Philosophy in the Time of Catastrophe

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Abstract
This essay reflects on the task of philosophy in the time of catastrophe, which can only be modest. Catastrophes force us to think, namely, what really is at stake in the midst of destruction. While it must engage the world and other disciplines, it must also guard against the illusion that it can and must change the world in the realm of human action. Philosophical thinking is "preparatory thinking," which proceeds in an "unpretentious way," so says Heidegger. Philosophy may not be able to predict or prevent catastrophes, it may not be able to help people rebuild their lives after catastrophes, but perhaps it can help in turning our eyes to what is truly catastrophic, the catastrophe that has already long happened, namely, the annihilation of "the thing," and our nearness with it.

Keywords: Heidegger, thing, annihilation, nearness, Fukushima

A World Under Duress

As I was writing this essay, news of the radiation level in the Fukushima Nuclear Plant reaching 10 million times beyond normal hit the headlines. This figure had been rectified not long thereafter: the correct reading was 100,000 million and not 10 million times the normal.[1]

The nuclear plant worker who made the reading said that the levels were so high anyway that he did not have the time to confirm it and had to leave the plant right away. While the Japanese government had every reason to reprimand those responsible for the mistake and to say that such an error was unacceptable and should not be repeated, the

[1] Mark Worthington, "Japan Nuclear Plant Data Error Was 'Unacceptable,'" *BBC Mobile*, March 28, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12877198 (accessed March 28, 2011).

rest of us for sure understand such a situation given the immense pressure weighing on those tasked to prevent a nuclear catastrophe. Under duress, one can easily be plunged into confusion and desperation, the gravity of which is too much for even the most patient, bravest and most mentally alert among the Japanese to handle, hailed as they have already been for the order and calm with which they faced the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami that hit them on an otherwise fine Friday afternoon, on the 11th of March 2011.

This is just one of the sources of distress besetting not just the Japanese people, but the world at large as well. These are distressing days indeed. The Japanese people are continuing with the hard work of rebuilding their nation. Reports say that Japan has laid out a four-year plan of rebuilding and recovery. Meanwhile, other nations, including the Philippines, continue to monitor levels of radiation and try to keep their people calm even as the concerned authorities seek to explain what is really going on and what could possibly happen.

And so while the catastrophe that hit Japan may be slowly fading out of our consciousness, we continue to express our solidarity with and offer our support and prayers for the Japanese people, distant as we are from them. I shall speak of catastrophe in this paper, ever so mindful of those who died, those who were injured, those still missing, and those who lost both loved ones and possessions and are trying to make sense of what happened even as they summon all courage to face the future.

What are we to think in the face of catastrophe? How are we to speak of catastrophe?

We who are at a loss for words, we who may be feeling without energy or motivation to think of catastrophe, weighed down as we are by a gnawing sense of anxiety and exhausted as many of us are by the daily updates on the nuclear crisis in Japan, may just find an opening for a thoughtful engagement with those who had come before us and had sensed catastrophe. Let us consider two of them, one a thinker and the other an artist. Let us listen first to the words of the thinker.

The Words of a Thinker: Heidegger on the Disappearance of Nearness

About 50 years ago, Heidegger more than once alluded to a global catastrophe, indeed the annihilation of all life on earth. For instance, in the 1950 public lecture, "The Thing," Heidegger says the following:

> Man stares at what the explosion of the atom bomb could bring with it. He does not see that the atom bomb and its explosion are the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, has already happened. Not to mention the single hydrogen bomb, whose triggering, thought through to its utmost potential, might be enough to snuff out all life on earth. What is this helpless anxiety still waiting for, if the terrible has already happened?[2]

We should hasten here to say that we need to set aside for now what many deem to be scandalous in Heidegger's remarks, something the thinker had been accused of a number of times in some of his more famous public lectures. Let us clarify that Heidegger by no means intended to ignore whatever clear and present danger we are faced with, or to downplay whatever suffering we are going through. And neither do we intend, by citing this passage from Heidegger, to suspend all sensitivity and speak lightly or callously of the plight of the Japanese people by engaging ourselves in empty musings about catastrophe, and call it philosophy.

Having taken the necessary precaution to ward off such misunderstanding, let us now return to the passage from Heidegger that we have just quoted. We have already clarified that the passage is not to be interpreted as a dismissal of the gravity of an atomic explosion, as had happened in Hiroshima, for example, let alone the complete annihilation of all life on earth by way of a nuclear catastrophe. These are terrifying things indeed, perhaps far more terrifying than the worst terror we can ever imagine.

And yet, Heidegger is telling us, in a way that is clearly meant to provoke us, that terrifying as these things indeed are, something far more terrifying has already long happened. But to hear this makes us wonder whether Heidegger might be like a madman proclaiming doomsday in the streets, or whether he could be telling something that is true. What if indeed he is pointing to something that is true? What could Heidegger be saying? What is this terrifying thing that has already long happened but apparently escaped our notice?

We might begin to find some answer to what Heidegger said right before the passage that we quoted above:

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[2] Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975), 164.

> What is happening here when, as a result of the abolition of great distances, everything is equally far and equally near? What is this uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near—is, as it were, without distance?
>
> Everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness. How? Is not this merging of everything into the distanceless more unearthly than everything bursting apart?[3]

Let us hear once again the last part, in case the gravity of that claim escaped us. "Is not this merging of everything into the distanceless more unearthly than everything bursting apart?" By way of rhetorical questions, which Heidegger is wont to raise, we are given a clue. The abolition of distance, when everything is reduced into "uniform distancelessness"—this event is far more terrifying, far more unearthly than everything bursting apart.

What is terrifying about the abolition of distance? What is so unearthly about the lumping together of everything into uniform distancelessness? To be sure, none of us, including myself, can readily see what is terrifying, what is unearthly, in what Heidegger describes until we understand what this abolition of distance, this reduction of everything into uniform distancelessness means.

At the beginning of his lecture, Heidegger describes how in our modern technological society we seem to be abolishing distances with our modern means of transportation and communication. We only need to think of jet planes and the Internet. But Heidegger says that despite all this frantic abolition of distances, nearness does not appear.[4] It is clear that by distance, by nearness, Heidegger does not mean the spatial, geometrical distance between two points that can be exactly measured by scientific instruments.

If we think for a moment about nearness, we will realize that strictly speaking, there is nothing near or far in science. For many of us here, for example, the object nearest us in terms of spatial, geometric distance is our glasses. And yet none of us here wearing glasses feels the nearness of our spectacles. I am hoping that right now we are all

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

dwelling in the nearness of each other as we try to reflect together on catastrophe. But then there could be someone among us here who left behind a spouse or child at home who is not feeling very well, in which case it is more than understandable that his or her house feels much farther than it would otherwise seem when everything is alright, and he or she could not wait until this conference is over so he could get back home as soon as possible.

Many years ago, I told my parents who were then residing in the U.S., that I was taking a boat from Zamboanga City to Sandakan, in Sabah, Malaysia to accompany high school students on a tour. My parents asked me where Sandakan was, and I tried to describe its geographic location, telling them it was in Borneo, but they still seemed to be not sure where it was. We all know that for us Filipinos, the U.S. is much nearer to us than, say, Borneo or Hanoi. Sandakan, which is near Kota Kinabalu, is about 1,090.373 kilometers from where we are right now in Quezon City, if the online distance generator I consulted is correct. On the other hand, Artesia, Califorina, where my parents resided then, is about 11,832.476 kilometers from where we are right now, roughly ten times farther from us than Sandakan in Borneo. As we can see, near or far is not a scientific category, strictly speaking, and yet everyone knows and feels what near or far is.

We do not have the space here to engage Heidegger with his thought on what nearness is, not only in the lecture, "The Thing," but also in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*.[5] It is sufficient for us at this point to see that nearness is not a scientific category, but rather something, at least as Heidegger claims, that belongs to the core of our being human insofar as "an essential tendency towards nearness lies in Dasein."[6] All of us here know the very human need to be near our loved ones. Even the Christian account of the event of the Incarnation is the story of God coming down to pitch tent with us, so that He can be near us. To be human then is to dwell in nearness, understood primordially. And it is this very nearness, which essentially belongs to our being human, that everywhere is being threatened in our modern technological age.

Heidegger claims that our modern technological world frantically wills to abolish distances, but ironically the more we do so, the less nearness appears. We saw above that strictly speaking science knows neither near nor far. Thus, insofar as ours is the age of

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[5] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of* Sein und Zeit, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[6] Ibid., 98.

the domination of modern science and technology, we can see how everything indeed is being lumped together into uniform distancelessness. When the resources of the earth are extracted, stored, and made to stand readily available for our consumption—what Heidegger calls *Bestand*, or standing reserve[7]—, such as in the case of nuclear energy, when every conceivable thing, including us human beings, is objectified, when our thinking assumes mainly a calculating mode, nearness disappears, and along with it our sense of being human.

From a Heideggerian perspective, the case of Japan shows us how indeed we are all being summoned to extract, store, and make the resources of the earth readily available for instant distribution. Such a summoning, such violent challenging forth of nature that supplies us with the resources that we need, belongs to the essence of modern technology that Heidegger names *Gestell*, or enframing.[8] Japan reportedly has 55 nuclear reactors, which supplied 30 percent of the country's electric power prior to the earthquake and tsunami that hit the land on March 2011, a figure that had been expected to increase in 20 years to 50 percent, making Japan among the highest in the world in terms of nuclear energy consumption in relation to its overall supply.[9] It remains to be seen how much change Japan is willing to undertake regarding its nuclear energy program.

Like the disappearance of nearness, the enframing that holds sway in our modern technological age does not belong, primarily and essentially, to the realm of human activity, as Heidegger carefully expounded on in his famous lecture on technology. Heidegger understands these events in a primordial historical sense: "History is neither simply the object of written chronicle nor simply the fulfillment of human activity."[10] Here we are touching upon a very crucial question, namely, human agency.

That this enframing is essentially a historical event that happens beyond the realm of human activity is perhaps made manifest in the case of the current crisis in Japan by what seems to be an irrational compulsion to keep extracting to the point of ignoring clear warnings and serious risks. Most of us would readily assume that Japan, like other highly

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[7] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and with introduction by William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 17.

[8] Ibid., 19.

[9] Yoko Kubota and Chisa Fujioka, "Japan Orders Immediate Safety Upgrade at Nuclear Plants," *Reuters*, March 30, 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/30/uk-japan-idUSLNE72T02E20110330 (accessed March 31, 2011).

[10] Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 24.

industrialized countries such as Germany, would know better when it comes to safety precautions and efficiency. But a Reuters study reveals that as early as 2007, the Japanese government as well as the nuclear plant operator brushed aside several warnings against nuclear accidents and even the possibility of a tsunami, ignoring the recommendations of plant experts.[11]

The common overestimation of human agency is the basis of the anthropocentric interpretation of world-historical events, so that we assign accountability to ourselves whatever the outcome of our actions could be. We praise ourselves in times of success, and we blame ourselves in times of failure. In times of success, we march onwards along the path of progress and conjure more plans towards greater success. In times of failure, we pause for a while, figure out where we went wrong, and carry out the necessary corrections. In any case, we are convinced that we somehow manage. And we manage because ours too is the age of management, to which belongs the predominantly calculating mode of thinking.[12]

But, alas, catastrophes of enormous proportions are another matter. Somehow we have a sense that they are no simple failures. Catastrophes are not the time for routine identification of errors and the implementation of corrections. We know that it is not business as usual. Catastrophes overwhelm us, when it seems that all we can do for the most part is let our heads hang in despair and confusion, and we walk aimlessly amidst the rubble, not sure whether we should beat our breasts. When we begin to regain our bearings, we might recognize the opportunity to rethink our understanding of human action, as Ladelle McWhorter and Gail Stenstad point to in the following:

> Thinking ecologically—that is, thinking the earth in our time—means thinking death; it means thinking catastrophe; it means thinking the possibility of utter annihilation not just for human being but for all lives on this planet and for the living planet itself. . . . Such thinking seems to call for immediate action. . . . However, in the midst of this urgency, thinking ecologically, thinking Heideggerly, means rethinking the very notion of human action.

[11] Kubota and Fujioka, ibid.

[12] Ladelle McWhorter offers an insightful reflection on this in "Guilt as Management Technology: A Call to Heideggerian Reflection," in *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Ladelle McWhorter and Gail Stenstad (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 5-16.

But such recognition of a historical event that lies beyond the realm of human agency is not to be taken as being tantamount to fatalism as commonly understood. It is not to be interpreted uncritically as the absolute renunciation of human freedom. On the contrary, as Heidegger sees it, the acceptance of historical destining paves the way for authentic human freedom:

> Always the unconcealment of that which is goes upon a way of revealing. Always the destining of revealing holds complete sway over man. But that destining is never a fate that compels. For man becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens and hears [*Hörender*], and not one who is simply constrained to obey [*Höriger*].[13]

We now turn to the words of the artist.

The Words of an Artist: Arellano on the Disappearance of Beautiful Things

If you visit Manila today, you will see the majestic Post Office Building standing behind Liwasang Bonifacio, not too far from the art deco Metropolitan Theater. What is common between these two beautiful, but sadly neglected buildings (and in the case of the Metropolitan Theater, even left to decay), along with other important structures in the area, is that they are all works of Juan Arellano, who is known to be the father of modern architecture in the Philippines. But apart from his work as an architect, Arellano also produced paintings and sculptures. More than half a century ago, Arellano said:

> I have always loved to paint. I want to paint the things that struck me as beautiful, the habits, the modes of our people, the things that will disappear with the encroachments of mechanization and the Atomic Age.[14]

[13] Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 25.

[14] Remmon E. Barbaza, "There Where Nothing Happens: The Poetry of Space in Heidegger and Arellano," in *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Ladelle McWhorter and Gail Stenstad (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 191.

It does not readily seem that Arellano is speaking here of a catastrophe. But he clearly speaks of things that will disappear. What are these things that will disappear? What struck the artist as beautiful are the habits and the modes of our people, and that these are the very things that will disappear with the encroachments of mechanization and the Atomic Age. Arellano is using the word "thing" in its widest sense, covering not just intangible things such as habits and modes of a people (its cultural heritage), but also the very tangible things that a people have been habituated to use, such as jars, garments, carriages, farming equipment, and so on. These, too, are beautiful things that can strike an artist, and they too stand under the threat of annihilation.

One of Arellano's paintings is that of a simple house in a rural setting. Behind this rustic abode, one can see in the distance smokestacks jutting out and spewing smoke into the sky. What Arellano portrays here is unmistakable: the tension between the habits and modes of people, and the encroachment of mechanization and the Atomic Age. It is a foreboding image of the disappearance of beautiful things. One is also reminded of a painting by Paul Cézanne that bears the title, *The Railway Cutting*. It depicts a rural field with a house on top of a hill that is violently cut in the middle to make way for a railway track.[15] The same tension is depicted here, in this case between an otherwise tranquil rural life and the violent intrusion of mechanized transportation.

For Arellano, a predominantly mechanized society and the possibility of an atomic explosion are perhaps not what really constitute a catastrophe. What is truly catastrophic is the disappearance of the beautiful things that make us the human beings that we are. And perhaps, like Heidegger, Arellano understands that the disappearance of beautiful things, which can only be experienced in primordial nearness, had started to happen long before the possibility of an atomic explosion and the actual physical destruction of the things that make up our world began to threaten us. If a modern technological catastrophe, such as a massive nuclear meltdown, and all its consequences, is a horribly and terrifyingly ugly thing to imagine, it is because what it annihilates is everything we hold to be truly beautiful, and that it is only the final act in the event of the disappearance of beautiful things that has started long before.

From the point of the view of the artist in Arellano, catastrophe is the displacement of a people from its modes and habits, from its cultural rootedness, through which alone nearness is concretely experienced.

[15] Paul Cézanne, *The Railway Cutting*, oil on canvas, c. 1870, Neue Pinakothek, Munich.

Conclusion: Philosophy as Preparatory Thinking

What does it mean then to do philosophy in the time of catastrophe? The task of philosophy in the time of catastrophe can only be modest. While it must engage the world and other disciplines, it must also guard against the illusion that it can and must change the world in the realm of human action. For Heidegger, philosophical thinking is "preparatory thinking," which proceeds in an "unpretentious way."[16] Heidegger describes in the following what this preparatory thinking could involve:

> An education in thinking in the midst of the sciences is part of preparatory thinking and its fulfillment. To find the suitable form for this, so that such education in thinking does not fall victim to a confusion with research and erudition, is the hard thing. This objective is in danger, then, above all when thinking is simultaneously and continually under the obligation of first finding its own abode. To think in the midst of the sciences means to pass near them without disdaining them.[17]

We also saw at the beginning that perhaps we are not terrified by what is truly most terrifying of all, that we do not know what the real catastrophe is, we do not know that this real catastrophe has already long happened, way before we have been made anxiously aware of the possibility of a global nuclear crisis. Perhaps we are comfortable, perhaps we have become way too comfortable in the "smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom" within a modern technological society that we have so carefully built and maintained, a comfort that is merely "a token of technical progress," as Marcuse notes in the provocative opening words of his book, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*.[18] In Heidegger's words, we are not distressed about what is truly distressful: the distress

[16] Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 55.

[17] Ibid., 56.

[18] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2d ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 1. See also: Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

consists precisely in the lack of distress.[19] The lack of distress seems to characterize that accursed tribe in hell that Dante describes in the *Commedia*:

> This miserable fate
> Suffer the wretched souls of those, who liv'd
> Without or praise or blame, with that ill band
> Of angels mix'd, who nor rebellious prov'd
> Nor yet were true to God, but for themselves
> Were only. From his bounds Heaven drove them forth,
> Not to impair his lustre, nor the depth
> Of Hell receives them, lest th' accursed tribe
> Should glory thence with exultation vain.[20]

What indeed is truly distressing? What indeed is truly catastrophic? Catastrophe (from the Greek *kata*, "down," and *strophé*, "turning") literally means a down-turning, connoting an over-turning, and usually refers to a sudden turn for the worse. Philosophy may not be able to predict or prevent catastrophes, it may not be able to help people rebuild their lives after catastrophes, but perhaps it can help in turning our eyes to what is truly catastrophic, the catastrophe that has already long happened. Perhaps philosophy can help us see the need to be distressed about what is truly distressful.

Let me end with the words of Marie-Luise Kaschnitz, a German poet not so well known, let alone translated, but whose poetic power ranks among the highest. Writing in the midst of the destruction of the Second World War, in a collection of essays titled *Menschen und Dinge* (Men and Things), Kaschnitz makes an appeal on behalf of things, which surely are the same beautiful things Arellano was referring to, saying:

> *Verleugnen wir die Dinge nicht. Sie haben uns gehalten.*
> *Und sie haben uns erhöht.*[21]

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[19] Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), section 60.

[20] Dante, *Hell* (trans. Henry Cary, ed. Ralph Pite in *The Divine Comedy: The Vision of Dante* [London: Orion House, 1994]) 3.33-41.

[21] Marie-Luise Kaschnitz, "Von den Dingen," in *Menschen und Dinge 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 24.

We translate it here as follows:

> Let us not disown the things. They have sustained us. And they have enriched us.

Furthermore, she says:

> *Vielleicht ist wirklich die Epoche vorüber, in der die Dinge ihre alte Macht und ihren alten Zauber ausüben könnten. Vielleicht wird niemand mehr Zeit und Lust haben, sie so zu bilden, daß sie uns mehr sein können als eine Notwendigkeit, ein kurzlebiges, jederzeit ersetzbares Gerät. Und es mag sein, daß dadurch unsere Kinder nicht ärmer, sonder reicher werden, nicht enger, sondern weiter im Geist.*[22]

Let us attempt to translate this passage as follows:

> Perhaps is the era really over, when things could exercise their old power and their old charm. Perhaps no one will have the time or the desire any longer to make them, in such a way that they become for us more than just a necessity, more than just a disposable and easily replaceable gadget. And it could well be that through them, our children will become not poorer, but richer, not narrower, butbroader in spirit.

If philosophy can help prepare the recovery of that era when things could exercise their old power and their old charm, if philosophy can help us realize that we do not need to go anywhere but only learn to dwell where we already are, that we only need to become who we already are, if philosophy can help us not only to preserve beautiful things, but even more so to allow these things to sustain and enrich us, then perhaps philosophy would have been true to what it is called it to be. And perhaps the need to heed this call has never been this urgent, here and now, as we all stand in the face of catastrophe.

[22] Ibid., 31.

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