

The Politics of Uselessness. On Heidegger's Reading of the Zhuangzi

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Abstract:

Martin Heidegger's fictional "Evening Conversation: In a Prisoner of War Camp in Russia, Between a Younger and an Older Man" (in volume 77 of his collected works) is dated May 8, 1945, the day of unconditional surrender for Nazi Germany. This text is a response to the German defeat. The seemingly annoying use of a quote from a Daoist classic, the *Zhuāngzǐ* (in Richard Wilhelm's translation), which forms the philosophical core of the text, raises a number of questions. Why and how does Heidegger use the *Zhuāngzǐ* to think about the German defeat? Does his reference to this text have to be understood as an escape from the responsibility of his entanglement with Nazi ideology? Or can it be read as sign of a philosophical turn against National Socialism? A turn which even has a normative content worth discussing? These questions lead to the problem of whether the discussion of Heidegger's 1945 "transcultural turn" to Chinese thought in particular (to which Chinese scholars have paid a great deal of attention) and his spiritual pivot to Asia in general, may provide important clues for understanding some of the structural problems which make it difficult for Western philosophers to recognize the global significance of classical Chinese philosophy.

"Your foot itself has effaced the way behind you,
and over it stands written:
Impossibility."
(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)