

Heidegger's Interpretation of Zhuangzi's Notion "the Necessity of the Unnecessary" (*die Notwendigkeit des Unnötigen*)"

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Abstract: This paper elucidates Heidegger's interpretation of Zhuangzi's notion of "the necessity of the unnecessary" (*die Notwendigkeit des Unnötigen*, 無用之用, *wuyongzhiyong*). This comparative analysis begins with two of Heidegger's letters in which he excerpts the same passage, titled "The Necessity of the Unnecessary," from Chapter 26 of the *Zhuangzi*. In these letters, Heidegger explicitly identifies the "unnecessary" (無用, *wuyong*) with his own concept of Being (*Sein*). The paper aims to clarify and critically examine this identification.

Keywords: Heidegger, Zhuangzi, 無用 (*wuyong*, the unnecessary, *das Unnötige*), 用 (*yong*, the necessary, *das Nötige*)

This paper undertakes an attempt to elucidate Heidegger's interpretation of Zhuangzi's notion "the necessity of the unnecessary" (無用之用, *wuyongzhiyong*).¹ This elucidation is based on two of Heidegger's letters, where he excerpted the same passage from Zhuangzi's work *Zhuangzi*. The German translation of this passage is titled "*Die Notwendigkeit des Unnötigen*" (the necessity of the unnecessary). This title was not devised by Heidegger himself but rather by the German translator of the *Zhuangzi*.²

¹ It is important to note that the "necessity of the unnecessary" is neither a standard nor a literal translation of "無用之用." Watson renders "無用之用" as "useless" and "用" as "use." See Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 231. Nevertheless, I adopt the translation "the necessity of the unnecessary," since it is the formulation Heidegger himself employs in his text "Evening Conversation: In a Prisoner of War Camp in Russia, between a Younger and an Older Man," which will be examined later in this paper.

² Dschuang Dsi, *Das wahre Buch vom südlichen Blütenland*, trans. and ed. by Richard Wilhelm (Jena: Diederichs, 1912), 203.

These two letters are particularly noteworthy insofar as they include the following comments: “which [=the unnecessary] is what I [=Heidegger] mean by ‘Being [Sein]’;”³ “the distinction between beings and Beyng [Seyn] feels increasingly enigmatic.”⁴ These comments indicate that Zhuangzi’s notion *wuyongzhiyong* is related to Heidegger’s concepts of Being and ontological difference. The clarification of this relationship will offer a new perspective for understanding Heidegger’s ontology.

My investigation proceeds as follows: first, I elucidate the passage cited in Heidegger’s letters, written in March 1945. I then examine two of Heidegger’s writings, namely “Evening Conversation: In a Prisoner of War Camp in Russia, between a Younger and an Older Man” (hereafter referred to as the “Evening Conversation”) and “Poverty.” The “Evening Conversation” was written in May 1945, and the “Poverty” was originally delivered as a lecture in June 1945. This examination shows how Heidegger interprets Zhuangzi’s passage. Finally, I compare Zhuangzi’s distinction between the unnecessary (*das Unnötige*) and the necessary (*das Nötige*) with Heidegger’s differentiation between Being and beings.

Heidegger’s March 1945 Letters and the Zhuangzi Passage

The first letter was sent by Heidegger to his wife on 2 March 1945. In this letter, Heidegger notes that the unnecessary “is what I mean by ‘Being’.” He also refers to a “short conversation between two Chinese thinkers,” which was likely the source of the expression “the unnecessary.” Unfortunately, the editor of Heidegger’s correspondence with his wife omitted the “conversation.” As a result, the identity of the two Chinese thinkers as well as the content of their exchange remain unknown. Nevertheless, Heidegger’s fascination with the conversation is evident, as he had transcribed and shared it with his wife. Furthermore, the same conversation is quoted by Heidegger in another of his letters.

The second letter was sent to his brother, Fritz, on 5 March 1945. In this letter, Heidegger mentions the “enigmatic” character of “the distinction between beings and Beyng.” At the end of the letter, he once again refers to a “short dialogue between two Chinese thinkers” and transcribes it. It can be translated into English as follows: “Huizi said to Zhuangzi: ‘You speak of the

³ Martin Heidegger, *Letters to his Wife, 1915-1970*, ed. by Gertrud Heidegger (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2008), 187; Martin Heidegger, “*Mein liebes Seelchen!*” *Briefe Martin Heideggers an seine Frau Elfride 1915-1970*, ed. by Gertrud Heidegger (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2005), 234.

⁴ The correspondence between the Heidegger brothers is included in the following book: Martin Heidegger and Fritz Heidegger, *Heidegger und der Antisemitismus: Positionen im Widerstreit. Mit Briefen von Martin und Fritz Heidegger*, ed. by Walter Homolka and Arnulf Heidegger (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 123.

20 HEIDEGGER AND THE FORGETTING

unnecessary (*das Unnötige*, 無用).’ Zhuangzi said: ‘First, a person must recognize the unnecessary, and only then can one speak with that person about the necessary (*das Nötige*, 用). The earth is indeed vast and wide. But a human being uses only a place (*Platz*) of the size of his feet in order to stand upright. Now, if a crack were to open right next to those feet and to reach all the way to the underworld, would the place where he is standing still be of use (*nütze*) to him?’ Huizi said: ‘The place would no longer be of use to him.’ Zhuangzi said: ‘From this, the necessity of the unnecessary becomes clearly manifest.’”⁵

It can now be determined that the two Chinese thinkers in question are Huizi and Zhuangzi. This short dialogue will hereafter be referred to as the “Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation.” It should be noted that the expressions “the unnecessary” and “the necessary” do not adequately capture the semantic nuances of Zhuangzi’s concepts “無用” and “用.” Moreover, the German translation on which Heidegger relied contains additional problems. My aim, however, here is not to identify or correct those mistranslations. Instead, I will try to explain Heidegger’s understanding of the “Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation” and his interpretation of the necessity of the unnecessary. For this reason, I will follow the German translation.

In the dialogue, Zhuangzi illustrates the necessity of the unnecessary through a compelling analogy. In the analogy, the “necessary” refers to the place directly beneath the person’s feet, which allows him to stand upright, while the “unnecessary” denotes all the surrounding land that is not in immediate use. Zhuangzi then asks Huizi to imagine a situation in which all the surrounding land disappears. In such a situation, the person would find himself confined to a narrow strip of land. No one would want to stand on such a small piece of land as it would leave him trapped. Thus, what had once seemed necessary becomes no longer necessary for any purpose. In this way, Zhuangzi’s analogy demonstrates that the unnecessary (無用) must exist for the necessary (用) to remain necessary. Therefore, the unnecessary is the foundation of the necessary.

Heidegger’s interpretation of the “Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation” in the “Evening Conversation” and “Poverty”

About two months after writing the letters mentioned above, Heidegger wrote the “Evening Conversation.” In this conversation, the older and the younger individuals discuss the “devastation (*Verwüstung*)” occurring throughout the world and acknowledge that they are not free from this devastation. They assert that the ability to think is necessary to become

⁵ Heidegger and Heidegger, *Heidegger und der Antisemitismus*, 124.

free. In the age of devastation, everything is calculated solely in terms of necessity. "The single law of the devastation is that the necessary is the most necessary and the only necessary thing [*Das einzige Gesetz der Verwüstung ist, daß das Nötige das Nötigste und das allein Nötige sei*]." ⁶ The older and the younger man suffer in such an age, because they have been "wholly expelled from the open expanse of the unnecessary thinking."⁷ Those people who are overly expectant and greedy are always obsessed with what merely appears to be necessary, while neglecting what seems unnecessary. Such people become the "pacesetters of the devastation."⁸

In contrast, the older and the younger man recognize that the unnecessary is "the most necessary of all," and they are aware of "the necessity of the unnecessary." What they identify as the unnecessary is "thinking [*das Denken*]." ⁹ The original essence of thinking is described as pure waiting. When human beings wait and think, they come into their own proper essence. In this mode of thinking, they do not transform things into mere objects for human subjects. In other words, they do not reduce them to the means for fulfilling human desires. Rather, the waiting-thinking "lets things return to themselves."¹⁰ As the evening conversation comes to an end, the older man expresses his gratitude for the profound and meaningful exchange with the younger man. He recites a brief conversation between two Chinese thinkers, namely the "Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation."¹¹

Although the "Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation" appears only at the very end, the expression "the necessity of the unnecessary" recurs from the middle of the "Evening Conversation" and onward.¹² Moreover, the concept of thinking in the "Evening Conversation" is metaphorically described as the "open expanse [*freie Weite*]" and the "distant land [*fernes Land*]," which resembles the way in which the unnecessary is analogically described as "earth [*Erde*]" in the "Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation." From this, it becomes clear that Zhuangzi's notion of the necessity of the unnecessary plays a significant role in the "Evening Conversation." Heidegger clearly understood

⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Abendgespräch in einem Kriegsgefangenenlager in Rußland zwischen einem Jüngeren und einem Älteren," in *Feldweg-Gespräche (1944/45)*, ed. by Ingrid Schüßler (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 236. This quotation is omitted in the English translation. See Martin Heidegger, "Evening Conversation: In a Prisoner of War Camp in Russia, between a Younger and an Older Man," in *Country Path Conversations*, trans. by Bret W. Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 154.

⁷ Heidegger, "Abendgespräch," 219; Heidegger, "Evening Conversation," 142.

⁸ Heidegger, "Abendgespräch," 229; Heidegger, "Evening Conversation," 149.

⁹ Heidegger, "Abendgespräch," 221; Heidegger, "Evening Conversation," 143.

¹⁰ Heidegger, "Abendgespräch," 229; Heidegger, "Evening Conversation," 149.

¹¹ Heidegger, "Abendgespräch," 239; Heidegger, "Evening Conversation," 156.

¹² Heidegger, "Abendgespräch," 220, 234, 237–239; Heidegger, "Evening Conversation," 143, 153, 155–156.

22 HEIDEGGER AND THE FORGETTING

the “Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation” and drew upon it in a deliberate manner in order to address his own philosophical concerns.

However, the concept of necessity is not explicitly explained in the “Evening Conversation.” Thus, the reason why unnecessary thinking is nevertheless necessary remains unclear. It can be surmised as follows: without waiting-thinking, all beings in the age of devastation would be calculated and reduced exclusively to necessity and utility. In order to prevent such calculative reduction, unnecessary thinking must necessarily exist so that all beings can remain as they are. However, in order to justify this necessity, Heidegger would have had to explain why all beings should remain as they are. It is likely that he could not fully emphasize this necessity through the “Evening Conversation” alone. Hence Heidegger turned to the powerful analogy of the “Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation.” Another problem is that, in the “Evening Conversation,” the connection between the unnecessary and Being remains unelucidated, since the unnecessary is identified there solely with thinking. For these reasons, the “Evening Conversation” by itself does not suffice to clarify Heidegger’s remarks in the above-mentioned letters.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of them, I shall examine the text, “Poverty.” Here, Heidegger elaborates on the concepts of unnecessary as well as necessity. He first distinguishes between general “poverty” and “true [*wahrhaft*] poverty.” General poverty denotes “not having and being specifically deprived of what is needed [*das Nötige*],” whereas “to be truly poor means to be so that one is deprived of nothing except what is not needed [*das Unnötige*].”¹³ Unlike what is needed, namely the necessary, which arises from “need [*Not*],” the unnecessary emerges from “what is free and open [*das Freie*].”¹⁴ What is free and open cannot be used; rather, it allows each being “unto its ownmost and protected essence from the compulsion of the need.” That which frees “in freedom averts or circumvents [*wendet*] in advance all need.”¹⁵ This overturning of the need is what Heidegger calls necessity (*Notwendigkeit*). In this sense, freedom is necessity. When a human being is truly poor, he is deprived of the unnecessary. Therefore, he is concerned with possessing it and, in turn, is possessed by it. His essence depends on and belongs to it. In this way, he relates to the unnecessary, namely, to Being, “which lets each and every being be what it is

¹³ Martin Heidegger, “Die Armut,” in *Heidegger Studies*, 10, (1994), 8. The English translation of this text is found in the following book: Martin Heidegger, “Poverty,” trans. by Thomas Kalary and Frank Schalow, in *Heidegger, Translation, and the Task of Thinking. Essays in Honor of Parvis Emad*, ed. by Frank Schalow (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 6.

¹⁴ Heidegger, “Die Armut,” 8; Heidegger, “Poverty,” 7.

¹⁵ Heidegger, “Die Armut,” 8; Heidegger, “Poverty,” 7.

and how it is.”¹⁶ In this way, Heidegger identifies the unnecessary with Being. This identification clarifies his comment in the aforementioned letter to his wife.

Zhuangzi’s the unnecessary and the necessary and Heidegger’s Being and beings

The examination of the “Evening Conversation” and the “Poverty” showed that the unnecessary corresponds to Being, while the necessary corresponds to beings. Accordingly, the distinction and relation between the unnecessary and the necessary can be compared to Heidegger’s ontological difference.

In the “Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation,” the place where a person is standing is something necessary, like a tool for use. In contrast, the surrounding land is unnecessary at that moment. However, without unnecessary land, the necessary place would lose its necessity. In this way, the unnecessary must first exist for the necessary to be able to be of necessity. Since the necessary cannot be without the unnecessary, the latter resembles Being, which allows necessary beings to be as they are. This resemblance explains why Heidegger refers to the distinction between beings and Being in the aforementioned letter to his brother.

Nevertheless, there are dissimilarities between the distinction of the unnecessary and the necessary and that of Being and beings. The most significant dissimilarity is that, in Zhuangzi’s thinking, both the unnecessary and the necessary are beings. The unnecessary being is simply much larger in size than the necessary being. This becomes evident in other examples from the *Zhuangzi*, where he speaks of an unnecessary tree or an unnecessary gourd, both of which remain a tree and a gourd, albeit unusually large in size.¹⁷ Consequently, there is no ontological difference between the two beings, namely the unnecessary and the necessary.

Another important dissimilarity lies in the nature of the distinction itself: Heidegger’s ontological difference is, so to speak, absolute, whereas the “Huizi-Zhuangzi-Conversation” presents a relative distinction between the unnecessary and the necessary. In Zhuangzi’s analogy, the currently necessary place may become unnecessary if the surrounding land disappears. Conversely, the currently unnecessary surrounding land becomes necessary once the person walks over to it. Hence, the unnecessary and the necessary do not remain fixed in these states. Each can become the other. Thus, the distinction between unnecessary and necessary is not absolute and

¹⁶ Heidegger, “Die Armut,” 9; Heidegger, “Poverty,” 8.

¹⁷ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 6–7.

24 HEIDEGGER AND THE FORGETTING

immutable, but rather relative and fluid. Probably Heidegger was deeply impressed by this relativity of the distinction. This may explain why, in the aforementioned letter to his brother, he described the ontological difference as an “enigma” and questioned the adequacy of his terminology.

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