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### On Being and Presence

As a teacher, I have observed students in my classes being so engrossed and absorbed in what they are doing that they do not notice the time that is passing. When I hear someone say, 'Oh, we are already done!' or 'The class is already over?', this is an indication to me that they have not been aware of the time as it was passing. It is precisely this unawareness of time passing that we attempt to capture by using the construction of the verb 'to be' with the past participle of the verbs 'engross' or 'absorb'. We can think of the students to be in a state where they do something, like conducting a science investigation but where they are not aware of the situation as such. They are absorbed in the situation and do not objectify and think about time – which they do when they are not absorbed and wish some lesson to be over. I remember times during my middle school years when I looked at the second hand of the clock on the wall behind the teacher and the lesson appeared to be interminable. Similarly, the afternoons of Christmas Eve, the hours before receiving our gifts, turned out to be interminable and I could never actually fall asleep to take the nap that my parents had ordered us to take.

Research generally might short-shrift the phenomenon by suggesting that the students engrossed in the science activities 'are (self-) motivated' and leave it at that; and researchers might describe me as an unmotivated student who was not interested in the lesson but who was hoping it would pass by watching the passing of time on the clock. The problem is that the very conceptualizing of knowing and learning as a conscious activity prevents us from thinking (about, of) those situations where students most and best do what we desire them to do: fully engage with the task designed to let them learn. Moreover, impossible in a state like this are all the attributes some psychologists want from students: self-awareness of themselves as learners. That is, not only are students supposed to be engaging in making thematic the learning object but also their own learning (process). All the ideas about meta-cognition and its importance as strategy for learning are based on the notion of making present to oneself the activity of thinking (cognition). But when I am engrossed in something I cannot inherently make present to myself the engrossment, because this would mean that I am aware of my engrossment, which

would precisely stop the engrossment. We already encounter a similar phenomenon in chapter 3, while investigating touch, which shows that we are intentionally oriented either to the hand touching the mouse pad or to the hand touching the hand that is touching. We may also orient our intentional effort toward the feeling of the object or on the relief that the object touched is providing to the itching part of our skin. That is, the very way in which many learning scientists think (about, of) and theorize learning covers up an issue that should be of the most interest to us: the relation of presence and its difference from the presence of the present. In this chapter, I exhibit first-person methods by investigating presence and Being (*Sein, être*) and their relation to representation and beings (*Seiendes, étant*).

### Being Absorbed

There are many instances in my daily life when I am completely absorbed in something. I am so completely involved that the personal pronoun ‘I’ and its pronominal forms ‘my’, ‘mine’, and ‘me’ no longer exist in the experience. In fact, I am not just absorbed on occasion but take it as an attitude: I deliberately allow myself to be absorbed. It is an attitude to life characteristic of Zen, which aims at presence rather than the making present of the presence. I do so across many, very different aspects of my daily life:

- ‘I’ am riding the bicycle for quite some time already and all of a sudden realize that a period of time has gone without ‘my’ ‘noticing’ ‘the environs’ or ‘the time’ ‘passing’ – ‘I’ can provoke the falling away of presence by focusing, for example, on the repetitive movement of my legs and feet pushing on the pedals;
- I have gone into the garden to weed. I pull a weed, pull a weed, pull a weed . . . and all of a sudden I realize that two hours have passed without ‘my’ ‘noticing’ the situation, *that* ‘I’ ‘have been pulling’ ‘weeds’, *where* ‘I’ ‘have been pulling’ ‘the weeds’, not even of an ‘I’ that has been the subject of the weeding;
- I am on a hiking trip. For the first couple of days, there are many thoughts racing through my mind. Later, I catch myself every now and then realizing that a long period of time has passed without ‘my’ ‘noticing’ ‘anything’ and that ‘I’ am unable to recall anything of the walk. If there has been anything at all, then it was a dim sense of ‘walking’;
- I sit at my desk, writing . . . until I suddenly realize that the morning has passed without that ‘I’ have gotten up once. Although ‘I’ have written more than 6,000 words, ‘I’ ‘have not been aware of’ ‘time’, ‘myself’, or ‘my surroundings’ – though there has been perhaps a dim sense of a process of ‘writing’.
- I fall asleep only to wake up many hours later without ever recalling anything – unless I had woken up or, upon waking up, remember a dream.

All of these experiences share some common features. First, the many quotation marks suggest that our language is ill-suited to the attempt to capture those ‘experiences’, which, as such, are not present to ourselves other than, perhaps, in some ‘dim sense’. The ‘I’ that appears in these descriptions is unable, in the state of absorption, to think ‘I’ in the same way, a person who sleeps or who is dead cannot

say 'I'. Second, the instance of the slipping away generally tends to be unavailable just as the early parts of the coming out of the 'state'. The transitions have synoptic quality because they belong to two very different and mutually exclusive states: conscious awareness and non-awareness. Third, the 'period' between the slipping away and returning to consciousness of presence in the present is not experienced as period at all, is not captured in any way by language in the normal way that we intend it. There is a complete unavailability of the period, which is inaccessible to consciousness by nature, just as sleep is a state that we cannot access by means of consciousness precisely because it is characterized by the absence of consciousness.

There are some indicators to the period of slipping away, that is, the period of transition from conscious

awareness of the present to the absence thereof. First, in the above-mentioned types of activities, there may be occasions when the actual slipping away is preceded by episodes of partial slipping away or brief periods in which consciousness has slipped away and then returns. Most notably, however, I have experienced a transition while falling asleep, a transition that is precisely felt as 'falling'. There is a sense of presence but also no hold on presence any more – just as in an episode related to illness featured in chapter 9, where complete passivity takes over the person. It is an experience of noticing without interference, without holding on to reality as it slips away.

It is apparent from what we actually do remember that something has happened. On the bicycle, I find myself in some place different from the one I remember having consciously attended to last – in the same way that I recall the green light I had passed prior to finding myself on the sidewalk bleeding, together with my crushed bicycle, finding out that an old lady had run me down from behind. I recall some before and some after, but nothing in between. In the first situation, I know it is not the result of an accident, a medical state of 'being unconscious' and suffering from the consequences of a concussion, such as in the second case. That is, there are states of conscious awareness of the present; and that aspect, the presence of the present, I do recall. In the same way, I remember going into the garden and beginning to pull weeds, only to find myself with a lot of vegetable garden cleared of any weed at what turns out to be some time later. On the hiking trips, as while cycling, there is a physical distance between the place that is present to me at the time and the last location that I can remember as such. Finally, there are many pages of text between where I consciously took note of myself as sitting at the desk and the instant that my presence in front of the computer is again available to me in my conscious awareness.

**Methodical Note** Even the simplest aspect of everyday life may allow us to gain deep insights into phenomena of interest. In my situation, the interest is in knowing and learning, being aware and coping, or presence and representation. The key to understanding these phenomena better is to pay attention to the dimensions of the phenomenon that we normally do not attend to, which leads to the fact that we do not properly understand it. Thus, cognitive psychologists tend to theorize knowing in terms of representations, which makes the very phenomenon of everyday coping disappear.

From the cycling experience I know that getting into the state of complete absorption tends to occur on very familiar roads, and when I do become absorbed while riding in unfamiliar terrain, I may miss a turn-off, as one of the episodes in chapter 2 illustrates (p. 36). In the garden, too, being absorbed arrives while operating in and on familiar terrain, where there are no unforeseen ‘obstacles’ that bring conscious awareness back. Similarly, a telephone call or ringing door bell would take me out of the flow of writing – though people sometimes enter my office without my becoming aware of their presence, which means, the absorption is so profound that the noises that accompany their arrival are insufficient to generate affection, allure on the ego, and prominence of the advent of another person.

These forms of experience show that together with the presence of the present comes the ability to recall that former present; what has not been or made present is not available to conscious recall afterward. This also means that I had to have noticed the girl on her bicycle with the dog on the first day, which allows me to *recognize* her, whereas the twin silos emerge into my consciousness as a first – they have never been experienced as present before. We may therefore speak of two forms of presence. The first is pure presence, whereas the second is presence that is made present to itself. Making presence present again involves two moments: (a) the deferral between an inherently ever-changing presence and the capture of any finite period *as* something that is present and (b) the means of making some presence present again, *representation*. Conscious awareness requires the latter, a structural form that allows the present to be made present again to consciousness any time and anywhere.

An interesting paradox arises from the fact that ‘being absorbed’ means an absence of awareness *of/for* the present. How can I intentionally enter a state of being that is characterized by the absence of an intentional object? It is a paradox that we live, for example, when we try hard to fall asleep and, precisely because of this trying hard, cannot fall asleep. We also experience it when we attempt to forget – e.g., the passing of a person or an embarrassing moment in our lives – and precisely because we think about it we cannot forget it. Consciousness holds onto its *object* precisely at the moment when it attempts to get rid of it. The form of relation, the subject’s intentional (transitive) engagement with the object renews the presence of the object. That is, non-engagement can only be achieved when the object is allowed to withdraw, when consciousness no longer holds on to it. In my accounts, we observe a state of repetitiveness: pulling weeds, pulling weeds . . . , focusing on the churning of the legs, or focusing on the ideas that emerge from under my typing hands that are not present to myself. To aid someone in falling asleep, popular wisdom recommends ‘counting sheep’ or ‘counting stars’. Focusing on breathing or imagining a white wall with eyes closed are other techniques that allow sleep to come or a state of meditation to open up, which is also characterized by the non-making-present of presence.

In Buddhism, the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* may have precisely this same effect that arises from the possibility to let go that comes with repetitiveness. Tai chi masters also have developed techniques that provoke a transition into pure being, that is, a form of presence that is not made present to itself: Relax, breathe, feel the earth, and do nothing extra. This ostensibly simple technique is nonetheless not easy to apply in the practice of tai chi or any other practice, including edu-

cational practices, if only because what is sought is becoming one with nature. These four techniques are inseparable: ‘To *relax* completely, breathe, feel the earth, and do nothing extra with your whole body. To *breathe* fully, relax, feel the earth, and do nothing extra with your whole body. To *feel the earth*, breathe, relax, and do nothing extra with your whole body. To *do nothing extra*, breathe, relax, and feel the earth with your whole body’ (Lee et al. 1996: 26). Eating, sleeping, walking along a wall with a cup full of milk, teaching or any other action can be undertaken in this spirit. A state of optimal relaxation, controlled breathing, unity with the natural environment (and with others), total concentration on what one is doing so as not to be dispersed (doing nothing extra) describe the fully focused state of persons engaged in the present with their whole being.

The state of pure being is not completely empty because, when consciousness explicitly returns, there is a resonance of what has been, an echo, a feeling of well being that dates from the period of non-presence of the present. Resonating means that something else reaches into the present in the form of an echo, but precisely because there is an echo, something else has been, which itself is not accessible in the way the echo is. We know from science that dreams are not generally available while we are dreaming. We remember only those that we have while waking up – according to dream experts, we do not remember most dreams, and some of us remember seldom or not at all remember the dreams even though sleep specialists can objectify and measure their presence. The dream I remember upon waking up is such a resonance. It testifies that there are some underlying processes that occur without being accessible themselves. Dreams therefore indicate that ‘falling asleep is not a loss of consciousness, but the conscious diving of consciousness into unconsciousness that it allows to rise within itself while sinking into it. The truth of this immersion overflows and carries off any kind of analysis’ (Nancy 2007: 24). The categories of resonance and echo allow us to have a sense of what has happened, states that I have experienced as *cycling, writing, weeding, hiking, or sleeping*. I use the construction ‘that are experienced as’ and then use a gerund because it avoids the articulation of a subject of the sentence that intentionally does what the verb form specifies. In absorbed coping, I do not think of ‘I’, this state is precisely characterized by the absence of the ‘I’ in the experience. As I am writing these lines, I am convinced that this is the reason why, prior to doing this research, I have used precisely this construction to capture what is happening during complete absorption.

Falling asleep is an interesting phenomenon because most of the time it happens without our conscious noticing the process.<sup>1</sup> The transition between being awake, knowing that I am awake, and being sleep, not (generally) knowing that I sleep is so fast that I do not notice how the state of presence to myself and that of non-presence to myself change over one into the other. There are instances, however, when I am so tired that I fall asleep on the couch in the family room. The sensation

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<sup>1</sup> In the title *Tombe de Sommeil* (Nancy 2007) is translated for the English version as *The Fall of Sleep*. In fact, ‘tomber de sommeil’ means ‘to fall asleep’. In the title, ‘tombe’ may be the first or third person form of the verb ‘tomber’, to fall. But ‘tombe’, as a noun, denotes something different: a grave. *Tombe de sommeil*, therefore, is the grave of sleep, just as the search term ‘la tombe de <name>’ will yield the graves and grave stones of the person whose name we use in the search (e.g., the grave of Jim Morrison in the Père Lachaise cemetery).

frequently is precisely one of falling: into a deep dark hole. At other times, there is a sensation of fading in and fading out. In a few instances, there is a sense of falling together with a second sense of being jerked around and a sudden return to full consciousness, at which point I realize that I have been falling asleep.<sup>2</sup> There is an instant in this experience where I can stop the falling by focusing on staying awake. Similarly, I can decide to let go and fade completely away. There comes an instant where I am barely aware of the falling before ‘the lights are out’. In falling asleep, ‘I am falling there where I am no longer separated from the world by a demarcation that belongs to me during all the time of my wakefulness and where I am myself in the same way that I am my skin and all my sense organs. I am passing this line of distinction, I am sliding as a whole to the most interior and most exterior of myself, erasing the partition between the two’ (Nancy 2007: 19–20).

‘There is’ ‘weeding’ (‘cycling’, ‘writing’, ‘hiking’). ‘There’ translates the German ‘da’ and ‘is’ constitutes the present form of the third person singular of the verb ‘to be’, which translates the German verb *sein*. ‘There is’, therefore, is a form of *Dasein*, ‘being-there’ (literally, *Dasein* translates as ‘there-being’). ‘Weeding’, as absorbed activity, constitutes a form of being (there) in which the presence of neither subject, nor its activity, nor the transitive object of activity are made present (again). ‘Weeding’, as absorbed activity, is a form of absorbed coping. There is a relation between absorption and the fundamental ways of being in the world, which is characterized by an ‘unthematic, circumspect absorption in the references that constitute the handiness of the totality of useful things. Taking care always already is what it is on the basis of a familiarity with the world. *Dasein can lose itself* in what it encounters in the familiarity and can be numbed by it’ (Heidegger 1927/1977: 76, emphasis added). That is, this situation is not characterized by the making thematic of things that are ‘at hand’, which means, which are made present to consciousness through some form of representation. The error of much of educational psychology and the learning sciences consists in taking those things that are at hand as the way in which the world exists in everyday coping. However, the way in which the ordinary everyday things appear changes when their presence comes to be made present: Thus, ‘that the world does not “consist” of what is at hand can be seen from the fact, among others, that when the world appears in the . . . modes of taking care what is at hand loses its worldliness so that what is revealed is objective presence only’ (ibid: 74). In this quotation we see a difference being articulated between Being (*Sein, être*), on the one hand, and the making present of being by means of representations, beings (*Seiendes, étant*). The error of metaphysics has been to confuse presence (Being, *Sein, être*) with the devices to make presence present again, representations (beings, *Seiendes, étant*). But in this quotation we find out that the world does not consist of the representations.

All these descriptions of falling into or allowing the arrival of a state of pure being involve the dialectical tension of agency and passivity. I can do certain things and engage in certain behaviors that allow the desired state to emerge but I

<sup>2</sup> Some car drivers apparently fall asleep without noticing it, continuing to drive as if there were no problem; others do notice that they have been fading out and then begin to wipe their faces, stop to have some coffee, or stop to go for a walk. That is, both experiences are fairly common: one in which we do not notice and therefore do not experience falling a sleep and another one in which the falling itself becomes apparent to us in our consciousness.

cannot do it directly by making this state the intentional and transitive object of my actions. I have to allow this state to emerge and have to allow myself to fall into it – whether it is absorption into cycling, weeding, writing, sleeping, or any other absorbed active form of being.

Some studies do focus on states of absorption. These tend to be denoted by the term *flow*, which also characterizes the state of optimal performance (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Flow has been defined as ‘the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it’ (ibid: 4). That is, I am in a state of flow: (a) when I am completely absorbed in what I am doing to the point that I forget (about) myself, when Self has become transparent (in the sense of invisible, like the lenses of my eyeglasses) to Self; (b) when I manifest a sense of joy, well-being, and happiness these are states that are available to my conscious awareness only through the echoes they leave; and (c) when I would not want to do anything else if I were consciously aware of the state.

## Being and Being

‘Being’ is an interesting, confusing, but also productive word the potential of which has yet to be developed for thinking (about) and theorizing learning. One website calls it the most ‘protean’ word of the English language because of its nature to be slippery, irregular, and changing. Of interest to our deliberations at this point are two of its forms: noun and present participle. For the noun form, the Oxford English Dictionary includes ‘Existence in relationship to some place or condition; condition; livelihood, living, subsistence, position, standing in the world; home, dwelling, place of abode. Existence, the fact of belonging to the universe of things; occurrence; (physical) life. Existence, as a property, substance, constitution; essence. Something that exists; living creature’. The verb form ‘to be’ underlying the present participle includes the senses ‘to exist. Take place, come into existence, to take its course. To be the case. To sit, stand, remain in stated circumstances’. These two different sets of senses of the word play an important role in philosophical thinking. In classical Greek, German, and French – the three languages in which a lot of this thinking has been done – actually distinguish the two by using two terms. The noun form of ‘being’ appears as *ón* in the sense of *tà ónta*, *Seiendes*, and *étant*, respectively, whereas the corresponding verb forms would be *einai*, *Sein*, and *être*. English translators tend to use the plural form ‘beings’ to set the noun apart from the participle form – thereby creating other problems in translation.

Linking the two modalities of ‘being’ is the concept of *alétheia*, unconcealment, disclosure, truth, the state of not being hidden, the state to be out in a clearing, factuality, and reality: ‘In bringing into the state of not being hidden of being [Seienden], it brings about the seclusion of being [Sein]’ (Heidegger 1977: 337). Because the Greek *ón*, as the English ‘being’, can be heard as a present participle and as a noun, the conflation characteristic for the entire Western metaphysical philosophy has been prepared: ‘The participle *ón* is the word for that which in

metaphysics appears as transcendental and transcendent transcendence' (ibid: 344). This is so because in the noun form, 'being' denotes what is, things in the physical world, facts; it also denotes thoughts and words that are taken for real. That is, things are used to think the processes 'existing', 'taking place', and 'coming into existence'. The noun form cuts up the world in a particular, concrete way. This is what has led to the term *ontology*, the science of things. But in the present participle form, 'being' points to process, living, and changing. This process is precisely that which is not present because hidden, undisclosed, and in seclusion. That is, ever since the Greek, Western philosophers have used the one, 'being' in the noun form, things signifying things, to think the other, living and ever-changing processes, 'being' in the participle form. But of course, the noun form also has its being (present participle).

In the Asian tradition, the difference between the two forms is explicitly thought. Thus, the *Tao Te Ching* opens by working out the difference between names and the things named, on the one hand, and the invisible and nameless from which everything springs<sup>3</sup>:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
 The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.  
 The named is the mother of ten thousand things.  
 Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.  
 Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.  
 These two spring from the same source but differ in name; this appears as  
 darkness.  
 Darkness within darkness.  
 The gate to all mystery. (Lao Tsu 1972: One)

Here, Tao takes the place of 'being' (present participle). It is the beginning of everything *there is*<sup>4</sup>; it is the mother of the real things we encounter. But the name, 'being' (noun) does not really name 'being' (present participle). The name, one of the ten thousand things, is associated with the ten thousand things – but, as such, it cannot capture the eternal 'being' (Tao). That which can be told and talked about is not the real 'being'. The teaching continues by stating that this truth reveals itself only when we are desireless; it does not reveal itself by intentionally aiming at it, because this, like the sleep we intend, makes the phenomenon disappear. Desire, that is, intentionally trying to access 'being' reveals only manifestations ('beings'). The mystery, 'being' (verb form), and its manifestations (noun form) 'spring from the same source' but differ in name – for the ancient Greek, *tà ónta* and *eínai*. Lao Tsu also makes thematic the absence of the 'I' in pure being (verb) when he says 'Creating, yet not possessing,/ Working, yet not taking credit./ Work is done, then forgotten' (ibid: Two). There is no 'I' who could say, 'I am working', there is no 'I' who could say, 'I am creating', there is no 'I' who could say 'This is *my* crea-

<sup>3</sup> Life as the invisible and nameless also is central to a material phenomenological approach to the body, flesh, and incarnation (Henry 2000).

<sup>4</sup> In the construction 'there is', 'there' is a dummy subject, so that the expression translates as 'to exist'.



tion', and there is no 'I' who could say 'This is *my* work'. The philosopher describes, 'Work is done and then forgotten' just as cycling is done and then forgotten, weeding is done and then forgotten, or writing is done and then forgotten. That is, the event is forgotten precisely because of the absence of things (representations) that would allow making the former presence present again.

A good example of how the metaphysical approach – the one that mistakes the ten thousand things for Tao – influences the ways in which scholars theorize in education, the learning sciences, and psychology is knowledge and learning. Thus, knowledge is thought of as a state. Prior to some

intervention – lecture, 'hands-on' laboratory experience, tutoring session – the student is said to have knowledge (structures), which we may denote by  $K_1$ . Following the intervention, knowledge is measured to be at the level  $K_2$ . What a student has learned is theorized in terms of the difference  $\Delta$  between the two states:  $\Delta = K_2 - K_1$ . That is, rather than thinking learning as a changing process of change, it is theorized in terms of the difference of states. Each of these states is a manifestation, and therefore is not the situation itself. But we do not generally experience ourselves in static manner: we are continuously involved in the ever-changing process of life.<sup>5</sup> To think the process, categories are required that *encompass* change, that is, the categories have to embody the *difference* that is constituted in change (e.g., learning). To return to the example, what we need are categories in which quantities cannot be reduced further without destroying the unity. That is, if we want to think change, we need to think them as something non-self-identical, something like ' $(K_1, K_2)$ '. Because it is non-self-identical, this category may exhibit itself in contradictory ways. In the example, it might be as  $K_1$  or  $K_2$ . This is possible because we no longer think *before* as separated from *after*, but we think the two as part of the same unit – which, for cultural-historical activity theorists, would be *activity*.

Historically, there have been thinkers of difference since the early Greek. Heraclitus was one of those first philosophers, influencing current thinking with his idiomatic 'You cannot put the foot into the same river twice'. Another philosopher

**Methodical Note** We may draw on the descriptions of experience that others provide, such as the writings of Lao Tsu. However, we must not stay with the surface level readings, for in this way we only get at properties of language. The intent of the analysis is to get at properties of the experience that is only obliquely and falsely pointed to in the account. Our reading of a text, therefore, draws on our own sympathetic and empathetic experiences that come to resonate in the written account. I am not analyzing the *Tao Te Ching*, but rather my experiences captured in the words of the seminal text.

<sup>5</sup> Even work at the assembly line can be experienced as flow, as workers become absorbed by what they are doing (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). When they do not become absorbed, it is because 'people do not heed the evidence of their senses. They disregard the quality of immediate experience, and base their motivation instead on the strongly rooted cultural stereotype of what work is *supposed* to be like' (ibid: 160). Here, the author uses 'immediate experience', which I denote by 'being' (present participle), and he uses 'cultural stereotype' to denote what I use to talk about 'being' (verb), denoted here by 'being' (noun).

is Hegel, ‘the only philosopher of the Occident, who experienced the history of thought in a thinking way’ (Heidegger 1977: 323). Karl Marx was the first philosopher to create categories that embody difference in itself such that they can and do describe phenomena that manifest themselves in contradictory ways.<sup>6</sup> For example, in thinking commodity, Marx introduces the category of *value*, which may manifest itself as *use-value* or as *exchange-value*. Classical philosophers want to think the difference between these two manifestations as a function of the point of view – in barter, a bag of grain is exchange-value for the farmer, but use-value to the tailor; but the frock is exchange-value to the tailor, whereas it is use-value for the farmer. Marx suggests that value can manifest itself in different ways only if it already constitutes difference in itself. This is analogical to the physical phenomenon of light, which manifests itself as wave or particle because of its contradictory (complementary) nature, not merely because we take a different point of view. In recent philosophy, ‘writing’ (*écriture*) is one such category that allows us to think change, because it is directly associated with process (see chapter 6). Writing and erasure are two different manifestations of the same process: writing constitutes a physical process and, as non-self-identical category, is useful to think and theorize change – most important among these, for me, learning.

Such categories are required, most importantly, to understand the phenomenon of consciousness itself. This is so because, as the descriptions and analyses of *cycling*, *weeding*, *writing*, *hiking*, and *falling asleep* show, to understand what is happening we require ways of thinking the disappearance and reappearance of consciousness. We need categories that capture both sleeping and wakefulness simultaneously, which is the only way that we can capture the transitions denoted by ‘falling asleep’ and ‘awakening’. These categories capture those points that are syncopic, no longer sleep but not yet full conscious awareness. The sense of falling and the dreams we ‘remember’ upon awakening are such syncopic phenomena because these straddle the divide between ‘being asleep’ and ‘being awake’. There is no causative agent: in the first instance, focusing on falling asleep prevents sleep to come and, in the second instance, in the absence of consciousness, there is no agent who could have caused the awakening. Both situations truly are saturated phenomena, events, which means that they cannot be explained by cause–effect relations (Nietzsche 1954). In music, a syncope (syncopation) occurs as a temporary displacement of rhythm so that one type of rhythm changes into another and, at that point, the two different rhythms are the same – the syncope belongs to both and therefore constitutes difference. The sameness of the night – i.e., of being, which the ancient Greek thought as *tà pánta* (‘the whole’) – meets the difference in

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<sup>6</sup> Almost contemporary with Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, too, overcomes metaphysical ways of thinking when he proposes that events cannot be understood in terms of causes and effects: ‘We finally comprehend that things – therefore also atoms – do not cause: *for they do not exist* – that the concept of causality is entirely useless. – From a necessary series of states does *not* follow their causal relation (– which would mean their causative potential makes for the jumps from 1 on 2, on 3, on 4, on 5). *There are neither causes nor effects*. Linguistically we cannot detach ourselves from this. But this does not change things. When I think the *muscle* separate from “its effects”, then I have negated it’ (Nietzsche 1954: 767–768). Nietzsche thereby overcomes the distinction of causes and effects, which cannot explain the nature of events, which always are in excess of causes (intentions) (Marion 2010).

itself of the day, which the ancient Greek thought as *tà pollá* ('the many'). This is therefore precisely what the first chapter of *Tao Te Ching* tells us in its above-quoted distinction between Tao, the 'hidden deep but ever present' (Lao Tsu 1972: Four), inaccessible 'being' (present participle), and the 'ten thousand things'. 'Being' (present participle) can only be experienced as *tà pánta*, as 'the pre-conceptually experienced being [*Seiendes*, noun] as a whole' (Heidegger 1977: 342). The experienced dream is part of night, the remembered and recounted dream is part of day.

At the beginning of this section I suggest that confusing the two dimensions of the term 'being' might have productive dimensions. This is so because, like its ancient Greek equivalent *ón*, it can be thought as comprising the difference between the two, the static (noun) and the dynamic (verb). *Being*, then, constitutes difference in itself – the term is not identical to itself because it harbors difference. This difference is the source of possibilities, a space, which Plato thinks by means of the concept *khôra*, a term that is also employed in recent philosophical discourse because of its generative possibilities. *Khôra* is a spacing, precisely that which is produced in *writing*. It does not belong to being (noun) or being (verb) but according to Plato to a third genus (Derrida 1993). Writing is indeed the concept that allows us to think the transition between those situations in our lives when we are consciously aware of the presence and those when we are so absorbed that we are not consciously aware of presence.

We can use these considerations to analyze and understand the phenomena articulated in the preceding section. Being absorbed means (pure) being (present participle, *ón*) and presence, tout court. It lies in seclusion, where it is undisclosed and inaccessible, just as are the instances that are part of *cycling*, *weeding*, *sleeping*, or *writing*. To make presence present again requires *representation*, that is, beings (noun, *tà ónta*). These beings constitute the disclosed, the things that appear in the clearing when we perceive them in this or that way by means of our senses; these are the ten thousand things of the *Tao* that stand out against the ground. They make things appear in a clearing; they are the appearance of things. But they do not explain what happens in their absence, when things precisely do not appear as things, in absorption, when even the 'I' disappears and only process remains, which we know about through its resonance into the conscious present: *riding*, *weeding*, *hiking*, *writing*, *sleeping*.

### **From Being (Presence) to Being (Representation)**

For many years I have been returning to *Sein und Zeit* and *Tao Te Ching*. But I read without understanding – without the understanding from which I write these lines, an understanding that allows me to look back and see that I have read without understanding. In fact, it was unclear to me what Heidegger wanted to think by means of the difference between *Sein* ('being', verb) and *Seiendes* ('being', noun). For that matter, it was unclear to me to what experience Derrida orients us with such categories *writing* (*écriture*), *trace*, *khôra*, or *supplement*. But one day, I was struck, as if by a lightning bolt. I understood. But this understanding had not been

actively pursued. It was given to me in an instant of insight. It was a gift, which I willingly came to host.

On that day, a female friend and I had gone to a nearby butte where, from a little promontory of rock, we could overlook the vale. When arriving there, we first sit down, taken by the view of the valley from that place glistening in the light of this beautiful summer day. We begin to become absorbed with one another; we begin to make love. I vaguely remember being taken out of absorption by an occasional plane passing overhead – instances when our situation, naked on the promontory, pushed itself into my conscious awareness, making the presence there present again. But those instances are brief, as my thematizing consciousness slides away again into the ground of being. I remember merely sensing the possibility that someone looking down could see our naked bodies, our absorption in the embrace. And then consciousness recedes again.<sup>7</sup> It is total absorption: no consciousness, no beings (things), no representation, no making present of the present or our presence. Any notion of presence vanishes. And then comes the time where absorption has ended. We awake as if it were from a deep sleep. We realize that the afternoon has passed and it is time to return. On the way back, she begins to talk about the afternoon, attempts to put the experience in words and to place it in a sequence of other events that make our lives. As soon as she begins to talk *about* the experience on the mountain, as soon as she attempts to make the event present again by means of language, the spell of the afternoon, which has continued to echo in my body, vanishes. But just as the spell is vanishing, I realize that the words ('beings'), the very attempt to articulate being (present participle), makes being disappear. The words ('beings', noun) become the *tomb* of 'being' (verb). In that very instant, I understand, all of a sudden and without my doing, the dehiscence/displacement of 'being' (present participle) and/by 'being' (noun). Talking about the event, taking symbolic mastery over it by framing it in narrative form, attempts to possess it. But such a move can reveal only its manifestations and misses precisely the nature of 'being'. I furthermore realize that if anything I may have experienced no longer belongs to me once it is put in words, which are everybody's words. And so: if there had ever been something like 'my' experience, it has been lost and has become the experience possible to everyone.

In this chapter, I show how first-person methods, exhibited in the process, allow us to come to grips with one of the deep mysteries of humanity. It also allows us to understand an essential aspect of insight learning, which comes precisely at an instant when this form of learning is not intended. In fact, the intention to learn about the mystery of 'being' (present participle) and 'being' (noun) would destroy understanding that the former precisely hides when we take the latter as tools to find it. But the entire analysis in this chapter rests upon this realization, this insight, given to me at an instant when I was actually not seeking such understanding. In fact, the English word 'understanding' is problematic in that it is ambiguous with respect to understanding something theoretically, in terms of concepts and

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<sup>7</sup> Remembering this is possible precisely because of the presence of representations that make the presence thematic. I do not remember those other periods when consciousness had taken a leave while 'being absorbed' – in the existential sense of being in a particular situation as much as in the passive sense, something is absorbing me.

their relation, and practical understanding, which is closer to having the sense of a game. The episode in the preceding section has provided me with the practical understanding, a sense of the fundamental difference, which cannot be captured in words, because these lead to the disappearance of the difference.

From a methodical perspective, the chapter exemplifies the slow reading of events and processes and precisely those dimensions that withdraw instantly – unless somehow recognized in the change that is occurring. To engage in any form of analysis that leads to further (theoretical) understanding, we need to notice these withdrawing phenomena first. The chapter also exemplifies the use of analogy that accompanies the analysis of a single case and, in the process, exhibits the invariants that allow us to (theoretically) understand the similarities between different forms of experience.