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MIDDLE VOICE AND MEDIALITY — PHILOSOPHICAL POSSIBILITIES AND LINGUISTIC CONSTRAINTS?*

Abstract: This paper explores how languages that do not conform to the active–passive verbal diatheses can offer alternatives to subject-centered modes of thought. Benveniste noted that, in the ancient Indo-European middle voice, processes occur not outside but within the subject. Due to the marginalization of the middle voice, Benveniste emphasized the need for a new grammar of action. But can we conceive a grammar that is not organized around the subject? Nietzsche critiques the belief in the centrality of the grammatical subject: Language imposes the subject–predicate structure onto reality, suggesting an acting subject, whereas in fact, there is only happening. In constructions such as *der Blitz blitzt*, a pseudo-subject is grammatically forced. Heidegger's verbal ontology — *die Welt weltet, die Sprache spricht, das Nichts nichtet, das Ereignis ereignet* — does not aim to unmask linguistic illusion but rather presents language as an event that discloses Being. If we attempt to rehabilitate the 'philosophy of the middle voice' against the binary opposition of active and passive voices, a fundamental question remains: Are we capable of distancing ourselves from this binarity at the level of language? Old Chinese, Japanese, and Korean do not clearly align with the active–passive verbal division. Byung-Chul Han describes Old Chinese as a language characterized by indifference to the active-passive distinction, as well as emptiness, absencing, and selflessness. In Korean, omitting the agent or patient evokes a sense of unfolding events. Japanese also has a verbal category *(jihatsu)* that expresses spontaneous action without an explicit subject. My thesis is that, although both the middle voice and Old Chinese, Korean, and Japanese are free from a strict active–passive opposition, in the case of the middle voice, the happening is internalized within the subject, whereas in the above-mentioned Far Eastern languages it is subjectless. In the light of Far Eastern languages, the middle voice, the problem of the subject, and the binary subject–object dichotomy, all embedded in language, appear in a new light.

Keywords: *language, middle voice, subject, subjectless, mediality*

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1. Middle Voice and Medial Mode of Thought as a Process Centering in the Subject

In modern Indo-European languages, the system of verbal voice typically distinguishes between the active and the passive voices. However, a third category, the middle voice, can be found in languages such as Classical Greek and Sanskrit. As Benveniste notes in *Problems in General Linguistics*, in the case of the middle voice, "the subject is the seat of the process, even if this process […] demands an object; the subject is the center as well as the agent of the process".[1] In ancient Indo-European languages, two diatheses existed — the active and the middle voice: "In the active, the verbs denote a process that is accomplished outside the subject. In the middle […] the verb indicates a process centering in the subject, the subject being inside the process."[2] While the active–medial structure was present in Classical Greek and Sanskrit, the middle voice no longer remained morphologically distinct in Latin. Nevertheless, many Latin verbs still exhibit medial characteristics, such as deponent and reflexive verbs. In the later historical development of Indo-European languages, the active–passive diathesis prevailed,[3] primarily due to the marginalization of the middle voice as a morphologically distinct category. The active–medial structure was gradually replaced by an active–passive paradigm.

In Hungarian, as a Uralic language, the middle voice existed as part of a tripartite division of verbal voices from the 16th to the late 19th century. After that, it disappeared from grammatical classifications; under German influence, the middle voice came to be regarded as reflexive.[4] Hungarian linguist Fejős summarizes: "The question of the middle voice remains an unresolved issue both in Hungarian linguistics and in the international literature. This fact is explained by the extremely complex nature of verbal voices."[5] Abaffy defines the middle voice as typically not demanding a subject.[6] To this, Bene adds another characteristic, namely that the middle voice lacks an agent.[7] This can also be interpreted to mean that, in the case of

1 Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971), 148.

2 Ibid.

3 Miklós Nyírő, *Medialitás, eseményontológia, gyakorlat. Hermeneutikai útkeresések* [*Mediality, Eventontology, Practice. Hermeneutic Explorations*] (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2020), 27.

4 Annamária Bene, "Medialitás jelenségek a magyar nyelvben" [Phenomena of Mediality in the Hungarian Language], *Nyelvtudományi értekezések* 160, ed. Klára Korompay (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2011), 39, https://doi.org/10.1556/9789634544401.

5 Edina Fejős, "A mediális ige kategóriája a régebbi magyar nyelvtanokban" [The Category of Middle Voice in Older Hungarian Grammars], in *LingDok.* 4. *Nyelvész-doktoranduszok dolgozatai*, ed. Balázs Sinkovics (Szeged: Szegedi Tudományegyetem Nyelvtudományi Doktori Iskola, 2005), 69.

6 Erzsébet Abaffy, "A mediális igékről" [On Middle Voice], *Magyar Nyelv* no. 74. (1978): 280–293.

7 Bene, "Medialitás jelenségek a magyar nyelvben," 43.

the middle voice, the subject and object, the agent and patient, are not sharply distinguished; rather, the individual, so to speak, affords space to the process.

The marginalization of the middle voice from modern languages is closely connected to a shift in perspective: while languages with medial structures were imbued with a processual and event-like orientation, modern philosophy's subject-centered mode of thinking ultimately suppressed what might be called a 'middle-voiced mode of thought'. Benveniste prompts a new grammar of action.[8] But how could a new grammar of action be conceived? Or, more broadly, can philosophy open possibilities for a 'medial mode of thought'?

2. THE GRAMMAR OF BEING: NIETZSCHE, HEIDEGGER, AND DERRIDA

Nietzsche is profoundly distrustful of language. He outlines a kind of grammatical limitation, and even the treacherous nature of language. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he writes: "Language, so it seems, was invented only for what is mediocre, common, communicable. In language, speakers vulgarize themselves right away."[9] Words do not capture the essence of things — and, in fact, there is no such essence. Language, far from revealing reality, actively lies about it. Truth is nothing but a "mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms".[10] As Schlechta also pointed out, in Nietzsche's conception, grammatical structures operate as a form of belief.[11] The shared grammar of belief expresses the 'shared philosophy' of that belief. Grammar thus becomes a kind of *Volks-Metaphysik*. Nietzsche writes: "In fact, where there is affinity of language, owing to the common philosophy of grammar — I mean owing to the unconscious domination and guidance of similar grammatical functions — it cannot but be that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and succession of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation."[12] According to Nietzsche, it is highly probable that philosophers in other languages, where the conception of the subject is less developed, perceive the world differently.[13] For this reason, Nietzsche articulates the necessity of relinquishing this belief: "Is it not at length permitted to be a little

8 Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 145–151.

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, trans. by Richard Polt (Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997) 66. Aphorism 26.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense," in *Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 2. ed. Oscar Levy (London / Edinburgh: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 180.

11 Karl Schlechta, "Nietzsche über den Glauben in die Grammatik," *Nietzsche–Studien* no. 1 (1972): 353–358, https://doi.org/10.1515/nietzstu-1972-010119.

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: The Modern Library, 1917), 22. Aphorism 20.

13 Ibid., 22.

ironical towards the subject, just as towards the predicate and object? Might not the philosopher elevate himself above faith in grammar?"[14]

Nietzsche formulates a critique of the faith placed in the central position of the grammatical subject as follows: "One believed in 'the soul' as one believed in grammar and the grammatical subject: one said, 'I' is the condition, 'think' is the predicate and is conditioned — to think is an activity for which one must suppose a subject as cause."[15] Nietzsche also formulates a critique of subject–predicate logic, arguing that language imposes the subject–predicate structure onto reality, suggesting the existence of an active subject, whereas there is only happening. To illustrate this phenomenon, he uses the example of 'the lightning flashes', der *Blitz blitzt*: "Reason sees actors and actions everywhere: it believes in the will as an absolute cause; it believes in the 'I', in the I as being, in the I as a substance, and projects its belief in the I-substance onto all things."[16] He treats the false subject formation in the statement 'the lightning flashes' in the following way: "Even as the people will separate the lightning from its flash and take the latter for the *doing*, the effect of a subject called lightning, so popular morality will sever strength from the manifestations of strength, as if behind the strong man there existed an indifferent substratum which *is free* to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming. 'The doer' is merely a fictitious addition to the doing; the 'doing' is all."[17]

Therefore, for Nietzsche, the logic of grammar gives rise to false ontological and metaphysical assumptions. When we say, 'the lightning flashes', the grammatical structure compels us to assume a 'thing' — the lightning — that 'does something' — flashes — whereas there is no subject behind the action. Language forces a false subject where only a happening occurs, the subject is grammatically compelled into existence. Grammar thus artificially and compulsively creates a subject, a 'doer' or actor, immediately granting ontological status to 'something' that does not exist. Thus, for Nietzsche, grammar is a form of metaphysical idolatry.

Heidegger also articulates "the task of freeing grammar from logic",[18] but — contrary to Nietzsche — in expressions such as 'the world worlds' *(die Welt weltet)*, 'language speaks' *(die Sprache spricht)*, 'time temporalizes' *(die Zeit zeitigt)*, 'nothing nothings' *(das Nichts nichtet)*, 'thing things' *(das Ding dingt)*, 'silence

[14] Ibid., 41–42. Aphorism 34.
[15] Ibid., 61. Aphorism 54.
[16] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 20. Aphorism 5.
[17] Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Genealogy of Morals. The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 10, ed. Alexander Tille (London: Macmillan & Co., 1897), 47. Aphorism 13.
[18] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 153.

silences' *(die Stille stillt)*, 'ground grounds' *(der Grund gründet)*, and the 'event events' *(das Ereignis ereignet)*, Heidegger does not expose a linguistic illusion but rather presents language as an event that reveals Being. Whereas for Nietzsche the 'lie' of grammar leads to every action being falsely attributed to a subjective agent, Heidegger understands these verbal structures as the unfolding movement of Being itself. In *Language (Die Sprache)*, Heidegger outlines the encounter with the essence of language as "our own gathering into the appropriation"[19] *(Ereignis)* — as "*Versammlung in das Ereignis*".[20]

The verb does not say something about the world; rather, the world itself happens in language. Heidegger's 'verbal ontology' reinterprets the subject–predicate structure by subordinating it to the event-like nature of Being, whereas Nietzsche uses the same linguistic syntax to expose the hidden metaphysical presuppositions embedded in grammar. For Heidegger, language speaks as a disclosive activity of Being; in the poem, happening takes place: "naming […] it calls into the word. The naming calls *[der Ruf ruft]*."[21] "The naming call bids things to come into such an arrival. Bidding is inviting. It invites things in, so that they may bear upon men as things."[22] These calls summon the coming of the world. "The world grants to things their presence. […] For world and things do not subsist alongside one another. They penetrate each other. Thus the two traverse a middle. In it, they are at one. Thus at one they are intimate. The middle of the two is intimacy […]. The intimacy of world and thing is not a fusion. Intimacy obtains only where the intimate — world and thing — divides itself cleanly and remains separated. In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their *inter*, division prevails: a *dif-ference*."[23] This difference between world and things, which mediates, is expressed by Heidegger through the word *ereignet*. For Heidegger, Being *(Seyn)* is the *Er-eignis — "Das Wesen des Seyns als Ereignis."*[24] This *Ereignis* is the truth of Being. Moreover, the *Ereignis* is a kind of mediating middle *(ermittelnde und vermittelnde Mitte)*.[25]

Grammar demands a subject. This is the basic structure in Indo-European languages. However, Heidegger attempts, with a philosophical–poetic gesture, to 'let it go', since language cannot be non-subject-like — unless we radically 'leave

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19 Martin Heidegger, "Language," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 188.
20 Martin Heidegger, "Sprache," *Unterwegs zur Sprache. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 19. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 10.
21 Heidegger, "Language," 196.
22 Ibid., 197.
23 Ibid., 199.
24 Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis). Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 65, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 8.
25 Ibid., 73.

behind' language or attempt to speak in other ways: poetic, philosophical, spiritual, or foreign language, etc.

Deconstructing the central role of the subject, Derrida evokes the spirit of Nietzsche, seeking a grammar in which language is not organized around the subject. Derrida asks: "'Who comes after the subject?' the 'who' already signaling, perhaps, towards a grammar which would no longer be subjected to the subject."[26] Derrida advocates the deconstruction and displacement of the traditional role of the subject as the source of meaning and sense, as well as of the speaker's intentional authority. Outlining the *différance*, Derrida evokes the spirit of the middle voice: "We must consider that in the usage of our language the ending *-ance* remains undecided between the active and the passive. And we will see why that which lets itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these terms."[27]

If we attempt to rehabilitate a kind of 'philosophy of the middle voice' against the active–passive binary, a fundamental question remains: Are we truly capable of distancing ourselves from this binary at the level of language? Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* — in his dialogical essay between a Japanese Zen-Buddhist and an Inquirer — points toward a thought-provoking direction for approaching the subject embedded in language — and the subject–object structure — differently.

3. The Grammar of Absence in Old Chinese, Japanese, and Korean

Indo-European languages typically rely on the subject–object relationship, whereas Far Eastern languages such as Old Chinese, Japanese, and Korean do not clearly conform to the active–passive distinction of verbs. Byung-Chul Han refers to Old Chinese as a language of emptiness, of absencing, in which the characters possess no essential properties and lack lexical identity. As Han puts it: "Old Chinese is a language of emptiness and absencing. Its signs are highly mobile elements that do not, as such, possess any essential traits. Only within a specific constellation do they acquire an identity. When they are removed from their position, they return to their state of in-difference. In Old Chinese, signs without a fixed lexical identity are called

[26] Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, "Interview with Jacques Derrida," *The Symptom* 10 (2009): https://www.lacan.com/symptom10a/interview-with.html.

[27] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 9.

'empty signs' […]. The expression 'empty', *xu*, does not mean that they *lack* meaning. It is not a negation. Rather, something positive is associated with it."[28]

Emptiness is also a central motif of Chinese thought, which does not associate fixed attributes with things: "The things behave like empty signs. They are not the carriers of a substance. Rather, they are *for themselves ab-sencing or in-different*."[29] Lao-tzu writes: "Empty your mind",[30] "Let yourself be empty",[31] and "True fullness seems empty".[32] In Zen Buddhism, emptiness is also a central concept, which stands in opposition to substance, made visible through division and differentiation. Emptiness has no substance. It does not annihilate, but rather prevents anything from gaining dominance or becoming 'substantial'. This emptiness is thus not simply negative theology, denial, or nihilism. It also resists the *horror vacui* — the dread of nothingness.

Han also refers to Old Chinese as a language of in-difference: "Old Chinese is itself a language of in-difference, a flowing language, a language of flowing. It is extremely supple and rich in transitions, intermediary levels and combinations. The grammatical value of Old Chinese signs cannot be unambiguously defined. They are situated on a continuum. […] most signs exhibit a great deal of flexibility. […] The grammatical value of a sign is not a fixed *property* of the sign. Rather, it is the result of its relations, that is, the context."[33]

In Saussure's structuralist theory, language is a network of differences.[34] The meaning of a word arises from how it differs from other words — linguistic value is relative and negative. Derrida emphasizes the "play of differences,"[35] which is nothing other than the condition of possibility for the functioning of the sign. The language system consists of differences, where "on the one hand, these differences *play a role* in language, in speech as well, and in the exchange between language and speech. On the other hand, these differences are themselves *effects*."[36] Every concept arises in relation to another. Meaning is never fully fixed; it is always displaced onto other signs. Derrida highlights the impossibility of fully determining meaning, while

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28 Byung-Chul Han, *Absence: On the Culture and Philosophy of the Far East*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 65–66.

29 Ibid., 67.

30 Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 16.

31 Ibid., 22.

32 Ibid., 45.

33 Han, *Absence*, 65.

34 Ferdinand Saussure, *Grundfragen der Allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, ed. Charles Bally et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967), 139, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111547503.

35 Derrida, "Différance," 11.

36 Ibid.

Han points out even the meaningless nature of fixation in a language whose internal flexibility inherently excludes the application of rigid categories. The Old Chinese worldview is not based on oppositions, but on complementarities and continuum. There is no need for presence or its absence, for identity or for difference.

This kind of indifference — and neutrality — does not remain only at the linguistic level, but permeates the entire worldview. Zhuangzi said that we should treat all things equally[37] and allow them to change freely in their own course. He invites us: "Why not join with me in inaction, in tranquil quietude, in hushed purity, in harmony and leisure?"[38] There, all distinctions disappear. In this state of indifference, *difference* dissolves, and deliberate action is replaced by non-action or inaction.

Han outlines that Heidegger's notions of *being*, *home*, and *dwelling* stand in contrast to the images of *non-being, non-dwelling*, and *aimless wandering* in Chinese philosophy and Zen Buddhism. Han also recalls that: "The wise man wanders where there is 'no door and no house'" and "he walks in the 'directionless'."[39] Zhuangzi says: "I go nowhere and don't know how far I've gotten. I go and come and don't know where to stop."[40] Han refers to Buddhism also as "a religion of 'dwelling nowhere'".[41] This is a different kind of wandering than Heidegger's — a non-dwelling, distinct from 'being-at-home', or 'being home in-the-world' — where the absence of essential being becomes predominant. In Zen Buddhism, too, the image of an alternative mode of wandering takes on a central role: "A Zen monk should be without fixed abode, like the clouds, and without fixed support, like water",[42] and "a good wanderer leaves no trace".[43] We can learn nothing about an agent and its intentions whose wandering is directionless and unfolds in a non-linear temporality. Lao-tzu's wanderer walks in the "directionless".[44] It is not dwelling, but wandering that defines existence there: "The fundamental topos of Far Eastern thinking is not being but the way."[45] Here, Han nuances the differences between *being* and *path*, *dwelling* and *wandering*, *essence (Wesen)* and *absencing (Abwesen)* — a kind of *selflessness*. Selflessness was also present in Confucius' thought. Han recalls that

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37 Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.
38 Ibid., 182.
39 Han, *Absence*, 5, quoting Zhuangzi.
40 Ibid., 6, Han quoting Zhuangzi.
41 Ibid., 19.
42 Ibid., 5, Han quoting Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki: Unterweisungen zum wahren Buddha-Weg* (Heidelberg: Werner Kristkeitz, 1997), 168.
43 Ibid., 1, Han quoting Lao-tzu.
44 Ibid., 5.
45 Ibid.

"Confucius did not self".[46] Here, the 'did not self' verbalizes the 'self'. These reflections evoke images of selflessness, and emptiness, where someone becomes a no one — though not a Heideggerian *das Man*, but not even an authentic being, no *Entschlossenheit*, no heroism. This is a wandering along a path that is itself empty. Emptiness overrides categorical distinctions — the binary logic of subject and object, active and passive. At this point, it is less about 'finding' oneself than about 'losing' oneself — not the question of *Wie kommt der Mensch zu seinem Selbst?*[47] Not the acquisition of an authentic mode of being, nor of a home or a homeland.

Turning to Jullien, in relation to Chinese culture, he foregrounds the concept of *blandness*, which he associates with not-being in terms of boundaries — with neutrality, indefinability, evanescence, restraint, intermediacy, transience, and balance. Blandness, in this sense, functions as a kind of middle: a continuous transition that links different aspects, brings them into contact, and opens them to one another. For Jullien blandness "pays little heed to the borders our various disciplines like to draw among themselves. As the embodiment of neutrality, the bland lies at the point of origin of all things possible and so links them."[48] Blandness, in its evanescence, resists disclosure through any methodical search: "Blandness represents a balance, an intermediate moment, a transitory stage constantly threatened with obliteration."[49] This pervades the entirety of Chinese culture, exemplified most characteristically by the absence of clearly identifiable flavor, yet it is equally present in landscape painting, poetry, and aesthetics. Jullien emphasizes that "according to the Daoists of antiquity, the very foundation of reality, in its infinite fullness and renewal, reveals itself to us as 'bland' and 'flavorless'".[50] Lao-tzu: "When it passes through […] the mouth, the Dao is insipid and flavorless: it cannot be perceived, it cannot be heard, but it is inexhaustible."[51] Jullien explains that when no particular flavor manifests itself, the experience of tasting becomes all the more intense, since nothing can be assigned to it. Here, flavor is thus not understandable in itself; it has no self — or, in Han's terms, it is absence — but is rather relative. The transparent flavor 'by flavorless' unites all flavors and reconciles them with one another. Therefore, the sage finds the flavorful in the flavorless and acts by nonaction or inaction — as Lao-tzu

46 Ibid., 6.
47 Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen II–VI (Schwarze Hefte 1931–1938)*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 94, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2021), 6.
48 François Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, trans. Paula M. Varsano (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 23.
49 Ibid., 93.
50 Ibid., 41.
51 Ibid., 42. Jullien quoting Lao-tzu.

recognizes.[52] In the same spirit, so too does the principle of non-governance. While Han places the concept of absence at the center of his thought, Jullien foregrounds the notion of blandness. He regards blandness as a distinctive quality of Chinese culture, and even as the quality of the middle.

Now we turn to a few examples from Korean and Japanese. In translating from Korean into Western languages, Han highlights a crucial aspect. He explains that, for example, the phrase *'I think that...'* would sound highly unusual in Korean, and the translation *'the thought occurred to me'* would likewise be inadequate. Even the kind of expression typical of a middle voice — "the reflexive pronoun 'itself' subjectifies the thought. The Korean expression lacks all subjectivity"[53] — illustrates this point. Han emphasizes that in the Korean language, the equivalent of 'I think that...' represents a different logic: "The thought is somehow there, without me doing anything for it. It lies there without imposing itself on me or anybody else. Nor is there a passive subject that suffers something that is happening. What is put into words is a simply lying there; *no one* is really *involved*. […] In a certain sense, the speaker is completely absent."[54] Since there is no active or passive subject, and even the reflexive verb is questionable, the absence of a subject and a sequence of occurrences or events come to the forefront: "The Korean language does not distinguish unambiguously between active and passive. In turn, it can very well express happenings in which no subject is involved either as acting or suffering, a happening that simply *takes* place or *comes* about. […] In Far Eastern languages, the subject is often left out altogether, so that the verb stands alone, making an unambiguous assignment of an action to a subject impossible. Because of the frequent absence of a subject, the description of an *action* often gives the impression of a sequence of *happenings* or *events* in which no one in particular is involved."[55]

Han also gives an example from Japanese: "Japanese also has a form for verbs that is neither passive nor active. In Japanese, a happening that takes place by itself is called *jihatsu*. The reflexive 'by itself' of the English, again, destroys the character of a happening expressed by the Japanese form. There is no subject making *itself* felt in the happening."[56]

Summarizing these points, although both the possibilities offered by the middle voice and the examples from Old Chinese, Korean, and Japanese resist reduction to a purely active–passive opposition, in the case of the middle voice — as Benveniste outlined — the event takes place within the subject; however, in the examples from

[52] Ibid., 42.
[53] Han, *Absence*, 74.
[54] Ibid., 75.
[55] Ibid., 76.
[56] Ibid., 77.

Old Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, the event is subjectless. This raises the suspicion that even in the case of the middle voice, subject-centered thinking may occur when viewed from the perspective of languages such as Old Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.

4. Action without an Actor, and Action within the Locus of the Event

Whereas in the philosophy of Heidegger — and also of Gadamer — language plays a central role, since understanding is always linguistically mediated; there is no 'raw' being, only interpreted being, and the world reveals itself in language as hermeneutic medium, the Far Eastern philosophies reactivated by Han and Jullien locate truth and being not within language, but in intuition and silence, in a realm 'beyond', 'before', or 'outside' the linguistic.

In relation to Far Eastern art, Jullien notes: "We are speaking here not of an absolute ineffability (that is, in the metaphysical or theological sense: that which, by definition, transcends all language and remains incommensurable with it) but one that is *relative*: the ineffability that lies at the root of all language but that all language is destined to lose as soon as it begins to assert itself."[57] Han also emphasizes that the unsayable does not belong to Far Eastern thought: "Language is renounced not because of a 'not enough' but because of a 'too much'."[58] It is not a matter of secrecy or mystery, but simply of suchness. This perspective recognizes neither a division between the known and the unknown, nor the search for hidden truths behind appearances.

As Lao-tzu puts it: "The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name."[59] Thus "the Master acts without doing anything and teaches without saying anything".[60] The *Zen kōan* likewise suggests that knowledge is not attainable through rational thought or linguistic explanation, but only through direct experience — an experience that precedes or exceeds language. Practices oriented toward this pre-nominal experience are primarily meditative or intuitive in nature, aiming to transcend conceptual thinking and attain a form of insight prior to naming or interpretation. The middle voice gestures toward this 'pre-linguistic' unity, in which subject and object, agent and patient have not yet been sharply distinguished in language.

The following concepts are taking shape: on the one hand, *silence, emptiness, blandness, selflessness, neutrality, restraint*, and *absence*; on the other hand, *language, substance, thinghood, selfhood, will-to-power, presence*, and the varying

57 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 80.
58 Han, *Absence*, 83.
59 Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 1.
60 Ibid., 2.

conceptions of the *middle*. On the one hand, the middle is also connected to neutrality. According to Jullien, in Confucius, neutral means "not characterized more by one quality than by another".[61] Following Han, the notion of the middle may be described as an attunement to the flow of the world — characterized by absence and indifference. This middle is an *empty middle*; in fact, the middle itself is absent, since anything anywhere can be the middle. It is free of everything, even of itself. [62] There is no essence, no foundation, *Grund*, or innerness.

The idea of emptiness also appears in Heidegger. In his essay *The Thing*, he describes the round dance of the fourfold (earth, sky, divinities, mortals),[63] where the elements mirror one another, yet still remain substantially distinct. In fact, through their gathering, the elements seem to acquire a kind of essentiality. Even if the center of this dance is an empty middle, he appears to suggest a state of inwardness.

While the metaphysical tradition has become aware of the problematic nature of subject and the subject–object structure, its destructive, deconstructive, or postmodern efforts rarely succeed in moving beyond the limits of this structure. The void left by the supposed disappearance of the subject inevitably calls for a substitute — something to fill the gap. This often leads to positing a hidden, unrevealed, or speculative essence, something unknowable or noumenal.

Han points to another distinction as well: While Derrida also questions identity and substance, his approach nonetheless 'remains foreign' to Far Eastern thought: "The negativity of these thinkers brings them close to absencing and emptiness, but the idea, typical of Far Eastern thinking, of a world-like totality, of the weight of the world, is alien to them, as it is to all postmodern thought. In Far Eastern thinking, emptiness or absencing ultimately has a collecting or gathering effect, whereas 'différance' or 'rhizome' cause an intense form of dispersal. They disperse identity, push diversity."[64]

The marginalization of the middle voice — and of medial thinking more broadly — constitutes not merely a loss of linguistic form but also a loss of worldview. One could juxtapose these understandings of subjectivity: that of the active, mastering or passive agent, and that of a subjectless or in subject-centered, process-oriented perspective. In the description of the middle voice, the individual affords space to the event, whereas the middle, as outlined by Han and Jullien, is the field of emptiness and simple being-

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61 Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 49.

62 Byung-Chul Han, *The Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*. Translated by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 7. "The worldview of Zen Buddhism is not directed upwards, nor is it oriented towards a centre. It lacks a ruling centre. One might also say: the centre is everywhere. Every being forms a centre. As friendly beings that do not exclude anything, each being reflects the whole in itself."

63 Martin Heidegger, "The thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 178.

64 Han, *Absence*, 16.

thus. Emptiness is a field of potentiality. In a similar way, mediality does not bring its own content but rather constitutes the condition for the flow of content.

Language is the medium through which the world reveals itself — and — *in the emptiness of the middle, being dissolves*. Be that as it may, the middle is not a fixed position but a flow that seeks to be without subject and object. The middle voice, then, is not merely a linguistic remnant, but the trace of a radically different ontology — where action is not subordinated to the subject, nor to the subject–object dichotomy, but happens *on its own*. Thus, action without differentiating could take shape, on the one hand, as *an action without an actor* and/or, on the other hand, *as an action unfolding within the locus of the event* — as a pre-subjective ontology in which subject and object, agent and patient, have not yet sharply differentiated.

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