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Echoes of No Thing: Thinking between Heidegger and Dōgen

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Conclusion

With(in) the Hyper-Event

What this reading of Heidegger and Dōgen has so far attempted has been to investigate the subjects of ontology and epistemology as dialogically placed between Heidegger and Dōgen, and as a conversation between the East and the West, seeking not so much similarities and differences but forms of possibilities, beginnings, potential traversals. The subject has been, as already mentioned, treated *irresponsibly*. To anyone immersed in the thinking of the West or of the East, there remain clear, decisive differences between the two traditions, and to reading one against the other is to take liberties, to bend the rules, to ignore obvious contradictions. This study has been a reaction against the sensible, against the logical, and against, precisely, the ossified practices of a philosophy practiced — too often — as the “regulated-regulating instruments of information.”¹ This reading of Heidegger and Dōgen therefore is meant to be seen with humor, or at least, if not that, to be treated with a certain speculative lightness, to be read with a smile — perhaps — and a bearing which welcomes the possibilities proposed here. To hew too closely to an already claimed world is potentially to miss the possibility of an *other* world. The opening of possibilities are

1 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 434.

practiced, with Heidegger, in the taking of a leap into an abyssal between, in surrendering oneself into the potentiality “a new beginning,” or in, with Dōgen, the “falling away” of mind-and-body. Reacting to a long period of stagnation in thinking, in which instrumental, formulaic responses seem to have replaced the simple awe and wonder of the thinking of the primordial that remains the wonder of original thinking, I desire in this study no less than to invite new directions forwards, or *towards*, seeing and understanding the two major thinkers investigated here. I do this not to offer one more interpretation of Heidegger or Dōgen, one more studied tome; there are others better qualified for that undertaking. In this study, I respond to the imprecation towards the creative; I respond to that *creatively*. In both thinkers, I see in their strikingly original thinking a way *out* of the crisis—whether environmental, personal or otherwise (though always existential)—in which we find ourselves drifting inexorably towards.

Like Blanchot stumbling from near certain execution before the firing line into a dark forest filled with burning fires,² we have treated this writing as an attempt *to get beyond* the irradiated fires of scientific, rational thinking which burn brightly around us, to take Heidegger at his word and to expose ourselves, and to leap—recklessly—into the abyssal between. As Heidegger writes in *Contributions*, “the basic disposition of thinking in the other beginning oscillates within shock, restraint, diffidence.”³ In *shock* we have opened ourselves to the possibility of something other, something which exceeds (*always, already*) that which has been presented to us, a truth which resonates beyond that granted us by a society which is resistant to—even deeply horrified by—the possibility of change, or a new beginning; in *restraint*, we have attempted to *practice* that “hesitant self-withholding,” that holding back of named being in order to allow

2 Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 4.

3 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 14.

to come forth what is so far unknown and withdrawn. Practicing *restraint* allows for a new, inceptual thinking to take place, a thinking which draws us *towards the already withdrawn*. In *diffidence* as well, practiced as hesitancy, as a form of respect, we have sought to *be-come* near, to expose ourselves, as authentic beings, to the thinking of the new beginning.

More importantly, and pressingly, this study has been a project towards divining a way forward towards the possibilities begun in the thinking of Heidegger and Dōgen (and less so Nishitani) and has been conducted in the glare of potential ecological cataclysm and social disintegration. Since this projects inception, we have seen the collapse of the Larsen B ice shelf in Antarctica, and the opening up of Northern shipping routes across a routinely ice-free Arctic (and the expectation that the Arctic will be entirely ice free by 2020, a fact celebrated with jubilation by at least one Northeastern United States governor.) Super storm Sandy personally affected me and millions more, while Super Typhoon Haiyan resulted in utter devastation in the Philippines, killing over 6,000 in a single day with millions displaced. The super as a descriptive in the storm seems to hearken to an event which begins to exceed language; will there come soon a “super-super” Typhoon? In Australia, a drought has wreaked havoc for years on the region, resulting in massive crop loss and tremendous brush fires which annually scorch thousands of square miles, killing dozens. In 2003, a heat wave in Northern Europe caused an estimated 25,000 to 70,000 deaths, and in 2010 in Russia, an extreme heat wave led to hundreds of forest fires which burned across the region for months and resulted directly in over 100 deaths; however, indirectly the corresponding heat-related fatalities killed over 56,000. As I write, a heat wave in India, with daytime temperatures exceeding 48 degrees Celsius, is estimated to have killed 2,000 already with little sign of it abating anytime soon. The war in Syria, resulting in nearly 700,000 deaths so far and a region catastrophically destabilized, with millions displaced, and conflict now spreading across the Arabian peninsula, and into the African continent, stems from an orange seller’s frustration in Tunisia at ris-

ing food prices, the result of a warming climate which saw food shortages across the globe; that year, 2011, saw food riots in no less than 36 countries. In California, again as I write, a drought once thought to be the “drought of a decade” has quickly become the “drought of a century” and recently has been referred to as the “drought of the millennium.” This is not mere Weather Channel marketing; California has never seen in its recorded history its reservoirs so depleted, and this spring it was widely reported that the state had less than a year of water left in reserve.⁴ The list unfortunately goes on.

This is horrifying. It is terrifying. It resists a response. The temptation to turn away is natural, to immerse oneself in the minutia of one’s life — swim team, soccer practice, departmental meetings, *Downton Abbey*, the latest iPhone 6, 7, 8, 9, 10... (the list must go on) and the corresponding OS updates preoccupy one, *distract* one. To *dis-tract* means to be pulled asunder, to be drawn away from; with Heidegger then, we can read that to be *distracted* by the latest technological bibelot is in fact to be “drawn away” from that which draws near. The climate emergency emerges into our consciousness as a call; we can answer that call, thinking the possibilities that unfold in that call. We can also turn away, and become pulled asunder. Unlike previous crises, such as the threat of nuclear annihilation or global war in which our faith was placed, albeit with skepticism, with the “rational” actors of national governments, the threat of climate change, or global warming, seems inexorable. We know what we must do, *yet we turn away*. In 1996 in a response to a series of riots across France, Jean-luc Nancy wrote a brief essay in which he stated that our only response to a world falling apart, the response that was most pressing, was to raise the question “what is to be done?” The question, he writes, is on everyone’s lips but remains “withheld, barely uttered for we do not even know if we still have the right, or whether we have the means,

4 In Cape Town, South Africa, Day Zero (the day in which the city of nearly 4 million will run out of water) is only ever just barely deferred, existing as a constant possibility.

to raise it.”⁵ We do not even raise the question, and in not raising the question, we turn away, we do not even begin to think that which is most terrifying, most horrifying. In Heidegger’s essay “What Calls for Thinking?” he writes that what is “*most thought provoking is that we are still not thinking* — not even yet, although the state of the world is becoming constantly more thought-provoking.”⁶ Echoing Heidegger and Nancy, we can only demand that the only true response, the only true beginning, is to turn to face the crisis, to *raise the question* and to take up the task of thinking once again. To start. Again.

In March, 2011, a 9.0 earthquake, now called the Tōhoku earthquake, devastated Japan. For six minutes, buildings shook and crumbled, highways buckled and bridges collapsed. Subsequently, a tsunami drenched the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan, resulting in, along with over 20,000 deaths, an uncontrolled meltdown (and possibly even a “melt-through”)⁷ of three of its six reactors. In the ensuing cataclysm, the nuclear plant unleashed a toxic spume of radioactive gases into the atmosphere (as well as, in the subsequent years, substantial amounts of highly contaminated water directly into the ocean.) That day, Japan experienced three “events” but the word “Fukushima” has come to represent everything that happened that day, and since. In *Hyperobjects*, Timothy Morton refers to the radioactive isotopes released in Fukushima (and in Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and countless atomic bomb tests, nuclear accidents, as well as still unknown and undisclosed releases of radioactive material) as hyperobjects. Morton uses *hyper* to describe how an object — a thing in the world — supersedes and exceeds our understanding of it;

5 Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), 191.

6 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 371.

7 Sara B. Pritchard, “An Envirotechnical Disaster: Negotiating Nature, Technology and Politics at Fukushima,” in *Japan at Nature’s Edge*, eds. Ian Jared Miller, Julia Adeny Thomas, Brett L. Walker (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 256.

the thing, in Morton's words — *viscous, nonlocal, and interobjective* — moves beyond our understanding, irreducible always to a single *thing* in the world. While we commonly think of *hyper* colloquially as referring to speed, Morton draws on the etymological roots of the word, *hyper-* and refers to an element which is “over,” or “beyond.” For Morton, the thing, whether a radioactive isotope or a plastic bag, a cosmic universe or a mere nuclear explosion is *hyper* in that it is “over,” or “beyond” our capabilities to grasp it in its entirety.

In the case of the nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, the entire unravelling might just as well be called a *hyperevent*, an event so far beyond our capacity to understand that it exceeds categories. The word Fukushima comes to stand in for an unravelling, mis-understood event, clouded in its own eventing and one that can never be fully understood, nor even *experienced*. To term an event *hyper* (rather than a mere object) is to understand that the event itself in its *eventing* is never finished; the hyperevent continues to unfold in ways unimaginable, or more importantly, unthought, to us. Where did the accident of Fukushima happen? Most clearly at the plant itself, but it also has a way of spreading, unfolding, *be-coming* in a way that is never finished. Certainly there is a clear causal link between the 9.0 earthquake that happened offshore, and the resulting tsunami which caused the waters to rise so precipitously (in one bay the wave was measured at over 38 meters) flooding and disabling the plant, leading to the meltdown. But could we trace the event — the actual hyper-event itself — back to when the plant was built? Or further to the Manhattan project of World War Two or the Trinity test site in southern New Mexico, site of the first nuclear explosion? Or to the thinking of a community which places the risk of a nuclear accident at less than zero? And when does the “hyperevent” of the Fukushima disaster end? According to a press release from the Physicians for Social Responsibility, cesium-137 has a half-life of thirty years, and “since it takes about ten half-lives for any radionuclide to disappear” it will literally take centuries before the exclusion zone becomes habitable again. And even then, will the hyperevent

have exhausted itself, or simply reached a new manifestation? The point of the hyperevent, as with Morton's hyperobject, is that we just don't know; the event and object, as we draw closer to understanding them, draw farther away; the event itself becomes stranger the closer we get to it; the event, in its eventing, is uncanny.

Global warming as the result of unprecedented climate change is the preternatural hyperevent of our time; it remains impossible to understand when it began, and how, and even more impossible to determine the various ways in which it will continue to unfold. The cause seems to lie most obviously in our burning of carbon emitting fuels, whether via our factories, our jets or our cars, and seems to accelerate with the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. It continues apace, however, even as the Industrial Revolution seems to foreclose on itself. Will anthropogenic climate change lead to the death of humanity, or only to the demise of Western culture, to a culture based on consumption, on profiteering and on exploitation? Will it result in death for everyone, or only for a small subset of humanity — Pacific Islanders, for instance, or Bangladeshis — peoples far removed, for the most part, from our own experiences? Will other societies arise in its wake, societies which are more resilient, more adaptable? What does sea level change look like? It seems ridiculous to fear a few inches, yet a few meters seems unimaginable. What happens to the 19 million residents of Florida (much closer to those of us in the West than the distant Bangladeshis) in the event of a single meter rise (which now seems inevitable) in ocean levels? What do we do with them? How do our understandings of justice or private property or capitalism change with an onset of human migration unlike what the world has ever seen? To a certain extent we are already seeing the effects of cataclysmic climate change in the bodies of migrants washed up on the beaches of the Mediterranean and the challenges this has brought to traditional European Enlightenment values. The rise of right wing parties across liberal democracies, whether exemplified by Greece's neo-Fascist New Dawn Party or Donald Trump, seem linked — albeit predictably — as emerging reac-

tions to the environmental crisis; what must be *our* response to *them*? *Theirs* to *us*? How are we to go forward when the society, and the claimed values that built it, seem more and more to be but a sham, a mere Potemkin culture, or a disappearing mirage of good will?

These questions not only resist easy answers; *they resist all answers*. We think, as Heidegger has written, “in too limited a fashion.” The questions that the hyperevent (as well as the hyperobject) provoke, require a new thinking, one unleashed from formulaic, rote, ratiocinative responses; it requires a new practice of thinking, an explosion towards what is unknown, what cannot be known, at least not yet, and to admit that they cannot be known. *Yet the effort must be made*. The questions behind the headlines — the thinking that has not yet been thought — acts as an irruption in the thinking which happens everyday. The questions themselves destroy the answers, and we accept this destruction happily. *For what stands now cannot continue*.

As global warming continues to become an accepted norm across the globe, governments and industry seek to capitalize on it in an almost gleeful way. Politicized and polarized, the chance for dialogue or for true thinking seems long past, and indeed even eclipsed by the drunken celebrations at the end of time (or history). What this reading has attempted to take up is the challenge posed by Heidegger and Dōgen to *see differently*, to attune ourselves to the possibility of something *other*. As Heidegger writes in “What Calls For Thinking,” “There is no bridge here — only the leap.”⁸ We cannot plan for the transition; rather it must be a falling, a willful plunging into the abyssal between. We must trust the leap, or at least trust that *this* cannot stand anymore. In *Contributions*, Heidegger writes that the leap “appears in the semblance of utter recklessness” and yet precisely it is this recklessness — this irresponsibility — which allows for the opening of being to the event. He writes, “before all else,

8 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 373.

[the leap] leaps into the belonging to Being in the full essential occurrence of Being as event.”⁹

What the question posed by the unfolding event of the environmental crisis takes up requires a radical, even reckless, response; it must admit to, as Nancy wrote in “What Is To Be Done?” asking questions which leave the world “perpetually reopened, of its own contradiction.”¹⁰ We must, he continues, “act in such a way that this world is a world able to open itself up to its own uncertainty as such.”¹¹

The Task Rethought...

What I have attempted to do here is to read both Heidegger through Dōgen, and Dōgen through Heidegger. This is an act of irresponsibility — recklessness at best, futility at worst — and one which presupposes an authority I lack, and which I doubt, with Heidegger and Dōgen, truly exists. For me, philosophy works best on the leading edge of the creative; indeed, the creative thinking towards wisdom can only lead to the love of wisdom, the *sophos* of thinking. Though unmentioned, there is an aspect of the Deleuzian gesture in this reading; the hope is that, through a creative reading with Heidegger and Dōgen, we are able to traverse and open out a new line of thinking, one which, as already mentioned, and though still unidentified, has within it the potential to change, or alter, the general direction in which society finds itself drifting. In Deleuze and Guattari’s *What Is Philosophy?*, they claim that “philosophy is the discipline that involves *creating* concepts.”¹² A discipline is as much a practice as anything else, and it is within this practice of *creation*, of conceiving and thinking *something* else, that I seek, and which I find, in Heidegger’s demands. Derrida also helps us on

9 Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, 179.

10 Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating The Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997). 191.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 16.

our way (*Holzweg*) describing deconstruction — thinking — as “inventive or nothing at all. [...]t opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail.”¹³ In his “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” Derrida attempts to explain to a Japanese translator how to understand the word “deconstruction”; he writes that “deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject. [...] [I]t deconstructs itself.”¹⁴

In *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, Heidegger describes how philosophy, when taken over and coopted by the rational sciences, becomes foreclosed; he writes that the original project of philosophy, the essential questioning which hearkens us (back) towards authentic being becomes lost, occluded, dismembered by the logical, ratiocinated faculties of the sciences. The late Pierre Hadot named this original questioning the “wonder of philosophy.” This wondering becomes an active refusal to be set upon by the logic of the sciences; it is awe, it is bafflement, it is a political and metaphysical stance to refuse the known, the categorizable. In wondering we seek not the answer — this would be too easy — but wonder itself. As an ontological and epistemological practice, it is the asking of the question *what is the nature of being?* as much as it is the seeking of an answer. In *The End of Philosophy*, Heidegger proposes that the demise of philosophy — a “triumph” for the “scientific-technological world” — can offer the possibility for a new kind of thinking, a kind of thinking that might appear after “the dissolution of philosophy in the technologized sciences.”¹⁵ This thinking, starkly opposed to the foreclosed, scholastic philosophy of the academy, offers a new path into and through the world. This thinking, freed from the sciences, “is content with awakening a readiness

13 Jacques Derrida, “Psyche: Inventions of the Other,” in *Reading De Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, trans. Catherine Porter and Phillip Lewis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 42.

14 David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 3.

15 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 436.

in man for a possibility whose contour remains obscure, whose coming remains uncertain.”¹⁶ It is a thinking which is “preparatory,” which resists prediction; it says what has already been said “a long time ago,” but which “has not been explicitly thought.”¹⁷

The issue of ontology — of what comes to be, and how it comes to be — is one of enormous importance; contained within it are the seeds of an ethical practice in which how we treat others, how we treat the planet, and the very relations between things, are brought to the fore as a questioning and a thinking that is so very necessary in a world that “has not yet begun to think.” These things frankly matter very much. For too long, as Heidegger explains, philosophy has become the handmaiden of instrumentalization, taking a subsidiary role to the creative act, to the act born from an authentic thinking practiced within the clearing of the primordial ground. What philosophy needs then is to let loose at times, to fall away from the sphere of logic and rationality, from formulas and predictable outcomes. In a very real sense, we do not know that much more about ourselves, or of our cosmos, than when Heraclitus first gazed upon his river, or when Diogenes the Dog turned his head away from Alexander the Great. Certainly, we have been to the moon, and created munitions capable of destroying the planet thousands of times over (one often wonders about this figure; does it matter if a weapon can destroy the planet any more times than once? And for whom is it destroyed? Is the landscape which flourishes in the no man’s land surrounding Chernobyl really destroyed? Again, for whom?) We have healed billions and improved without a doubt the lives of even more. And yet, despite all our sciences and explanations, we cannot explain the most fundamental question of being. We return again and again to it, and yet, like all things, especially thoughts, it resists an answer.

The resistance to an easy answer, indeed to any answer, is an uncomfortable position to take in philosophy, as it is in life. It leaves one on the margin, living just beyond the *periphérique*,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

on the outskirts of the city, the city society has built, and from which one is permanently excluded. This exclusion is felt keenly, for no matter how much one moves away from the center, the center entices, it attracts. As Jean-Luc Nancy and Aurélien Barrau write in *What's These Worlds Coming To?* resistance finds its genesis in a rebellion against society's unquestioning, "obsessive," embrace with ontological order and a "recurrent phobia of dis-order."¹⁸ The world as conceived by society demands a structured, hierarchical regime in which questions are answered *before* they are asked, that what is unknown is quickly occluded by the proven, by the claimed fact. Nancy and Barrau write:

To truly enter into the disorder, to explore its crevices, to climb out onto its branches, to get drenched by its tumultuous downpour, perhaps one would need to return to the technological aporia that pushes one — that compels one — to no longer fear the disorderly and the irreversible, and finally, that orders or enjoins one to leave the entropic phobia behind.¹⁹

To fall into the disorder, then, requires a leap, a surrender, a falling away. Not everyone is willing to take that up. Not everyone is able. Indeed, for Heidegger, it is *only the rare, only the few* who will ever attempt the leap.

But it is for them this world, for those who leap.

18 Jean-Luc Nancy and Aurélien Barrau, *What's These Worlds Coming To?*, trans. Travis Holloway and Flor Méchain (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 69.

19 *Ibid.*.