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Pandemic Experience and the Concept of World

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Abstract

This article begins with some common or well-known sentiments about the present pandemic era and our experience of it, and moves by way of these toward discussion of the concepts of human existence and the “world” in the broadest sense of both terms. Departing from but also radicalizing the notion that “everything changed” in this pandemic time, I discuss certain logical difficulties that pertain to conceiving of or coherently talking about strict totalities which would include our own selves. This will have significant consequences for our conception of the world (when taken in its absolute or broadest sense), and in what sense there are or could be multiple such immersive wholes of experience. Ultimately, I will suggest that in being able to name such pervasive or all-encompassing phenomena, phenomena which are “always more” than what it is possible for us to indicate, that human existence is fundamentally liminal, or essentially between and borderline. Being essential or fundamental, this liminality or betweenness will form the basis which precedes and makes possible the apparently simple activities of, for instance, counting time or comparing and contrasting ordinary things, activities which would otherwise seem to require no outside support or conditions.

Paul Turner received his PhD in Philosophy "with distinction" from DePaul University in 2022, where he studied Continental and ancient Chinese thought. Presently, his main interests are in the philosophy of language, metaphysics, phenomenology, deconstruction, and how these bear on key methodological concepts in interculturally or historically comparative philosophical research. Right now Dr. Turner is revising his dissertation, "The Sense In Which All Things Move: Concepts of Meaning and World in Heidegger and the Zhuangzi 莊子," with plans to turn it into a book.

Introduction

The following takes certain aspects of our pandemic experience as an occasion and point of departure for discussing the nature of experience and meaning in general. What primarily interests me is the peculiar sense, held by at least surely very many of us, that *everything changed* in this time. Even if this is not true, the idea itself is an interesting one. If taken literally or radically, it actually points to a certain paradox: if *everything* has changed in this strange era—a sentiment which would not only technically include the people we are, but actually seems primarily to refer to our view or sense of the world, our attitude toward (rather than the facts about) historical events and so on—then how is it possible for us to differentiate this time from others?

Now, of course, I do not think that people intend this quite so literally. But there is also a certain suspicion, held again by at least some of us, that the whole combined pandemic phenomenon of, e.g., viral threat, literal isolation, felt alienation, economic dislocation, and unprecedented (even if necessary, and indeed also even if one perceives them to be insufficient) state actions has impacted us in ways that are difficult or impossible to calculate. *Every* thought or feeling we may have might somehow bear the influence of the pandemic, in a way resembling the wide-ranging suspicion that the virus might be present in *any* physical interpersonal encounters.

The term “pandemic,” combining “all,” *pan-*, “the people,” *demos*, already points to generality, universality, or pervasiveness. It refers to a phenomenon so widespread, and capable of contagious spread, that it generally will not only pertain to this or that population, but *the* population, as a whole. Every person might be at risk. But in light of what was noted above, we might also see the recent pandemic as pervasive not only among human beings, but also within the much broader subjective realm which is treated by “the humanities.” This seems quite close to the “everything” that might have been changed by the pandemic, as the realm of human “subjectivity,” that is, thought, feeling, and perception (etc.), all broadly construed.

This puts slightly more flesh on the bones of the difficulty raised above: if it were the case that everything has changed, and if what is really most intended in this sentiment is that our *sense* or *perception* might be transformed, how would it be possible to sense or perceive such a shift? That is, if we were to hold that *all* of our experience, *every possible* perception, has or might have been disrupted, this would mean that we lack any viewpoint from which to register such a change in ourselves or our “world.” To make use of our common sense distinction, we would lack an uninvolved, external, or “objective” view of the situation, given that the alteration is supposed to pertain to what we can perceive as a *whole*. It would be a more comprehensive version of Alice putting her hand on her head to determine whether or not she was growing taller and finding only that she had remained the same size.

Now again, the notion that the pandemic has changed us, or has changed everything (for us), is probably not intended as literally as this. But investigating the literal or radical phenomenon this figurative version draws upon will be broadly—indeed, probably radically—helpful in clarifying the concept of research in the humanities. This is especially the case insofar as this field intends to understand matters such as “the history of ideas” or the “subjective element” in science. The following investigation will be “pandemic” in the sense that it puts *everything human*, or the *whole of humanity*, in question; it is therefore an inquiry into the limits of human experience, that is, an inquiry into the concept of a border or horizon in this maximally encompassing context. Given the comprehensiveness of this domain, or the universal range of human concerns and activities which it will encompass, our sense of what it is to be “outside” of it or “at its margins” will have to be transformed, or *disrupted*. Indeed, I will suggest that conceiving of the limit or border of human experience requires us to think through the “inherently” disruptive concept of the border itself or as such, that is, insofar

as it essentially expresses a *non*-location and refuses to be “anywhere.”

(I will make one last brief note. Though the approach that I provide to these issues is in my view essentially Heidegger’s, my intention here is not to interpret his work. This is for several reasons. Defending a particular interpretation, that is, as the correct representation of his thought, presents a significantly broader task than I can undertake in this brief essay. But more importantly, when the object is primarily to interpret Heidegger’s—or any other philosopher’s—text or intention, this can easily become disconnected from the more general philosophical task of simply dealing with a particular issue. Given Heidegger’s well-known tendency to express his ideas by way of complex or obscure terms, and moreover to do so often without any apparent attempt to clarify them, it is easy to get lost in such details. What I want to do here is make a standalone case for why his ideas are important and correct, which means precisely not appealing to Heidegger’s authority, as one often does in saying “For Heidegger . . .” or “in Heidegger’s view . . .”¹)

¹ My view is in outline consistent with Sheehan’s, and is in essence that Heidegger’s work is “solely and exclusively about meaningfulness and its source” (*Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift*, 10; cf. xii). One must understand the counterintuitive sense *meaning* has here, however. In introducing *Being and Time*, Heidegger states that his inquiry, namely “the question of being,” aims “at an a priori condition of the possibility of the sciences, which investigate beings as this or that kind of being and which thus always already move within an understanding of being, but also at the condition of the possibility of the ontologies which precede the ontic sciences and found them” (*Being and Time*, 10). The *always already* here is key, and shifts our frame of reference toward the *limits* of time, toward a certain “a

priori perfect” temporality (ibid., 85). While it is neither possible nor my intention to attend to Heidegger’s body of work in any depth here, I will stress, as he does ad nauseam, that he really intends to investigate what is *always* already in view, *including* in the context of scientific activity. This runs counter to efforts to see Heidegger as providing a kind of generalized sociological or psychological framework for understanding the ways that individuals *come* to perceive or behave in particular ways, as he says his inquiry precedes exactly these kinds of activities. This would be an example of the narrow conception of psychology (his own would presumably treat this as a study of the “soul” in a comprehensively encompassing sense) Heidegger means to criticize, in which the “I” is taken as “the empirical subject” and “the possible subject matter of theoretical

Era, epoch, and world

We are accustomed by now to the notion of a “pandemic era.” Even if many societies have at this point abandoned most formal containment measures (or perhaps the sense that the virus poses an extraordinary threat), it is virtually inarguable that we still live in something like this “age.” This has been a time of disruption, a time in which things have been very broadly unsettled, and there is furthermore an ongoing sense that—much like the way that the threat of the virus itself would, in earlier stages of the pandemic, loom over virtually every form of physical interpersonal contact—there is no end in sight to the dislocations and peculiarities we will experience. Even when particular things are unchanged, most of us can at least relate to the idea that these appear within a certain broader atmosphere of weirdness. It is also probably generally difficult for many to imagine this weirdness ever going away.

While the scope of applicability will vary according to the context in which it is used, in their paradigmatic usage, *era* and *epoch* name a span of time defined, or perhaps metonymically represented, by some distinctive phenomenon. This might be a certain ruler or dynasty, technology, aesthetic sensibility or fashion, and so on. When we are within the scope of these eras, they may not seem like particular eras at all, as they will tend to bear a certain compelling and “natural” character. (We need think only of retrospectives on certain decades’ hairstyles and our wondering

how anyone could possibly have found them anything but silly, much less attractive.) The notion of *world* also comes to mind here, insofar as this is understood as a particular totality of possibilities and immersive norms. We can refer fairly interchangeably to the world or era of disco, though they of course do not completely coincide, as there is a world of Dante’s *Inferno* that seems distinct from its era or epoch (at least in their unspecified usage).

Cursory examination of the etymology of “world” reveals a provocative historical connection with epoch or era. The Old English *woruld* or *weruld* (these being two particular spellings within a wide range), signifying “human existence, the affairs of life” and “the human race or humanity,” combined *wer*, “man” (as preserved in “werewolf”), with *ald/uld*, “age” (like “old” or “elder”). Taking its composition literally, it has a distinct temporal air, as “the age of (hu)man(ity).” To at least my contemporary ear, this sounds as if it is ripped right out of magical fantasy. Though we use the word in a variety of ways, if we were asked to provide the primary sense of “world,” I suspect most of us would identify it with the globe, that is, the planetary body we generally inhabit in the sense of our spatial location. “Other worlds” are often extraplanetary realms, perhaps inhabited by alien life forms which experience *that* place as home or “mundane.”

I do not want to get into a discussion of Old English cosmological views and their

observation in psychology” (“Comments on Karl Jaspers’s *Psychology of Worldviews*,” 26).

evolution, which would involve determining exactly what the referent of “the world” might have been in relation to, say, the heavens and celestial bodies or any underworld. But approaching the world as something like the realm of human existence, including the affairs of human life, proves to be interesting firstly insofar as it actually accords nicely with our more general usage of the term. That is, *human existence* is a particular or differentiable domain of possibilities and norms. It is, indeed, the one in which we ourselves live. But it is also not just one we merely *happen* to be located in, as with our conception of the human world as the globe, which in the last analysis is a series of points in extended space.

The “realm of human existence” is inherently difficult to locate, and not just because it might move or broaden to wherever human beings might happen to be found. Instead, the issue really comes to the fore in glossing it as “the affairs of life,” and even if we consider that to refer “just” to human life, rather than life in general. This is because *affairs of life* encompasses anything that might be or become an issue in our existence, with which we might be concerned, by which we are confounded, or in which we might be interested in some way. But going even further toward its most basic or formal sense, an affair of (human) life really need only be something we might encounter. It might be something which does not even particularly interest us, whether positively or negatively, but may just be something which could possibly come to our attention.

Once we orient ourselves toward the formal sense of the world as whatever we could possibly encounter, it really takes on the same kind of expansive significance as “possible (human) experience.” If it seems that I have moved too quickly in identifying the affairs of life with the whole of possible experience, let us consider what constitutes an *affair*. We might define it as something which is of some significance, import, or consequence; it is that which matters to someone, or even might matter. This will seem plain enough, but all of these words—to matter or be of significance, importance, or consequence—themselves require clarification. Indeed, here we can see quite evidently that *significance* (etc.) is itself a matter of significance, or is within the range of our possible business and affairs, just insofar as it too falls within the range of our possible questioning and inquiry.

The breadth of indication

So what is it to matter, to be of import, or to signify? To mean something, to have meaning? Each of these conveys a relation, or perhaps the relational movement (conveyance) of reference or referring. Most of the terms in this cluster have a peculiarly doubled character to them, where “meaning” in particular (although one can hear this in “significance” as well) has both a more everyday and a much more lofty sense. That is, while we generally understand a question with the form of “what is the meaning of [x]?” to ask what a given word or sign indicates or refers to, when the question becomes, say, “what is the meaning of life?”, we generally do not take this to be a

question about the meaning of the particular word.

Let us put the big picture or “values” sense to the side for the time being. To understand the more mundane sense of meaning and those other related terms, we need only look to what is intended in asking these questions and how they are resolved. If I ask what an unfamiliar word means, you might *point to* what it refers to, whether this is some object or a dictionary definition (the meaning of which might in turn require further identifying indications). The activity proceeds within what we might call an indicative situation, by which I mean the broad activity in which we are capable of discerning “this” from “that.” Each thing, item, or matter—and the idea is that these themselves are anything that a word can refer to or point out—is ultimately some “this” (or “that”), and therefore specifiable in contrast to (or in similarity with) others which are addressable within what is ultimately the same practice or way of distinguishing “this” from “that.” Though there will surely be different contexts or “regions” of similarity and dissimilarity, in the same way that we are capable of saying, for example, “no no, I meant that in the way dental insurers’ digital marketing teams use the term,” these contexts are themselves specifiable

² Discussing the relationship between Heidegger’s thought and the recent pandemic, Aho portrays Heidegger’s concept of world in terms of the social scientific concept of “a context of socio-historical meanings,” or “situations where things already count and matter in particular ways” (“The Uncanny in the Time of Pandemics,” 7). One is “in” these particular ways or worlds insofar as one happens to be socialized in a certain culture, and will accordingly

within a sort of total or basic domain of distinction.

This same principle will also apply to even greater cases of divergence. While there is at this point a widespread sense in the academic and popular humanities (and, of course, well beyond) that people who live in very different circumstances or who speak different languages might experience the world in radically different ways—indeed, might inhabit or experience different “worlds,” even “entirely” different ones—it is important that we recognize that *these too* must be discernible within what is ultimately the same basic manner of pointing “this” out from “that.” In referring to a multiplicity of such worlds, as in our discussion above of eras and epochs as particular immersive domains of possibilities and norms, we are still making distinctions between *this* experiential domain here and *that* one, and often the people who are subjectively immersed in them. *Each* of these, i.e. the “one” or sort being enumerated, is a particular instance of a broader kind.² No matter how stark and real their differences may be, if we are able to refer to a number or multiplicity of worlds (or perspective-like worldviews), we have something shared or general in view with the basic term. As *a world*, each is comparable and indeed the same *at least insofar as* it is a “world,” and

have certain expectations and routines. Cole also portrays Heidegger’s topic as one of worldview, or “what matters to an individual or community” (193), and Wasser speaks of “each individual’s field of possibilities” in terms of a range of options available based on the (dynamic) influence of one’s context (358). While I disagree with these interpretations, if Heidegger does indeed mean this, then we would still need to account for the overall situation of distinction-making that I address in this essay.

indeed also insofar as it is something potentially differentiable (that is, what we might refer to as a “this” or “that”). Even if the *worlds* feature “irreducible” differences of some kind, these must remain differences among members of a common class or set of what it is possible to distinguish.

But when we look toward *the* world itself, i.e., the “unit” by which we count various worlds, we find ourselves in another situation entirely. While it is possible for us to differentiate among *this* immersive experiential possibility here and *that other* one there—and with the possibility of making ever-further distinctions among a potentially infinite range of other things (including aspects, parts, and arrangements thereof, etc.)—this will not be the case with the world itself, at least once it is construed maximally. The problem is that the world cannot be meaningful or significant in the way that things can be. This is because the term world, at least as long as we construe it as the *whole* of what it is possible to indicate, is not itself indicatable as a “this” or a “that.” As I posed it above, “the affairs of (human) life” would refer to the possible range of what we can differentiate; it is really more of a way of proceeding or a pattern of activity. As such, it cannot be treated as a thing.

It will help clarify what I mean if we try to treat this wholeness as a thing, matter, or affair, however. Imagine someone has asked you what you mean by “the affairs of life.” To get the idea across, you start pointing at, or listing, everything. The person waits for you to stop, recounts the list you provided, and then asks if they have your meaning: “The

affairs of life’ means the sun, this tree, that shrub, this pack of marshmallows, your wallet, me, and my cell phone. But you did not list my stomachache, the fact that my pet caterpillar Charlie will leave me one day, paleontology, financial crises, or romantic comedies, which are therefore not ‘affairs of life.’” You tell this person no, this is not getting your intended meaning—those things *are* affairs of life, just not *all* of them. The person will ask you what else is to be included, which they will then in turn recount, and so it will proceed.

This is plainly an absurd situation. But we make essentially the same kind of error if we imagine that the whole of what can become an issue for us is essentially *something* that we can indicate, as if this were determinate and differentiable from others. One of the “things” that gets left out here—and this is really where the whole confusion arises—is actually the indicative context or activity itself. If we take “all differentiation of ‘this’ versus ‘that’” as a definite or determinate “this” which it is possible to juxtapose with whatever other “that,” then we are failing to notice the relationship between what we are saying (or indicating) and doing. That is, “all indication of ‘this’ versus ‘that’” would include the present contrastive situation. We leave the latter out, treating it as a sort of irrelevant marginal case, or perhaps an indissoluble residue one just does not know what to do with. If we did want to “include” it, we would be left with the infinite task of adding “this too” to the growing heap of “all indication.”

But this is not at all just a marginal problem. If we take it seriously, it should perplex us as

to how we even have words for phenomena such as human existence or the affairs of life, where these are construed holistically so as to encompass the full range of our possible concern and activity. One matter of perplexity (also an “affair of life”) arises with regard to how these holistic words function as “terms.” Signifying or indicating “the affairs of life” should, in our common sense view of language, mean that it is a “this” which we might contrast with something else. But if the “term” is supposed to indicate all possible indicative activity, then it should definitionally include whatever we supply as a contrastive “that” or “other.” Ultimately, then, there *can be no* other or term of contrast which would lie outside of all indicative activity; if we were to (supposedly) identify such an other, “something” lying “over there outside” of indication, it would only mean that we are still proceeding within the very same indicative activity or pattern. That is, if I indicate what is beyond indication, or point to an “outside” to contrastive activity, I have not at all indicated where contrast and indication end. Once attention is drawn to them, it is easy to see that “inside” and “outside” are, of course, classic terms of contrast.

Related to this is the problem of “who” it is that would point out the whole of human concerns, the one to whom such a “thing” would appear and by whom it could be pointed out. The issue here is once again with what the holistic word or name intends. A person, given to “reflective consciousness,” is here supposed to in at least *some* way stand outside of the whole of what we can be concerned with in life. Being outside of it allows it to be pointed out, although it would again

not be clear what the viewer might contrast such a whole with so as to indicate it. We ourselves, however, in entertaining this picture *do* discern a (supposed) “whole” being looked upon by a “reflective subject” or “consciousness,” which we will recognize again in our own reflection on *this* situation. Plainly, reflecting on such matters leads quickly to the specter of infinite regress (or progress, depending on one’s visualization).

By now, we should be left wondering exactly how it is that we even have such expansive or holistic “terms,” then, or how these could be imparted to, say, children learning to speak. If *the world, human existence, or the affairs of life* are all so expansive as to encompass everything we can point out, how can they themselves be pointed out? Being so indefinite in “what” they refer to, how do we even understand these words?

Pandemic time

If this model of indication cannot get at what we intend in referring to the whole of our existence or the range of our possible affairs, then we will need a new one in order to formulate our already-existing understanding of such phenomena. That we already do understand and are capable of signifying them is evident in our sense that we will have to keep adding all the “latest” instances of “reflection on life” into the tally in order to get at the *wholeness* of what we intended by “the affairs of life” (or “existence”). This is also evident in our understanding *that* this process of tallying-up will and must go on ceaselessly. Despite the constitutive indefiniteness and

necessary incompleteness of the phenomenon, we will quickly grasp “where” it is going, even though there *is* precisely no “where” it will go. In conveying an infinite regress (or progress) to someone, we can always point out its particular or latest “results,” but the trajectory or principle always goes beyond this. We can demonstrate the activity of counting all we want, but if the learner takes away that numbers stop at fourteen or twenty-seven, then what we intended to demonstrate—perhaps the very nature of “number” itself—did not come across. Our “point” was not this or that point, but the rule, principle, way, or even spirit which leaves them behind.

As we saw earlier, an era, epoch, or world in their common (and plural) usage suggest the significant influence (or even pervasive dominance) of some particular phenomenon, within some certain context. “Era” in particular is often associated with either the reign of a political figure or system (including in the much grander “reign” of Christ in the A.D. period, during which time various crucial rules of existence were arguably revised or fulfilled). But what rule or principle might govern the world construed as the *human era*? We glimpse something approaching such a law or binding phenomenon in the very inexhaustibility of human existence, understood as the whole of possible concern.

I must of course immediately clarify in what sense human existence is “inexhaustible.” Plainly, human beings die, and there is nothing standing in the way of imagining all of us dying out. (This is, of course, not to say that all human beings dying out would not be “unthinkable” in the sense of being horrific

and therefore painful to bring oneself to consider, but it is certainly not at all inconceivable in the sense of being literally unimaginable or logically impossible.) *Human existence*—approached radically and comprehensively such that no exception is granted to a theoretical observer who would pick *it* out in contrast with anything else—*is* inexhaustible for the same reason that we cannot encounter anything outside the range of possible distinction. The idea of it is straightforwardly incoherent: the very conception of an “outside” is itself the kind of distinction that pervades possible (that is, “our human”) experience. When we envision the world after you, I, or all other people have died out (the one which no human would any longer have “experiences” of in the common sense), we nonetheless imagine all of this within the inexhaustible scheme of time and space. Like numbers, there is strictly speaking no “end” to moments in time; while a particular period of time will, being particular, be bounded by a beginning and end, it is not possible to conceive of time in general this way. There is no more an earliest or latest time (when time is taken in this basic or general sense) than there is a biggest number or a location where spatial existence ends.

The principle which governs the era or epoch of human existence is precisely that it is, when taken in terms of possible points or what can be pointed out, indefinite and without end. The human era is in this respect an ageless age, an epoch without limits or, as it were, “epochality.” We can think of this as being like the apparent “timelessness” of an era one experiences while within it. But despite

our immersion in this era, it is nonetheless *defined* by a necessary indefiniteness, again in the sense that there *cannot be* any final point (no “this here” or “that moment then”) at which this “era” would stop. The governance here is clearly not that of any particular ruler or regime, and the phenomenon which would shape this epoch does not occur in time, as if it were a moment on a timeline.³ Indeed, the time or “temporality” in question here is not temporal in the usual sense at all, and instead gives an *atemporal* or even *eternal* shape to the passage of time as we ordinarily construe it.⁴ The language of eternity resounds throughout the secular or temporal—where these latter terms are understood as the infinitely extended “clock time” of points or “nows”—but within the imperatives which provide its essential or conceptual *structure*. (These imperatives would radicalize the sense of normativity we said was associated with “world” in its general usage.) We can hear this language at work in the following “statements of fact” about time: there will *always* be more time to come, there could *never* have been an ultimate beginning point, there has *forever and ever* been time.

³ Accordingly, it would be the context within which it is possible to measure out the length of Agamben’s “state of exception, to which governments have habituated us for some time” (“Giorgio Agamben on health scare and the religion of science,” 3). In the context of my present issue, the *state of exception* he has discussed in connection with the recent pandemic (although he makes clear here that it preexisted that crisis) would “govern” our “condition” insofar as the exceptional state refuses to be a state at all, or confounds definition. A state which is constitutively or essentially exceptional (as it were, the state of exception as such) would include its outside and thereby confound definition.

The *always*, *never*, and *forever* do not indicate any possible point or “now” in time, but instead stand as *disruptions* in the midst of such “now”-points. By this, I mean that they serve to confound the counting of “nows,” but “confound” it in such a way that they allow for a grasp of time as a whole. Plainly, grasping time as a whole cannot mean getting the sum total of all the events that will ever come to pass before one’s mind’s eye. Rather, grasping time as a whole only means apprehending its nature or concept, and this means seeing the definitive incompleteness of time as a set of points.⁵ Time is precisely never *defined* by, in the sense of being completed with, indicatable “nows”: if we point at the earliest moment on a timeline and insist that “*before* this, there was no time,” or say that *after* such and such moment there *will then* be no more time, we are attempting to find the kind of boundaries which positively define periods *within* time. Though this is just the sort of procedure we follow in referring to, say, the whole of Grover Cleveland’s presidency, it is precisely the absence of definition *in the scope of these terms* that allows us our (that is, “we humans” in the *radicalized* sense

⁴ See Heidegger’s discussion of *peras* as a specifically constitutive “limit,” not as an “outer boundary” but rather as “that by which and in which something begins and is” (“On the Essence and Concept of Φύσις in Aristotle’s *Physics* B, I,” 205-6).

⁵ Grasping this definitive aspect of existence, namely the irreducibility of the eternal aspect we see *among* the sequence of “nows” or moments in their limitless extent (the “always”), would in my view be the appropriately radical sense of Heidegger’s call for “human beings to *become* [. . .] mortals,” which Dastur interprets as “ceasing to give in to the illusions of immortality and com[ing] to truly inhabit and take care of the Earth” (842).

of human existence) grasp of these “utterly simple” facts about the nature of time.

The essential disruptiveness of the limit

Ordinarily, we will talk about how something or someone disrupts a certain state of affairs or way of doing things (etc.). This will mean to change it somehow, put it out of alignment, or displace it. In our context, however, we are thinking about disruption “itself,” which we might think of as a kind of inversion or explosion of the point, at least insofar as the latter (the point) is definitively identical with itself. That is, a point is just “this” and not “that,” at least in the particular relevant respect or context of significance, as this contrast is precisely what allows it to be pointed out. But in talking about pure disruption, disruption itself, or disruption as such, I mean for us to get at what *definitionally* confounds definition. Whereas a “this” contrasts with a “that” insofar as the one is here and the other is there (when their difference is conceived spatially, that is), disruption *itself* “is itself” insofar as *it* breaks apart or displaces.⁶ While disruption in the ordinary sense names a

⁶ Compare this with Heidegger’s characterization of “grounding [*Gründen*],” because of its rootedness in *transcendence*, as being “*strewn* into manifold ways” and forming a threefold complex of meanings (“On the Essence of Ground,” 127). Transcendence is a being beyond . . . or outside . . . , or in other words “itself” a relation, so it appears in multiple concurrent aspects.

⁷ In a separate work on the ways Heidegger’s concepts pertain to the pandemic experience, Aho discusses how residents in elder care homes’ “horizon[s] of familiarity collapsed” due to the general disruptions in routine brought about by confinement measures. Already out of sorts in these environments, “the lockdown measures enflamed this disorienting experience” (“We’re Protecting Them to death”—A

relationship between either things (an agent and patient entity, say) or a transition between states of something (a before and an after), here the relation is among expressions or aspects of the “same thing.”⁷

Being transitional, disruption is “itself” nothing and nowhere. It invokes the absence of any entity, affair, or state, the in-between or border “condition” of coming *from* . . . and going *toward* . . . somewhere or something else. (Indeed, we can approach it through the marginal figure of the ellipsis “itself,” the “point” of which is to lead elsewhere.) Though it is perfectly possible to locate where *something* that is in motion might be at this or that moment in the course of its being on the way toward . . . (this place or that condition), these of course do not successfully pin down the motion itself. In saying that motion *is not*, this is of course not to say that there “is no movement” in the sense that nothing in the world actually moves or changes, as if one were, say, simply denying empirically observable reality. Rather, I mean that motion itself, or motion proper, is essentially withdrawn from possibly being pointed out; the

Heideggerian interpretation of loneliness among older adults in long term care facilities during COVID-19,” 9). In the context I treat here, a “horizon” (which I term as limit, world, or border) would collapse in and of itself, given that it is an essentially incoherent or self-disrupting concept. It is for this reason “closed” or inaccessible in the sense that “it” could not possibly appear; it stands as its own withdrawal from possible encounter. While Aho suggests that a collapsed horizon leads to one’s seeing the world as a hostile and unfamiliar place, being capable of seeing *something* in terms of *something* (for instance *this* shadowy figure *as something* which might cause me pain) means that one is capable of seeing and specifying what *things* are, even if one portrays them inaccurately.

phenomenon is not available within the sense of the “is” that is based on pointing. What “defines” it, then, is something like exteriority or being-outside.

Conceptually, definitive exteriority—which, we should keep in mind, presents a contradiction in terms, as to *define* is to enclose or make finite—will *multiply* as we think it through. The outsideness comes to relate to itself in a complex fashion. In being outside of itself, it is outside of . . . (itself), such that it is itself in its actively exceeding itself. But in exceeding *itself*, outsideness is also itself in *being* exceeded. And as outsideness, it *is* itself “both” of these, or the unity and sameness thereof.⁸ Insofar as these are all aspects of outsideness *per se* or as such, they do not break apart into a sequence or series of separable points, where “now this” and “now that” are simply bundled together somehow.

⁸ One might compare this evasion or confounding of interiority with Foucault’s remarks on absence and exteriority in the work of Blanchot, at least if a statement like the following is taken literally or radically: “The outside cannot offer itself as a positive presence — as something inwardly illuminated by the certainty of its own existence — but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible, receding into the sign it makes to draw one toward it (as though it were possible to reach it)” (*Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside*, 28). For this to remain relevant to the same theme I am developing here, however, I would emphasize that the “fictional” character of the images of the outside must be approached as something like a *pure* fiction or image, where the image stands as *constitutively* “unreal” insofar as it manifests pure reference, relation, or indication (which are all ironic figures expressing a confounding or sully of the self-identical concept of the “pure such and such”). That is, the outside or sign *per se* would, *in itself*, point *outside itself*—would be this pointing away toward . . . an elsewhere which “it” also is—in relating to . . . itself, where the

The “point” of all this is the essential withdrawal—we can even think of it as a sort of implosion, closing the distance which otherwise separates whatever is drawn up in its wake—from the contrastive procedure which characterizes indication. As I have suggested, the rules which govern and provide needed shape to the realm of what can be indicated (i.e., of possible concern) are not themselves indicatable, that is, are not reducible to being pointed out. We must understand that there can neither be time *before* time nor time *after* it, just as we must see that there can be nothing we can identify beyond the range of what it is possible for us to indicate. The “cannot be” grasps and expresses the *wholeness* or *exhaustive depth* of possible time and possible “this” and “that,” a wholeness which cannot appear or be pointed out *within* the scope of time-telling or indication. (Again, if represented in such a way, we will have to reckon with, e.g., the problem of how to include the

relevant “self” is the interstice or relation. The self-undermining character of the sign, its pulling away, is just the playing-out of the essentially relational sign “in itself,” apart from its reference to a stabilizing presence or, to use some language from the cited passage, a *something* that is ontologically *certain of its own existence*. It is, or consists in and plays out, the very recessionary or regressive movement which would conduct thought toward this identity-confounding exteriority. I cannot delve further into the specifics of how exteriority functions in either Foucault or Blanchot’s corpus, but stress that each is a particular representative of a broad movement—a movement which, it must be noted, reaches back into the classical period of not only European but also, for example, Chinese thought (see, for instance, the limit paradoxes explored in the *Gongsun Longzi*’s 公孫龍子 “*Zhiwulun* 指物論” or “Discourse on Pointing Things Out” and *Zhuangzi*’s 莊子 “*Qiwulun* 齊物論” or “Discourse on Evening Things Out” chapters)—responding to the problem of how to conceive of the limits, and therefore the outside, of linguistic indication or sense.

one who points out “everything” in that *intended* “everything.”)

This “within” plainly cannot contrast with an opposite “without” in the usual sense of these terms. Instead, the contrastive procedure itself (cf. the *discerning* character of “critique”) must be confounded or disrupted here, such that we are not just continuing along the same broad *way*, positing just another “outside” to an “inside,” a “that other over there” opposing “this one here.” We will be able to disrupt this way of seeing only insofar as we explicitly come to inhabit the *contrast* or *between* as such, or come to dwell within the *border* or *limit* itself. We are all already border-dwellers, living in the interstitial “space” in which identity is open and accordingly becomes indistinct, just insofar as we are attuned to the impossibility of there being anything beyond the (maximally-conceived and inexhaustible) scope of “our” experience or existence. In understanding what is expressed in “must always,” “could never,” and “in every possible case,” we are ourselves enraptured by the essential disruption or confounding of self-identity.

This disruption is essential in two senses. It is on the one hand the disruption of essence as that which defines something, or what it is to be some [x], some “this” or “that.” What “defines” the transition between states, what it is to *be* that transition or relation, is to be absent, to lead away toward . . . something else, or to self-efface. But in *holding on* to this self-effacement or disappearance, we end up with

a “definition” which multiplies, metastasizes, and in general includes what is outside of it, or what it is not (but also *is*, and this is where the disruption lies). On the other hand, however, the disruption is also essential insofar as it first “opens up” the scope of possible concern. There could be no *realm* of life’s possible affairs and concerns, no *way* of indicating this versus that, without the disruption of identity. It is only because of our being swept up in the border or limit’s disappearance and evasiveness that discrete things, moments, or points can be seen as a whole, or indeed as *the* only possible whole there can be.

The world, then, does not just *have* limits. It *is itself the* border or limit, a “place” which in its steadfastly incoherent betweenness refuses identification or retreats from locatability. Human existence is drawn into this retreat and moved by it, and it is in the movement of the border’s *essential* disappearance or refusal of being pointed out that time, space, and in general whatever can be pointed out take on the eternal or exhaustive aspect.⁹ The world itself is the end, margin, or limit as such, the disruptive absence and self-*marginalization* of which bestows on “our” affairs (the unending series of “this” or “that” possible matter of concern) an inexhaustible and eternal aspect. The *radically banal* quality of the affairs of life, the way that these matters and things sprawl out universally and everywhere of necessity, emerges only in the removal of this most profound and disruptive exception. *World*—which invokes the pandemic outstretching of the realm of possible

⁹ Cf. Heidegger’s statement that possibility “grows in its possibility” out of “*restriction*,” that is,

out of a pure limitation (*The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 363).

human concern out into the unfathomable depths of the “always” and “never”—names this critical exception, not as an unavailable “something” lying outside our consciousness to which it might ever refer, but in tracing the way such reference will and must always fall short in expressing its strangeness.

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