



Darkness and Light: Absence and Presence in Heidegger, Derrida, and Daoism

Steven Burik¹

Published online: 8 July 2019
© Springer Nature B.V. 2019

Abstract

The light metaphor is a perpetual favorite for philosophers, both East and West. I seek to reevaluate its opposite, darkness. I claim that there are good reasons to favor darkness over light, or at least to not see them as mutually incompatible or in hierarchical fashion. In recent Western philosophy, both Heidegger and Derrida argue that what the light metaphor represents, the promise of clarity and objectivity, is exactly what makes Western metaphysics problematic. In Chinese philosophy, classical Daoism offers a thinking that does not favor the light metaphor over its opposite. Daoists have the good sense to acknowledge darkness as a positive contribution to human life, at the very least on par with light. I argue that both the Western criticism of the light metaphor, and the Daoist approach to light and darkness, can be read as challenging the metaphysics of presence and providing an alternative way of thought.

Keywords Darkness · Heidegger · Derrida · Daoism · Metaphysics

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1: 1–4, King James Version)

These two—the nameless and what is named—emerge from the same source yet are referred to differently. Together they are called obscure [*xuan* 玄]. The obscurest of the obscure, they are the swinging gateway of the manifold mysteries. (*Daodejing* 道德經, Chapter 1; Ames and Hall 2003: 77)

✉ Steven Burik
stevenburik@smu.edu.sg

¹ School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, 90 Stamford Road, Level 4, Singapore 178903, Singapore

When the Way is lit it does not guide. (*Zhuangzi* 莊子, Chapter 2; Graham 2001: 57)

1 Introduction

The light metaphor has always been a favorite for philosophers, both East and West. This article seeks to reevaluate its opposite, darkness. I will argue that there are good reasons to reaffirm darkness against the dominant light metaphor, or at least to not see them as mutually incompatible or in hierarchical fashion. My strategy consists in (re-)asserting certain forms of darkness over light with the ultimate aim to overcome the *hierarchy* of the two binary opposites and understand them in a more complementary fashion. This strategy concerning what are supposedly opposites is something we find consistently employed in the work of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and in classical Daoism. My focus on darkness and light will therefore ultimately be used to highlight the differences in approach between a metaphysics of presence and a thinking of absence, and to use these to argue for a complementary approach. I do not aim to overcome the *duality* between light and darkness or between presence and absence per se. With Heidegger and Derrida, I do not think such an overcoming is completely possible or even desirable. Instead, I will argue that my protagonists are more about understanding the duality differently, and then about embracing double-sidedness and interplay, and that “overcoming” lies exactly in overcoming the *hierarchy* in the duality. I believe that this is both true of the Daoist position (at least for Zhuangzi 莊子 and Guo Xiang 郭象), and it is a position which resonates in Heidegger and Derrida as well.

In recent continental philosophy, both Heidegger and Derrida have contemplated and questioned the light metaphor in an effort to first show its omnipresence in Western metaphysics, and then to challenge its dominance. Heidegger’s famous “clearing” is a light *in* darkness, and his favorite light metaphor was therefore the star. Derrida’s “White Mythology” (Derrida 1982: 207–271) exposes the importance of the light metaphor in maintaining the dualist hierarchical structures present in Western metaphysics. Both argue, in different ways, that what the light metaphor represents, the promise of clarity and objectivity, of presence, is not only impossible, but more importantly, undesirable.

Speaking of darkness, philosophically, it seems that most often when something seems incomprehensible, we relate it to darkness, and feel the need to “shed light” on it, and it is this tendency to “present” or make present which has given darkness a bad name. This quite natural tendency has “obscured” the unwarranted assumptions and the direction of Western metaphysics, with the end result that traditional Western metaphysics has become a rather one-sided way of doing philosophy. In classical Chinese philosophy, we find in Daoism a kind of thinking that seems not to favor the light metaphor and what it stands for over darkness. I will not argue that the light metaphor plays no role in Daoism. It does, but at least, in genuine *yin yang* 陰陽 fashion, Daoism also appreciates a certain idea of darkness. I believe Daoists want to make a point with their use of “darkness.” Neo-Daoism is referred to as “dark” learning, “dark” understanding, *xuanxue* 玄

學. I will first argue that the classical Daoists take darkness seriously, as they seem to have the good sense to acknowledge darkness as that limit beyond which thinking should not or cannot venture, so they think darkness as absence in a positive way at the very least on par with light. When Daoists come to a point which cannot be argued further, when they speak of what really matters, they seek not clarification, but rather an immersion or joining in darkness, obscurity, muddledness, vagueness, obfuscation, ineffability. The reader should bear in mind that when I speak of darkness in this article, I will be referring to all of these notions above. I argue that both the Western criticism of the light metaphor through Heidegger and Derrida, and the Daoist approach to light and darkness, can shed a different light on the notion of darkness and its function in thinking. Although it is understood that darkness has been thought about throughout the history of mankind, in both East and West, my goal is to show how it can be understood differently in my protagonists in relating it to the notions of presence and absence, and how this different understanding is conducive for a more comprehensive understanding of human knowing and its limits in a global context.

2 Darkness and Light in Western Philosophy

Metaphors of light are everywhere in the Western vocabulary of knowledge and understanding. Western philosophy, as we know it, would simply be impossible without the constant reference to light. From our earliest beginnings humans around the world have always been wary of darkness, and have associated light with security, power (through fire), possibility, and by philosophical extension with Truth, presence, goodness, Reason, purity, and what is worthiest of pursuing. In the words of Hans Blumenberg:

Light is the absolute power of Being, which reveals the paltriness [*Nichtigkeit*] of the dark, which can no longer exist once light has come into existence. Light is intrusive; in its abundance, it creates the overwhelming, conspicuous clarity with which the true “comes forth”; it forcibly acquires the irrevocability of Spirit’s consent. Light remains what it is while letting the infinite participate in it; it is consumption without loss. Light produces space, distance, orientation, calm contemplation; it is the gift that makes no demands, the illumination capable of conquering without force. (Blumenberg 1957/1993: 31; German in original)

Blumenberg further illustrates that although light and dark were often *both* seen as “primordial principles,” the hierarchical approach favoring light over darkness was already present in Parmenides (Blumenberg 1957/1993: 32). The entire history of Western philosophy indicates that the grand project of Western thought has always been to let light overcome darkness, or if that was found not to be possible, at least to keep the hierarchy intact and to keep darkness at bay. Although darkness did have a function (mostly in the form of a cave), its function was always in relation to light, which had to overcome darkness (by moving out of the cave, or by infiltrating into the cave). As

such, illumination has always been the ideal, whether in a Platonic sense or a more subjective or even political sense.

Blumenberg elegantly traces the history of the light metaphor from Parmenides, through Plato's uses of light as represented in the escape from the false world of darkness of the cave, and of the sun as externally representing the idea of the good, through Cicero's natural light representing the inner moral truth, where an internalization of the light metaphor takes place. This internalization culminates in Descartes' clear and distinct vision and the natural light by which we see. The light metaphor is then reappropriated again differently in the Enlightenment where the truth is not internal light, but has to be brought out into the light that human rationality and science can objectively shine on it. Blumenberg also clearly shows how the light metaphor is simultaneously repeated, extended, and used comprehensively in similar ways in the history of Christianity. Whether external or internal, philosophical or religious, humanity must always be led toward the light, toward enlightenment. Blumenberg also gives an excellent exposition of the diversity of uses of the metaphor of light, but one nevertheless cannot escape the conclusion that by and large light stands for truth and good, and darkness for falsity and evil.

One cannot deny this history, but I want to suggest that we have taken this tendency so far that we would rather believe in the presence of something completely unknowable as the light and the source of light, than to live with darkness or the threat of absence itself. Darkness makes people afraid, it represents danger, the incomprehensible, and ignorance, and Western philosophers have bought into this way of thinking about darkness metaphorically. Thus, they find it needful to circumvent darkness, to do something with it, to change it to light. We speak of the light of reason, the light at the end of the tunnel. Light is associated with good, hence we have Plato's cave analogy, where the prisoners emerge from the darkness into the light, we have Descartes' constant referring to the "natural light" or "light of nature," we have the Enlightenment, and by parallel we have the light in religious contexts, for example in Jesus declaring: "I am the Light of the World," or as indicated by my epigram from Genesis above.

Conversely, darkness is commonly associated with danger, uncertainty, especially when seen through the lenses of popular culture and religion. Thus, we have things like dark matter, dark or black holes, which are or at least sound menacing, because things vanish in them. We have the devil portrayed as the Prince of Darkness. We are glad that we did not live in the Dark Ages. We are considered unknowing if we are in the dark about something, and we should not give in to our darkest thoughts. Culturally, on many different levels darkness is thought of as something negative.

In the tradition of Western philosophy, a similar metaphorical functioning has mostly been the case. We shed light on problems, when we understand something we say we now see it clearly, we call people bright, brilliant, we are illuminated. Light and truth are related to each other, as are darkness and falsity or untruth. When we do not understand, we are either dim, or the problem is obscure, opaque, murky, blurred, and we are left in the dark. The history of (Western) philosophy has been seen by Hegel (and others) as moving from morning (in the East) to Evening (in the West), but not into or out of the darkness of the night. The visible has been the key metaphor for philosophy as we know it in the West. I could go on. There are many more instances like this, which we will see throughout this article, but for now, we can say that the idea

of light is overwhelmingly seen as positive, whereas the idea of darkness is mostly associated with negativity.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson mention the connection of light with positive or “up” briefly (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 48). However, we also have metaphors in the other direction of up: to get to the bottom, to go in-depth, but all in all both our philosophical and more general history is filled with metaphors of light and vision. As Lakoff and Johnson mention in a later work:

The Knowing Is Seeing metaphor defines the core of a folk theory about how the mind works that is so widely shared in our intellectual tradition that it virtually defines our public understanding of intellectual operations The Knowing Is Seeing metaphor is so firmly rooted in the role of vision in human knowing and is so central to our conception of knowledge that we are seldom aware of the way it works powerfully to structure our sense of what it is to know something. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 394)

Getting to the bottom, or going in-depth, is never associated with descending into darkness, but always associated with seeing and light. We have reached the point where we have forgot that all reasoning with light, or employing the light concept, is not literal language, but metaphorical at its core. Aside from the metaphor of seeing being a universal metaphor, it is particularly influential in Western philosophy (see Harrison 2015), also due to the Platonic foundations of Western philosophy, where light/fire, the sun, and seeing are related to the pure idea of the good. Although there are different functions of light in the history of Western philosophy, it is again overwhelmingly clear that where light indicates purity, darkness indicates ambiguity and is best avoided. “Light” makes one see “clear and distinct,” as in Descartes (Descartes 1984: 24). As a consequence, darkness has received a lot of bad press. It is not my intention to claim that in Heidegger or Derrida or Daoism darkness conversely indicates clarity, but I will claim that what darkness stands for—ambiguity, unclarity, nonpresence—does not present a problem to be surmounted for Heidegger, Derrida, or the Daoists. Getting to the bottom is not the aim for them; they seek to rest in the bottomless dark abyss.

This article argues then for a rehabilitation of darkness, because it was not always the case that light was good and darkness was bad. For example, in religion, in the Old Testament God is usually shrouded in darkness, and the fact that God had to first create light but then had to separate light from the original darkness suggests a more profound unity of the two. It is only with Plato and the subsequent philosophical and religious traditions that “light” became more prominent and even dominant, but there used to be a more equal duality or interplay between the two. I want to turn now to some of those who have questioned the guiding ideas behind this dominance of the metaphors of light over those of darkness, and who have sought to challenge the apparent dichotomy and especially the hierarchy inserted into this pair of metaphors in our history.

3 The Western Challenge

The fact that light has always been the dominant metaphor did not mean that darkness was totally neglected in the West. There have been numerous thinkers in the Western

tradition who have had a more positive approach to darkness, mainly in the continental tradition (this is partly why Heidegger and Derrida are chosen). Darkness has been a feature in the Western tradition, but mostly as an approach within or similar to that of negative theology, where darkness is always to point to “something” that cannot be pointed to. My claim is that such an instrumental use of darkness for metaphysical purposes does not take darkness itself seriously.

Other Western thinkers have played with the notion of darkness, such as Schelling, who suggested that in ourselves we have an unconscious, dark principle and a conscious principle, both of which constitute us, and that birth is from darkness into light (Lindsay 1910). Although Schelling does use the metaphor of darkness positively, he is more interested in the conscious-unconscious distinction for which he makes the metaphor work. As such his work has been the metaphysical foundation for a number of psychologists. Yet interesting as this approach may be, their aim is ultimately to see darkness as instrumental and restricted to the realm of the spirit, and their darkness is really the unconscious, whereas my aim is to look at darkness itself more purely philosophically. Schelling is also a philosopher of idealism and religion, and my aim in this article is to seek for usages of the darkness metaphor, which challenge the metaphysics of such movements. So although Schelling did challenge the standard interpretations of his time, his work remains largely within the metaphysical tradition.

Kierkegaard has also employed the darkness metaphor, most famously in the following quote:

The believer humanly comprehends how heavy the suffering is, but in faith's wonder that it is beneficial to him, he devoutly says: It is light. Humanly he says: It is impossible, but he says it again in faith's wonder that what he humanly cannot understand is beneficial to him. In other words, when sagacity is able to perceive the beneficialness, then faith cannot see God; but when in the dark night of suffering sagacity cannot see a handbreadth ahead of it, then faith can see God, since faith sees best in the dark. (Kierkegaard 1993: 238)

Again, interesting as this may be, in my opinion there is really no specific philosophical importance here to the use of the metaphor of darkness. In fact, this quote and other places where Kierkegaard uses darkness follow quite closely the standard interpretation of light as good and darkness as bad.

Within the continental tradition then, it is specifically Heidegger and Derrida who are chosen because although in continental philosophy the idea of darkness is more present than in other Western traditions, even in the continental tradition darkness is mostly seen only as an antidote to metaphysical presence intentions, or functioning within that metaphysical system itself. It is only with Heidegger and Derrida that this inversion of the hierarchy (which is indeed a very necessary stage) becomes not the main theme, but a stage to be overcome itself. This does not mean we are now in the process of overcoming the distinction completely, but that we are taking darkness *as itself* seriously in a nonmetaphysical way. As mentioned before, my ultimate goal is neither to invert the hierarchy by seeing darkness as more important than light, nor to claim that the distinction can somehow be totally done away with. One can see such a first stage of inverting the hierarchy play out in Nietzsche, for example, where he talks about his Dionysian approach opposing the values associated with Western philosophy,

Dionysius being the god of darkness. It seems evident that Nietzsche *does* want to invert the hierarchy. He seeks to establish an *Umwertung der Werte*, whereas my aim is to show that such an inversion is only one part of the story.

I have chosen Heidegger and Derrida because of this. They specifically relate the metaphors of darkness and light to the metaphysics of presence and absence. Both have argued, although in different ways, that the metaphysics of presence, in which the light metaphor plays such an important role, is limited in its scope and actively excludes other ways of thought. This is why I feel this topic may be of importance with regard to comparative and Chinese philosophy. I do not wish to argue that Heidegger and Derrida do not employ the light metaphor, nor that they want to revert to darkness per se, but I do wish to argue that for both of them light and dark have to go together, and light is not superior to darkness. In other words, they seek to take absence seriously as absence, and not to attempt to incorporate absence into the metaphysics of presence or to put it into the service of such metaphysics of presence. In my opinion the importance of my treatment of this topic of darkness lies in this, and can be summed up nicely by the following long quote from Derrida:

To counter this simple alternative [the mere inversion of opposites, SB], to counter the simple choice of one of the terms or one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an *economy* escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions.... If we appear to oppose one series to the other, it is because from within the classical system we wish to make apparent the noncritical privilege naively granted to the other series by a certain structuralism. Our discourse irreducibly belongs to the system of metaphysical oppositions. The break with this structure of belonging can be announced only through a *certain* organization, a certain *strategic* arrangement which, within the field of metaphysical opposition, uses the strength of the field to turn its own stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system. (Derrida 1978: 22; italics in original)

What this quote shows is on one side the desire and effort to indeed overcome the system of oppositions, while at the same time realising that such overcoming necessarily to a certain extent recognizes the necessity of such oppositions, but points out their provisionality in our ever renewed efforts to think our world.

3.1 Heidegger

Heidegger argues along these lines in the context of his idea of truth as *aletheia*, unhiddenness or unconcealment. Consider the following quote: “The λόγος, thinking, is a letting appear of what here has come to appearance from itself, of what is brought into the light from out of the darkness and its sheltering” (Heidegger 2012: 102). While it might appear that Heidegger here subscribes wholeheartedly or even Platonically to the light metaphor (coming out of the darkness of ignorance, into the light of understanding), he continues with the following: “Hereby what is dark is not dissolved in a vain brightness, but rather the dark remains what is concealed and thereby itself first comes to appearance. The light remains invariably a dark light.... Thinking dwells inceptually in the essential space of a dark light” (Heidegger 2012: 102). When we remember that

the star was Heidegger's favorite light metaphor, this appreciation of darkness begins to make sense. Heidegger sees a very close connection between darkness and light, and translates this connection or unity to truth and untruth, or in his terminology, unconcealing and concealing.

This connection or unity should not be understood in a standard hierarchical fashion: "Yet the decisive question must search for the originary unity of disclosure and concealment" (Heidegger 2012: 130). Such a search for unity fits within Heidegger's greater task of abandoning the dominance of the metaphysics of presence, guided as the latter is by dualism and a clear preference for the "light" side of the pair. Whereas metaphysics is uncomfortable with darkness, Heidegger wants us to regain that comfort, by expressly arguing for letting darkness be itself as the (non-)source of Being. Darkness for Heidegger is not something that needs to be lifted, or something we should escape, as becomes evident in the following quote: "The guiding word in the statement of Parmenides, *to auto*, the same, remains dark. We leave it dark" (Heidegger 2012: 112; italics in original).

Translating his ideas on darkness to truth or *aletheia*, Heidegger intends to argue that darkness is a necessary part of truth as unconcealing. Unconcealing *needs* concealment first:

If the "true" for the Greeks means the unhidden, that which is free from hiddenness, then the experience of the true as unhidden must also involve experience of the *hidden* in its hiddenness.... The fundamental experience of hiddenness is obviously the ground from which the *seeking after* unhiddenness arises. (Heidegger 2002a: 10; italics in original)

However, it is important to note that this ground of hiddenness is really literally nothing, and this nothing is conveyed (in one way) through the metaphor of darkness and concealment. "*A-letheia*, the unconcealment of what presences as such, however, essences only when and only for as long as concealment, *Lethe*, takes place" (Heidegger 2012: 47; italics in original). We should not dismiss this as merely Heideggerian jargon, because even in our everyday understanding of truth, Heidegger's unveiling or unconcealing surfaces when we talk in terms of uncovering the truth, or digging it up, which means that in the end it is the truth *itself* which is found under cover.

Elsewhere Heidegger says that it is only the dark that makes us able to see things in the first place. Pure light would mean we do not actually see anything, we would literally be "blinded by the light," but darkness gives us things to see: "The dark fails to make visible because it can also secure sight: in the darkness we see the stars" (Heidegger 2002a: 46). This means that in a way darkness is the source of light, as untruth or concealment is the source of truth or unconcealment, but what is important about such a source is that it is not conceived as a metaphysical or transcendental ground. In Heidegger's words:

The worlding of world is neither explicable by nor grounded upon anything other than itself. This impossibility is not a matter of our human thinking being incapable of such explaining and grounding. The inexplicability and ungroundability of the worlding of the world lies much more in the fact that

things like causes and grounds remain unsuitable for the worlding of the world.
(Heidegger 2012: 18)

The idea of darkness itself as constituting a unity with light and being on the same level prohibits such a hierarchical metaphysical reading of this “ground.”

So how does Heidegger perceive the position of darkness versus light? Here is a longer quote that may shed some light (or more darkness) on the problem:

Let us calmly admit it: the provenance of the basic principles of thinking, the place of the thinking that posits these propositions, the essence of the place named here and of its location, all of this remains veiled in the dark for us. This darkness is perhaps in play for all thinking at all times. Humans cannot set it aside. Rather they must learn to acknowledge the dark as something unavoidable and to keep at bay those prejudices that would destroy the lofty reign of the dark. Thus the dark remains distinct from the pitch-black as the mere and utter absence of light. The dark however is the secret of the light. The dark keeps the light to itself. The latter belongs to the former. (Heidegger 2012: 88)

We may add to this that darkness also belongs to light. Heidegger’s grand plan is not just to reverse the hierarchy, as that gesture, as we have seen, although it constitutes a necessary first stage, would remain parasitic on the very metaphysics it seeks to overcome. Instead, the strategy of reversal is in the end subservient to the aim of undoing the hierarchy and to come to a more complementary understanding of the dichotomy, and through this to attempt to undo the strict dichotomy itself, if this is what we understand by overcoming or undoing.

Heidegger also wrote a lot on, and was influenced by, Heraclitus, notoriously known as “the dark one.” In the standard narrative, in line with the dominant negative understanding of darkness, Heraclitus’ “darkness” is usually considered a dismissal of his thinking, or an admission that he is incomprehensible, but Heidegger refutes such facile readings of Heraclitus’ darkness summarily. Instead, Heidegger says:

Because that-which-is-to-be-thought is essentially the self-concealing and thus in that sense “dark,” therefore and only therefore is the essential thought that stays fitting to the thus experienced “darkness,” itself necessarily dark. Seen this way “darkness” now means: an essentially necessary way of self-concealing. The thinker Heraclitus is the dark one because his thoughts uphold the essence that belongs to that-which-is-to-be-thought. (Heidegger 1994: 32; my translation)

Heraclitus is dark not because he is incomprehensible, but because *das Zu-denkende*, that-which-is-to-be-thought, is essentially a darkness, a concealing that is inseparable from the light of unconcealing. Again, what we can read here does not really amount to a reversal of the hierarchy, but is a careful exposition of how light and dark are really part of the same configuration, so that metaphors employing these terms should be read as not being in opposition, but complementary. “Darkness and Light belong together, and not only in the way that wherever there is darkness, there must always be light and vice versa. Rather, darkness *is* essentially light and light *is* essentially dark” (Heidegger 1994: 33; my translation, emphasis in original). Both these quotes go to show that for

Heidegger, in a kind of *yin-yang* fashion, darkness and light make no sense without each other, and darkness is the source of thought, the nothing of Being.

The importance of this for comparative philosophy lies in the fact that we can perceive here in the thoughts of Heidegger a challenge to our normal use and understanding of concepts such as darkness. This challenge brings us closer to other ways of thought and expands our toolbox for understanding other ways of thinking. It widens our vocabulary for dealing with other ways of thought by reinterpreting standard meanings. For our Western understanding of Chinese philosophy, such an approach has certain consequences, for we find a similar kind of thought in classical Daoism as well, and also and especially in the Neo-Daoist Guo Xiang. It does not seem a coincidence that Heidegger refers to Daoism in this passage: “The word ‘event’ [*Ereignis*] is now, as a guiding word, taken into the service of a thinking that attempts to keep in memory that dark word of Parmenides: *to auto*—the same is thinking and being. The word ‘event of appropriation’ [*Ereignis*] can be translated just as little as the Greek guiding word *logos* or the Chinese *Tao*” (Heidegger 2012: 117; italics and German in original). The connection with darkness is even clearer when Heidegger quotes Laozi 老子 again right after speaking about darkness being the place of provenance of the basic principles of thought:

It remains difficult to guard the limpidity [*das Lautere*]¹ of thinking, i.e., to keep at bay the admixture of the brightness that does not belong and to find the brightness that is alone fitting to the dark. Lao Tzu [Laozi] says, “Whoever knows its brightness, cloaks himself in its darkness.” We add to this the truth that everyone knows, but few realize: Mortal thinking must let itself down into the dark depths of the well if it is to see the stars by day. It remains more difficult to guard the limpidity of the dark than to procure a brightness that only wants to shine as such. What only wants to shine, does not illuminate. (Heidegger 2012: 88–89)

The “dark depths of the well” that Heidegger refers to are explained later on in the same work, as denoting exactly the absence of ground, the abyss, *Ab-grund*, nothing: “Grounding-principles now mean leaps into the abyss, and indeed leaps of thinking precisely into the abyss of thinking. Thinking leaps away from ground” (Heidegger 2012: 149–150). The metaphysics of presence has always taught us to want to get to the bottom of things to see clearly, to bring things to light, but Heidegger wants us to jump into a dark abyss that has no bottom. Being always draws back, as he says in *Off the Beaten Track*: “The unconcealment of the being [*das Seiende*], the brightness granted it, darkens the light of Being. By revealing itself in the being [*das Seiende*], Being withdraws” (Heidegger 2002b: 253; translation slightly modified). What Heidegger is saying amounts in my opinion to a confirmation of thought as essentially groundless, a denial of a metaphysical guiding principle, and instead a celebration of the interplay of different forces, in this case dark and light, without a background guiding principle. There is no light at the end of the tunnel The light keeps receding and being replaced by

¹ *Das Lautere* is hard to translate, but has connections to purity, cleanness, clarity, transparency. “Limpidity” has the same connotations.

darkness all the time. Wherever there is presence there is absence. However, this is not to be perceived as negative. Being is not shrouded in darkness like the God of the Old Testament, but Being just *is* not, and thus the metaphor of darkness is more appropriate than that of light.

It is clear that at the very least Heidegger sees a connection between these thoughts on darkness and what he perceives to be the Daoist equivalent. Whether Chinese philosophy in general and Daoism in particular adhere to Heidegger's ideas is a different story that we have yet to find out, but the fact remains that such an opening up toward darkness can at least spell a more accommodating and sympathetic attitude toward perceived ideas of darkness in Daoism. As such this article offers a new way of appreciating certain aspects of Daoism within a Western vocabulary by reinterpreting that very vocabulary through the challenges that Heidegger and Derrida bring to the background assumptions of the traditional Western metaphysical way of thought itself.

3.2 Derrida

In the case of Derrida there is less material to go on, but I chose him as again, similar to Heidegger, Derrida is not only a firm opponent of the metaphysical hierarchies that Heidegger also sought to undo, but within the continental tradition these two are the only ones who do not fall into the trap of either thinking the inversion of the hierarchy is the end, or thinking they can do away with the dichotomy altogether in some kind of fusion thinking. Neither Heidegger nor Derrida make those mistakes. The difference between the two is that Derrida accuses Heidegger of still looking for a meaning or truth of Being and Nothing, however he conceived of these. Derrida's *différance* does not succumb to this inclination. Instead *différance* is called

[T]he play of a trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of Being, but whose play transports and encloses the meaning of Being: the play of the trace, or the *différance*, which has no meaning and is not. Which does not belong. There is no maintaining, and no depth to, this bottomless chessboard on which Being is put into play. (Derrida 1982: 22)

Différance as trace does not point to some origin of presence, and if we can even speak of origin, it points to an origin of absence.

How does this relate to the notions of light and dark? Deconstruction is based on the premise that no matter how hard we try to bring things to presence, into the light, there is always something left behind in the dark. The promise of light, which is presence, is always deferred. Derrida, however, conceives of this absence as constitutive for the idea of presence. The moment of darkness, of indecision, is exactly the moment where the conditions for decision, for presence, are laid. As Derrida says:

Our unbelievable *perhaps* does not signify haziness and mobility, the confusion preceding knowledge or renouncing all truth. If it is undecidable and without truth in its own moment (but it is, as a matter of fact, difficult to assign a proper

moment to it), this is in order that it might be a condition of decision, interruption, revolution, responsibility and truth. (Derrida 2005: 43; italics in original)

So, similar to Heidegger, Derrida thinks that darkness or absence does not stand for the opposite of truth. Darkness or absence is the (absent) condition of truth. In the words of Ian Almond, in a comparative study of Derrida and Ibn Arabi: “What distinguishes deconstructive demystification from all other Enlightenment versions of mystery-murder is precisely this calling into question of the desire to explicate. For deconstruction, to ‘explain’ is simply to produce another set of signs to describe the first” (Almond 2004: 94). This means that the promise of light, of clarity, is always deferred:

If deconstruction *does* re-mystify the text and liberate it from certain rigid parameters of meaning, it is not by insisting upon a secret, transcendently hidden interpretation of the text, but rather by restoring an originary darkness (from *ainigma*, lit. “to darken”) to the illusion of clarity. A darkness that no amount of *lumiere* or *Aufklärung* can ever completely dispel. A darkness in which nothing is hidden. (Almond 2004: 95; italics in original)

In the end, it is not about balancing Darkness and Light, but about finding a system that will not see these as different, but as mutually entailing and part of the same arrangement. There is no light without dark. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida puts it in the following way: “To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words ‘proximity,’ ‘immediacy,’ ‘presence’ ... is my final intention in this book” (Derrida 1976: 70). Obviously the original meaning or etymology of *ainigma* as “obscure saying,” with its connotations of darkness and ambiguity, is not lost on Derrida.

However, Derrida does not really employ the metaphors of light and darkness that much. He prefers the metaphors of presence and absence, yet they point to a similar thinking. He does say that the “metaphor of darkness and light (of self-revelation and self-concealment) [is] the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics” (Derrida 1978: 31). Pointing out such foundational metaphors has the function of starting the process of deconstruction:

In this way we question the authority of presence or its simple symmetrical contrary, absence or lack. We thus interrogate the limit that has always constrained us, that always constrains us—we who inhabit a language and a system of being in general as presence or absence, in the categories of being or beingness (*ousia*). (Derrida 1973: 139; italics in original)

Derrida connects the light metaphor and its dominance in Western philosophy with the Subject-Object distinction so characteristic of the metaphysics of presence. Light creates distance; it allows the subject to experience itself as opposed to other things. Although Derrida does not really mention this, we can venture a speculation that the opposite of light, darkness, would then signal a denial or rethinking of the Subject-Object distinction, and intuitively this makes sense. In darkness, one’s experience is one of much closer connections, and much more of “being-in” instead of “being-opposed-to.” Again, this does not mean that we should now focus purely on darkness

instead of on light. First of all, this is impossible. Derrida establishes that there really is no thought possible without the light metaphor and its background. We simply cannot think or speak outside of categories like day-night, inside-outside: “In vain would one burn or imprison the letters of light, for language in its entirety already has awakened as a fall into light” (Derrida 1978: 141).

In a work on Levinas, Derrida connects light, which as a metaphor permeates the whole of Western thought, to the power and violence of metaphysics as an oppressive way of thinking that seeks to exert power over all that is other (Derrida 1978: 104–114). As such light is the metaphysical metaphor par excellence, combining both the Subject-Object distinction and the power or force emanating from it:

Light is only one example of these “several” fundamental “metaphors,” but what an example! Who will ever dominate it, who will ever pronounce its meaning without first being pronounced by it? What language will ever escape it? ... Light perhaps has no opposite; if it does, it is certainly not night. (Derrida 1978: 114)

Thus, “the infinitely other is the invisible” (Derrida 1978: 115). What is “other,” in ways both similar and at the same time very dissimilar to Heidegger, is what escapes this “searchlight” of metaphysics, escapes the metaphysical way of thought, but also what at the same time gives meaning to metaphysical thought. Similar to Heidegger, it is not that darkness is inverted in the hierarchy, but that darkness—in Derrida in the form of the “other” and “absence”—is thought to point to the unity of both, a unity that has remained largely unthought or marginalized within the Western philosophical tradition. This is exactly because that tradition has been so heavily influenced by the metaphysics of presence. This metaphysics of presence is unable to think its other, not just because its vocabulary and language is unequal to the task, but because it has always been one-sided in an important way, in that it has always thought on the level of beings and their superiority or inferiority, with God being the supreme being. The result of this is that the metaphysics of presence has sought to appropriate that which is other, that which is dark or inexplicable, into its categories. Trying to unthink that hierarchy is what Heidegger and Derrida are about, as well as trying to rethink otherness and difference in a nonmetaphysical way: “‘Other’ is the meaning of this unthinkable unity of light and night. What ‘other’ means is phenomenality as disappearance” (Derrida 1978: 161). There is always some unthinkable and unspeakable and invisible darkness, but in the metaphysical tradition this darkness or absence—whether it is called God, Transcendence, or whatever—is what determines or is originary or is perceived as ground. Contrary to this, Heidegger and Derrida argue that this darkness is really nothing, abyss (*Abgrund*). Not to be reduced to any-thing, they seek not to fit it into the thinking of presence; it is nothing, absence. This is perhaps the experience that Derrida is referring to in the following passage, about a non-Jew who would look inside the holiest place of Judaism:

Nothing behind the curtains. Hence the ingenuous surprise of the non-Jew when he opens, when he is allowed to open or when he violates the tabernacle, when he enters the dwelling or the temple and after so many ritual detours to reach the secret center, he discovers nothing-only nothingness. No center, no heart, an empty space, nothing. You undo the bands, move the cloths, pull back the veils,

part the curtains: nothing but a black hole or a deep gaze, colorless, formless, and lifeless. (Derrida 1986: 49)

Where the believer (and it makes little difference here if the believer believes in a religion or in a metaphysical guiding principle) would see something in this darkness, the postmetaphysical thinker would see exactly nothing, darkness, and would translate this darkness into the provisionality of all thought. In my opinion, it is this idea which is fundamental to understanding Derrida: he argues for the provisionality of understanding, the constant deconstruction of fixed identities, the inadequacy of language, and the impossibility of assigning any lasting univocal meaning to “writing” or the “context” of our experience, because the play of *différance* and the notion of trace constantly challenge such univocality. Derrida is not talking in terms of transcendence and immanence: the play of *différance*/trace is wholly immanent, and there is no outside. Derrida thus opposes what one may call “the illusion of illumination,” although different metaphors and concepts are used.

It may be objected here that my interpretation leaves ample room for reading it as a form of negative theology, and it is indeed the case that both Heidegger and Derrida have been “accused” of propounding such a negative theology. Both have, however, denied this “accusation” on numerous occasions. The darkness, or inaccessibility, or “other,” need not refer to a deity or principle. It may just refer to the absence (or rather nonpresence) of such things. In the words of Derrida, speaking of Levinas, the absolutely other

[M]ust present himself as absence, and must appear as nonphenomenal. Always behind its signs and its works, always within its secret interior, and forever discreet, the face is not “of this world.” It is the origin of the world. I can speak of it only by speaking to it; and I *may* reach it only as I *must* reach it. But I must only *reach* it as the inaccessible, the invisible, the intangible. (Derrida 1978: 128–129; italics in original)

One can see here how an interpretation in the direction of negative theology is possible, but in my interpretation this is not at all necessary. Absolute alterity is not light, it is inaccessible, incomprehensible (nobody knows where it comes from, it is enough that it is there, as Zhuangzi would have it), and *may be* nothing rather than an absent and hiding principle or god. An absence *that does not point to anything* is in my interpretation, and especially in the light of Heidegger’s and Derrida’s denials, a more viable understanding.

Here we may also think of Derrida’s writings on the “trace” and “tracing,” mentioned briefly earlier. In the quote earlier in this article Derrida makes it quite clear that “trace” is not to be understood as pointing to something absent but present in a different way, but just trace, there is nothing it is the trace of. In other words, the trace never leads back to an origin. As such, simply put, light stands for (the promise of) presence, darkness stands for absence. Derrida, and Heidegger, seek to establish a thinking of absence as such, or at least the (im-)possibility of thinking absence. Absence is no longer the absence of something, like the absence of God or of first principles, but absence *as itself*

taken seriously. The trace is no longer a trace of anything. It refers to an ever present absence—if I may be allowed to speak in such apparently contradictory terms. Importantly for comparative philosophy, this way of thought returns in the issue of translation. It has become a sort of platitude to say that in translation there is always something left behind, something not clear. The promise of clarity and presence of the original text is always inevitably broken, pointing to the larger impossibility of the original text or any language *ever* leading to such an ideal clarity. Let us now see if such a thinking is present in classical Daoism as well.

4 Light and Darkness in Daoism

Of course there are also many non-Western traditions of light, and in many ways the same metaphor is used in Asian ways of thought, be they Hindu, Buddhist, Japanese, or Chinese. There is no doubt similarities to the preference for light in the Western philosophical traditions can be found in these Asian traditions. As pointed out by Lakoff and Johnson (1999), the “knowing is seeing” metaphor seems to be a universal given. For example, as mentioned, Victoria Harrison has elaborated that the light or knowing-is-seeing metaphor is also highly important in the Indian philosophical tradition (Harrison 2015). However, the particular dominance of this metaphor of light in Western thought may be rather specific to the metaphysics of presence which developed in the West.

Of course there are also instances in Chinese philosophy in general and Daoism in particular where darkness is considered something negative. For example, in Chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* we find the character *an* 闇, meaning darkness or muddledness, in the following exchange about arguing over alternatives: “If you and I are unable to know where we stand, others will surely be in the dark (*an* 闇) because of us” (*Zhuangzi*; Graham 2001: 60). So there is also the standard use of different characters denoting darkness in Daoism. However, I will argue that the metaphor of darkness, when used in philosophically important instances, depicts the goal of philosophical effort, and is more important than light in Daoism, both in the two classical Daoist texts the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, but also in the work of the neo-Daoist Guo Xiang. I claim that this rather well-known focus of Daoism on darkness points to a thinking of absence not unlike that of Heidegger and Derrida.

4.1 Darkness in the *Daodejing*

Starting with the *Daodejing*, there are a number of chapters where darkness plays a philosophically important role, obviously starting with the first one:

These two—the nameless and what is named—emerge from the same source yet are referred to differently. Together they are called obscure [*xuan* 玄]. The obscurest of the obscure, they are the swinging gateway of the manifold mysteries. (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 77)

In this chapter, darkness (*xuan* 玄), as the obscurest of the obscure, is seen as mysterious; but in my reading this mysteriousness does not relate back to a metaphysical principle. The idea conveyed seems to be that this should be left as mysterious. I have argued elsewhere that there is never any mention of what might be behind the gateway (*men* 門), and this darkness is exactly “reflective” of the attitude of not questioning after what is not there (Burik 2010). Things stop in darkness, but the fact that the chapter ends there seems to indicate that the Daoists have no problem with that; they are happy to acknowledge this and get on with life. In other words, there seems, and I think this can be read throughout the Chinese classics, very little preoccupation with lifting the darkness, with finding that metaphysical principle and explaining it. In true *yin yang* fashion, darkness is acknowledged as that where light comes from, and vice versa.

In Chapter 5 of the *Daodejing*, the dark (*xuan*) female is considered the root of productivity, and in Chapters 10, 51, and 65, there is mention of *xuan de* 玄德, dark efficacy. All these are positive uses of darkness, where darkness stands metaphorically for productive, profound, deep.

Aside from this use of darkness as profoundness in the *Daodejing*, darkness is connected to the Daoist sages in another way. Daoist sages seem to have a preference for obscurity, obfuscation, and muddledness, although obviously different characters are involved in different cases. In Chapter 15, for example, the sages of the old days are said to be “subtle and mysterious, dark and penetrating” (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 97). In the same chapter they are referred to as “murky,” “vast and vacant,” and it is said of them that they “do not seek fullness; it is only because they do not want to be full that they are able to remain hidden and unfinished” (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 98). These characteristics of the sages are corroborated in Chapter 20: “The common lot see things so clearly, while I alone seem to be in the dark. The common lot are so discriminating, while I alone am so obtuse” (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 106).

The sages’ preference for darkness, obscurity, and unfinishedness is combined in Daoism in general with a dislike of clarity, since clarity is understood to be the pretended end result of deeming and discrimination, both of which are discredited throughout the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. Sages do not go in for such deeming, they do not fall into the trap of the illusion of clarity and presence. Hence they are referred to by metaphors of darkness, obfuscation, and provisionality or unfinishedness.

The same way of thinking is even applied to *dao* 道 itself. As is obvious from the first chapter, *dao* defies description, and in Chapter 21, for example, *dao* is portrayed as “indefinite and vague..., nebulous and dark” (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 107). However, it is exactly this darkness, vagueness, that is seen as being the source or root of all images and events. Also, in Chapter 41 it is said the *Established Sayings* have it that “Radiant Way-making seems obscured” (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 140).

In short, although I do not want to argue that the *Daodejing* has no use for light, it does seem on multiple levels to display a preference for darkness. In my opinion, as aligned with my reading of Heidegger and Derrida, this does not necessitate a metaphysical reading whereby this darkness stands for the unknowable first principle. The sages are quite content to function at the level of uncertainty and without seeking shelter in a firm ground. Let us take Chapter 21 again:

As for the process of way-making,
 It is ever so indefinite and vague.
 Though vague and indefinite,
 There are images within it.
 Though indefinite and vague,
 There are events within it. (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 107)

A metaphysical reading would interpret this passage as suggesting that behind the appearances, which are sculpted from the vague and indeterminate, there is a reality that is eventually easier to understand, a Platonic world of ideas and principles. On my reading, I take this passage to mean a very similar thing as what Derrida suggests that within the system, only differences function and thus only traces with otherness are to be found. The system itself is nothing else than this play of differences, but within that system of course there are references. These references or traces, however, never get back to an origin, or attain the fullness that is suggested by the metaphysical tradition. In my reading, darkness and indefiniteness refer exactly to the absence of such a metaphysical principle or fullness. There literally is nothing there. The Daoist sages seem to have naturally heeded the message that in the West only really began to surface with Nietzsche's death of God. This message is well worded by Van Fraassen: "Our language, our world, our self are the domain of radical incompleteness, vagueness, darkness. So be it; it will be no solution to deny it" (Van Fraassen 1986: 221). The Daoist, as opposed to your classical Western philosopher, is at ease with this darkness, and celebrates it as it is, without feeling the urge to overcome it.

To elaborate what I mean we could look at Chapter 62 of the *Daodejing*, which says that "Way-making (*dao*) is the flowing together of all things (*wanwu* [萬物])" (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 173, *pinyin* in original). This passage implies a process thinking which is comparable with Derrida's trace thinking, since there is nothing behind the flowing together of things, meaning first of all that there is no guiding principle behind it, and second that all things flow together in the sense that they have traces in each other. Although there is no mention of darkness in this chapter, it does indicate an absence of pure identities or transcendental principles. Darkness is just one metaphor the Daoist uses to indicate this absence.

Other chapters of the *Daodejing* can be read in the same way. Chapters 4, 6, and 14 all talk about *dao* as ever evading, as only seemingly there, which means there is no getting beyond the hinting traces. In Chapter 14 we are told that when looking for *dao* there is nothing to see. A similar thing is repeated in Chapter 35: "Look for it and there is nothing to see" (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 132). There is literally nothing behind the scenes. Absence is taken as absence, and not reinvented into some kind of hidden presence. The sage reflects this, and is therefore without fixed heart/mind, as seen for example in Chapter 49 of the *Daodejing*.

As is well known, the metaphysical hierarchy has also been introduced in interpretations of *you* 有 and *wu* 無 as "Being" and "Nothing" respectively. A. C. Graham was one of the first to notice that these translations are distortions of the classical Chinese characters and language, in which *you* and *wu* respectively denote more a presence, having and nonpresence, not-having of things (e.g., Graham 1986: 322–360; 1989: 406–414). The relation between Being and Nothing in the West is different from that of *you* and *wu* in Daoism. While this is a well-known fact, I believe that clarifying it

through the lens of darkness and light, absence and presence, will help us better understand these categories and provide a clearer vocabulary for such understanding. When the *Daodejing* in Chapter 40 says something to the extent that “being comes from nonbeing,” this can be read as meaning that something was nonexistent before it became existent, and in due time it will return to its state of nonexistence again. All things, then, when present, come from and return to being not-present. It is not necessary to read in this *wu* a metaphysical principle, especially not when read in conjunction with Chapter 2 of the *Daodejing*, which has the following line: “Determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) give rise to each other” (*Daodejing*; Ames and Hall 2003: 80, *pinyin* in original). When read in this way, we can see that the darkness referred to in the numerous chapters of the *Daodejing* is that limit where thinking in terms of presence is no longer useful or accurate.

4.2 Darkness in the *Zhuangzi*

The difference between the obsession with light in the Western tradition versus the more harmonious approach to light and dark in Daoism is nicely summed up in this quote from the *Zhuangzi* “Autumn Floods (Qiushui 秋水)” chapter:

Now do you say that you are going to make Right your master and do away with Wrong, or make Order your master and do away with Disorder? If you do, then you have not understood the principle of heaven and earth or the nature of the ten thousand things. This is like saying that you are going to make Heaven your master and do away with Earth, or make Yin [陰] your master and do away with Yang [陽]. Obviously it is impossible. (*Zhuangzi*; Watson 2003: 103)

Order and disorder, right and wrong, and light and dark; all belong together. This is opposed to the Western obsession with one side of these pairs to the exclusion, denial, or oppression of the other one. The relentless search for a metaphysical outside was not so interesting to the Daoist: “What is outside of the cosmos the sage locates as there but does not sort out” (*Zhuangzi*; Graham 2001: 57). The notion of darkness in *Zhuangzi* then has very much to do with his insistence that we go in the wrong direction when we start to analyse and “sort out,” when we think we deem or see things clearly. Such an illusion of clarity should be overcome: “We can use words to talk about the coarseness of things and we can use our minds to visualize the fineness of things. But what words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing—this has nothing to do with coarseness or fineness” (*Zhuangzi*; Watson 2003: 100–101). The knowing-is-seeing metaphor is obviously challenged by *Zhuangzi*.

In the *Zhuangzi*, two arguments in Chapter 2 point to a similar way of thought. When everything has a “this” and a “that,” full identities are denied and the way is opened for seeing things as traces in traces. As *Zhuangzi* says:

There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. Suddenly there is being and

nonbeing. But between this being and nonbeing, I don't really know which is being and which is nonbeing. (*Zhuangzi*; Watson 2003: 38)

I take this to refer to the fact that “otherness” is always inserted. *Yin* is always *yin* becoming *yang*, and vice versa. Although *yin* is dark and *yang* is bright, there is always an interplay between the two; they are equals amongst each other. There is always a regression, which means we cannot see things otherwise than as infinite traces only identifiable within or by an ever expanding context. Being and nonbeing, light and dark, presence and absence, then become categories which are no longer strictly separable, and definitely not to be understood hierarchically. Searching for an endpoint that would give us our beloved metaphysical creator or first cause is really searching in vain. Graham has described this thought in a compelling way: “Perhaps *Lao-tzu*'s Way is how the Trace will look to us when we are no longer haunted by the ghost of that transcendent Reality the death of which Derrida proclaims” (Graham 1989: 228; italics in original). Or in the words of *Zhuangzi*, “All the ten thousand things are what they are, and thus they enfold each other” (*Zhuangzi*; Watson 2003: 42). There is nothing more than this interplay of the *wanwu*.

One may object that *Zhuangzi* does talk about “illumination” or “clarity” (*ming* 明) at three crucial points in Chapter 2. This use of the notion of illumination at first glance suggests a clear preference similar to the Western use of “light.” However, we have to look beyond the surface use of this word to understand what *Zhuangzi* means by “illumination” or “clarity.” Using “clarity” in the *Zhuangzi* is being guided by the torch of chaos and doubt. He explains that illumination is the opposite of the deeming attitude of the masses. In other words, the *shi* 是 (right, this, true, approve) and *fei* 非 (wrong, not-this, false, disapprove) of the disputes between the Moists and the Confucians are one-sided in that both parties believe they know the “real truth” or “real way,” and fail to see that at this level providing “clarity” is illusory. If *Zhuangzi* does indeed speak of illumination, it is a kind of illumination that has nothing to do with the idea of light. In the same passages where *Zhuangzi* talks about *ming*, he also mentions that “the lighting up [*zhang* 彰] of ‘That’s it, that’s not’ is the reason why the Way is flawed” (*Zhuangzi*; Graham 2001: 54). In the same chapter a bit further *Zhuangzi* states that “when the Way is lit [*zhao* 昭] it does not guide” (*Zhuangzi*; Graham 2001: 57). Speaking of three people who excelled in a certain thing, there is the following passage:

Zhao Wen [昭文] played the lute; Music Master Kuang [曠] waved his baton; Huizi [惠子] leaned on his desk. The knowledge of these three was close to perfection. All were masters, and therefore their names have been handed down to later ages. Only in their likes they were different from him [the true sage]. What they liked, they tried to make clear [*ming* 明]. What he is not clear about, they tried to make clear, and so they ended in the foolishness of “hard” and “white.” (*Zhuangzi*; Watson 2003: 37)

In this last case, the same character *ming* 明 is used, and in the other cases (*zhang*, *zhao*) characters that also mean clear, luminous, brilliant. It is by no means the

case that *ming* is seen purely as a good thing. In fact, from the last quote it should be evident that the three men mentioned failed to reach sagehood exactly because they were trying to use *ming* (clarity). It is exactly because they sought the illusionary “perfection” that comes with illumination that they went wrong or too far. Instead, a Daoist should heed the multiple warnings that one should know when to stop and not rely on knowledge (and language). “Hence to know how to stay within the sphere of our ignorance is to attain the highest” (*Zhuangzi*; Graham 2001: 57). Such “immanent” knowing which arises instead of the illusionary illumination is called “the shaded light” (*bao guang* 葆光). This shaded light is comparable to Heidegger’s “clearing” and the “darkening of the light” mentioned earlier, and similarly, it should be noticed that hardly any attempt is ever made to “clarify” or “illuminate” the darkness; in fact, it is important for the Daoist *not* to seek such clarification. Hence *Zhuangzi* at the end of the Inner Chapters can speak highly of Hundun 混沌 who is without the means to see light, lives in total darkness, yet is brought on stage as an exemplar. Once given the means to “clarification,” Hundun dies. In other words, once Hundun has the option to start making *shifei* 是非 distinctions, his spontaneity is lost. Other passages in the Outer Chapters equally seem to indicate that darkness is at the source of things and in constant interplay with light. In Chapter 21 Confucius is told by Lao Dan 老聃 that the harmonious interplay between *yin* and *yang* forces, including dark and light, is really all there is (*Zhuangzi*; Graham 2001: 130). In Chapter 22 it is said that “the bright is born from the dark” (*Zhuangzi*; Graham 2001: 132), followed by an explanation that there is really nothing behind this process. Again, darkness is where it all begins, but the interplay between dark and light is where it ends. There should be no attempt to focus on clarity too much, as is the case with the deeming attitude of those who *Zhuangzi* criticizes. *Zhuangzi* himself is adept in avoiding such trappings, as seen from this passage from the “Autumn Floods” chapter:

Zhuangzi, now—at this very moment he is treading the Yellow Springs [underworld] or leaping up to the vast blue. To him there is no north or south—in utter freedom he dissolves himself in the four directions and drowns himself in the unfathomable. To him there is no east or west—he begins in the Dark Obscurity [*xuanming* 玄冥] and returns to the Great Thoroughfare. (*Zhuangzi*; Watson 2003: 109–110)

This *xuanming* brings me to GUO Xiang.

4.3 Darkness in GUO Xiang

The Neo-Daoist movement, of which some of the most prominent members were WANG Bi 王弼 and GUO Xiang, is also called *xuanxue* 玄學 or dark learning. Not for nothing. Both thinkers put emphasis on darkness. WANG Bi is usually understood as interpreting this darkness as a metaphysical substance of “nonbeing.” In WANG Bi’s words: “The term *xuan* [dark, mysterious] means dark [*ming* 冥]; that is, silent Non-Being. This is that from which both the Beginning and the Mother emerge” (in Ziporyn 2003: 35). But in GUO Xiang, who, as is well known, is profoundly opposed to a

metaphysical reading of Zhuangzi, darkness does not point to a transcendent substance or metaphysical principle. Guo's darkness is different in that it does not point to anything, nothing is there leaving traces, there is no "Nothing." It is my opinion that the metaphor of darkness in Guo denotes absence, and not some kind of presence as when nonbeing is taken to mean something still somehow "there." Things are just *ziran* 自然, and do not need anything behind or beyond them. If this is so, then the "traces" that are left are really not traces of something, but in a Derridean fashion, for GUO Xiang traces are all there is, and this is referred to as "darkness" (see also Ziporyn 2003: 18–19).

The darkness character *ming* 冥 is not only prominent in GUO Xiang himself, Zhuangzi also uses it frequently. As Brook Ziporyn in his study of GUO Xiang, *The Penumbra Unbound*, mentions: "The term *ming* is also used quite a number of times in the *Zhuangzi*; ... it is usually (though not always) used to describe the indescribability of the Tao, as in the *Laozi*, and hence has a positive connotation" (Ziporyn 2003: 35, italics in original). In GUO Xiang, however, it gets even more attention. Ziporyn speaks of this darkness as "'dark joining' or 'vanishing into things'" (Ziporyn 2003: 19), and this points to the darkness of the self-so. Guo's idea is that the reason why Zhuangzi recognizes that the sources of human knowledge are unknowable is that the "sources" are really nothing. They form a boundless abyss that is hinted at through metaphors of darkness, mainly *ming* 冥 and *xuan* 玄, but also for example *ming* with the water radical 溟 understood as "boundless," "vast," also "dark" or "ocean," which is equally suggestive of the Daoist attitude of not making distinctions. *Dao* then is really not so much associated with light, but with darkness. But especially in GUO Xiang, this darkness is not associated with some metaphysical substance. Here is a longer quote from Ziporyn that corroborates a nonmetaphysical understanding of darkness and thus of *dao*:

For Guo this darkness is not the metaphysical Non-Being of WANG Bi, but rather a word for the unknowability of how things create themselves; it is because of this unknowability that former metaphysicians have mistakenly applied the term Non-Being as if it were a substance that could have some kind of causal efficacy, which could do something or make something happen. Hence Guo says: "The dark obscurity (*xuanming*) is the reason it is called Non-Being, but it is not an actual Non-Being." (Ziporyn 2003: 35–36)

Guo also says: "This shows that there is no thing that makes things as they are, but rather that things spontaneously become what they are. Because they spontaneously become what they are, [the process] is [called a] darkness" (in Ziporyn 2003: 65). GUO Xiang's denial of a metaphysical absolute takes the dark learning seriously as "dark." Dark joining (*ming*) becomes merging with things, "a vanishing of the encounter into the encountered" (Ziporyn 2003: 19), which can be read as a move from the enlightenment of the person who ascends out of this world, to the absorption of the person into the events of this world. We know that black absorbs all, and darkness therefore emphasizes a situational, contextual approach omnipresent in Daoism, whereas white (connected to light) reflects all and can thus easily be seen, as Derrida did, as indicative of and conducive to the Subject-Object distinction characteristic of Western metaphysics. The return to "non-Being" in GUO Xiang then is not a return to a metaphysical

principle, but a return to the unknown in its most literal sense. Guo consequently also connects the idea of illumination to the discriminating attitude of *shifei* (this and that): “If one illuminates (*ming* 明) ‘this’ in terms of ‘that,’ both ‘this’ and ‘that’ will lose [their true self-rightness]” (in Ziporyn 2003: 67; *pinyin* in original). Ziporyn’s comment to this is “enlightening” in terms of how illumination is connected to the Subject-Object distinction: “When two things relate to each other by means of cognitive illumination, the opposite of vanishing into each other, they are distorted by their mutual relativity; their qualities are merely reflections of their comparisons to one another and to the observing subject” (Ziporyn 2003: 67).

What then should be the correct way of relating (to) things, if it is not the way of illumination and distinction making? Here GUO Xiang obviously returns to the idea of “free and easy wandering” from the *Zhuangzi*. Speaking of the idea of traces again, Guo says that the legendary emperor Yao 堯

[L]et his mind wander in the realm of absolute darkness [*ming*] Yao is actually an [unknowable] darkness, but his traces are “Yao.” Looking at the darkness from the point of view of the traces, it is nothing strange that the inner and outer form different realms. The world only sees Yao as “Yao”; how could they perceive his dark [actuality]?” (in Ziporyn 2003: 34; *pinyin* in original)

The “real” Yao cannot be perceived, it is impossible and therefore should not be tried. Instead of focusing on the traces, and then thinking about the real thing, Guo is suggesting that there is no real thing, “Yao” is our invention, and we would be better off thinking about how to live in our world than focusing on long dead sages. To get to the “essence” of things one needs to understand that they have no essence; instead of an essence there is darkness, and it is with this darkness, this unknowability, that we should harmonize or merge, and not with the traces that we perceive. Yet the traces are all we have, because darkness comes with the strong denial of any metaphysical understanding of “Nothing” that Guo stands for: “Of all things involved in the realm of existence, even the penumbra, there has never been one that did not lone-transform in the realm of dark vanishing (*xuanming*). Thus creation is without any lord or master, and each thing creates itself” (in Ziporyn 2003: 101; *pinyin* in original). When a thing is no longer there, there may still be some traces, but these traces do not point to a metaphysical realm. At most they just point to the absence of what was present before.

In my opinion it is here that Daoism, and especially Zhuangzi and Guo Xiang, have an advantage over Heidegger and Derrida. Whereas Daoism, through the metaphor of darkness, but also in general, gives us a language of openness, metaphysics gives us a language of (supposed) closure and strict distinctions. Daoism shows us how to embrace the uncertainty as a possibility. Whereas Heidegger and Derrida mostly work to correct the metaphysical tendencies of the Western tradition, Daoism had no such need. As such, one can say that Heidegger and Derrida still stay indebted to the metaphysical tradition, and may never be able to escape it fully (of this they were actually acutely aware), still adhering to concepts as truth, signification, agency, and so on. Daoism on the other hand has little of the same concerns, and is thus able to show us more freely a way to live and navigate between *yin* and *yang* forces or extremes such as dark and light. They show us, better than Heidegger or Derrida can, how to stop relying too much on distinctions that are ultimately artificial and often obstruct a full

appreciation of the diversity and complexity of life. They show us how to merge with the process that is continually ongoing and of which we are not just observers, but full participants.

5 Concluding Remarks

Is it a coincidence that the protagonists of this article (Heidegger, Derrida, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Guo Xiang), were mostly, like Heraclitus, considered “dark”? In the West, Derrida’s writing is considered vague, dark, as is Heidegger’s. In Daoism, it is not exactly the case that Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the neo-Daoist Guo Xiang are thought to be the clearest. In terms of the obscurity of their writing, I believe that at least some of this obscurity is on purpose. Surely they could have said things in simpler and clearer ways, but to a certain extent it is true that all of these thinkers seek to convey with “dark” writing the darkness of what they are writing about.

For a long time, there has been a distinct preference among Western translators not to use the word “dark” or “darkening” as translation for either *ming* or *xuan*, so they come up with terms like “oblique,” “profound,” “deep,” and so on. I think this may be a remnant of the obsession with the light metaphor that Westerners have. We just cannot tolerate darkness; it must have some more profound meaning. In similar vein, both Heidegger and Derrida have been said to really be thinkers of a kind of negative theology, and both have denied this “accusation,” while acknowledging certain similarities. Similarly, Daoism *could* be seen as propounding a form of metaphysics, with *dao* as the ineffable metaphysical principle that nobody can get close to or really know. Wang Bi proposes such a reading. However, I hope to have shown, through this exposition of the use of the metaphors of darkness and light, that a nonmetaphysical approach is a serious possibility, especially in the case of Guo Xiang, and given the constant denial of Heidegger and Derrida that they were doing negative theology. In this sense neither light nor darkness need refer to some sort of metaphysical and transcendent entity.

More to the point I have tried to remedy the dominance of light by a rehabilitation of darkness. In this I have tried to follow Derrida, or Zhuangzi, by not replacing one set of explanations with an opposite set, but to see all such sets as incapable of explanation, and then not to worry about that incapability, but to celebrate and rest in it. Derrida uses the word “abyss” for this, as does Heidegger. Zhuangzi and Guo Xiang refer to the “dark obscurity.” The point is that where light may certainly help you see limits and demarcations, the trick is to go beyond such artificial distinctions and see through the artificiality and provisionality of such limits and distinction-making. In darkness one literally does not see limits anymore. This leads Heidegger, Derrida, and the Daoists to a sense of caution (one proceeds cautiously in the dark) and intellectual humility that is exactly aware of the limitations of thinking in terms of limits and distinctions. It also leads, in Daoism, to a position which allows us to freely roam within our world without worrying about it all too much. That is what the metaphor of darkness stands for. Where does this all lead? I

do not claim to know, I rest in the dark, but maybe that is not such a bad thing anymore....

References

- Almond, Ian. 2004. *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and 'Ibn Arabi*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ames, Roger T., and David L. Hall. 2003. *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Blumenberg, Hans. 1957/1993. "Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation." In *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, edited by David Michael Levin. London, Berkeley, and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Burik, Steven. 2010. "Thinking on the Edge: Heidegger, Derrida and the Daoist Gateway (*Men* 門)." *Philosophy East and West* 60.4: 499–516.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1973. *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays: On Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Trans. by David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- _____. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. by G. C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- _____. 1978. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1986. *Glas*. Trans. by John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- _____. 2005. *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. by George Collins. London and New York: Verso.
- Descartes. 1984. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II. Trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Graham A. C. 1986. *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*. Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies.
- _____. 1989. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle: Open Court.
- _____. 2001. *Chuang-tzŭ: The Inner Chapters*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Harrison, Victoria. 2015. "Seeing the Dao: Conceptual Metaphors and the Philosophy of Religion." *Religious Studies* 51.3: 307–322.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1994. *Heraklit*. Gesamtausgabe 55. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann.
- _____. 2002a. *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Analogy and Theaetetus*. Trans. by Ted Sadler. London and New York: Continuum.
- _____. 2002b. *Off the Beaten Track*. Ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 2012. *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*. Trans. by Andrew J. Mitchell. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1993. *Kierkegaard's Writings, XV: Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Edited and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lindsay, James. 1910. "The Philosophy of Schelling." *The Philosophical Review* 19.3: 259–275. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2177432>.
- Van Fraassen, B. C. 1986. "The World We Speak Of, and the Language We Live In." In *Philosophy and Culture: Proceedings of the XVII-th World Congress of Philosophy*. Montreal: Editions du Beffroi.
- Watson, Burton. 2003. *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ziporyn, Brook. 2003. *The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of GUO Xiang*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.