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The Ontology of Hope: Lessons from a Child

by

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And now this is 'an inheritance' –

Upright, rudimentary, unshiftable planked

In the long ago, yet willable forward

Again and again and again

(Seamus Heaney 2000, ix)

Introduction

Postmodernism arose in part as a result of Martin Heidegger's radical critique of the ontology of self-identical substance that had, he claimed,

underwritten the history of philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche. This ontology is straightforward and desperately ordinary sounding: things are what they are, independent of their relations to other things. If things are what they are independent of their relations to other things, perspectives, knowledge, opinions and approaches to such things are necessarily subsequent to this ontological given.

It was this ontological Urdoxa—this "founding ontological belief"—about how things exist that was critiqued by Heidegger, a critique which was subsequently taken up by one of his students, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Part of this critique involved insinuating the idea of temporality and finitude, not into how we might know about things in our world, but into the Being of those very things. As Gadamer puts it, the long, sometimes contradictory, sometimes tangled ways in which, for example, the images of Plato's cave analogy have been handed down to us is "not at all a question of a mere subjective variety of conceptions, but of [this tale's] own possibilities of being that emerge as [this tale] explicates itself, as it were, in a variety of its aspects." (Gadamer 1989, 118). This is why he insists that interpretation, first and foremost, involves "breaking open the being of the object" (362). First and foremost, we must break apart the idea that the things that have been handed down to us in our world are first of all self-identical things that are themselves despite their historical travails. Rather, a thing is how it has "collected and gathered itself" (97) over time. This puts interpretation in an awful, painful position of realizing that, to understand something is to hold it open and susceptible to a future that has not yet arrived and that, despite all our best efforts, our knowing and planning cannot outrun. This susceptibility to the future involves, also, and of course, the susceptibility of the past to turn out to be something that it currently is not. This implication of futurity and ancestry is precisely at the heart, once again, of Heidegger's critique of the "metaphysics of presence."

At least since Heidegger, this "metaphysical betrayal" (Caputo 1987, 4) of the troubled being of things has been afoot in philosophy. It is less clear, however, that the old ghosts have actually been laid to rest. Consider this passage from Bill Doll's infamous article (1993, 289) regarding the status of recursion in the humanities:

A recursive curriculum emphasizes the notion of returning—to look at itself, yet again, in a new light, for the first time. This metaphorical

playing happens more easily in the humanities than in the sciences. In mathematics, recursion is synonymous with mathematical iteration—working an equation in a nonlinear way so that the solution y (in an x - y formula) is fed back into the equation as a new x . This is done over and over, each new solution (y) becoming input (x) for the next repetition of the equation. It is these recursion/iterations that make up the marvelous fractal computer graphics one sees in chaos mathematics.

In the humanities, however, recursion has a broader meaning. Here, it refers to the act of a mind or self "looping back," "turning around" or reflecting on itself, and in this way actually creating itself as a conscious self—the highest expression of human awareness.

We both love and radically disagree with this passage. We believe that recursion is not an act of a mind or a self, but is, rather, an ontological characteristic of the being of the inheritances entrusted to us as teachers and students. Hermeneutics suggests that things themselves have a recursive character, a character of ancestry, returning, re-forming, transformation, and so on. It is because of this ontological character of the recursive being of things that our recursive conversations about them are appropriate and worthwhile. Thus, rather than recursion being an act of the mind, or of a self "looping back" or "turning around", things themselves have a way of turning on us, demanding things of us, laying claim to our attention.

What if reflection is not a human activity on a stubbornly self-identical subject, yielding different understandings, different perspectives, different points of view? What if multiplicity is just the way things show up in the world, not just as nouns that must be somehow be verbed? That is, what if a thing is its multiplicity--not an entity knowable in multiple ways, from multiple perspectives--but existing only and always in its actual diversity?

Eating a Riddle

In December 2000, we spent 10 days in China visiting schools and talking to educators. We were treated royally, always fed far beyond reason with a gracious hospitality that far exceeded anything we had expected. At one such dinner, hosted by the principal of a very progressive middle school, we were served a riddle. A sculpted vegetable plate was placed before us. Rising elegantly from the center was the

carved figure of an animal.

"What do you see?" asked the principal, turning the plate one way.

"A rabbit," we replied.

"And now," he asked, rotating it 180 degrees. "Now what is it?"

"A deer!" we exclaimed, delighted by the transformation.

"This is a lesson about East and West," he offered, looking to us to tell him what we now understood. "From the East, a rabbit. From the West, a deer."

"Oh," we offered, "we see. Everything depends on how you look at it, doesn't it."

That's a little story, and one that didn't even puzzle us until we returned home and began reading the Analectics of Confucius. There we bumped right into the essentialist nature of English, itself: things do things, and have attributes assigned to them. Entities interact. The tree blooms, or sheds its leaves, or shades me. But all along, it is still the tree, constant somehow through all its manifestations. Mandarins doesn't work like that. It is what Ames and Rosemont (1999, 22) call "an eventful language" in which reality and its appearance this time around, in this place, with these circumstances are the same. In Western thinking, discrepancies between reality and appearance, between what is permanent and what changes, between original and versions are important. In Chinese, they disappear. Everything is always changing; everything is its change, through cycles and seasons, through unexpected disaster and triumph, through our own efforts and through the irreversible passage of time.

So here is what we discovered. In Mandarin, the very word for thing is dongxi. And its literal translation? Dongxi means "East-west".

What the principal served us was far more than a riddle on point of view--seen from point of view of the East, the carving is a rabbit; through the eyes of the West, it's a deer. What he served us went straight to the heart of how we understand the world. A thing, dongxi, is its multiplicity, its change, its east-westness, its relatedness to everything else. Things do not

exist as separate entities, atomistic A's and B's which are then joined in connections that can either be maintained or severed. Rather, "relatedness defining of the Confucian world view is intrinsic and constitutive...[and] people literally rather than figuratively change each other's minds" (Ames and Rosemont 1999, 24).

The Ontological Character of Recursion

What we stumbled upon that evening is something about the nature of being. If a thing, dongxi, is its multiplicity, what would happen if we considered that recursion is not a matter of us turning back on things, but of the thing, dongxi, turning back on us? Thought of this way, recursion is not a reflective turn of mind, but the thing's own variety. It is not organized around our volition, but rests in the character of things and how they constitute the world. They arrive, they make claims beyond our willing and doing (Gadamer 1995, xxviii). Thought of this way, our experience is not so much "factored into things, actions, attributes of things and modalities of action" (Ames and Rosemont 1999, 22) as it is constitutive of dao, having "as much to do with subject as it does with object, and as much to do with the subject's quality of understanding as it does with the various aspects of the felt experience" (Ames and Rosemont, 22).

Where do we go if we start to think like this? What happens to teachers and children (our particular concern) if we take seriously the possibility that things don't have substance that then accumulates accidental properties or contexts or relations? What if we hunker down around the possibility that we don't have original texts, or experiences of which all others are merely versions—or worse yet, corruptions? What if we turn our backs on the ontology of being as presence, as substance--and embrace the possibility that reality is temporal, existing only in its versions, relations and contexts? What on earth happens then?

The Ending

One day we told Plato's allegory of the cave to a group of students. Unmasked, two of them returned several days later with their own retelling, in which two prisoners in the cave, now named Sophia and Luxor, escape

into the world and then return to their people, scared almost to death to actually tell what they have seen. Here is the story:

The Ending

Based on the story of Plato's Cave

And written by Shelby

So with the knowledge of a six-day journey and the promise of a home, Luxor and Sophia followed their leaders to the once familiar cave. It started to come into view. Its' silent and still shadows so right, yet so wrong created anger in her eyes and in her heart. She felt a longing so tight and so strong that she felt sick to her stomach and knew Luxor felt no other. The pulling was from wanting, wanting to live again inside the cavern yet she and he both knew that even if they were chained again she would never be the same as she was the first 13 years she spent in the cave.

Luxor felt the same about everything but as they were thinking all this they were also nearing the grotto. Sophia wanted to tell her family of her wonders and travels yet she feared it at the same moment. Would they understand? Would they even listen? Maybe all the knowledge belonged only to them, the journeyers.

As they rounded the final bend the cave suddenly loomed before them. It seemed smaller than the last time she saw it. As she recognized it she saw more fully her own purpose: she was leading her family to freedom. A tremor of excitement ran through her veins.

Luxor gently nudged her shoulder to bring her back to the present. Sophia realized that she had come to depend on him as another part of herself. He had become what she needed, and she had learned to be what the needed. Instinctively each knew the other's feelings and sometimes even thoughts. They had come through a lot together and who knew what the future held. She swallowed hard as they reached the cave.

The entrance was dim. The light of the flickering fire still danced on the

walls of the cave and more memories flooded back. Sophia cleared her husky throat as she and Luxor stood facing the people, in front of the shadows still moving on the back of dull cave wall. For the first time the cave dwellers saw something other than shadows and did not know what to make of it. In the dim light, Sophia spoke her first words to her people.

"My family and friends, please do not be afraid. I was once one of you, in chains, sitting there on the floor. This was also my world. I need you to listen to me and hear my words.

What I am about to tell you may frighten or shock you. Or it may just reassure you. Or it may give you another way of seeing things.

Your world has been this cave, these dancing images on the wall and ceiling. But look at me. Where did I come from? I came from you. I left and returned. Where did I go? Out. Yes, there is an out. And there is more, perhaps more than you can imagine at this time. But you can see it too. You don't have to believe me; you can see it for yourself. You just have to try. Why should you? It is more than I can possibly begin to describe. Ask Luxor. He is my witness. He explored and questioned the many others we met. We came back to help you, to free you."

Luxor spoke for the first time in the presence of his people.

"Sometimes the limits we set for ourselves are too short. And then we don't think anymore, about what could be, about possibilities, and now I know, about what is. We do it all the time. Those limits are like the walls of these caves and even, like the chains on your wrists. Look at me and know that you have arms, wrists, limbs like me. They feel tight, they feel bound and they feel imprisoned. Are they? Sometimes that is all it takes, is to ask that question. Are they? Ask yourself and imagine that you can move freely as I do. Ask more than once. Ask and ask again."

As they watch Luxor and Sophia begin to see the fear on the people's faces turn to thoughtfulness. They have not been harmed. They are still doubtful. But as they began to move their weak and withered limbs they saw with new eyes that the chains that they believed to have come from the center of the earth were just a trick of the light, were just shadows. With many difficulties and even more attempts, for the first time in their lives, the cave people moved. For the first time in their lives the cave

people were free...

With many of their first words and many of their first movements, they slowly turned around and saw light. They saw what the opposite was to what they believed their whole lives. They believed this now. Sophia and her companion, Luxor, signaled them to follow them out of the cave. The cave people followed their leaders to the world and to the early dusk of evening. The first stars were appearing as the people gazed upward and they were in awe.

Sophia continued her story and everyone listened. As she ended, a little girl Carry spoke up, "Sophia, you have told us so many, many things and we can see now. But you used to think the cave was the limit and since you have discovered this world, you know you were wrong. Sophia, look up...Are we still wrong?"

The End

As teachers, this story is incredible, not for what it says about Shelby and her friend—which would be the usual way of trying to figure out how such a piece could have come to be. Who are these students? How did they come to have such insight? What had their teacher done to encourage and support such imagination and insight? What will become of them in their next class, with their next teachers? That is, who "is" this child? What are all her educational attributes: how old? How gifted? How manageable in a class of others? How rich a home environment? And how do we thus understand what she has "done"?

We wanted to ask different questions altogether. What showed up when Plato's allegory of cave was told half a world and millennia away from its creation?

The first thing we think showed up was hope. In philosophy, the pursuit of the self-identical subject is a kind of death. The quest to know, finally, what something is puts an end to questing, after all. Did Shelby get the story right, yes or no? Can we fit her into our usual ways of

understanding students? Yes or no? Buddhists warn us that the desire to nail something down, to hold it and fix it forever is the cause of all suffering. With Shelby's telling, somehow the allegory of the cave became itself once again, in this place, with these students. The way they took it up, retold it and interrogated their own understanding is what that story is all about. There is no ontological separation between the original and this version. What appeared in this story is not a version of Plato. What appeared is Plato, himself.

And what is required of us as teachers is not the little death of classification, sorting, weighing and measuring that characterize so much of educational discourse. All that is required is the courageous act of giving up, of giving over, of recognizing that something has happened. Considered like this, we can now see that when a child struggles with something like addition, addition itself is showing up: the original difficulties of figuring out about counting, about putting things together in new ways never before considered, about giving them names and places and values. Our task as teachers is to re-member that very human struggle—not to correct it. Thus, each child's struggle becomes insight into the character of addition, itself—not merely insight into the mind and performance of this child, trying hard to learn how to add before he loses his baby front teeth.

It is the sense of "emptying out" of which Buddhists speak, or what Heidegger means in his later work when he spoke of releasement--of letting something come forward and be itself without trying to commandeer or co-opt or contain. It's why understanding, of necessity, means a loss of "self"--of the grotesque little certainties and categories and classifications that tell us in advance how one thing belongs with another. And it's what Gadamer means when he says (249) "It's only when the effort to accept what is true fails that we then characterize it as someone's opinion."

Interpretation is not then something that we perform upon a thing in order to understand what it is, nor is a "version" like Shelby's, a corruption of the original. Rather, interpretation breaks open the being of a thing. It releases its futurity, its possibilities. Interpretation does not become one more version of Plato's cave; instead, it becomes a necessary function of the allegory's being itself at all. Dongxi: what Plato created in the first instance is how susceptible to the future it has been all along.

And so interpretation becomes a matter of a certain kind of ex-perience (ex peria meaning "perimeter"), a certain way of knowing your way around, or being ready when a new "thing" like Plato's cave presents itself. It becomes somehow ecological—knowing how to dwell in a place in such a way that things will show themselves in this way, this time around.

Being thus ex-perienced means a kind of dedication. The more you commit your self to something, the better it becomes; the more fully itself it evolves to be. And there is no end point to this, no final resting place where all living-with ends, no little epistemological deaths. Multiplicity is in the thing itself, in Plato--not in this version or that, in this student or that, with the original being somehow fixed like a butterfly on a pin or laminated like a bunny on the wall, sealed against the inevitable contamination of time. Dongxi takes your breath away, as Shelby did, ours.

Shelby's story witnesses the character of care, of living well with the allegory of the cave, of engagement in the face of Plato's call. Dongxi. Dao. Releasing the certainties of "self" into the vertiginous object of address.

And so hope, the essential commitment each of us makes when we enter into relationship with the young, may be less a matter of our wishes or feelings, less a matter of our willing and doing. It may be much more a matter of the character of things we offer, themselves, and living with them in such a way that they have a future of their own.

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