

Beyond Utility – Opening New Fields of Possibility

Silja Graupe, Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences, Alfter (Germany)

In Chinese there is an expression, “we can’t see the true face of Mount Lu, because we are standing on top of it.” In each society there exist foundational values, strategies and images by which people seek to meet the challenges of the present. These foundations, usually subsisting below the radar of awareness, are the means by which we try to bring about solutions to the burning problem of our times hardly without questioning them in turn. Yet, I ask myself, is the earthquake that hit Japan on March 11, as well as its aftermath, really something that we can expect to handle from the secure position of our given Mount Lu? Or aren’t these events about to really shatter the very foundations of our way of thinking? In what follows I attempt to exemplarily illuminate these questions in regard to the underlying paradigm of our idea of who we are as human beings.

The part of Mount Lu to which I would like to draw our attention here is that very notion of utility presently pervading all our lives. In order to do so, I turn to the writings of Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990). Being obsessed with utility, explains the modern Japanese philosopher and Zen practitioner, “we put ourselves as individuals/man/mankind at the center and weigh the significance of everything as the *contents* of our lives individuals/man/mankind. [It is] the posture from which we think of ourselves as *telos* and center of all things.” (3) At the same time, we tend to forget about our own self, simply taking it as self-evidently given. “We proceed through life, on and on, with our eye fixed on something or other.” (4) In this relentless “forward progress of everyday life, the ground beneath our feet always falls behind as we move steadily ahead; we overlook it.” (4) Always looking at things outside of us, we grow accustomed to looking away from ourselves. As such, we ultimately fall short of coming to terms with the nature of the ground upon which we ourselves truly stand. We simply *believe* it to be stable, presupposing it as an unquestionable foundation from which to capitalize the whole world according to our own pre-given will.

Nishitani relates this belief back to Descartes who “took the *cogito* as an immediately evident truth, the one thing that stood above all doubt and could therefore serve as a starting point for thinking about everything else.” (13) I would also argue, however, that we as philosophers must look at economics as well. For when economists invented the modern notion of utility in the second half of the 19th century, they simply equated it with energy in an effort to interpret it in a purely mechanistic way. And as the flow of energy can only be predicted and controlled in a physical field that is itself unchanging, so economists began to think about utility against the background of an immovable, permanent field of consciousness. As a consequence, people not only appear as incessantly calculating the value of everything but also as remaining wholly incapable of noticing, let alone changing the inner rules according to which they make these calculations. Their preferences are simply considered stable and immovable. Thus, man creates a self-image of being conscious of everything in the outer

world while remaining wholly unconscious of his very self, especially of his own transformative abilities. Also, we begin to look at our fellow human beings simply as *pleasure machines* to be observed and controlled by means of incentives but never to be inwardly moved or touched by our presence. Ultimately, we come to think of the whole of humanity as incapable of learning, regretting and being creative. Even when an earthquake the magnitude of 9,0 is literally shaking the entire planet, we still consider this as an event taking place outside of us; an event incapable of jolting the citadel of our ego.

Looking at the same issue from a slightly different angle, we can say that our obsession with utility presupposes an idea of man built upon a “field of separation between within and without” (10).

“The self of contemporary man is an ego of the Cartesian type, constituted self-consciously as something standing ... against the world and all the things that are in it. (...) We are incapable of conceiving of the subjectivity of individual man without at the same time conceding to each individual his own ego, absolutely independent and irreplaceable. We designate as ‘subject’ that entity which can in no way ever be made into an object itself, or can never be derived from anything else, but is rather the point of departure from which everything else may be considered.” (13)

This mental attitude is certainly not only deeply ingrained in our daily habits, but has also become the hallmark of modern science. Consider the case of economics again. In an effort to control the world of consumption, production and finance, anyone trained into this science is made to implicitly think of himself as an umpire capable of designing the rules of the economic game without ever becoming an actual player. Also the natural sciences make us prone to think of ourselves as mere distant observers: We are to look upon and deal with the world as if we were outside of it, observing and managing it from a God’s eye perspective. As such it makes us think we can control and utilize nature’s forces according to our own advantage, but never engage in it to change it. This mental attitude certainly not only limits our creative capabilities in dealing with natural disaster; to my understanding it also plays a fundamental role in causing technological crises to arise in the first place, not least the one currently unfolding at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant. Does it not make us believe that we can control and utilize all natural forces, including those of nuclear fission, while never expecting them to turn around and destroy the very ground on which we *ourselves* exist?

What becomes visible here is the idea of man as standing on definite ground. Upon this foundation we are made to think of everything outside of us as mere means towards our own given ends, while nothing in the world can change or transform us in turn. At the same time it seems to us a given fact, as Adam Smith famous saying goes, that “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages.” We not only

think of ourselves but also of the rest of humanity as instrumentalizing the world according to one's own given preferences. But are crises such as the one currently befalling Japan really something we can still hope to manage from the safe vantage point of our ego? Nishitani at least argues otherwise. "Any of those situations that entail a fundamental negation of life, existence and ideals," he cautions us, "undermine the foothold of our existence and bring the meaning of life into question." (3) As such, they are likely not only to wrest all ordinarily necessary things of life their meaning; the very notion utility by which those values are commonly judged becomes in itself questionable. "Questions crowd in upon one: Why have I been alive? Where did I come from and where am I going? A void appears here that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands. In the face of this abyss, not one of all the things that had made up the stuff of life until then is of any use." (3) At this point, our task cannot be to shrink away from this gaping abyss in an effort to hastily seek safe ground somewhere else. Rather we must throw light onto the abyss directly underfoot:

"Taking a step back to shed light on what is underfoot of the self – 'stepping back to come to the self,' as another ancient Zen phrase has it – marks a conversion in life itself. This fundamental conversion in life is occasioned by the opening up of the horizon of nihilism at the ground of life. It is nothing less than a conversion from the self-centered (or man-centered) mode of being, which always asks what use things have for us (or for man), to an attitude that asks for what purpose we ourselves (or man) exist." (4-5)

Here, another idea of man arises. This idea primarily does not allow us to be predicated on pre-given and safe foundations. It also denies the possibility of viewing the world from a safe distance: The abysmal world is not a repository of means which we can observe and control outwardly; as the fabric of our very own existence, we are carved out and formed by it. As such, however, we are not mere victims; we rather become true *agents* of the world in which and out of which we live. We are granted the possibility of grounding ourselves within the world of experience; a world which, precisely because of its inherent instability and unpredictability, also demands our creative engagement. As creative agents within an ever changing world, we here attain the freedom, and the duty, to carefully build and nourish our own home ground. In asking ourselves to what purpose we exist, we take up the position of servant to every other thing. As such, we become "a constitutive element in the being of every other thing, making it to be what it is," assuming "a position at the home ground of every other thing." (148) At the same time, growing aware of the fact that far from being of any use to a preset individuality, all things become our true home ground. Thus, our field of consciousness cannot be considered a pre-given and immovable foundation any longer from which to manage the world. And yet, being emptied of any egotistic self-nature, we must not think of ourselves in a merely nihilistic sense. Rather, a "*field of possibility*" (151) opens up, where we leave both our essential self-attachment and our essential attachment to things behind, allowing ourselves and the world to form and transform one another in an

interdependent fashion. Said differently, we begin to ground ourselves in the dynamic *betweenness* of man and man as well as the *betweenness* of man and nature, thus truly becoming intimate with the situation we find ourselves immersed in. Far from being a matter of utilizing the outer world according to one's own given preferences, we must be responsive to the world's multifold crises, while also allowing these crises to change us in turn.

As for now, I am still unsure what consequences these two different idea of man possibly carry for our current situation. Allow me, however, to make at least a preliminary remark in regard to the problems inherent in our dealings with nuclear power. As indicated before, it seems to me that we have uncritically based these dealings on the unquestioned presupposition of man's ability to stand on safe ground from which to outwardly control and exploit this power. As this presupposition is now emerging as nothing but a dangerous illusion, the question remains what alternatives remain open to us. Beyond doubt, a technology such as nuclear fission demands a stable and predictable field upon which to operate. Once we no longer uncritically take such field as a given, our task becomes the one of deliberately and continually creating and conserving it on a day-to-day basis. But are we really capable of growing our fields of inbetweenness so as to rise to this task? Are we willing to meet the enormous challenges that come along with it, as well as to carry the responsibility and responsiveness inherent in it? If it turns out we cannot provide positive answers to these questions, I argue we must abandon this kind of technology completely. Also, it becomes our immediate task do our utmost to co-create a new livable and viable home ground for those who are now suffering from the nuclear crisis in Fukushima. For they have not simply lost a means by which to manage their lives. They are about to lose the very ground upon which they themselves once stood: the betweenness in which and out of which they have grown has human beings.

In closing, I would like to focus our attention on the role of philosophy in times of crises. In my view, it should do everything possible to point humanity not only to its yet unanswered questions but also to its unquestioned answers, placing itself, in this way, again at the service of humanity. This is to say that it must free itself from the tendencies of either retreating into the seclusion of an ivory tower or of utilizing the world's events for its own highly abstract discourses. Said differently, we might begin to bear witness to the fact that even for us philosophers the time has come for the kind of fundamental conversion we referred to above.

March 31, 2011

All quotations are taken from: Keiji Nishitani, Religion and Nothingness, translated with an introduction by Jan van Bragt, Berkeley 1983.