

GATHERING THE CONTENDING SEPARATIONS OF
A NEVER ENDING STRUGGLE FOR UNCONCEALMENT:

Cutting through the Distance and Adversity
Implicit to a Foucault/Heidegger Encounter

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One thinker thinks his way back to "the place of origin, the point of departure of a whole dynasty of philosophical questions,"¹ and sets out from this origin to reveal an opening to the present, our own present, as a place of confinement and creativity. Here, at this point of origin, he finds a path for questioning, where discourse takes on the challenge "to take account of its own present-ness, in order to find its own place, to pronounce its meaning, and to specify the mode of action which it is capable of exercising within this present."² Here, the thinker strives to take account of his own emplacement, endeavors to understand his "lodging" within a configuration of structures, within a complicated network of multiple relations in which we find ourselves always already involved in things, dealing with each other, habituated to practices, and living for the event of our own overcoming. Here an emergent form of thinking opens itself to questions with enthusiasm, and aims to understand the power relations of its own present, in which a will to self-awareness finds itself captured in patterns and practices of domination and, at the same time, released to the project of its own overcoming.

In this space of intimate involvement with the present situation of thought, in this space of the singularity of events, thinking aims to liberate the courage to *do* something with its new understanding, to attain the leverage of a self-awareness "situating itself in relation to its past and its future, and prescribing the operation which it (is) required to effect within its own present."³

In taking up this project of unconcealment, thinking aspires to "the invocation of an event in the general history of thought, reason and knowledge, an

¹ Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," tr. Colin Gordon, in *Foucault's New Domains*, eds. Mike Gane and Terry Johnson (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 17.

² Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," p. 12.

³ Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," p. 12.

event in which it has its own special role to play."⁴ Here, thinking defines "its own task in relation both to the general history of thought and to its own present and the forms of knowledge, ignorance, illusion in terms of which it identifies its historical situation."⁵

Here, thinking embraces an enthusiasm, a disposition for revolution, as "a permanent virtuality which cannot be ignored," framed by "a philosophical question inscribed in our thought since the 18th century," the very question of the event of the Enlightenment and its meaning, reflecting "the question of the historicity of the thought of the universal," and manifesting the will to revolution as a path to peaceful liberation through a critical interrogation of our own present.⁶

Thinking can at last take its departure from an "attitude" or "ethos" of "philosophical interrogation -- one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject," all the while engaging in "the permanent reactivation" of a "permanent critique" of ourselves and our historical era.⁷ In this mode of interrogation, thinking learns to operate "at the frontiers" of transgression, and the matter at hand is to question "what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory" and to discern in this the place occupied by "whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints."⁸

The task of thinking calls this thinker to a genealogical, archaeological, non-transcendental "historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, and saying," and requires that we "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think." In this project, thinking seeks to "give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom."⁹

⁴ Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," p. 12.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," p. 12.

⁶ Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," p. 17.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" tr. Catherine Porter, in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 42-43.

⁸ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" p. 45.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" p. 46.

The goal in this regard is to reveal the passing events "in their proper dispersion," that is, "to identify the accidents, the minute deviations -- or conversely, the complete reversals -- the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us," thereby "fragmenting" what was thought to be unified and revealing "the heterogeneity of what was imagined to be consistent with itself."¹⁰ The challenge is to think in terms of the matter and philosophical urgency of the present, to conduct an "ontology of the present" which is simultaneously "an ontology of ourselves," and so to "record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality."

Here, the task of thinking is to engage the operative "systems of subjection," not to reveal "the anticipatory power of meaning," not to pave the way for some form of "universal reciprocity," but to engage the "violences" operating in a system of rules, and to arrive at an analysis of the ever-present "hazardous play of dominations."¹¹ Under the force of an ontology of the present, this play of dominations reveals systems of "ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation" of discourses of truth and power.¹² As a result, thinking transforms its relation to the subject, which was previously thought to be either "transcendental in relation to the field of events" or something that "runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history," and through this transgression the subject is seen to be lodged within a stream of forces and events as a locus of constitution arising within a historical framework.¹³ Such thinking seeks to understand the forces of production operating to produce truths, subjects, and relations of power -- hence also the moralities and various practices of liberty and domination that give structure to human and interhuman relations, and to the

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," tr. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Foucault Reader*, p. 82.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," p. 83.

¹² Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Foucault Reader*, p. 74.

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," p. 59.

constraining networks, discourses, institutions, practices, and strategic games of truth and power involved in the constitution of our present life.¹⁴

This practice of philosophical interrogation steps back from our immersion in experience without disengaging from the present. We remain in every way a being-in-the-world, as captured by the forces of engagement as we are liberated from their seductive collusion. We do not seek the origins of our problematized existence for the sake of a nostalgic and transgressive return to a mode of thinking that is somehow unencumbered by such practices of domination. Stepping back by means of genealogical thinking means becoming immersed in the hidden and not-so-hidden details of the present and striving to disturb and disrupt the concealing powers of domination shaping the constitution of human subjects. There is no presumption of having revealed an "analytic of Dasein," nor of having revealed technological enframing as the driving will to power of contemporary life. And yet, in the practical singularity of this mode of thinking, in the effort to reveal power in all its present manifestations, we gain perspective on what it means to exist in the world, at the point of the tear, living within the interplay of forces comprising our contemporary life. But we never see our way clear of the hidden dynamics and constraining practices that are continuing to shape our worldly involvement. The task is infinite in the most fundamental sense of all, not as a project we could in principle exhaust if only we had sufficient time and paid sufficient attention to the sum total of detail comprising the present, but as a project whose boundaries are perpetually transgressed anew with each sweeping gesture of thought.¹⁵

Thinking from Within the Question of Being

The second thinker thinks his way back to an origin occluded by a newer beginning in which our own present has been captured, disciplined, and brought to bear on itself as standing reserve.¹⁶ The newer beginning has interrupted our

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," tr. J. D. Gauthier, in *The Final Foucault*, eds. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 1-21.

¹⁵ This notion of positive infinity is developed in the working notes to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, in contrast to the Hegelian/Husserlian sense of negative infinity.

¹⁶ The following presentation will draw from Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 130ff.

primordial encounter with being, undermined the original *polemos* that marked “the essential belonging together of being and apprehension.”¹⁷ In the wake of the new beginning, “unconcealment,” as “the space created for the appearing of the essent,” has “broken down.” And while “idea” and “category” “were saved from the ruins,” thinking has been reduced to a play of false appearances, on the assumption that “a ready-made logos” must “assimilate and accommodate itself to a ready-made . . . object.”¹⁸

Through this transfiguration, Being is resignified as *subjectum*, configured “in the sense of permanent presence, already-thereness.” In the process, apprehension, the original partner in the showing of being, “is taken over” by a transfigured *logos* that has been reduced to the discursive practice of an “evaluating representation.” In this transfiguration of apprehension, the human subject is ensconced in language, with no sense of how this play of language “can only have arisen from the overpowering, the strange and terrible,” that is, “through man’s departure into being.”¹⁹ Instead, there is a new determinative sense of the human essence, reflecting the creative power to produce and master language as the basis for a refined *techné* that operates to conceal the overpowering unhomely character of human existence in a “homely” cloak of “customary, familiar, secure” categories.²⁰

In place of the founding mode of “reciprocal confrontation” that marked “the essential belonging-together of being and apprehension,” the new origin, as a second beginning, delivers the human subject over to a project of “capture and constraint.” Through its mastery of this newly refined *logos* of subjugation, the transfigured human subject manages to reduce the overpowering “eruption and upheaval” of being to the “customary, familiar limits” of the “permanent, always identical, already-there given.”²¹ But through this transfiguration, human

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.140.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.190.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.171.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.151.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp140, 151, 154, 157, 193, and 202.

experience is cut off from “the power of appearance and the struggle with it” that marks “an essential part of being-there.”²²

The return to the first beginning marks a reengagement with the original “contending belonging together” of apprehension and being. In this engagement, being dominates thinking. Even so, there is a reciprocal confrontation between being and apprehension. In response to a “need” and “affliction” of being, “the sapient man sails into the very middle of the dominant order, he tears it open and violently carries being into the essent,” though never with the power to master the overpowering.²³ Still, “the creative man, who sets forth into the un-said, who breaks into the un-thought, compels the unhappened to happen and makes the unseen appear,” and so stands “at all times in venture.” And in this venturing gesture to master being, “he must risk dispersion, in-stability, disorder, mischief.”²⁴ But this is to risk the “happening of the unfamiliar,” “the event of homelessness,” as a “setting-apart” in “strangeness” that is also a “bringing-together” of being and being-there. For the thinker who stands at the first beginning, this reflects “the initial [and “decisive”] disclosure of the essence of being-human.”²⁵

²² Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp.150-51.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.163.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.161.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.167. See also p. 151.