Schleichert and Heiner Roetz (2009, 113-114).
[25] *Zhuang-Zi* (1968, book 14, 156).
[26] The "postmodern" conception of such a liquid self is seen primarily as a problem rather than a potential by Bauman (2006) and Sennett (1998).
[27] *Dao-De-Jing* (2002, chapter 18).

than adequately addressing and, wherever possible, transforming them. The point made by Daoists is that it is not helpful to change the moral convictions of the time as long as one does not also change the underlying practices.

In the earlier analysis of the logic of instrumental action we have seen that by way of trying to master the present for the sake of a future project, the openness of the present is closed and the present shrinks. Constant innovation becomes a means in order to desperately try to gather more experiences and rush after fugitive goals in every shorter time spans. Critical theory has been incapable of addressing the pathology of acceleration in theoretically plausible and practically promising ways by failing to see through the temporal structure underlying instrumental, purposive action. This becomes particularly obvious when we turn to the third dimension of a critical social theory, that of opening up or at least pointing to transformative dimensions. In order to distance itself from the norms prevalent in the society, critical theory in a Daoist spirit has to point to something that is not only significantly different, but also significantly better. Only when it is possible to disclose possibilities that promise to overcome or at least significantly ameliorate the diagnosed pathologies as forms of social injury are we dealing with a progressive rather than reactionary force. The emancipatory dimension distinguishes mere cultural critique from critical theory.

In what way, then, does a reconstruction of Daoist conception of the relationship between optimal action and time point towards a transformative potential in the present? A charitable reconstruction of the concept of *wu-wei* would, without doubt, have to abandon certain metaphysical background assumptions common to ancient Daoism. In particular it is necessary to dismiss the cosmological conception of a basic harmony of the cosmos as well as the possibility of retreating from societies, including the norms governing these societies. It is not plausible to assume that the moderns have simply lost the right path or *dao*, because this would presuppose that there once was or always is a right path one could be led astray from. Rather, we might say metaphorically that the *dao* itself has become astray to express that social structures take on pathological forms. In other words, many of the pathologies of late modern societies are not directly to be attributed to the decisions of individual actors but are structural dimensions governing all spheres of society as much as theses spheres are only reproduced through human action. Actors cannot simply leave behind an unhealthy for a healthy *dao*, but have to uncover dimensions within *dao*, dimensions pointing to forms of actions, which allow for flourishing and transformation from within. Given these ramifications, a charitable interpretation of *wu-wei* could provide valuable insights for contemporary action theory in the context of critical social theory. I have suggested that *wu-wei*, understood as pertaining to the form of an action performed in an effortless way, provides a radically different conception of optimal action from that of purposive, instrumental activity.

As a key normative concept, *wu-wei* could perhaps be better translated as, following Ames and Hall, "non-coercive action" or, following Eric Sean Nelson, as

"effortless non-calculative responsiveness"[28] to avoid the passive and quietist implications associated with the literal translation "non-action" or "non-doing".[29] Since the term appears in many different contexts and different texts, it can at best serve as an umbrella concept covering a potentially unlimited set of practices, which have some things in common and diverge in other dimensions. It is fair to say that due to its high valuation in classical Chinese texts, activities or forms of responsiveness referred to as displaying the structure of *wu-wei* present an achievement. They are optimal forms of comportment. While they can be cultivated, they don't follow the same means-end rationality which reduces the means to be only instrumentally useful and has a tendency to wear subjects out in accelerating processes of a forgetfulness of the present.

It has been argued by Chris Fraser, among others, that it is misleading to conceive of *wu-wei* as a form of effortless action and that it would be better to interpret it as non-intentional action instead.[30] To understand why it is nevertheless justified to understand *wu-wei* as involving effortless dimensions rather than focusing on non-intentionality it is essential to distinguish two different senses of effort. This will allow us to avoid the misunderstanding that *wu-wei* would be an irrational, non-purposive state of simply letting oneself go without conscious focus. *Wu-wei* interrupts a *certain form* of effortful striving. When referring to effort, we often conflate objective effort with subjectively experienced effort. While the former includes the exercise of physiological processes (physical effort) as well as thought processes (mental effort), the latter refers to the subjective feeling of exertion and exhaustion.[31] When translating *wu-wei* as a form of "effortless non-calculative responsiveness" (rather than nonintentional action), what is meant is not the absence of objective effort, but a decreasing amount of subjectively experienced strenuousness. Such forms of performing an action without exhausting oneself coincide with the deliberate and often skilled performance of a practice. Often

[28] Ames and Hall (2003, 44-45); Eric Sean Nelson (2009, 294-316 and 396).

[29] For the purpose of this paper I will ignore the use of *wu-wei* as literally doing nothing and relegating tasks to subordinates in the context of good governance depicted in the figure of the emperor who, by relegating all authorities and responsibilities to his inferiors, constitutes the invisible and inactive center of power. See Roger Ames (1994).

[30] Chris Fraser proposes to adopt a diachronic model of action in which "acquisition begins with deliberate exertion, but eventually we internalize the skill and develop the ability to act automatically and sometimes effortlessly" (2007, 101). Such a quasi-Aristotelian two-phase model of action (first effortful acquisition and habituation, then effortless exertion of a skill) might fit some of the examples in *Zhuang-Zi*, including that of butcher Ding. It is not in line with *wu-wei* as the instantaneous transformation of the nature of one's character and action as it is introduced in the respective passages from *Dao-De-Jing*. In our context, the two-phase model would be incapable of explaining the transition from a perfectionist, future-oriented form of cultivation to an effortless and skillful engagement with the present. Effortless action is not the goal of causally necessary forms of antecedent acts of cultivation, but it constitutes a transfiguration of the very form of the action an actor is involved in. It could happen any moment and could also be lost again when replacing spontaneity with a blind following of rules.

[31] The distinction is introduced by Brian Bruya in the introduction to the rich collection of interdisciplinary essays on effortless attention (2010, 5).

effortless actions tend to coincide precisely with an increased form of identification with highly complex forms of skilled action ranging from playing chess and juggling to speaking a natural language fluently. These actions are intentional in the sense that when being asked why an actor engages in them, he could provide a reason for his action as an answer.[32] However, when *wu-wei*-like actions are conducted well, the consciousness of these reasons and especially the conscious fixation on future goals, which needs to be actualized through significant degrees of subjectively felt exhaustion, drops out of the field of experience of the actor.

One classic example to illustrate the structure of *wu-wei*-like actions is the story of cook Ding mentioned in *Zhuang-Zi*. The cook perfected the skill of cutting up oxen by learning how to use a knife with the greatest subtlety, avoiding any *unnecessary* friction. Ding did so by "using his cultivated intuition rather than his eyes" to cut up the ox according to his joints, avoiding all unnecessary resistance and thereby transforming an instrumental skill into an effective and context-sensitive art, an *ars contextualis*.[33] He perfected the art of butchery to the point of not having to blindly follow rules in a subjectively as well as objectively (with regard to the sharpness of the blade of the knife) exhausting way. This does not mean that cutting up the ox does not confront the butcher with challenges. Otherwise he would not even need a knife and would not be a master of his art. It also does not mean that Ding could not provide reasons for what he is doing. After all, he explains his philosophy of intuitive mastery to Lord Wen-Hui. However, when challenges arise, Ding stops for a moment to "size up the difficulties" and focuses on the activity in the present in a slow and calm manner rather than wasting his energies in forms of overly strenuous and hasty acts of applying a context-independent method. The story does not simply illustrate the benefits of *wu-wei*-like action, but offers a normative model, which "goes beyond skill" and, in Lord Wen-Hui's words, illustrates "the secret of caring for life".[34] This secret, we may infer, is that the mastery of practices does not rest on analyzing or reasoning from principles, but in spontaneously attending to a situation intuitively and with a high degree of effortless concentration and dedication.

What is significant for our context is the specific temporality of engaging in *wu-wei*. What the concept *wu-wei* designates is a perfection in the moment of present action rather than a perfection the goal of which is being projected into the future. The vital organ of decision making processes is the heart-mind *xin* (心) rather than the disembodied intellect. "For the ancient Chinese," A.C. Graham remarks, "the heart, not the brain, is the organ of thought. Most men use it to plan ahead, but the sage uses it only to reflect the situation as it objectively is, before he responds. Like a mirror, it reflects only the present; it is not stuffed with past information which it

[32] The thesis that an action is distinct from a mere physiological occurrence in terms of the answer that would be given by an actor or observers about the intention embodied in the action is developed in G.E.M. Anscombe (1957).
[33] Roger T. Ames (1989).
[34] *Zhuang-Zi* (chapter 3).

'retains' (*ts'ang* [*cang* 藏] 'stores, hoards') at the cost of being trapped in obsolete attitudes. The sage perceives and responds to every situation as new."[35]

Seen from a temporal perspective, *wu-wei* is intended to free the future-creating presence as it discloses itself from the perspective of an actor who is pursuing his task in a skillful and whole-hearted fashion in the ever new and newly experienced present. The actor is fully absorbed into performing an action well to the point of forgetting himself, the passage of time, as well as extrinsic goals of the action. It is easy to see that an action carried out in this way is also self-rewarding while being indirectly efficacious. The actor forgets the passage of time and is not being inhibited by the anxiety connected to goal fixation while he might nevertheless indirectly realize goals which are important to him. Being in a state of fully absorbed, meaningful and skilled action includes a heightened responsiveness to the constantly changing potential of the context surrounding the action. Rather than acting only locally by detaching a certain task, instrument or goal from its context, the actor mirrors the situation in its entirety. By freeing the attention for the demands of the present moment from the weight of a recollected past and the demands of a not yet present future, it allows an action to be spontaneous rather than being guided by a fixed plan the goal of which is projected beyond the here and now. The actor is not wearing himself out in the process of being plagued by a deadline attached to his project, but exercises his energies efficiently in the mastery of the art of perfecting action.

Based on the concept of *wu-wei*, a critique of the temporal logic underlying instrumental action that is lacking in critical theory becomes possible. In contrast to the inactivity of an apathetic person, the actor practicing *wu-wei* engages the present in non-instrumental ways. Rather than limiting non-instrumental action to the aesthetic realm as has been common in the European tradition from Schiller until Adorno or that of intersubjectivity as in the tradition from Kant to Habermas and Honneth, the domains in which actions can be practiced in a *wu-wei*-like manner is virtually unlimited.

Drawing on insights arising from analytic philosophy of mind and action, Chris Fraser has shown that *wu-wei* can be understood as what John Searle refers to as "the Background".[36] The Background is a term of art referring to the various tacit capacities, abilities and know-how an actor always already draws on whenever performing an action. These unthematized background conditions allow for an action to be successful while facing real time challenges that could not be solved through slow acts of premeditation. Classic examples would be the intuitive operation of a car's transmission or speaking a language fluently. These actions are being performed without having to calculate which gear is appropriate for which speed or consciously having to apply the rules of grammar.

Fraser ultimately criticizes *wu-wei*-based normative accounts of action since they proclaim to do away with the kind of higher-level deliberation that he rightly

[35] A.C. Graham (1983, 9).
[36] Chris Fraser (2008).

considers fundamental to engaging in moral reasoning and other practices. I agree with Fraser that it is necessary to account for these forms of intentional deliberation while I disagree with him in excluding higher order intentional deliberation from the realm of potentially *wu-wei* forms of activities. What Fraser's reductivist analysis of *wu-wei* understood as nonintentional action fails to see is that reasoning is an action as well, a thought-action.[37] Thought actions also always presuppose a background of tacit assumptions, including normative assumptions, meanings and associations of concepts, etc. A contemporary reconstruction of the concept of *wu-wei* understood as effortless non-calculative responsiveness (rather than nonintentional action) can thus also be applied to cognitive thought-acts. In the mentioned story of butcher Ding as well as other stories, Zhuang Zi emphasizes that the person who knows what he is doing often engages in thinking before he makes his moves. However, such thinking does not decide between alternative courses of action by applying rules in judgment (*bian* 辩). Rather, as A.C. Graham points out, such a form of attentive thinking is an intuitive sorting out (*lun* 論).[38] Accordingly, artificial forms of deliberation, which are nonspontaneous, strenuous and fixated on following predetermined principles and future goals, are then to be distinguished from those kinds of genuine thought-actions which are conducted in a skillful, responsive and spontaneous manner with a heightened attention for and awareness of the specific needs of the evolving present. Daoism would espouse the latter while dismissing the former practices. Free intentional deliberation consists in an open encounter with intentional contents. Searle's assertion that "intentionality reaches down to the bottom level of the voluntary actions"[39] thus needs to be extended by adding that spontaneity and effortlessness receptivity also reaches all the way up to the level of intentionality.[40] Only by acknowledging that *wu-wei* potentially applies to all actions, including thought-acts, do we get an insight into the scope and impact of Daoist naturalism. Once we acknowledge that many of our thought contents, as Galan Strawson's puts it, "just happen",[41] the question becomes whether we can make any general claims about how to relate to them responsively. Actors are not simply confronted with neutral, occurring episodes entering and leaving their field of attention, but stand to their streams of consciousness in a relationship that Harry Frankfurt aptly characterizes as one of caring.[42] In the process of *wu-wei*-like action, the actor does not distinguish between an instrumental value of intermediary goals and an absolute value of the

[37] Christopher Peacocke (1999).
[38] See Angus C. Graham (1983, 7-8); for the meaning of '*lun*' see also A.C. Graham (2004, 28).
[39] Cited by Fraser (2008, 90).
[40] The importance of spontaneity for intentional action and judgment has been worked out by John McDowell (1994).
[41] Galen Strawson (2003, 228). Strawson stresses that thought processes are not correctly characterized as primarily consisting of conscious actions as much as they are activities, thus echoing the literal translation of *wu-wei* as a form of non-doing or an "action which is not an action".
[42] Harry Frankfurt writes "In my view, it is only in virtue of what we actually care about that anything is important to us. The world is everywhere infused for us with importance; many things are important to us." (2006, 20); see also Frankfurt (1988).

future, final goal. Rather, as Graham shows, the only imperative of the Daoist critic of imperatives is "respond with awareness of what is objectively so."[43] If an action is performed in a *wu-wei*-like manner, the actor does not only, and not even primarily care for the realization of the goals of his action, but also cares about how well, in the sense of how attentive, the action leading to such a realization is being performed. Daoists agree that if an action is carried out well, the actor responds to streams of inherently interconnected mental and physical events in a focused and context-sensitive manner. He is in a state of acquiescence to the specificity of the task performed and the context in which it is performed. In other words, he stops to see these events as unacceptable intruders that need to be sorted out anxiously according to given rules and reified plans, but as providing occasions or invitations for actions, actions which are responsive, sensitive and focused.

The implications of conceiving of optimal intentional action as not being one of an overtaxing, future-directed effort, but one that effortlessly focuses on the demands of the present, are far reaching. An action, which is not based on the logic of striving for future goals but on performing a practice well in the here and now, is the most efficacious form of practice since it does not waste its energy in fruitless confrontation. This is not to say that *wu-wei*-like actions could not be executed quickly. *Wu-wei* concerns the form rather than the speed in which an action is carried out. Whether an action is being performed quickly or slowly does not determine whether it is performed in an absorbed and responsive way. Sitting still, for example in the context of meditation, can be non-*wu-wei*-like in involving a lot of effort when the person meditating forces himself to sit still for ulterior goals. The skilled mastery of the juggler over his cascades or the engagement in a lively conversation, on the other hand, might be performed quasi-automatically even if involving quick and spontaneous responses. Conscious deceleration, be it through eating in a slower pace or turning to meditation, might further perpetuate the temporal logic of the instrumental calculus as long as it is performed with too much effort and connected to a focus on an extrinsic concern. The efficacy of effortless action is not one measured by calculating future gains against present costs, but one that takes into account how far the acting individual is in fact in tune with the rhythm of his or her environment by responding to challenges of that environment as they arise in ever readjusting forms. Such a process of being "in tune" combines mastery and responsiveness, engagement and receptivity, order and spontaneity, purpose and disinterestedness. Effortless action is thus not subject to following a universal set of norms as the Confucians (or Kantians) would have it. Rather, a person performing actions well generates *singular* norms that arise from, and do justice to, the concrete situation (*auto-nomous*).

The state of mind that a person is in while exercising noncalculative and responsive action has been compared to what psychologists have described as "flow experience". Flowing action provides an antidote to the accelerating, reifying and disenchanting logic that drives instrumental action. It comes as no surprise that

[43] Graham (1983,11).

Zhuang Zi's story concerning cook Ding's perfected carving of an ox serves as a prominent example in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's classic *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* in which '*yu*' (御) is being translated as 'flow'.[44] Flow comes about when human actors are absorbed in the present tasks at hand. The present tasks at hand are seen as providing living potentials rather than dead means for ulterior ends. When actors in flow states are confronted by a challenging task, the completion of this task lets the actor forget the past and the future. Interrupting ordinary strenuous comportment, an actor undergoing flow experiences also overcomes a reified sense of self, thereby "dereifying" or liquifying, reenchanting, and decelerating his relationship to the objects he produces, himself, the act of production and his fellow human beings. Flow arises out of a balancing act that is in constant danger of collapsing either into becoming a rote routine or an overtaxing effort. The overtaxing effort brings forth unnecessary forms of reactions, while the rote routine lacks the sense of freedom and potential. The art of *wu-wei* thus consists in successfully striking and sustaining a balance between extreme effort and passive rule-following. If an actor is capable of sustaining such a balance, there is a harmony between his desires and will. In this sense *wu-wei*-kind of actions are free actions as they are characterized by Frankfurt: "a free act is one that a person performs simply because he wants to perform it. Enjoying freedom of action consists in maintaining this harmonious accord between what we do and what we want to do."[45] As different as the underlying temporality is, the guiding ideal of effortless, attentive actions provides a surprising overlap with the guiding Western ideal of positive freedom.

Let me end by returning to the legend concerning the origin of the *Dao-De-Jing*. According to this legend, the book was written down by Lao Zi through his student as a form of road toll in order to pass the toll-keeper at the Han pass when moving West. It is an irony of history that perhaps the first critique of the principle of exchanging the present for the future was passed down to us based on an operation of exchanging the written word for the right of passage. Lao Zi, the first critic of the assumption that we could once and for all fix the living knowledge necessary to traverse the changing way with timeless principles,[46] paid for his final passage by writing down and thus codifying the idea according to which water defeats the stone. Walter Benjamin, perhaps the most Daoist member of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, wrote a brief commentary on Brecht's poetic image of this scene. The commentary stresses that Lao Zi's friendliness and cheerfulness interrupted the principle of equivalent exchange by "rendering a great service as if it were trivial." We might also say, as if it were non-calculative, effortless and responsive. Lao Zi, Benjamin continues, thus "places these world-historical days under the motto: 'All right-just a brief stop'." It is the act of an effortless giving and thereby interrupting the journey without leading to a standstill that is forcefully conjured up in this anecdote. Capturing the spirit and the

[44] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008, 255). See also Chris Jochim (1998).
[45] Harry Frankfurt (2006, 14).
[46] "A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way. A name that can be named is not a constant name." *Dao-De-Jing*, trans. Ivanhoe (chapter 1).

specific presenting temporality of effortlessness, Benjamin asks "and what use would his wisdom be if he who forgot the valley (which he had just looked on with pleasure again) when he rounded the next corner did not also forget his anxieties about the future almost as soon as he felt them?"[47] Critical theory has yet to come to terms with the radical potential of such seemingly small, spontaneous, effortless, friendly, forgetful and anxiety-free acts in the midst of precarious times.

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[47] Walter Benjamin (2003, 248).

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