

Joyful Thinking-Thanking: A Reading of Heidegger's "What Is Called Thinking?"

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Interpretations of Heidegger's existentialism tend to emphasize states of mind such as anxiety and boredom in his work, and his analysis of human being-toward-death. With such talk, one might rightly come to the conclusion that Heidegger had a morbid fascination with death and the horrible aspects of life. However, I am not alone in recognizing that Heidegger was not really a philosopher of anxiety, but, rather, one of joy (Robbins, 2003; Smith, 1981). Read in context, his analyses of anxiety and death are preparatory for an authentic appropriation of finitude in which one finds what Heidegger calls an "unshakeable joy." And it is also within this spirit of joy that Heidegger explores in a radical way – what is called thinking?

"Before one's individual ability-to-be, there goes an unshakable joy in this possibility."

– Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

What is Called Thinking?

Was heist denken? What is called thinking? Or, what calls for thinking? This is the title of one of Heidegger's (1968) major works, and the German is ambiguous. It can be interpreted as either "What is *called* thinking?" or "What *calls for* thinking?" Heidegger (1976) found it ironic, and a sign of the times, that this book was one of his least read books, even as he considered it to address the most important topic. The important play between the two connotations of the title leads us into a deeper understanding of what Heidegger means by "meditative thinking." Heidegger means to playfully demonstrate in the title that to even begin addressing the question of *what thinking is called*, one must also answer at the same time the question of *what calls for thinking* (Stark, 1998).

Theories of rationality typically consider thinking to be a matter of following the correct method. In other words, thinking becomes reduced to a 'rationality' that is a means to an end. Thinking, that is, is reduced to instrumental or calculative reason. Yet such a calculative reason is oblivious to the all-important question that asks *what one's thinking should be about*. The about-ness of calculative rationality is taken-for-granted.

The calculative rationalizing philosopher is *thoughtless* with regard to what is most worthy of thought. To put it another way, in terms closely associated with sociologist Max Weber, Heidegger is saying that instrumental rationality as a means to an end always already implies a substantive rational end to the instrumental method. But instrumental rationality remains oblivious of and thoughtless in regard to what it is calculating about. In essence, such a calculative rationality would inevitably degenerate into a vicious circle of calculation merely for the sake of further calculations, ad infinitum. Indeed, it is just such a calculative circularity that is the essence of what Heidegger calls the *Gestell* – the technological worldview of our age – which orders merely for the sake of further ordering and in which things and persons are resources made to stand by awaiting further ordering.

So, when Heidegger speaks of “our thought-provoking time,” he is referring to our technological age. In our technological age, there are few spaces for thought worthiness. Our age is very different than the age of the Greek, a time when the issue of thought-worthiness was addressed. For this reason, Heidegger becomes entranced with Parmenides’ statement, “One should both say and think that Being is” (Heidegger, 1968, p. 168). Clearly, the fragment indicates an intimate connection between thinking and Being, a notion that carries over – not without some loss of clarity – into the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Human beings as thinkers strive toward the excellence of the highest being by thinking about thinking. For human beings, *thinking is most thought-worthy*. And in our age, *what is most thought-provoking* when we think about thinking is that we are *not* thinking.

Thus, when Heidegger wrote “in our thought-provoking time,” he was referring not just to the current events of the day, but to our age as the epoch of the *Gestell*. In our time, we are still not thinking and, in this context, Heidegger refers to Nietzsche’s diagnosis of our age as a time of nihilism: “The wasteland grows.” If it is Being that most calls for thought, what most calls to be thought about in our age is the *forgetting or withdrawal of Being*. And it is due to the withdrawal of Being that we are still not thinking. In contrast to Hegel’s notion of history, Heidegger’s is a history wherein we find ourselves increasingly fallen from and more distant from Being. Being withdraws in our technological age as the experience of thinking is reduced to calculative rationality. ‘Thinking’ has become the experience of using rationality as a device to operate on a world of things

already reified into a network of ends. In our age, Heidegger (1968) will go on to argue, *ratio* has trumped *legein*. The thoughtfulness of calculative rationality threatens to obliterate the possibility for being-thoughtful.

When Heidegger (1968) writes that “we are still not thinking,” he means that we are not thinking upon that which is most thought-worthy: Being. He argues, as well, that we shall continue to miss what is thought-worthy if we continue to use “thinking” as a technological device rather than thinking of thinking as thoughtful dwelling. Unless our thinking is rooted in the being-thoughtful of dwelling, our thinking remains homeless. What it means to dwell as being-thoughtful Heidegger attempts to illuminate by tracing what was lost in translation when the Greek word for thinking, *legein*, was translated into the Latin, *ratio*. He finds that two significations for *legein* are not found in *ratio*: a) thinking as speaking and b) thinking as gathering.

Thinking as speaking is a speaking and thinking which is attuned to how Being calls for thinking in language. The address or language of Being is historical, not historiological, in that it arises out of the sending of Being. Thus, when *legein* is translated into *ratio* and when *ratio*, for instance, is taken up as *Vernunft* and *Grund* in history, no human being made such decisions per se, but rather “language itself is speaking to us” (Caputo, 1986, p. 73). Philosophy and hence thinking has historically been translated into the language of “reason” which covers over the more fundamental sense of what serves as its primal source. In the Roman, *ratio*, there is no obvious connection between thinking and Being. Yet, when *ratio* is traced back to *legein*, from which *Logos* is derived, Heidegger (1974) finds that it means “to collect together,” “to lay one thing beside another,” “to arrange one thing after another” (p. 178). Thus, we find the second meaning of *legein* as a gathering.

“*Legein* and *logos* are the letting lie forward of a thing which comes to presence in its presence,” writes Heidegger (1974, p. 179). What for the Greeks is that-which-comes-to-presence-in-its-presence? It is being in its Being; thus, “*logos* means Being” (p. 179). Thinking as gathering, then, is the gathering of Being. “Thinking cuts furrows into the soil of Being,” writes Heidegger (1959, p. 70). *What calls for thinking* then tells us *what is called thinking*: thinking is called a gathering for it gathers *what is called to be gathered*. What calls to be gathered? Being-thoughtful!

All of this may sound as though it were a circular logic going nowhere, but with proper reflection one can see how Heidegger meditatively deepens

what it means to think and in that sense is *performing* for us the *process* of thinking. Heidegger shows us *how* to think even as he shows us how thinking is a showing, a presencing or gathering of what *calls* to be thought. Heidegger demonstrates for us how being-thoughtful is not a matter of performing a method of mental activity that is applied to get from point (a) to point (b). On the contrary, he shows us how being-thoughtful is an encounter with Being.

As mentioned above, *lesein* and *logos* are the “letting lie forward of the thing which comes to presence in the presence” (Heidegger, 1974, p. 17). With regard to that which lies forward (*das Verliengende*), it is the upon-which that forms the basis for “properties” and that about-which that we may speak. In this sense, *logos* also means “ground” (Caputo, 1986, p. 79). Hence, when one says *logos* in the Greek sense, one speaks in the same breath of Being and ground. Thus, Heraclitus can say, “If you have heard not me, but the *logos*, then it is wise to say accordingly: all is one.” But this early Greek understanding of the belonging together of Being and ground becomes, in time, corrupted. Historically, the belonging together of Being and ground was forgotten.

Philosophy as a thing of reason is the consequence of the fall from the original early Greek sense that “the thing lies forth of itself, that it rises up and stands before us on its own grounds” (p. 79). The will-to-power disclosed by Nietzsche, then, has its roots in this oblivion, by which the history of Western thought becomes an attempt to submit things to human reason for the purpose of certifying its existence.

In contrast to calculative reason that derives from the severance of Being from its grounds in Western thought, meditative thinking is a thinking that leaves metaphysics alone. It is a thinking that, instead, is called to think upon that which lies forth of itself without why – that is, without grounds. Heidegger (1974) writes:

Insofar as Being is, it itself has no ground. Yet this is not so because it is self-grounded, but rather because every form of grounding, even and precisely that [which occurs] through itself, remains inappropriate to Being as ground. (p. 185)

Being, that is, cannot be explained upon grounds outside of itself. On the contrary, to think Being, one must *let Being be*: let it lie forth (*lesein*) and emerge of itself (*physis*).

Thinking as Play

Being as that which lies forth from itself is “unmeasurable” and thus cannot be measured by the standards of conventional rationality. Nor is it irrational. Rather, Being itself gives the measure to thought. As Caputo (1986) puts it, “It is not man or human reason which is the measure of things, but Being itself which is the measure of thought” (p. 81). Thinking, then, “brings thought into play with that which Being as Being rests, although not with that on which it rests as on its ground” (Heidegger, 1974, p. 186). In contrast to the calculative thinking of traditional rationality, meditative thinking is “bringing into play” that in which “Being as Being rests.”

The notion of ‘play’ is quite alien to traditional rationality. Traditionally, ‘play’ is understood as the break one takes from the serious business of life. Play in this sense is understood to be a deviation or departure from rationality, from the calculation of ordering for the sake of further ordering that has the character of utmost seriousness. However, Heidegger insists that the ‘play’ of meditative thinking is not merely the play of beings, but on the contrary, the serious business of rationality is itself grounded on the ‘play’ of Being. The ‘play’ of Being itself, which cannot be rationalized in terms of something else but like the rose is without why. “The play is without why,” writes Heidegger (1974). “It plays for the whole that it plays. There remains only play: the highest and the deepest.” (p. 188). The mysterious play of being cannot be accounted for in terms of an external cause or purpose; rather, the play of Being is the groundless ground of play which one arrives at through a leap into thought.

The playfulness of being-thoughtful flies in the face of traditional notions of rationality as a mental activity by which one calculates the means to given ends, or even the ends themselves. Yet, if thinking is not the mental activity we have assumed it to be, what is it? And how does it take on the character of playfulness? And in what sense could it have anything whatsoever to say if not reasons or purposes which are rational grounds for the existence of entities? What then?

The Gift and Thinking-Thanking

I submit that we find several clues in the following passage by Heidegger (1933):

Occasionally we still have the feeling that violence has long been done to the thingly element of things and that thought has played a part in this violence, for which reason people disavow thought instead of taking pains to make it more thoughtful. But in defining the essence of the thing, what is the use of a feeling, however certain, if thought alone has the right to speak here? Perhaps, however, what we call feeling or mood, here and in similar instances, is more reasonable – that is, more intelligently perceptive – because more open to Being than all that reason which, having meanwhile become *ratio*, was misinterpreted as being rational. The hankering after the irrational, as abortive offspring of the unthought rational, therewith performed a curious service. To be sure, the current thing-concept always fits each thing. Nevertheless, it does not lay hold of things as it is in its own being, but makes an assault upon it. (pp. 150-151).

What a remarkable passage! Here, in a relatively brief and rarely cited passage of Heidegger's essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art," he speaks of the violence of calculative rationality's assault upon the thing. But more importantly, he states that the violence done to thing is not 'intelligently perceived' by rationality (that which reason has become as *ratio*), but rather is disclosed through *feeling*. Further, feeling discloses as well that thought as *ratio* has perpetuated this violence. Consequently, Heidegger states further that *feeling* or mood is *more reasonable* than what has typically passed for thinking as rationality. More reasonable? In what sense?

We have already seen that by the term "thinking," Heidegger is not referring to what is typically understood as the mental activity of cognition. Rather, thinking is being-thoughtful, dwelling, speaking, gathering, playing, Being. Meditative thinking as thinking is *letting be*. Now, however, we find that Heidegger asserts that what he calls thinking [what calls for thinking] is *closer to feeling or mood* than what usually passes for thinking as calculative rationality.

In this light, consider the following passage from Heidegger's (1968) "What is Called Thinking?":

Joyful things, too, and beautiful and mysterious and gracious things give us food for thought...if only we do not reject the gift by regarding everything that is joyful, beautiful and gracious as the kind of things which should be left to feeling and experience, and kept out of the winds of thought." (Heidegger, 1968, p. 31).

Here, Heidegger says that joyful, beautiful, mysterious and gracious things give us food for thought. Indeed, he states that to not thinking upon things that are joyful, beautiful, mysterious and gracious would be to reject a *gift*. Further, he goes on to state that the way to reject the gift would be to leave the kinds of things that are joyful, beautiful, mysterious and gracious to feelings and experience that remain severed from the “winds of thought.”

In the above passage from “The Origin of the Work of Art,” we saw that Heidegger does not cleanly separate thinking and feeling; on the contrary, he asserts that feeling is more *intelligently perceptive* of Being than what we typically understand to be thinking as calculative rationality. These two passages, taken together, suggest that the food for thought, as in meditative thinking, are things that are joyful, beautiful, mysterious, and gracious. Now, one must ask, what would be the feeling or mood that would be the most attuned to things that are joyful, beautiful, mysterious, and gracious – indeed, to the play of Being? Clearly, the most intelligently perceptive answer is joy. Could it be that the attunement or mood of being-thoughtful is *joy*? Yes, I believe so, if we are to take Heidegger seriously...er rather, playfully. Indeed, *thoughtful thinking is joyful thinking*.

In what sense is being-thoughtful a joyful thinking? Let us recall that the call of Being is the call to experience the wonder of all wonders, that the being is, that it stands out over against nothingness (Heidegger, 2002). In the case of anxiety, the dread is a response to the wonder and awe at the “abyss” of Being. In the case of joy, Being is received in its *plenitude* as the *gift* that it *is* – the “it gives” that withdraws in its giving of beings. Whereas anxiety recoils in terror at the abyss of Being, joy is a *gracious acceptance* and *thanking* (*Danken*) for the *favor* (*Huld*) and *grace* (*Gunst*) which Being has bestowed upon the human being (*Dasein*) by giving itself as a matter for thought. *In joy, thinking becomes a gracious thanking* (Heidegger, 1965, p. 49). Indeed, a joyful thinking which is a gracious thanking requires no explanation, for explanations (formed from the question “why?”) arise from the desire to fill a lack, from a desire for answers as to the grounds of Being. Yet, in the gracious thanking of joyful being-thoughtful, the grounds of Being are Being itself in itself, resting on its own ground, without why.

Joy as the Attunement to the Playful Dance of Being

If we listen to language speaking in joyful being-thoughtful, we hear Being speak of what is joyful, beautiful, mysterious, gracious. We hear too

Being's play. The English word play has obscure origins, but is related to a term in Middle Dutch, *pleien*, which means 'dance about, jump for joy' (Ayto, 1990). In the leap into thought that is thankful being-thoughtful, joy is the attunement to the playful dance of Being. The playful dance of thinking-thanking is the proper way to 'rejoice' in the gift of Being. 'Rejoice' is a term which derives from the Latin *gaudere* from which is derived *gaudium*, 'joy' (Ayto, 1990). A closely related term is *gracious*, which is derived from the Latin *gratus*, which meant 'pleasing' (Ayto, 1990). Its English derivatives include the words *grateful*, *gratify*, *gratuity*, as well as *grace*.

What is joyful is *pleasing*, and joyful thinking-thanking is pleased with Being as it is, without why. To en-joy Being is to be *gratified*, that is, satisfied or pleased, but also *grateful*, which means both 'pleasing' and 'thankful.' Joyful thinking-thanking in being pleased with the gift of Being, acknowledges the favor of Being as *grace*. Thinking-thanking recognizes the gratuitousness of the gift of Being, given without why, unearned and without recompense, costing nothing, unwarranted, without cause or purpose. Gratified by the gratuitous grace of Being, thinking-thanking perceives the beautiful *gracefulness* of Being.

The word *beauty* is derived from the Anglo-Norman *beute* and Old French *bealte* from Vulgar Latin *bellitas*, a derivative of Latin *bellus*, 'beautiful' (Ayto, 1990). Ultimately, *bellus* is derived from the Latin *bonus*, meaning 'good,' from which is also derived the English terms *beatific* and *bounty*. In acknowledging the beautiful gracefulness of Being, thinking-thanking recognizes its goodness. In acknowledging the goodness of the play of Being as its own ground, thinking-thanking is beatific, such that Being takes on a *blissful* appearance. In the midst of the dance of Being, thinking-thanking is *beatified*, made supremely happy in reception of the vision of the direct knowledge of blessed enjoyment. In such a blissful state, thinking-thanking receives the goodness of Being's *bounty*, given liberally by the generosity of the "it gives," Being.

In the beatific abundance of the grace of Being, thinking-thanking is joyfully fulfilled. In the midst of the dance of the revelation of Being, Being nevertheless withdraws from being fully understood and remains *mysterious*. When thinking-thanking attempts to seek grounds to explain the excitement of the dance of Being, the "it gives" withdraws and wonder gives over to mere curiosity. Thinking-thanking then falls back into *ratio*.

Let us, in the spirit of Thanksgiving, give ourselves over to a thinking that calls to be thought, a thinking that is a thanking.

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