Nothingness, *Chōra*, and the Heart's Desire

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Neither ancient Greek discussions of *chōra* nor its modern interpretations coincide with the discussions of nothingness we find in Japanese and other East Asian intellectual traditions as neatly as it might seem at first glance. I say this not to toss the overlaps aside. On the contrary, Plato's idea—along with its presocratic precedents and its reverberations in Western thought—provides a useful bridge for traffic between philosophical worlds. The noncoincidence I would like to address here is a mark of that utility.

I

As modern readings of Plato attest, the *chōra* has proved a fitting metaphor for reflecting on a range of questions, from theological ideas of creation and *kenosis* to metaphysical alignments of the relationship between the permanent and the impermanent. In many cases, such interpretations add little more than a supporting paraphrase for what the interpreter already takes to be the case. But—and this is the more critical point—the original idea of *chōra* stipulates a distinction between the notions of Being and becoming that is carried over uncontested into these adaptations. If becoming were to collapse into Being, or Being into becoming, *chōra* could no longer serve as a middle ground between the actual and the eternal, between inconstant, visible forms and the invisible, indestructible formless form of all forms. Plato's *chōra* is not a backdrop to the material world but the crucible in which matter takes shape in things and the substratum that holds them in place. It is not merely an indeterminate place for existence to take place but the creative and structured womb of a world in the making. This generative quality of *chōra*

takes its meaning from the bond it forms between the degeneration and flux of that world and the stability of eternity. In short, insofar as *chōra* is seen as the locus of potentiality, the power to transform that which is not into that which might be, it belongs to a beingness superior to any sort of nothingness, and it allows meaning to emerge only in departure from the realm of non-being for the realm of Being. Plato's *chōra* is a third "realm"—the original meaning of the word in Homer—in which non-being is transformed into Being. Its meaning lies in not in the *nihilum* from which it created but only in the creations it positions *extra nihilo*.

Adjacent to *chōra*, the notion of nothingness stipulates the irreducible correlativity of Being and becoming. The logical marker for this is the copulative *soku*, which combines the opposites into a continuous identity of opposites, like a Moebius strip in which the two sides of a piece of paper flow into one another. Being *and* becoming are seen as Being-*in*-becoming. Together they constitute a "beingness" that stands in opposition to a "nothingness." Nothingness cannot be reduced to becoming or any other negation of Being. The more the absence of potential is seen as the presence of something more ultimate, the further the reality of nothingness slips away from the metaphor of *chōra*.

For these same reasons, nothingness cannot be seen as generative. All generation is at the same time a degeneration. All causality is an abstraction of reality in the sense that something of what *was* is always sacrificed for what *comes to be*. This may be so for existence, but there is no coming to be or passing away for nothingness. Generation and degeneration are rather seen as manifestations of nothingness, as ciphers of a presence that hides itself by showing itself. It is not itself a power or a force or an energy field; it is only *experienced* as such. Nothingness is present both in the effects of force as well as in the force itself, but it is not reducible to either. If the supreme expression of Being is pure happening, then nothingness cannot be said to "happen" at all. There is no conditioning, no cause, no contingency, and no necessity—nothing to take place and nowhere for it to be placed in.

Moreover, insofar as *chōra* is imagined as "the receptable of all coming and being,"[1] it is always full to the brim. In this sense, *chōra* differs from the devouring mother of Anaximander's ἄπειρον and the tranquil void of Democritus's κενόν. Nor can it open up and overflow like an Aristotlean τόπος. Setting aside the logical question of how a container that contains everything could be considered a container at all, it is what is *in* the receptable that gives *chōra* its meaning. It is a creative matrix in which Being and becoming generate the world—both the fragile world of appearances and the infrangible world of Ideas.

Metaphors of nothingness rest on the opposite assumption. Nothingness is not seen as a receptacle for beingness but precisely the other way around: the world in

1. Plato, *Timaeus*, 48e.

its constant flux is where nothingness takes place, where it becomes visible, tangible, knowable, and meaningful.[2] Reality itself is the Moebius strip of nothingness-in-beingness, impermanence revealed in permanence, *nirvana*-in-*samsāra*. As such, it always overflows the receptacle of beingness. The ultimate reality of nothingness is accessible to us only in glimpses and fleeting sentiments that interrupt the rhythms of the everyday world. Beingness is like Laozi's cup. By itself, it is useless and without meaning. Its meaning and purpose begins where the cup ends, in the emptiness that it holds within it.[3]

Rather than enter deeper into the rational thicket that such a reversal of perspective on *chōra* opens up, I would like to use the remainder of my space here to hint at how the glimpse of nothingness in human experience may also help nudge metaphors of *chōra* to dimensions beyond mere logical abstraction.

II

The paradoxical mystery of the human spirit—and by extension, of God—is as indispensable to human life as it is immune to our disposition. By this I mean that it is experienced as a kind of "missingness" that takes a step back for every step the mind takes towards it. Although consciousness makes more of reality accessible to us than it does, say, to a rock, a tree, or a bird, the core of reality—what makes things real—remains finally beyond our ability to identify with confidence, let alone to name or access at will. The idea of reality is, we might say, the ultimate *Grenzbegriff*. Talk about God belongs to religious language as one attempt to create a language for the unspeakable, not in order to speak of it with certitude but in order not to forget that it is inaccessibly there. It remains a nothingness to us, but it is present as an absence. The unknown author of the fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* puts it, somewhat cryptically, this way:

> Leave aside this everywhere and this everything, in exchange for this nowhere and this nothing.... A person's affection is remarkably changed in the spiritual experience of this nothing when it is achieved nowhere.

To paraphrase, the mystery of the human spirit is nowhere more in evidence than when its affections are freed of attachment to its achievements. Further, the power of this mystery is not at our beck and call, much as we might want it to be.

2. Nishida Kitarō's idea of the ultimate *basho* of nothingness is not itself a *basho* but a manifestation of all other *basho* as *basho*. It is not any kind of a divine *locus locorum* but rather the point in human experience at which we see our *basho*-affected thinking as the nothingness of ultimate reality at work in Being and becoming.

3. The image is from chapter 45 of the *Daodejing*.

Unsurprisingly, that "want" has often been used to explain both the origin of beliefs in a spirit realm, whether as part of the natural world or completely beyond it, and the origin of attempts to submit to that higher realm in order to make up for what is wanting in our lives.

Whether we trust in that mystery not only to be with us but ultimately on our side is a matter of faith, not of doctrinal certitude. Karl Barth tried to soften the radical nature of this act of fundamental orientation by insisting that it is a divine gift not at the disposition of human volition—*unverfügbar*. I am more inclined to side with his successor Heinrich Ott, who did not share Barth's deep distrust of human experience unaffected by Christian faith. Ott preferred to begin from what he called "the inaccessibility of our own heart." As he explained, behind our every feeling and thought and decision, each of which has a specific something that makes it "what" it is, lies a "nothingness" so unknown and unidentifiable that every symbol we devise to speak of it is swallowed up in that nothingness. In Ott's words:

> We cannot directly access what we are. What does that mean? It means that everything we experience, feel, suffer, act, or think, does not ultimately come from ourselves.... But neither does it mean that we can confront nothingness as an "other." It is an inaccessible and uncontrollable reality already present within us.[4]

His point is that we need to preserve the difference between unproductive, self-deluding attachment to control and achievement and acceptance of the ultimate reality of the inaccessible. This leads to the question: From which of these did the idea of *chōra* itself come? Obviously, an echo of *something* in experience gave it its shape. To locate the origins of the idea in an eternal realm indifferent to the workings of mind is to reject the question. But if, as I am confident Plato himself believed, philosophy's pursuit of clear thinking belongs to the quest of the good life, then the idea of *chōra* is a response to something in our nature, and the difference between being guided by it and being misguided hangs on our experience of that mystery of our own humanity. In this sense, any idea of *chōra* disassociated from human experience is, to borrow the expression of William James, "always dust and disappointment" compared to "the real goods which our souls require."[5]

4. Heinrich Ott, *Das Reden vom Unsagbaren: Die Frage nach Gott in unserer Zeit* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1978), 86, 125.

5. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Lecture iii. See *Writings 1902–1910* (Library of America, 1987), 131. In his 1977 book *L'Idole et la distance*, Jean-Luc Marion highlights the way in which Heidegger rejects ontotheological descriptions of God as idolatrous precisely because of their disconnect from the dwelling of the divine in the experience of the lack of God and their distance from cult. See the discussion and references in Maria Villela-Petit, *Questioning Greece with Heidegger and Simone Weil* (Chisokudō Publications, 2023), 216–19. This is not to say that I find Heidegger's notion of *das Nichts* and its relationship to Being any closer to the East Asian tradition than Plato's *chōra* is.

The idea of nothingness stands squarely against the assumption that we can take ourselves out of the picture and secure knowledge of the universal principles governing reality. The surety of such knowledge, in turn, begets the assumption of our right to govern in accord with those principles. In fact, universal principles are always an imposition on the world they are thought to preside over. If the history of thought should teach us anything, it is that even the most esteemed of our universals cannot escape servitude to epoch-specific and culture-specific ways of thinking. Nevertheless, we carry on passing laws and enforcing them on the natural world as if they were objectively true and just. True, this propels the scientific method, but it also justifies the imperium of human "civilization" within the natural order, despite the fact that, in the larger scheme of things, the short history of consciousness gives us no such right.

The impersonal character of nothingness is more cautious. Not only does it resist the infliction of anthropomorphic or perceptual bias; it also rejects the attempt to de-anthropomorphize thought by elevating certain ideas to the status of eternal verities. All ideas, including ideas of nothingness, are seen as human convention bound to the specificities of time and place—that is to say, of beingness. At the same time, thinking is a supremely human way of manifesting a nothingness whose presence is known by its absence.

From the standpoint of nothingness, the idea of principles governing the creation and transformation of reality drives the mind in the vicious circle of a tautology. If reality is the whole of it, and if there is no Being without becoming, then there cannot be some principle within beingness that makes everything into *every thing*, that makes beings actual rather than potential. In other words, the reality of beingness—actual and potential, past and future, generating and degenerating, causality and contingency, principle and achievement—is *not* the whole of reality at all. Only a nothingness glimpsed in beingness and conventional truth but not coincident with them can be said to represent ultimate reality.[6]

Now if the idea of *chōra* echoes an unacknowledged, anthropocentric attachment to beingness as ultimate reality, the idea of nothingness echoes something else within human experience, something that cannot be located in the memory of past experiences or even in the administration of perceptions and the regulation of reason. Nothingness itself has no location, no within or without, and its

6. Obviously, not all conventional thought is conventional truth. The distinguishing characteristic of the former is that it seeks ultimate truth in rational conventions about Being and becoming; of the latter, that it points beyond beingness to ultimate truth, of which ideas like nothingness and no-self are merely conventional ciphers. For example, conventional thinking populates the world of ideas with dualities like good and evil, subject and object, divine and human. Conventional truth proposes nondual thinking, not in order to reject the utility of conventional ways of thought but in order to protect them from being set up as ultimate.

manifestation *in loco* does not change that. Eckhart provides us with just the right image for this when he speaks of an uncreated "spark" that flashes for a moment in the "inward desert" of the soul. It is a desert not because it is barren of life but because it lacks the landmarks that orient our everyday lives. Only in the experience of complete disorientation can the ultimate reality of nothingness show itself in our experience, like a naked spark that "time and place have never touched;" it illumines all times and places—if only for a moment—like an "imageless image" or an "image beyond images."[7]

The proper starting point for explaining the experience of nothingness, then, is the point at which Kant's three pivotal questions are made to stand on their heads: What can I know? —Nothing. What ought I to do? —Nothing. What may I hope? —Nothing. The desire to know with certainty, to act correctly, and to hope for the fullness of life are not reducible to concrete facts and theories, to laws and principles, or to expectations of a better existence in this world or the next. When these questions are voided of content, which is another way of saying, when the questioning itself has no identifiable object, then thinking in terms of self and other, subject and object, question and answer is no longer adequate. One has to see oneself as no-self in order to understand that nothing specific *I* can know or do or hope is a proper analog for the whole of reality.

The term "no-self" does not register easily with our usual understanding of agency, just as the idea of "nothingness" grates against our way of talking about reality. The terms "empty self" and "emptiness"—both of which have a long philosophical history in East Asia—are less hostile to our ordinary preconceptions of agency and reality, but the experiences they tag are the same.

Far from any kind of *unio mistica* or radical negation of self, the experience of nothingness is a radical affirmation of self—not as imperial ego but as an instrument of an all-embracing impulse to connect with the world and everything in it. No-self is agency empty of self. It reconciles the apparent contradiction between Jesus' rebuke of those who parade their virtues on the street and his injunction against putting one's light under a bushel. The Japanese proverb captures the essence of selfless agency: "The foot of the lighthouse is dark." It is only by turning the light away from oneself that the darkness can be lit up for others. Unlike a halo attracting attention to a virtuous agent, it is like a candle whose own darkness enables it to brighten its surroundings. So, too, there is a sense in which the images of God embedded in sacred texts and theological reflection are not mere objects of adoration but expressions of the irrepressible human desire for absolute

7. See Sermons 53 (Pf 88, Q 22, QT 23), and 60 (Pf 60, Q 48, QT 34). On the nature of the desert, see the poem, possibly authored by Eckhart, "The Grain of Mustard Seed," in M. O'C. Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (Crossroad, 2009), 14–16.

relativity, to be connected with everything, directly, always, and everywhere—for perfectly selfless love, if you will. The paradox of consciousness is that nothing less could satisfy us, once and for all, than to achieve what our skinbound consciousness denies us.[8]

Selfless action extends far beyond the Kingdom of Ends that Kant idealized for rational beings. It has much more to do with Jesus' notion of a "Kingdom of God" that is present within us and within all things around us. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus advises his disciples again and again that they need only open their eyes to encounter a truth that is secret and hidden to those who keep them shut.[9] As human beings, we experience that mystery most intimately as something we may call "the heart's desire," that elusive yet undeniably real part of ourselves which, for the most part, we are content with domesticating, civilizing, educating, and legalizing out of sight and out of mind of our everyday self.

III

The first and most important thing that needs to be said about the heart's desire is too simple and too obvious to be stated directly and in the abstract. I prefer to draw on an archetypal image from the seventeenth century, of which Dostoyevsky once wrote: "If there is one book humanity must not forget to bring with it to face the Divine Tribunal in Final Judgment, it is *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, in whose pages Cervantes has delivered to us the very heart of who we are."[10] Popular affection for the story aside, the lantern-jowled madman unwittingly entangled in myths out of time that forever distort the real world about him is an image of our very own well-intentioned but misguided efforts to lead our lives away from the heart's desire. Caught between a past we cannot ever fully appropriate and a future whose uncertainties we cannot control, we are all of us, every soul of us on earth, tangled up in the story of Don Quixote. In the most basic sense, his sin is our humanity.

Quixote's adventures come to an end, we recall, when he is defeated in Barcelona by the Knight of the White Moon. En route to the contest, which was set up by villagers from his home town, he has two experiences that shake his convictions to the core. First, he comes upon a caravan transporting the statues of four

8. I take this to be the point of Nishitani Keiji's critical and mildly antagonistic essay "Impressions of Religion," in which he exposes the selfish side to Christian faith when it seeks to replace self-understanding with self-assurance or the mitigation of human reason by illusory beliefs.『西谷啓治著作集』(Sōbunsha, 1986–1995), 2: 163–82.

9. I have analyzed this point at some length in *Jesus' Twin: A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas* (Crossroad, 2015).

10. The passage is from *The Diary of a Writer* (George Braziller, 1919), 836. For more on Dostoyevsky's reading of Cervantes, see Tamara Djermanovic, "Dostoyevski y Don Quijote: Poética y estética de una ilusión," *Anales Cervantinos* 47 (2015): 9–24.

figures mounted on horseback: St. George slaying the dragon, St. Martin dividing his cloak with a beggar, St. James Matamoros, patron of Spain, and St. Paul being struck down en route to Tarsus. Quixote reflects on the virtues of each as heroes of the same profession as he. He ends with the melancholic remark that whereas these men were doing "the will of heaven," he was only fighting "after the manner of men," which makes him wonder whether, "by a happy change in my fortune and an improvement in my understanding, I might perhaps take a better course."

A while on, Quixote falls out among a band of outlaws led by the infamous Catalan bandit Roque Guinart and comes to appreciate better just what the consequences of such an "improvement in understanding" might be. For three days and three nights he is held captive in the robber camp. At first we find him distraught at the fact that a man capable of attaining such fame as Guinart should so waste his life as an outlaw. He can only counsel him to take steps to heal his wounded conscience. The bandit listens patiently, as do the rest of the band whom Quixote lectures copiously on the dangers of their chosen profession. His words are of no avail. To the contrary, as Quixote comes to learn with what justice and rigid discipline the company of thieves is ruled, he grows perplexed. Whence such virtue, he wonders: Whence such generosity seldom equaled in that society that has named Guinart an outlaw? Slowly it dawns on him that he and the thief share the common dream of a just society, but with one important difference: Guinart does not seem to have gathered his dream from the bookshelf or fashioned it in accord with traditional philosophic and religious values. It is rather some inner prompting of the heart that has driven him to embrace the austere, day-to-day existence of a wandering outlaw.

After his defeat in Barcelona, Quixote turns back towards La Mancha in despair, his principles not abandoned voluntarily but taken from him by force. He resolves at this time to undertake the simple life of a shepherd in the hills, to roam about in exile from society, breathing the fresh air of freedom in search of a new myth of life. As it happens, he falls ill before he can undertake his adventure to the heart's desire. On his deathbed he repents of his conversion and reverts to trust in the only other kind of life he could have conceived: to have read *better* books which would have suggested *other* ideals to serve with the same total commitment. "Blessed be Almighty God," he cries out:

> "My mind is now clear, unencumbered by those misty shadows of ignorance that were cast over it by my bitter and continual reading of those hateful books of chivalry. I see through all the nonsense and fraud contained in them, and my only regret is that my disillusionment has come so late, leaving me no time to make any sorts of amends by reading those that are the light of the soul."

Immediately he disposes of his possessions, stretches himself full length in his bed, and faints for the last time.[11]

And so Cervantes closes his tale, reminding us that the tragedy of this frail caricature of a man whose mind was poisoned and whose conscience dimmed by years wasted in the reading of worthless literature is that he had connected to it through the medium of books and lost touch with deeper impulses that would have connected him to a greater reality. We are given to consider something more than a meaningless abyss that opens up when we come to at the end of our rational tether, swallowing up all our principles, laws, and conventions, something like an experience of emptiness from which we can look back and rediscover our connectedness to a world unencumbered by what is of value or disvalue to the everyday self. Such is the mystery to which nothingness opens our eyes and conventional thinking closes them.

The encounter with nothingness is a disturbance of the spirit so essential to our human condition that we can only agree again with Dostoevsky that the story of Don Quixote stands as a *vademecum* for humanity on its "journey to the heart." That journey does not aim at fashioning a clear idea of the world, of inflicting that idea back on the world, or even of rejecting all such ideas so as to revel in unrestrained enjoyment of the world. The journey has no other destination than the endurance of the search itself. Its aim is the *pursuit* of the heart's deepest desires, not their *fulfillment*, full aware that whatever we can know or do or hope, the heart itself remains forever unfathomable. It marks the point in life at which we renounce the desire to *lead* our life, like some intemperate animal at the end of a rope, for the desire to *follow* it. The question, "What shall I do with my life?" gives way to the uncertainty of wondering, "What might life want to do with me?" This quest, prompted by hope but ultimately hopeless, leads the journey into the desert and through the necessary darkness of a pessimistic wisdom and the constant threat of despair. Insofar as we can talk of an encounter with nothingness, it is experienced not as a noun or a verb but as an adjective or adverb, as quality to the connections that make up the things of life and the world—not unlike Eckhart's description of God as a *bîwort*,[12] a gloss on the inscrutable grammar of the ultimate reality we seek but can never find.

It is not hard to sympathize with Plato's resistance to the idea of *chōra* as pure, unspeakable emptiness. We want to give it attributes, to bring it down to earth, to make it accessible to mind and consistent with what we already know. By the same equally rational token, we want to make nothingness accessible through the categories of beingness. In some sense, we dislike mystery and metaphor, the unknowable

11. The relevant passages can be found in Chapters 58, 60, 67, 74, and 75.
12. See, for example, Sermon 67.

and the uncontrollable, as much as we dislike anything about our humanness. We know how deeply we long for eternity, but in the end we just want more time. We prefer secure fantasies of attainment to the insecurity of renunciation to the unattainable. Like Quixote, we may despise having our lives ruled by books, but when it comes down to it, we prefer to read books that tell us why there is more to life than books. There is nothing we can *do* about the incongruity, but neither can we afford to ignore it. At some point, the abstract metaphysics of *chōra* needs to be balanced by reflection on the inaccessible but indispensable and inexhaustibly intelligible heart's desire as more than the occasional temptation to hobble reason in the name of freedom. Little wonder that our poetry and literature direct our affections again and again to the outsider, the misguided, the unprincipled, the fool, the outlaw, the shepherd roaming in the hills, and the Samaritan.