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Echoes of No Thing: Thinking between Heidegger and Dōgen

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The Questioning of All Questions

A Fugal Repetition

In *Contributions*, Heidegger returns to certain themes brought up in *Being and Time*. *Contributions* takes up, *again*, the questions first thought in the work of the previous decade; the question of being, temporality or finitude, historicity and truth are raised and questioned — *again* — this time in a radical, sustained, and (possibly) even more confusing way than in *Being and Time*.¹ (Declaring it confusing, however, in no way diminishes the work; Heidegger's call *towards* will remain always preparatory, provisional, and, above all, transitional, and thereby already resistant — in its very simplicity — to the formation of a concrete definition.) Following Heidegger's turn in thinking, the triadic appearance of *Contributions*, *The Event*, and *Mindfulness*² seem more honest in their utter rejection of a classical system in which to explore these questions; *Contributions* resists

1 There is a place where Heidegger questions his system in *Being and Time*.

2 As already mentioned, *Contributions* was written between 1936–38, and was followed by *Mindfulness* (*Bessinung*), written in 1938–39, and *The Event* (*Das Ereignis*), written in 1942–43. These dates are culled from the Vittorio Klostermann *Gesamtausgabe*, which is still an ongoing effort. Accordingly, each title is part of a collection organized by Klostermann. *Das Ereignis* is also known as the *Gesamtausgabe* 65, *Bessinung* as the *Gesamtausgabe* 66, and *Das Ereignis* as the *Gesamtausgabe* 71.

a clear plan — it is rather a call, a movement (in the originary sense of the word), a leap into the abyssal unknown which is a new beginning. It is a fugal repetition of that initial questioning into being itself and the questioning gives way, passes into, a sounding (*Anklang*), or resonating of the question itself. Heidegger writes,

In order for this attempt to become an actual impetus, the wonder of questioning must be experienced in carrying it out and must be made effective as an awakening and strengthening of the power to question.³

The project of *Contributions*, then, is not to provide an answer, another system; it provides no clear way forward, nor does it provide a concrete analysis of a phenomenon. Rather, Heidegger asks — as he has done since the beginning — that we embrace, or rather open ourselves to, the wonder of the questioning that is a question, that is the question of Being, and the only question finally which is “question-worthy.” In order to “awaken” we must experience first that wonder (which, as we shall see, could be related — *provisionally, transitionally* — to the beginner’s mind of Zen practice, or to the doubting of Nishitani.) In §4 of *Contributions*, Heidegger writes that, though questioning at times risks “amounting to an empty, obstinate attachment to the uncertain, undecided, and undecidable,” and could seem to simply be a “backtracking of ‘knowledge’ into idle meditation,”⁴ we must do so. For, as he continues,

in questioning reside the tempestuous advance that says “yes” to what has not been mastered, and the broadening out into ponderable, yet unexplored, realms. What reigns here is a self-surpassing into something above ourselves. To ques-

3 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 10.

4 *Ibid.*

tion is to be liberated for what, while remaining concealed, is compelling.⁵

To say “yes” is to exist within the future of possibilities; it is an ecstatic stance that opens rather than closes; it is to accept the unknown with equanimity, with care. The “yes” compels being into an authentic experience with Being, away from the quotidian, everyday experience of mundane reality.

To those who are not, or cannot be, “compelled” by this radical questioning (which is, in itself, an extension of Descartes’ radical doubt, though Heidegger does not stop within the certainty of the *cogito* but rather insists on us going far beyond), Heidegger seems to have little to say. They “do not belong in the invisible ring enclosing those whose questioning is answered by the intimation of Being”⁶; indeed, to those who exist solely within this mundane age of “infinite wants stemming from the concealed plight of a lack of a sense of plight,” writes Heidegger, “this question must necessarily seem the most useless idle talk.”⁷ Heidegger’s gesture is one towards an aristocracy of thinking, to the, as already mentioned above, *the rare, the few*.

This questioning of the few cannot be a mere rethinking of what has come before, using the same language; Heidegger instead points us towards thinking the beginning of a new “beginning of another history.”⁸ As unavoidable as is the confrontation with the first beginning of the history of thought, just as certainly must questioning itself forget everything with which it surrounds itself, and merely think its own plight.⁹

This question is, resolutely, “the question of all questions.”¹⁰ For Heidegger, everything is at stake in the act of questioning; it is not simply an intellectual exercise. The question can only be,

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 11.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

for Heidegger, the “retrieval of beings out of the truth of Being.”¹¹ We must become thinkers as questioners, in order that the “truth of being, the grounding of Da-sein, becomes necessary” *again*.¹² This cannot be a mere systematic understanding or processing; it must be, for Heidegger, as he writes in *Contributions* and elsewhere, not a bridge but a leap, “the leap carried out by the human being as the seeker of Being, i.e., as the *thinker* who creates.”¹³ Thinking this way, then, is a profoundly creative act in which one exposes oneself *to the question, to the unknown*. To fall, one does not need a system; one needs only the will, the will to question, to think, to surrender. It is as though Heidegger is attempting to clear the ground in an act not dissimilar to Nietzsche’s “philosophy with a hammer,” directing us to, not to smash idols, but to think differently, in a radically new way; the effect, however, is the same — radical, unsurpassed change. “The questioners have broken the habit of curiosity; their seeking loves the abyss, in which they know the oldest ground.”¹⁴ This movement towards a “new beginning” is a transition out of traditional metaphysical thinking (whereby Being is singular, infinite, and all-encompassing) to another, very different way of thinking. It is an opening of one’s being to the possibility that the ground on which we have based our thinking is no longer there, that there is another ground, older, more primordial, more basic which until now we have not even considered, a ground which Heidegger calls the abyssal ground (*Abgrund*).

How are we to think ourselves without a metaphysical ground, a ground which until this point had been the only ground there was? This is the beginning of thinking a new beginning, and of no longer separating Being and beings as if they were divisible, objectifiable, hypostatized entities. Through the leap towards a new beginning, we manage to join Being and be-

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 24.

¹³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

ings, thinking the new beginning as an authentic event without the entrapments of a metaphysical history.

Like Dōgen, whose rhetoric illustrates opposites and describes everyday, seeming dualities, while all the while destroying them as false and delusional, Heidegger never denies that they continue to exist. That they occur as a reality (but never compromise an *entire reality*) means only that these dichotomies manifest on a single, obvious plane of the everyday. Through careful examination of ground, or by attending to one's situation with a clear, precise mind, we can begin to see that all phenomena are, with Heidegger, groundless, and with Dōgen, empty of inherent essence. Dōgen writes that when a person "practices and realizes the Buddha Way," when they have attuned themselves and when "they have attained one dharma, [they] penetrate it exhaustively; when [they] encounter one practice, [they] practice that one practice."¹⁵ When, through whatever practice or thinking, we enter into an authentic encounter with the event of truth — be it through the sudden enlightenment of Zen *satori* or through the immediate, transformative "site of the moment" (*Augenblicksstätte*) of Heidegger's *Contributions* — the world of opposing antinomies begins to break down in this new abyssal, fluctuating, and fluid beginning *beginning again*.

The Falling Silent of Deep Listening

We are in the abyss without the comforting ground of a metaphysical presence or answer (we are beings without ground) and this, in effect, opens our being, according to Heidegger, to a radical shock (*Erschrecken*). Thinking as ordinarily practiced in the quotidian world shelters us, and allows us not to think "what is most worthy of the question."¹⁶ It inures us from thinking the most primordial, basic questions and as such we remain out of touch and removed from what is most important to us. It is only,

15 Eihei Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 44.

16 Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, 11.

according to Heidegger, the effect of shock which can shatter us — our systems of knowledge, our way of being — and rescue us from the ordinary, from the easily answerable. But in doing so, shock propels and springs us into a new place of “openness” from which what is most unknown and most unthought — for Heidegger, *the abandonment and withdrawal of being from beings* — can begin to be thought, as though for the first time — as a *new beginning*. The shock of thinking this way does not cause us — *the few, the rare* — to withdraw, though it could; rather it presages a radical transition away from the false grounding of traditional metaphysical thinking of one in the world, and towards creatively thinking the possibility of being as authentic, historical being. This shock opens “the self concealing of Being,” which in turn is joined by its own “will” which Heidegger calls “reticence” (*Verhaltenheit*),¹⁷ or “the creative withstanding [*Aushalten*] in the abyss.”¹⁸

It is in this creative withstanding through reticence and restraint, and through the practice of an ennobled silence (falling silent to the old questions, the questions of metaphysics and world systems), that the clamor of Being’s withdrawal from beings is heard. Falling silent avails to us the abyssal possibility of the new beginning, but this silence is in no way is a quiescence as in a form of surrender; rather, it becomes an emboldened stance *towards* not a force *against*; reticence and restraint (as silence) look into and across the abyss. There is a “hesitant self-withholding” in reticence, a self-withholding that allows for what is to come, *to come*, to emerge. This is perhaps best illustrated in language; in dialogue, if we “withhold” our words, we “allow” for our interlocutor to say what they mean to say. What is to be revealed is revealed in the gaps between, in the silences that happen between thoughts. In reticence, we hold back our vulgar assertion to being — our clamorous insistence — and we

17 *Verhaltenheit* is translated as “restraint” by Rojcewicz et al. but Emad and Maly in their 1999 translation of the *Beiträge* as “reticence.” Considering the focus on silence, solitude and stillness, it seems better to stay with Emad’s translation, following the latin *re-tacere*, to be silent.

18 Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, 30.

thereby “allow” for Being to emerge. This emergency takes place as event in which being comes into its own, to an authentic, emboldened state.

Falling silent attunes us first to a listening (to a deep stillness) rather than a saying (of a cacophony). Falling silent and stillness are deeply interpenetrated, and Heidegger writes that “this stillness arises only out of keeping silent. And this bringing into silence grows only out of reticence [*Verhaltenheit*].”¹⁹ In our hesitancy, in our holding back, our withholding, we transition from the clamor of individual being asserting itself and enter into what Heidegger characterizes as meditative awareness, or, more simply, meditation (*Besinnung*), the attunement to a new beginning. Heidegger’s meditation is not just a meditation on oneself, but serves the process within inceptual thinking, of moving oneself to a new concern of selfhood.

The meditation of inceptual thinking concerns us (ourselves) and yet it does not. It does not concern us so as to bring out from us the prescriptive determinations; but it does concern us as historical beings and concerns us specifically in the plight of the abandonment of beings (at first, decline in the understanding of being, and then forgetting of being). It concerns us, who thus are initially posited in our exposure amid beings; it concerns us in this manner in order that we find our way beyond ourselves to selfhood.²⁰

We are beginning to think the new beginning, we are beginning to think what is *most question-worthy*, and this most question-worthy of questions takes us from the petty concerns of everyday existence — concerns about money and love and hunger — towards the concerns of a larger, more primordial, more incipient nature, a nature not yet thought. In this, Heidegger goes far further than he has in the past. He writes that it is tempting to dismiss the entire thinking of *Being and Time* as “limited

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29, translated amended.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

to the sphere of an anthropology.”²¹ The concerns in *Contributions* point us towards fundamental existential problems that are, in effect, larger than the mere mortal — though messianic they continue to resist metaphysics — and it is this preparation towards an inceptual thinking that has begun to make the way ready for a new opening, a new beginning, one that will lead, in Heidegger’s words, to

the opening of the simplicity and greatness of beings and the originally compelled necessity of securing in being of securing in beings the truth of Being so as to give the historical human being a goal once again, namely, to become the one who grounds and preserves the truth of Being, to be the “there” as the ground required by the very essence of Being, or, in other words, to care.²²

It is only through this new conception of a language without metaphysical constraints or conceits, in the clearing and lightening (*Lichtung*) of the openness of being to the possibility of Being that the historical human being has a role again, has a purpose, and this purpose, unanswered but obvious, is towards becoming, through *care*, being essential being.

That is what care means, neither a trivial fussing over just anything, nor a renunciation of joy and power, but something more original than all that, because care is uniquely “for the sake of Being” — not of the Being of the human being but the Being of beings as a whole.²³

Inceptual thinking has carried us from the new beginning to a new being (amongst Being). It is the formulation of care, or concern, that explodes the human being from an individual concerned with itself to a being that is concerned with the “whole.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Ibid.