

On The Future of the Self and the Gegenwärtigkeit des Geistes

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One of the problems that confronts anyone seeking to address the topic of our conference, “prognosis,” is the vast variety of meanings and uses associated with this word. The following remarks can therefore touch only on a few of these, and try to discern certain general tendencies informing such usages, tendencies which I believe require a historical perspective in order to be properly interpreted.

Let me begin then with an event that is quite recent. On November 19th of this year, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) officially released its fourth and final report, entitled “GEO 4: The Future of the World Environment.” This report, as many of you will doubtless have read, involved the work of over 1400 scientists and experts. The report outlines four possible “scenarios” based on different policies adopted by the world’s nations in the coming years. In addition to this prognostication through scenarios, the report also calls for action on the part of member nations. The very existence of four different “scenarios” reflects a distinctive characteristic of such prognostication: it involves a future that qua future is not entirely determinate, not univocally defined or inevitable. In this sense, knowledge relating primarily to the future appears to be different from that relating to the past, on which it is based. One striking indication of this is that immediately after the report was made known, other scientists criticized it as understating the dangers of climate change. Although the report is quite blunt and emphatic about those dangers, many scientists were quoted in newspaper reports as suggesting that even more disastrous consequences were possible and indeed probable if current policies were

not rapidly changed. This critique was based on several factors, including the need of the authors of GEO4 to temper their conclusions in order to arrive at the consensus necessary for the report to be approved. But another cause of the critiques, perhaps more interesting for our concerns, involved a temporal factor: due to the rapidity of developments affecting climate change, many emerged too late to be taken into consideration by the report's authors. Such factors include "faster than expected industrial development in China and India, with all the attendant emissions from factories and cars" ("Some Say Report Wasn't Dire Enough", IHT, 11-19-07).

Another tendency not sufficiently taken into consideration by the report, according to certain critics, is the reintroduction of coal as a major source of energy: "The IPCC report never imagined the world would move back to a coal-based energy economy—and that's essentially what we have done," as Gernot Klepper from the Kiel Institute is quoted as saying. (ibid.).

A curious fact emerges from such critiques. Prognostication is a means of anticipating future trends, of bringing what has not yet happened into view as a cognizable object. And yet in this case, at least—and as we will see in many others as well—the very passage of time that creates the opportunity and need for prognoses can also overtake it and thereby undermine its results. The object of prognosis, the future, is a moving object and any attempt to stabilize it in order to analyze or interpret it inevitably involves a certain reduction and distortion.

One is reminded of a remark made by Turgot that Walter Benjamin quotes in his notes to the Paris Passages: "Before we have learned that things are in a determinate situation, they have already changed several times. Thus we always perceive events

too late, and politics always needs, as it were, to predict the present (*prévoir...le présent*). (N 12 a,1).

This sentiment expressed by Turgot, which Benjamin characterized as a “magnificent” justification of why “presence of mind”—*Geistesgegenwart*—has to be considered a “political category,” demonstrates an experience of which Benjamin, and before him, Hegel, were well aware: namely, the experience that knowledge always comes too late because it is intrinsically temporal, both insofar as its object is concerned and in its own operation. Thus, to catch up with the present knowledge must always anticipate the future: it must always in part involve prognostication.

But if this trait is true in general, it becomes particularly significant when the organization of time is increasingly subordinated to the maximization of profit, as in modern capitalist societies. All of this is familiar: the motif of “speed” and “acceleration” as characteristic of a certain experience of modernity—let’s say Western modernity in order to try to delimit the experience and avoid simply universalizing it—is well known to all of us. But as Hegel writes, “bekannt”—well-known—is not “erkannt,” i.e. understood in its ramifications, and it is with the latter that I am concerned here. For any interpretation of “prognosis” has to take into account the temporal structure that it entails. In its simplest form, it involves an attempt to extend knowledge of the past into the future. But the nature of this attempt, I want to suggest, will depend on the way it engages past, present and future.

Today, when a certain organization of temporal experience—which despite its complexities can be adequately summarized in the old cliché, time is money--is in the process of extending its hold over vast parts of the world, it is important to remember

that this organization has a very distinctive history that is neither “natural” nor “universal.”

In what follows I will be discussing one very important moment of that history. But before I come to it, I want still to look at two more contemporary instances involving “prognosis” and the activity of “prognosticating”. The report GEO 4, with which I began, is ultimately concerned with the future of life on the planet and with human life in particular. Let me jump from this global use of the term to what appears to be a quite different usage, which pertains more to the lives of individuals than to that of large groups. In English one very widespread use of the word “prognosis” is associated with another related word, namely *diagnosis*, and both of these are frequently employed in a medical context. A medical diagnosis generally serves as the basis of a *prognosis*, which in turn determines a course of treatment. But often the two—diagnosis and prognosis—are difficult to separate clearly. The analysis of a present condition already includes, or entails, the likelihood of future evolution. Once again, then, an analysis of the present implies anticipation of the future. But this individual, medical use of prognostication shares certain other characteristics with the previous example of the GEO4. For it too links conditional knowledge to action, diagnosis to prognosis and prognosis to treatment. Finally, the two examples share a common concern with the preservation of life, whether of individuals, or of much larger groups and species.

This concern also appears to inform the last example I want to discuss, albeit very briefly. It is drawn from the political sphere. I am referring to the famous, or perhaps infamous National Security Statement delivered by President George W. Bush in September of 2002, a year after the destruction of the World Trade Center in New

York. In this Statement the American President for the first time declared preventive and preemptive military action to be an official and legitimate part of official United States policy.

The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination. The United States will not allow these efforts to succeed. [...] As a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed. [...] History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action.
(<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssintro.html>)

This statement proceeds from diagnosis to prognosis, and from prognosis to policy. It begins by ascertaining what it describes as a radically new world situation, brought about by the convergence of “radicalism and technology.” What is new about this situation is that nations, and in particular the United States, finds itself exposed and vulnerable to dangers that are no longer easily identifiable or predictable, and which therefore require actions and policies that had been excluded from international law for centuries. In the international law deriving from the Peace of Westphalia, which put an end to the incredibly destructive 30 years war between Catholics and Protestants, preemptive military action was allowed only when an attack was considered to be imminent, and was therefore justified as an act of self-defense. “Imminent” however was generally understood to imply a threat of attack that was clearly identifiable as such, which in turn previously implied a certain visibility, as in the case of the mobilization of regular military forces. In President Bush’ statement,

by contrast, the progress of military technology, while consolidating the military superiority of the United States, has at the same time brought about a new situation, in which “weapons of mass destruction” have become widely available to groups that are no longer visible in the way nations are, and which therefore are far more difficult to detect:

Now, shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores for less than it costs to purchase a single tank. Terrorists are organized to penetrate open societies and to turn the power of modern technologies against us. (ibid.)

This last example of prognostic diagnosis shares certain aspects with the previous ones, and yet also introduces a new element. What it shares is the concern to protect life from a future seen both as the realm of unlimited opportunity and as the domain of infinite danger. What distinguishes it from the other examples of “prognostication” is first, its emphasis on the divergence between what can be called the traditional access to reality, exemplified by a certain visibility of, to use a philosophical term, a certain phenomenality, and second, the growing significance of “shadowy networks” that are no longer constituted as visible nations, peoples or other traditional groups. It is significant, in this context, that these “shadowy networks of individuals” are associated with “terrorists” and that what has emerged from this diagnosis and prognosis is the all too familiar “war against terror.”

This “War Against Terror” is interesting not least of all because the enemy it designates spans the gap between object and subject, network and individual, affect and effect. It is revealing to juxtapose this expression with the famous phrase with which Franklin D. Roosevelt ushered in his New Deal in 1932, shortly after having

been elected President for the first time, namely that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” The “fear” to which he referred was that associated with the economic devastation brought about by the Depression that had broken out in 1929, and the social misery that it had brought in its wake. “Fear” however, in contradistinction to “terror,” is usually connected to a definable, identifiable object or situation. “Terror” on the other hand, like “anxiety” or “anxiousness,” is associated more closely with a lack of identifiable, discernable objects—as in the case of a “network” of “individuals” who are precisely not visible qua individuals since they function in tandem, and above all, in the “shadows”. And what makes these shadowy and networked individuals so terrifying is not just their ability to avoid detection, but also the threat that they present to life and property. Or more precisely, their willingness to sacrifice their own life to take the lives of others. This introduces another relatively inhabitual factor into conflict that has not been predominant in traditional military strategy, even if obviously it has never been entirely absent from it either, namely, the logic of “martyrdom.” In this perspective, the temporal dimension of the future, far from being simply the condition of “the pursuit of happiness” emerges as the shadowy possibility of unpredictable death and destruction on an unfathomable scale.

A correlative of the relative invisibility of these “shadowy networks” is that they cannot be defined by reference to the visible institutions that previously dominated political life and conflict: namely, nation-states. This means that they are also more difficult to locate, to situate, and therefore to define and control. Above all, it suggests that they can operate freely within borders hitherto considered to be secure. One response to such delocalized “terror” has been to reinforce what today is called, in a very strange formulation, “Homeland Security.” What is at jeopardy according to this phrase--whose limited use in English reinforces the recollection of the “homelands”

set up by South Africa to implement its system of apartheid, while also resonating with the vocabulary of early Zionism—is no longer “National Security” as it was called during the Cold War, because what is at issue is not just the nation, but the land of the “home”, which has become the paradigm of security in a nation increasingly dominated by the private appropriation of wealth. If the “home” is thus appealed to as the last haven within which individuals can hope to secure their lives and their property, the “terrorists” seem to be defined as having no home, a version of the “homeless” who however can therefore be at home everywhere precisely because they are at home nowhere. The home of such shadowy, networked individuals is therefore not subject to private appropriation but is collective and transcendent and as such presents both a radical alternative and a dangerous threat to a “homeland” that needs to be “secured.”

(If there were time and space, this would be the place to explore what the current “credit crisis” deriving from “subprime” mortgage lending might reveal concerning the “homeland-security” society. The increasingly disparate redistribution of wealth that has marked that society over the past decade deprives ever larger numbers of potential consumers of the financial resources necessary for the acquisition of property. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain mass consumption, which requires ever more risky credit in order to continue at the levels necessary to the overall economy. The emergence of “subprime” mortgage lending and its inevitable collapse thus reveals the contradictions at work within a system that requires a minimal level of spending in order to sustain itself while tending to reduce the bases of that spending through the necessity of cost-reduction and profit maximization. This has come to a head with the collapse of the real estate “bubble” in the U.S. and the instability affecting the availability of credit, without which the

acquisition of private property, epitomized in the “home”, cannot be implemented. The system thus produces its own insecurity at the heart of the home, and of the homeland. This is a source of “terror” that the War against Terror both obfuscates and capitalizes upon.)

It is precisely this structural, necessary and by no means merely extrinsic or technical crisis of the “home” and of “homeland security” that allows us to make a link between certain highly contemporary forms of prognostication and what I suggest may be one of its most significant early modern origins—an origin that can provide us with a perspective that will hopefully cast light on its operation today.

I am referring to the home away from home that in 1638-40 provided the setting for one of the founding texts of modern Western thought, namely Descartes’ “Meditations on First Philosophy.” Descartes wrote his most famous work while living in the countryside of Northern Holland, where he felt he could pursue “the search for truth in the sciences” more effectively than in “the air of Paris,” with its “innumerable distractions.”¹ Historically, it is worth noting that Descartes’ life and work falls within the period marked by the Thirty Years War (1618-1648)—a war in which he as a young man also participated. The crisis of Christendom that these wars marked with incredible devastation also provided the decisive context to which Descartes sought to respond. To be sure, his purpose in writing his Meditations seems at first to have little to do with a religious crisis. Rather, as is well known, his aim in this text, as elsewhere, is to discover or construct an Archimedean fulcrum—a “punctum ... firmum & immobile” (Med. II, §1)” or in other words,

¹ Letter of May 17, 1638, to Mersenne. Quoted in: R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, edited by G. Heffernan (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1990), p. 19.

“fundamenta... certa & inconcussa (Med I, §§ 1-2)—i.e. unshakable foundation on which to sure and certain knowledge could be based. This might seem to have little to do with our problem of “prognosis”. And yet, what Descartes’ search for “firmness” and “immobility” presupposes, is a very particular experience of time, which, I want to suggest, continues to inform prognostication ever since. This experience of time poses a redoubtable challenge to the premises on which knowledge had hitherto been based. This is how Descartes describes the situation that leads him to write his

Meditations:

Already some years ago I have noticed how many false things I, going into my youth, had admitted as true and how dubious were whatever things I have afterwards built upon them, and therefore that once in my life all things are fundamentally to be demolished (*evertenda*) and that I have to begin again from the first foundations if I were to desire ever to stabilize something firm and lasting in the sciences. (I.1)

The project of “demolishing” or “expelling”—*evertenda*—of all things previously held to be true responds to an historical situation in which the passage of time has come to undermine established truth as well as the truth of all establishment. To arrive at the “first foundations” of scientific knowledge thus implies a certain overcoming of time experienced above all as the medium of transformation, alteration and change: that is, as the medium of everything that militates against the establishment of “firm and lasting” stability—in the sciences, in the field of knowledge, but perhaps also in human existence in general.

In short, the very criterion of, and demand for a knowledge that would be “firm and lasting,” and based on “foundations”—note the spatial, architectonic metaphor—that would be durable and stable—all of this sets knowledge in a certain tension to time experienced as the medium of transience, and hence, of uncertainty and illusion.

Reformulating this situation in terms closer to the topic of our conference, one could say that the problem that Descartes confronts calls for a redefinition of the relationship between diagnosis and prognosis, between knowledge of the past and knowledge of the future. In a famous example, this problematic relation of time to knowledge is vividly staged by Descartes: it is commonly known as the example of “the piece of wax.” But this familiar designation, and in particular, the use of the definite article, “the”, obscures what is perhaps the distinctive trait of the Cartesian situation, namely, one that throws him back upon an experience that is rigorously *singular*. In the context of a crisis that is not just epistemic but also religious--*heilsgeschichtlich*—the only point of departure available to Descartes is that of the solitary individual who in his isolation must on his own produce the firm foundations that previously was the work of a collective tradition, but of one that can no longer be taken for granted or considered reliable. All of this comes together in his discussion not just of “the piece of wax” in general, but rather, as he puts it with precision, of “one body in particular...for example *this* piece of wax *here* (unum in particulari ... hanc ceram):

It has very recently been taken from the honeycomb. It has not yet lost all the taste of its honey. It retains some of the odor of the flowers from which it has been gathered. [...]

“Recently,” “not yet,” “retains”—the opening description of “this piece of wax here” defines its particularity in terms of its temporal situation: it has “recently been taken from the honeycomb, it *has not yet lost* all the taste of its honey”—not yet, but perhaps soon. “It *retains* some of the odor of the flowers from which it has been gathered”—it retains that odor, but for how long? Time is already wearing away the original situation of “this one body in particular” (sed unum in particulari) with which

Descartes is concerned: that of the wax. (I note here in passing, but may return to it later, that unlike today, for Descartes the word “body” did not necessarily mean *human* body—even if the example of the “wax” surely stands in a particular relationship to the human body). Returning to the passage: after introducing the body of the wax by situating its temporal singularity, Descartes goes on to emphasize everything in it that seems to resist the passage of time:

Its color, figure and magnitude are manifest. It is hard. It is cold. It is easily touched. And if you were to hit it with a knuckle it will emit a sound. In short, all the things are present in it that seem to be required in order that a body might be cognized very distinctly. But voilà, *while I am speaking* the piece of wax is moved towards the fire...

The piece of wax, although removed from its origin, still resists the effects of the passage of time: it is hard, cold, resounds when struck—is solid and available for distinct recognition. *Sed ecce: But voilà:* by virtue of its singular position, which means both that it is a single body and that it is determined by a singular historical setting, close to a fireplace, its solidity and stability will soon be put to a severe test. For those not familiar with the *Meditations*, it is not insignificant that Descartes is only able to write them after having withdrawn from public life to a domestic setting; he describes himself sitting in front of the fire, wearing a robe, and thus with no immediate intention of going out. This setting he considers an indispensable condition for his meditations, since it provides him with a protected area clearly separated from the discredited public sphere whose unreliable traditions he must “demolish” or at least escape if he is to find or found the secure basis of knowledge that he seeks. But the very same fire that warms his room also has other less reassuring properties, which the passage now goes on to describe:

But voilà, while I am speaking the piece of wax is moved toward the fire: The remains of the taste are purged, the odor expires, the color is changed, its shape lost, its size increases, it becomes liquid, it can hardly be touched and now, if struck, will no longer emit a sound. Does it still remain the same wax? (I.11)

Although Descartes will quickly seek to dispel any doubts that his own questions have raised—“Of course it is the same wax that I see, that I touch and that I imagine: the same wax, in short, that I thought it to be from the very beginning” (I.12)—such sameness turns out to be rooted not in the physical piece of wax, which is subject to the radical alteration of time and space. Rather, its sameness, its self-identity, is based on the activity of “the mind alone” (*sed solus mentis inspectio*). And similarly, it is in the activity “of the mind alone” that the foundation of stable and unshakeable knowledge is to be sought, rather than in the things themselves, and in particular in their physical, bodily, material existence. For the latter, being fully exposed to the effects of time and space, is, like the piece of wax, subject to “innumerable changes” which qua temporal and spatial could never provide the basis of a clear and distinct identification or identity.

What does all of this have to do with “prognosis”? First of all, it shows that in one of the founding texts of modern Western thought, knowledge is valorized only insofar as it can jump ahead of itself—which is to say, only insofar as it literally entails a kind of pro-gnosis. But this sort of prognosis involves not so much knowledge of the future as a knowledge that seeks to transcend the future. For the future, insofar as it is a temporal dimension, is subject to an experience of time as a medium of radical change and alteration. For there to be stable meanings and discernable identities, those meanings and identities must therefore be able to withstand the test of time, which is to say, the test of alterity. For Descartes, this means a turning away from physical

perception—visual, tactile, auditory—and a turning toward a process of the mind that he designates as cogitating. It is a process that necessarily goes on in time, but one that understood in a certain way can seem to transcend it. That way is what has come to be called “self-consciousness.” It is not just thinking, nor even thinking of oneself that is decisive, but rather thinking of thinking *itself*: it is this that makes the Cogito for Descartes the only possible locus for that sure and certain knowledge that he seeks.

And yet, the problem of the relation of knowledge to time—the problem of prognosis - is not thereby resolved without a trace. For the Cogito is already something of a misnomer. It is not precisely what Descartes identifies as the movement of self-consciousness, of thinking thinking itself. We need only reread those decisive sentences in which Descartes ostensibly overcomes the doubt to which he has been subjected, and out of which he has forged a method—we need only reread these passages in order to discover the slight but decisive difference that the Cartesian Cogito rather conceals than reveals. After dismissing all evidence of his bodily senses as potentially too unreliable to serve as a basis for stable knowledge, Descartes finds himself left with this:

To cogitate? Here I find: it is cogitation; this alone cannot be torn from me. *I am, I exist*; it is certain. But for how long? So long as I am cogitating, of course. For it could perhaps also happen that if I would cease all cogitation I as a whole would at once cease to be. I now admit nothing other than what is necessarily true. I am, then, precisely only a cogitating thing [*res cogitans*]...a thinking thing. (II.7)

Two points can be made here. First, it is not the form of the president indicative that is decisive here, not the timeless Cogito (I think) but the ongoing and indefinite Cogitans: thinking. I will come back to this in a moment. Second: Although

etymologies never can be taken as simply authoritative, they often turn out to be quite thought provoking, and that is certainly the case here. The word “cogitate”—in English a somewhat antiquated synonym for thinking—comes from the Latin *co-agitare*: literally, co-agitate. In Descartes’ treatise, this word, which is designed to introduce a certain stability and durability into a world of agitation, continues to co-agitate. And it does this because far from simply overcoming the agitation of time, it displaces it. There are two indications of this, one semantic, that other grammatical. The semantic indication is contained in the passage just quoted. The only thing of which the single solitary I, which remains the point of reference for Descartes’ reflections, can be certain of is that it is the objects that it imagines, perceives or represents that provide it with evidence of its existence (for they may all be delusional), but rather its own activity of thinking. This is the usual interpretation. But what it overlooks, and yet what Descartes in the passage quoted and throughout makes unmistakably clear, is that this overcoming of the uncertainties of time and space—the media of representation—is itself subjected to an essential temporal condition or limitation. For it is only “so long as I am cogitating” that I exist, and therefore only so long as I cogitate that I am cogitating that I can know that I exist. The co- of co-gitation is absolutely necessary to establish the one relation that is exempt from all doubt: the relation of consciousness to itself own activity of being conscious. Co(a)gitation entails con-sciousness, but consciousness also consists in co(a)gitation. Or rather, in co(a)gitating. The very temporal dimension that Descartes sought to overcome thus creeps back into the Cogito, which now becomes not an abstract and self-identical “I think” but rather the temporally contingent “thinking”. The subject of this verb is, however, no longer intrinsic to it—as with the Cogito. And this is no accident. For if I can only know that I think by thinking of my thinking

while I am thinking, the co- of consciousness and of cogitation opens the space of a concomitance that becomes very difficult if not impossible to close upon itself. For if I only can be sure I exist while I am thinking that I am thinking, the “I” that seeks to englobe the process and give it a certain unity must always come *after the fact*, after a while--as a kind of retrospective prognosis—or projection. But that projection will never succeed in spanning the gap of the “while” as a bridge does a chasm. The result is a divergence between the Cogito and the res cogitans: the “I think” turns out to be a thing, a thing thinking itself thinking, but without that self being able to close the circle or the circuit.

Although I am not finished—no more than Descartes ever could be—I have to stop here, with the final suggestion—or prognosis--that what is always lurking in the wings where we speak of prognosis is the attempt of self-consciousness to close the circle, to encircle itself, to overcome and integrate the “co-“ or the “con” which is ultimately also a con-temporaneity. Its bout with the “con-“ constitutes its effort to survive the test of time by extending its scope into a future that will never be fully present or representable, and that is always therefore exhilarating, fascinating—but also terrifying. Like the conclusion of the weather report as it used to be announced on German television, such *Voraussagen* are always “*ohne Gewähr*”. For the Geist will never be entirely gegenwärtig.