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Heidegger, Deconstruction and Responsibility: Some Critical Reflections on Nobuhiko Itani's Paper 'Beyond the Self'

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper should be read as a direct response to Nobuhiko Itani's paper "'Beyond The Self" as a Goal of Education'. I emphasise this point because other writers from the Institute blend their responses with original contributions drawn from their respective fields of research. In contrast, what follows should perhaps, in the main, be read as a series of critical remarks or queries pertaining to arguments and assertions taken from Itani's text. Of course, this is not to say that there will be no deviation along paths opened up by Itani's rich discussion.

II. FINDING COMMONALITY

One of Itani's objectives in his paper is to find a commonality amongst previous studies of ontological education. He looks at the work of a number of writers and notes that one theme that links the authors' is the 'deconstruction of education as utilization' (Itani, 2008). I think what Itani means by this, is that the respective writers in this field show how the technological understanding of being (diagnosed by Heidegger) manifests itself in education and then go on to criticize this tendency. Hubert Dreyfus provides a useful illustration of what Heidegger's account of the technological understanding of being amounts to:

We don't even seek truth anymore but simply efficiency. For us everything is to be made as flexible as possible so as to be used as efficiently as possible. If I had a Styrofoam cup here, it would be a very good example. A Styrofoam cup is a perfect sort of object, given our understanding of being, namely it keeps hot things hot, and cold things cold, and you can dispose of it when you are done with it. It efficiently and flexibly satisfies our desires. It's utterly different from, say, a Japanese tea teacup, which is delicate, traditional, and socialises people. It doesn't keep the tea hot for long, and probably doesn't satisfy anybody's desires, but that's not important (Dreyfus, 1987, p. 273).

The writers Itani refers to are therefore critical of how education is treated in terms

of ‘utility’—who could doubt the superiority of the Styrofoam cup? This explains the treatment of people as ‘human resources’ and the preoccupation with notions of ‘excellence’ and ‘what works’ at the expense of richer possibilities for thinking about what education might be/become. Now, the fact these authors are critical of thinking about education in terms of utility is perhaps clear, yet whether this has anything to do with deconstruction is another matter. In one sense, taking Itani to task over the use of the term ‘deconstruction’ might seem pedantic. After all, these days, the term is often used simply as a synonym for critique. However, issues pertaining to ‘deconstruction’ are particularly relevant in the case of Heidegger because (in a sense) he coined the term. Indeed, Heidegger’s treatment of the term deconstruction features in his attempt to find the way out of metaphysics. This entails going back to the origin of metaphysics (this origin should not be thought of as an historical moment but a structural possibility). To do this involves ‘destruction—a critical process in which the traditional concepts, which at first must necessarily be employed, are de-constructed (kritischer Abbau) down to the sources from which they were drawn’ (Heidegger, 1982, pp. 22-23).

Of course Derrida, whose work is heavily influenced by Heidegger is the philosopher most famously associated with ‘deconstruction’. Like Heidegger, Derrida wishes to challenge metaphysical assumptions regarding the philosophy of presence. However, Derrida is suspicious of Heidegger’s notion of ‘deconstructing down’ as this implies the distillation down to a primordial essence that brings metaphysics into being. Derrida cannot follow Heidegger down this path, yet of course this is the path that Heidegger takes in his critique of the ‘technological understanding of Being’. For Heidegger, the time of the early Greeks provides a model of the gathering of beings under Being. The technological understanding of Being marks the late development of a metaphysics that departed from this primordial space. Whether or not Itani’s ‘previous authors’ adhere to a Heideggerian form of deconstruction is questionable. This is certainly not the case with Standish whose general output does not conform to discourses of nostalgia pertaining to lost origins. Indeed, as will hopefully become clear when we look at Itani’s approach to ethics and ontology, it might appear that what marks previous ontological approaches to ethics is that they do not engage in deconstructive (in the Heideggerian sense) strategies and that this is actually what Itani is critical of.

Unease with Itani’s search for commonality amongst earlier and more recent studies is compounded by his claim that ‘previous studies share the concept of openness to the Being itself’ (Itani, 2008). Itani does not state this explicitly, but we might take him to mean that for the writers he alludes to, going beyond the self involves an openness to things as they ‘are’ and that this marks a departure from the egoistic ‘self’s’ attempt to control meaning. This kind of control is coterminous with the technological understanding of being and must be avoided. Although ‘openness’ is clearly characteristic of previous studies, it is perhaps questionable as to whether or not the different contributors treat the terms ‘openness’ and ‘Being’ in the same way. For example, there is a great deal of difference between the kind of receptiveness to things and suspicion of mastery that Standish describes and the kinds of ‘authentic experience’ that characterise some of the other approaches described by Itani. Shortly, we shall see how Itani, when writing about ethics and ontology, introduces problems pertaining to authenticity.

III. ETHICS AND ONTOOLOGY

A significant part of Itani's analysis focuses on ethical questions. For Itani, previous theories of ontological education suffer from bringing what he calls 'naive ethical evaluations' into the picture. He argues that writers in the field have apparently replaced 'the contents of the ontological experience with other concepts such as selflessness, responsibility, patience and humility' (Itani, 2008). This assertion raises a few questions. Firstly, what were the 'contents' of the ontological experience prior to their being replaced? Also, it is hard to imagine how such an experience might be thinkable without a commitment to selflessness, responsibility, patience and humility'. Indeed, if openness to Being is somehow possible, surely such characteristics are prerequisites for its possibility.

Perhaps we get a clearer picture of Itani's perspective on ethics and ontology when he takes the interesting step of citing Adorno's critique of the 'ethical implication in ontology'. Following Adorno, Itani appears to be suggesting that putting an ethics of openness into ontology leads to submission. The vacuum created by the vague notion of openness to Being creates passivity to something beyond the self and that this could be anything depending on the political arrangements of time and place. For Adorno, Nazism represents an instance of blending ethics into ontology.

Having cited Adorno, it is surprising that Itani chooses not to focus on Heidegger's 'unfortunate' involvement with Nazism. It might therefore be helpful to introduce Tubbs's powerful treatment of this issue. Indeed, there are some parallels between what Itani is after and Tubbs' argument. Tubbs straightforwardly asks: How is it that Heidegger ends up being a member of the Nazi party? How does it come about that someone who writes about the necessity of the teacher to contain his own withdrawal writes: 'knowledge means: to be master of the situation into which we are placed?' (Heidegger in Tubbs, 2005, p. 316).

Tubbs argues that Heidegger grounds 'spirit' or struggle (as regards power) in Nazism. When Tubbs talks about spirit, we might take it that he is referring to the third partner in the relationship between authority (*Das Man*) and freedom. The third partner is the struggle between these two things. Tubbs argues that Heidegger simply replaces this struggle with 'the mastery of the properly educated will of the German people' (Tubbs, 2005, p. 317). Heidegger maintains that: 'asking questions is always marching ahead, sounding the future' (Heidegger in Tubbs, 2005, p. 317). So it would appear that, in some sense, for Heidegger, the future is already known—we are not open to it. Heidegger argues that education should represent the spiritual will to serve whereby the self is sacrificed for a genuine understanding of Being that is manifested in the destiny of the *Volk* and the National Socialist revolution.

Tubbs maintains that the relationship between teacher and student is always problematised by the struggle regarding power and freedom. The teacher who teaches for doubt and questioning is not only concerned with the negation of certainty in theory and principle but knows he knows he must bring it about in practice. In this process, the teacher can influence the student but in doing so is, in some sense, no longer the teacher because the teacher cannot remain the same after the work as before it. The work is his education, a work that requires the learning of both teacher and student.

Tubbs argues that Heidegger's description of the student-teacher relationship differs from this, as it is the teacher who calls the student to self-examination and questioning—to his own *Dasein*. Heidegger describes how Being withdraws from the question leaving only its trace as 'possibility', and this is the same for the teacher, who withdraws from the truth of his teaching to be present as the trace of its possibility.

Tubbs maintains that the withdrawal of the teacher is simply a rhetorical ploy. The teacher withdraws from what is already known in advance. In doing this he denies the student her own work and protects himself from the negative implications of that work. Heidegger says that the difficulty of the teacher is ‘to let learn’ but really he is talking about the dissemblance of the teacher who is and remains master. Tubbs argues that it is in the risk of the relation to the other, not in the withdrawal from that relation that the truly philosophical teacher represents the truth of that dilemma and opposition that constitute his work. Heidegger does not risk the difficulty and struggles that will not stand being owned by any individual or race. Philosophy of withdrawal becomes the philosophy of mastery.

As mentioned earlier, there are some similarities between what Tubbs and Itani are attempting to do. What Tubbs criticises in Heidegger, Itani criticizes in his followers—namely filling in a space made room for by a philosophy that masquerades as the champion of passivity. Itani argues that bringing ethical weight to ontology, results in the kind of control that characterizes a technological understanding of Being—the ontological experience becomes a ‘means’ for ‘getting a good personality, which is to be evaluated in the well-worn perspective of the ethics’. Here, Itani appears to be critical of the aforementioned championing of ‘authenticity’. Attempts to achieve authenticity do not transcend the technological understanding of being, but reinforce it. Consequently, ‘openness’ if treated in a particular way can (paradoxically) become a means of getting control—of bettering oneself. This seems close to what Tubbs says about the paradox in Heidegger’s thought where openness and standing back can result in problematic power relations. Indeed, we might say that both Tubbs and Itani throw light on the problematic treatment of the term authenticity.

Despite some similarities, there are significant differences between Tubbs and Itani’s arguments. Here is Itani: ‘In fact... the previous students of ontological education have never forgotten our everyday life. Rather ontological education itself is still arrested in the materialized world’ (2008). Here, talking about ethics, Itani is following Heidegger’s backward look to the Ancient Greeks when (according to the latter) thinking had yet to be compartmentalised into disciplines such as philosophy. Here is Heidegger: ‘The tragedies of Sophocles—provided such a comparison is at all permissible—preserve the *ethos* in their sagas more primordially than Aristotle’s lectures on ethics’ (Heidegger, 1982, pp. 22-23). Heidegger is arguing that thinking about ethics (as many philosophers do) in terms of virtues or principles impoverishes and limits our understanding of what is valuable. Following this line of thought, which involves the distillation of metaphysics down to its origins (to the original absence that makes metaphysics possible), Itani argues that we must:

... reconsider the possibility of ontological education by returning to its origin. According to Heidegger, the ontological experience is an experience of nothing. The quest for the Being compels us to confront the absolute unfathomableness of the whole world and even of ourselves. Our life loses all importance, as the Being loses its self-evident meanings. No criteria exist that enable us to evaluate the world in terms of its utility. Even ethical evaluation is deprived of its significance (Itani, 2008).

Here, Itani is replicating Heidegger’s desire to move beyond metaphysics and ‘ethics’. It is not ‘authenticity’ that Itani finds problematic in the work of writers on ontology, but their inauthentic treatment of authenticity—their failure to make the journey back to the origin of metaphysics and beyond. In some respects, Itani’s critique sounds

persuasive—the only way to escape the limits imposed by metaphysics, ethics and the technological understanding of being is to wipe the slate clean. However, his argument demonstrates the very renegeing on responsibility that Tubbs finds so problematic. Derrida has regularly demonstrated the impossibility of moving beyond metaphysics—the very attempt to move beyond it sets up a binary opposition that is integral to metaphysics. Derrida shows the importance that the metaphysics of presence has for the moral life. Although we should not succumb to the lure of foundationalism (presence), the conjuration of presence is what allows us to take responsibility for anything—the fact that presence exists in the form of the ‘trace’ is what allows us to take a stand on things. Problems do not arise by taking a stand in regards to a particular issue. Rather, they emerge when that stand is conceived of in absolutist or foundationalist terms—when we think we’ve found the ‘authentic’ solution to a problem and fail to acknowledge that problem’s undecidable aspect. It should also be noted that Heidegger does not manage to avoid taking a moral stance in regard to the technological understanding of Being. If he did not think there was something wrong with it, then he would not spend so much time and effort in trying to think outside/beyond it.

IV. CONCLUSION

Itani’s suspicion of ‘naive’ approaches to ethics and ontology (which often involve the conjuration of an authentic space) is well founded. However, the thrust of his argument moves towards a primal authenticity that is not realisable—there is no way of going beyond metaphysics. Following Tubbs and Derrida, perhaps what is needed is the recognition of the ethical problems that surround ontological approaches to education so that they might be addressed. This would not involve the evocation of a primal space but a form of action that acknowledges the logic of the trace and an understanding of ‘spirit’ as struggle. If we act in the knowledge that no absolute solution can be found—that questions of value cannot be avoided—we acknowledge our vulnerability and are consequently open to the limits of ‘openness’.

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