

Heidegger and Dōgen on the Ineffable

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Abstract: Many writers have commented on connections between the work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Chan/Zen Buddhism—a school of Buddhism originating in China around the 6th Century. In this essay, we will explore one aspect of that connection, drawing on the work of the Japanese Zen philosopher Dōgen Kigen (1200-1253). Heidegger held that being is ineffable, and Dōgen held that ultimate reality is ineffable. Now, ineffability is an extreme form of indeterminacy: if something is ineffable it transcends any determinacy whatsoever. However, there is an obvious contradiction involved in talking about the ineffable, as do both Heidegger and Dōgen. Indeed, even to say that something transcends all determinacy is to give it a determination. Though Heidegger and Dōgen's concerns are, *prima facie*, completely different, we will show that they both responded to the contradiction (or came to respond to it) in exactly the same way: they were dialetheists about the matter. Not only did they endorse the contradiction in question; they both, in much the same sense, endorsed the necessary entanglement of the speech of effability and the silence of ineffability. Finally, by looking at the work of Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), we will show that the thoughts of Dōgen and Heidegger converge in the fact that the subject of the contradiction for both may, in fact, be seen as nothingness.

Being is the indeterminate immediate; it is free from determinateness in relation to essence and also from any which it can possess within itself.

Nothing, pure nothing: it is simply equality with itself, complete emptiness, absence of all determination and content—undifferentiatedness in itself.

Hegel, *Logic*.¹

¹ Miller (1969), pp. 81, 82.

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1. Introduction

Indeterminacy can mean many things. For example, it can have an epistemic sense. Something is indeterminate in this sense if we cannot determine (at least at present) whether or not it is true. Thus, we might say that it is currently indeterminate whether there is intelligent life anywhere else in the galaxy. Presumably, either there is or there isn't, but we just don't know which (yet). Indeterminacy can also have a metaphysical sense. Something is indeterminate in this sense just if there is no fact of the matter. It's not just that we don't know whether something is true or false, but reality itself, as it were, leaves the matter undefined.

Examples of indeterminacy, in this sense, are bound to be philosophically contentious. However, as just one example: some philosophers think that vague concepts give rise to indeterminacy of this kind.² Suppose that something changes colour slowly from red to blue. There is an area of indeterminacy in the middle: at some point, it's not true to say of the object that it is red, and it's not true to say that it isn't. The reality of the situation determines no verdict on the matter. An object, then, is indeterminate with respect to some characteristic, *F*, if it is the *kind* of thing to be *F*, but it is neither *F* nor not-*F*.³ In our example, the characteristic is *red*.

The ineffable—something about which one can say nothing—if there is such a thing, delivers an extreme case of indeterminacy. It is indeterminate with respect to *every* characteristic. Since one can say nothing of it, there is no characteristic, *F*, such that it is either *F* or not-*F*. For each of these would say something of it.

² E.g., Fine (1975), Tye (1994).

³ The qualification is required. It is natural to suppose that the number three is neither red nor not red; but this is not a case of indeterminacy, just of a category mis-match.

Of course, one might hold that there is nothing which is ineffable. However, many (many great) philosophers or philosophical traditions have held there to be some things that are ineffable. In what follows, two such will concern us. One is Martin Heidegger (1889-1976); the other is the tradition of Zen Buddhism, especially in the form given to it by Dōgen Kigen (道元希玄, 1200-1253). Heidegger probably needs no introduction to readers of this volume. Dōgen is one of the most important Japanese Zen philosophers, who founded the Sōtō school of Zen in Japan.

The similarity between certain aspects of Heidegger's thought and Zen has been noted by many;⁴ and it is only one of these which will concern us here: their treatment of the ineffable. Both hold that something is ineffable; both have their reasons for this. But it does not require deep thought to see that there is an issue here. The ineffable is completely indeterminate. But any reason as to why something is ineffable, must say *something* about it, and so attribute some characteristics to it. Indeed, even to say that something transcends all determination is to give it a determination. Thus, for *some* characteristics, *F*, the ineffable thing is either *F* or not-*F*, even though there is *no* such characteristic. The contradiction is clear.

So clear, indeed, that philosophers who find themselves in the situation of talking about the ineffable—Dōgen and Heidegger included—are well aware of it. Those who pin their colours to the mast of the Principle of Non-Contradiction, try to take some evasive action. Such is rarely successful, though this is not the place to go into these matters.⁵ For this was not the response of either Dōgen or Heidegger (at least, in the case of the latter, in his later thought). Both simply rejected the Principle of Non-Contradiction. It may well apply to some things, but the thing which is ineffable is not one of them. One can, indeed, talk of the ineffable, characterize the uncharacterizable.

⁴ For an informative overview of the relation between Heidegger and the Zen tradition, see May (2005).

⁵ See Priest (2002), esp., p. 227.

In Section 2, we will discuss Dōgen’s philosophy. We will look at the Mahāyāna notion of ultimate reality (Section 2.1) and note that, according to this tradition, ultimate reality is ineffable. Hence, speaking about it, as the tradition does, is contradictory (Section 2.2 and 2.3). We will show that Dōgen endorses this contradiction (Section 2.4). Finally, we will see how Dōgen takes the speech of effability and silence of ineffability to be mutually necessitating (Section 2.5).

In Section 3, we will discuss Heidegger’s philosophy. We look at his notion of being, its ineffability (Section 3.1), and the contradiction this entails (Section 3.2). We will see how Heidegger comes to accept this contradiction after the *Kehre* (Section 3.3). Finally, we will show that he, too, takes speech and silence about the matter to be mutually necessitating (Section 3.4).

Finally, in Section 4, we will see that what is at issue as the subject of the contradiction we are concerned with may, for both thinkers, be seen as the same thing: nothingness. This is shown for Heidegger in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, and, with the help of Nishitani, for Dōgen in Sections 4.3 and 4.4.

2. Dōgen

2.1 Ultimate Reality

Let us, then, start with Dōgen. Dōgen was a Zen (禪, Chin: Chan) Buddhist philosopher. But Zen is one kind of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and one cannot understand his thought if one does not understand some central aspects of that whole tradition. So before we get to him, we will have to spend some time on this.⁶ Let us start by seeing why, in Dōgen’s tradition, there is something ineffable.

⁶ On Indian Buddhism, see Siderits (2007). On Mahāyāna Buddhism (Indian and East Asian), see Williams (2009).

All schools of Buddhist philosophy hold there to be a distinction between conventional and ultimate reality. Conventional reality (Skt: *saṃvṛti satya*),⁷ all schools agree, is the reality which we normally experience: our *Lebenswelt*. There was less agreement amongst different Buddhist schools about what, exactly, ultimate reality (Skt: *paramārtha satya*) is; but in Mahāyāna Buddhism, it was generally agreed that conventional reality is a conceptual construction, and that ultimate reality is what remains if one strips off from conventionally experienced things all conceptual overlays.

As Nāgārjuna (fl. 1st or 2nd c. CE), the foundational philosopher of Mahāyāna Buddhism (and specifically, its Madhyamaka school) says in his immensely influential *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way, MMK):⁸

Not dependent on another, peaceful and
Not fabricated by mental fabrication,
Not thought, without distinction.
That is the character of reality.

Indeed, so important is the point, that it is made in the dedicatory verses of the text:⁹

I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha
The best of teachers, who taught that
Whatever is dependently arisen is
Unceasing, unborn,
Unannihilated, not permanent,
Not coming, not going,

⁷ Note that translators of Buddhist texts usually translate the Sanskrit word *satya* as *truth*; however, it can also be apt to translate it as *reality*, which is much more sensible in the present context.

⁸ MMK, XVIII: 9. Garfield (1995), p. 49.

⁹ Garfield (1995), p. 2.

Without distinction, without identity,
And free from conceptual construction.

One does not need to unpack here all of what is going on in these quotations. It suffices that Nāgārjuna is talking of ultimate reality—he is obviously not talking about conventional reality!—and both quotations, in their way (‘mental fabrication’, ‘conceptual construction’), say this is concept-free.

2.2 Ineffability

Since ultimate reality is concept-free, it follows immediately that one cannot say what it is like: it is ineffable. This is not to say that it cannot be experienced; just that the experience cannot be characterised. It is a simple *thatness* (Skt: *tathātā*).

The Mahāyāna tradition is well aware of the ineffability of ultimate reality. Thus, Nāgārjuna himself points this out:¹⁰

The victorious ones have said
That emptiness is the elimination of all views.
For whomever emptiness is a view
That one will accomplish nothing.

The views in question are, of course, those concerning ultimate reality. And later we have:¹¹

‘Empty’ should not be asserted.
‘Non-empty’ should not be asserted.
Neither both nor neither should be asserted.
These are used only nominally.

How can the tetralemma of permanent and impermanent, etc.
Be true of the peaceful?

¹⁰ MMK XIII:8. Garfield (1995), p. 36.

¹¹ MMK XXII: 11, 12. Garfield (1995) p. 61 f.

How can the tetralemma of finite, infinite, etc.
Be true of the peaceful?

The topic of these verses is, again, ultimate reality, and they are saying that none of the four kinds of things one can say about it is applicable. Moreover, in endorsing the ineffability of ultimate reality, Nāgārjuna is simply echoing the verse summary of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra of 8,000 Lines), which says:¹²

All words for things in use in this world must be left behind,
All things produced and made must be transcended—
The deathless, the supreme, incomparable gnosis is then won.
That is the sense in which we speak of perfect wisdom.

But now there is an obvious issue. Ultimate reality is ineffable, but much is said in the tradition about it. In the quotations of the previous subsection, Nāgārjuna himself says many things. Indeed, even to explain that it is ineffable because it transcends conceptual imposition is to talk about it.

It is patent to anyone after a moment's thought that there is a contradiction here. The ineffable is being spoken of. Unsurprisingly, then, the Mahāyāna tradition is well aware of the matter; and a number of Mahāyāna philosophers take evasive action.¹³

¹² Conze (1973), p. 12. The *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* were a class of sūtras which appeared around the turn of the Common Era, and heralded the advent of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

¹³ Though not, interestingly, Nāgārjuna himself. The MMK does not comment on the matter.

For example, the Tibetan philosopher Gorampa¹⁴ is as clear as his Mahāyāna predecessors that the ultimate is ineffable. He says in his *Synopsis of Madhyamaka*, 75:¹⁵

The scriptures which negate proliferations of the four extremes refer to ultimate truth but not to the conventional, because the ultimate is devoid of conceptual proliferations, and the conventional is endowed with them.

But he also realises that he talks about it. Indeed, he does so in this very quote. Gorampa's response to the situation is to draw a distinction. Kassor describes matters succinctly thus:¹⁶

In the *Synopsis*, Gorampa divides ultimate truth into two: the nominal ultimate (*don dam rnam grags pa*) and the ultimate truth (*don dam bden pa*). While the ultimate truth ... is free from conceptual proliferations, existing beyond the limits of thought, the nominal ultimate is simply a conceptual description of what the ultimate is like. Whenever ordinary persons talk about or conceptualize the ultimate, Gorampa argues that they are actually referring to the nominal ultimate. We cannot think or talk about the actual ultimate truth because it is beyond thoughts and language; any statement or thought about the ultimate is necessarily conceptual, and is, therefore, the nominal ultimate.

It does not take long to see that this hardly avoids contradiction. If all talk of the ultimate is about the nominal ultimate, then Gorampa's own talk of the ultimate is this. And the nominal ultimate is clearly effable. Hence Gorampa's own claim

¹⁴ Gorampa Sonam Senge (1429-1489) is one of the central philosophers in the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism.

¹⁵ The translation is taken from Kassor (2013), p. 401. The 'four extremes' is a reference to the trope of Buddhist logic called the *catuṣkoṭi*, which enumerates the four kinds of things that can be said about something.

¹⁶ Kassor (2013), p. 406. She notes (in correspondence) that the nomenclature for the distinction employed here is not Gorampa's, but is that of another thinker. He himself calls the distinction one between the ultimate that is realized, and the ultimate that is taught.

that the ultimate is devoid of conceptual proliferations is just self-refuting. This is, hence, no way out of the contradiction: it merely relocates it.

2.3 The *Vimalakīrti Nireśa Sūtra*

The evasion of contradiction is one response to talking of the ineffable in the Mahāyāna tradition. Another is simply to embrace it. This comes out clearly in a sūtra called the *Vimalakīrti Nireśa Sūtra* (Sūtra of the Teachings of Vimalakīrti—who is, in the dialogue, a very astute Buddhist layman from Licchavi). The sūtra is an Indian Mahāyāna text, of uncertain date, but possibly about the 1st century CE. One of its central concerns is the overcoming of dualities, of which the duality between effability and ineffability is a central one.

At one point in the sūtra, a goddess appears in the room, and causes petals to flutter down. These slide off enlightened people, but stick to people who are unenlightened. The petals stick to Śāriputra (a hero of a number of the pre-Mahāyāna sūtras), and he is not very happy about this. A conversation between him and the goddess ensues:¹⁷

Then the venerable Śāriputra said to the goddess, “Goddess, how long have you been in this house?”

The goddess replied, “I have been here as long as the elder has been in liberation.”

Śāriputra said, “Then, have you been in this house for quite some time?”

The goddess said, “Has the elder been in liberation for quite some time?”

At that, the elder Śāriputra fell silent.

¹⁷ Thurman (2014), p. 59.

The goddess continued, “Elder, you are ‘foremost of the wise!’ Why do you not speak? Now, when it is your turn, you do not answer the question.”

Śāriputra: Since liberation is inexpressible, goddess, I do not know what to say.

Śāriputra, appealing to the idea that enlightenment, the realisation of ultimate reality, is ineffable, takes the 5th Amendment. The goddess is not impressed (ibid):

Goddess: All the syllables pronounced by the elder have the nature of liberation. Why? Liberation is neither internal nor external, nor can it be apprehended apart from them. Likewise, syllables are neither internal nor external, nor can they be apprehended anywhere else. Therefore, reverend Śāriputra, do not point to liberation by abandoning speech! Why? The holy liberation is the equality of all things!

The reply is dark. The thought would appear to be that words are not something over and above ultimate reality, which can be—indeed, must be—peeled off of it. They are part of it, and so can be used to describe it. But whatever the exact meaning of the goddess’ words, it is clear that she says that one can speak about ultimate reality.

If one left the text at this point, one might just think that the doctrine of the ineffability of ultimate reality had been dismissed. But this is not so. Two chapters later there is a chapter entitled ‘Entering the Gate of Non-Dualism’. As the title suggests, the topic of discussion turns explicitly to the question of what it means to transcend duality, that is, realise the ultimate. Many bodhisattvas (beings on the path to enlightenment) are brought into the discussion, and each takes it in turn to say what this means.

The last bodhisattva to speak is the most important of them all. This is Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom—so he should know what he is talking about:¹⁸

Mañjuśrī replied, “Good sirs, you have all spoken well. Nevertheless, all your explanations are themselves dualistic. To know no one teaching, to express nothing, to say nothing, to explain nothing, to announce nothing, to indicate nothing, and to designate nothing—that is the entrance into nonduality.”

Then, Vimalakīrti, the real hero of the dialogue, is asked what he thinks (ibid):

Then the crown prince Mañjuśrī said to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, “We have all given our own teachings, noble sir. Now, may you elucidate the teaching of the entrance into the principle of nonduality!”

Thereupon, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti kept his silence, saying nothing at all.

The crown prince Mañjuśrī applauded the Licchavi Vimalakīrti: “Excellent! Excellent, noble sir! This is indeed the entrance into the nonduality of the bodhisattvas. Here there is no use for syllables, sounds, and ideas.”

Vimalakīrti remains silent. But unlike the silence of Śāriputra, this is praised. What is the difference?

The context. The silence of Vimalakīrti acquires its meaning from what Mañjuśrī has just said about transcending duality. (If Vimalakīrti had been silent because he hadn't heard this, or just plain fallen asleep, it could not have had the same significance.) Mañjuśrī has just *said* that you cannot speak about the ultimate. (So Mañjuśrī contradicts himself.) Vimalakīrti *shows* the same thing. The sūtra, then, endorses speaking of the ineffable.¹⁹

¹⁸ Thurman (2014), p. 77.

¹⁹ See, further, Garfield (2002).

Although the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* is an Indian text, it actually had little impact on the development of Indian Buddhism, as judged by the Indian Mahāyāna commentarial tradition. It rapidly became a very well known sūtra in East Asia, however, and finds a core place in East Asian Buddhism.

2.4 Dōgen

With this background, we may now turn to Dōgen. When Buddhism entered China around the turn of the Common Era, it met the indigenous philosophy of Daoism, which was to exert an enormous influence on the development of Chinese Buddhism. By the 6th century of the common era, a number of distinctively Chinese schools of Buddhism had developed. They were all, however, in the Mahāyāna tradition. Chan was one of these. Traditionally, it was taken to have been brought to China by the Indian or Central Asian monk Bodhidharma (Chin: Damo, 達摩), fl. 5th c. CE, who thereby became the first patriarch of Chan, and the 28th of Buddhism itself (the Buddha being the first).

Chan has many distinctive features. Perhaps the most notable of these was the development of various techniques designed to induce in the student an experience of ultimate reality, unmediated by any conceptual overlay.²⁰ This is not the place to go into these matters, however.²¹

Starting in about the 6th Century, virtually all of the schools of Chinese Buddhism entered Japan via the Korean Peninsula. Dōgen trained as a Tendai (Chin: Tiantai, 天台) Buddhist monk.²² But, according to the traditional story, he became dissatisfied with this and went to China in search of something better. There he met Sōtō (Chin: Caodong, 曹洞); and when he returned to Japan, he founded this school of Zen there.

²⁰ Such as the study of kōan—certain verbal puzzles—and shock tactics on the part of the teacher, such as shouting or striking.

²¹ On Chan in general, see Hershock (2015). On Dōgen in particular, see Abe (1992).

²² Tendai is one of the other major schools of Chinese Buddhism.

Dōgen gave many lectures to his monks. These are recorded in his *Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, 正法眼藏). The texts are very difficult to decode.²³ They refer frequently to other Buddhist texts, play with language, reinterpret standard Buddhist ideas. Sometimes the aim would appear to be as much to disrupt the listener's thought as to expound Dōgen's own. For that reason, they are singularly difficult to translate, and translators can come up with things that appear radically different.

Having uttered this warning, let us now turn to what Dōgen has to say about the nature of ultimate reality. As much as for any other Mahāyāna philosopher, it is ineffable. Thus, in the lecture of the *Shōbōgenzō* entitled *Hōshō* (The Nature of Things, 法性), he says:²⁴

[CP: It is wrong to think that] the *nature of things* will appear when the whole world we perceive is obliterated, that the *nature of things* is not the present totality of phenomena. The principle of the *nature of things* cannot be like this. The *totality of phenomena* and the *nature of things* are far beyond any question of sameness or difference, beyond talk of distinction or identity. It is not past, present, or future, not annihilation or eternity, not form, not sensation, not conception, conditioning, or consciousness—therefore it is the *nature of things*.

But he, like his predecessors, is prepared to talk about it. Indeed, he does so in the above quotation. What does he make of this?

Note, first, that Dōgen often appears happy to endorse contradictions. For example, in the *Shōbōgenzō* lecture entitled *Shoji* (Life and Death, 生死), we find:²⁵

²³ See the introduction to Cleary (1986), esp. pp. 5 ff.

²⁴ Cleary (1986), p. 39. The italics are Cleary's. In what follows, translators' interpolations are marked with square brackets. Ours are marked with initials [CP: thus].

²⁵ Tanahashi (1985), p. 74.

Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvāṇa. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided. There is nothing such as nirvāṇa to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death.

And in the lecture *Genjō kōan* (The Issue at Hand, 現成公案), we find:²⁶

As all things are Buddha-dharma, there is delusion and realization, practice, birth and death, and there are Buddhas and sentient beings. As the myriad things are without an abiding self, there is no delusion, no realization, no Buddha, no sentient beings, no birth and death.

We do not need to worry about exactly what is going on here—though one needs to understand this if one is to understand why Dōgen might be expressing these views. Even without this, it is quite clear that he is endorsing a contradiction.²⁷ Does he do this with the contradiction involved in talking of the ineffable?

2.5 *Katto*

To find an answer to this question, we can go to the *Shōbōgenzō* lecture entitled *Katto* (Kudzo and Wisteria, 葛藤). Note that Kudzo and Wisteria are both plants that grow vines, which climb by wrapping themselves round other things. Back to this in a moment.

In Zen thought there is a familiar story about how Bodhidharma elected his successor, Huike. In *Katto* Dōgen relates this as follows:²⁸

²⁶ Tanahashi (1985), p. 69.

²⁷ This translation and interpretation of the passages is defended in Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest (2013).

²⁸ Heine (2009), pp. 151-2. In this context, ‘Dharma’ means something like *true teaching*.

The twenty-eighth patriarch said to his disciples, “As the time is drawing near [for me to transmit the Dharma to my successor], please tell me how you express it”.

Daofu responded first, “According to my current understanding, we should neither cling to words and letters, nor abandon them altogether, but use them as instruments of the Dao [CP: way].”

The master responded, “You express my skin”.

Then the nun Zongzhi, said, “As I now see it [the Dharma] is like Ānanda's viewing the Buddha-land of Akshobhya, seeing it once and never seeing it again.”

The master responded, “You express my flesh.”

Daoyou said, “The four elements are emptiness, and the five skandhas are non-being. But in my view, there is not a single dharma to be expressed.”

The master said, “You express my bones.”

Finally, Huike prostrated himself three times and stood [silently].

The master said, “You express my marrow.”

The standard interpretation of the story is that each of the respondents says something acceptable, each getting closer to the essence of things. By his silence, Huike indicates the ultimate, and so ineffable. On the basis of this, Bodhidharma makes him his successor.

Dōgen's interpretation of the story is, however, quite different. He says (ibid.):

You should realize that the first patriarch's expression, “skin, flesh, bones, marrow,” does not refer to the superficiality of depth [or understanding].

Although there may remain a [provisional] distinction between superior and inferior understanding, [each of the four disciples] expressed the first patriarch in his entirety. When Bodhidharma says “you express my marrow” or “you express my bones”, he is using various pedagogical devices that are pertinent to particular people, or methods of instruction that may or may not be apply to different levels of understanding.

It is the same as Śākyamuni's holding up the udambarra flower [to Mahākāśyapa],²⁹ or the transmission of the sacred robe [symbolic of the transmission of enlightenment]. What Bodhidharma said to the four disciples is fundamentally the selfsame expression. Although it is fundamentally the selfsame expression, since there are necessarily four ways of understanding it, he did not express it in one way alone. But even though each of the four ways of understanding is partial or one-sided, the way of the patriarchs ever remains the way of the patriarchs.

Dōgen's point is that the replies of each of the disciples do not indicate differences of depth, but merely different ways of saying the same thing (and each might be appropriate on different occasions). The speech of the first three disciples and the silence of Huike, then, are all equivalent. So silence is not privileged over speech. After all, a body is an integrated whole, and each part of it is necessary for the others. The replies of the disciples are mutually co-dependent, like the parts of the body.

So what has this to do with kudzo and wisteria? The discussion of the transmission takes off from the following passage (ibid.):

My late master [Ruijing] [CP: 如淨] once said: “The vine of a gourd coils around the vine of a[nother] gourd like a wisteria vine.” I have never heard this saying from anyone else of the past or the present. The first time I heard

²⁹ This is an allusion to a Chan story about how the Buddha himself elected his successor. Whilst with a bunch of his disciples, he simply held up a flower. None of the disciples knew what to do, except Mahākāśyapa, who just smiled. He had grasped the ineffable, which the Buddha was conveying; the Buddha elected him. ‘Śākyamuni’ is a name for the Buddha, and means *sage of the Śākyas*, the Buddha's clan.

this was from my late master. When he said, “the vine of a gourd coils round the vine of a[nother] gourd,” this refers to studying the Buddhas and patriarchs directly from the Buddhas and patriarchs, and to the transmission of the Buddhas and patriarchs directly to the Buddhas and patriarchs. That is, it refers to the direct transmission from mind-to-mind.

The direct transmission is the silence of Hiuke. That is the vine of one gourd. Language is the vine of the other. The being of each of these is necessary for the being of the other. And both, in their own way, say the same thing.

We have here a reprise of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*. It is exactly the point that the goddess is making when she says that words are not internal, not external, and not anywhere else. And it is exactly the final entanglement between Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti. Dōgen is saying that one can talk of the ineffable; indeed, the ineffable and the effable each requires the other.

3. Heidegger

3.1 Being

Having seen Dōgen’s approach to the problem of ineffability, let us now turn to Heidegger.³⁰ As we will see in this section, even though these two philosophers come from very different traditions, they share many ideas. First, both Heidegger and Dōgen agree that something is ineffable. For Dōgen, this is ultimate reality; for Heidegger, it is being. Secondly, they both believe that ineffability leads to a contradiction. Thirdly, they both endorse dialetheism concerning ineffability: they think that the contradiction implied by talking about the ineffable is true. And last, they both take the speech of effability and the silence of ineffability to be entangled.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is clearly one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th Century. Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the most famous of

³⁰ Much of the material in this section comes from Casati (2016).

Heidegger's students, describes his teacher as the last shaman, owing to his ability to enchant the students. His classes were always full and the course that he gave at the University of Freiburg, during the summer semester of 1935 did not constitute an exception. In that occasion, Heidegger began his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, with the following question: "Why are there entities at all instead of nothing?"³¹

Of course, it is a trivial fact that we are constantly surrounded by entities, such as books, dreams, mathematical theorems, and cherry-trees. What is not trivial is to understand why there are all these entities and what makes them *be*. An easy answer could be that, as the redness of the rose makes the rose red, the being of all entities makes all entities be. But, then, what is the being of all entities? This is the well-known *Seinsfrage*, the question of being; and from the beginning of his philosophical work, Heidegger aimed to answer it. In *Being and Time*, he writes:³²

what is asked about is being, ... that on the basis of which entities are already understood, however we may discuss them in detail.

So, what is the being of all entities? According to Heidegger, being has two main features. The first one is that being is the 'being an entity' of all entities—the *Seiendsein*. As such, it "determines entities as entities".³³ Being is that in virtue of which all entities are something and not nothing. Since Heidegger interprets the relation between being and entities as a grounding relation, then being can be also characterized as the ground of all entities—the *Grund*. He writes: "being is intrinsically ground-like—what gives ground" to all entities.³⁴ The second feature of being is that being itself is not an entity. According to Heidegger, there is an

³¹ Fried and Polt (2000), p. 1.

³² Macquarrie and Robinson (1962), pp. 25-26.

³³ Macquarrie and Robinson (1962), p. 25.

³⁴ Stambaugh (1985), p. 170.

ontological difference between being and what being makes be, namely all entities. In *Being and Time*, we can read:³⁵

The being of entities ‘is’ not itself an entity. If we are to understand the problem of being, our first philosophical step consists in ... not ‘telling a story’, that is to say, in not defining entities as entities by tracing them back in their origins to some other entities — as if being had the character of a possible entity.

Even though Heidegger does not give any reason to endorse the ontological difference, it is possible to defend this position appealing to both a metaphysical argument and a grammatical argument.

The metaphysical argument aims to show that, without an ontological difference between being and entities, a vicious infinite regress is generated. To see this, consider the case in which the ontological difference does not hold, namely the case in which everything, including being, is an entity. As we have noted before, being grounds all entities; and all entities, in order to be something and not nothing, need to be grounded in something else. If so, since everything is an entity, including being, then being needs to be grounded in something else as well. Let’s say, then, that being is grounded in being₂. However, as everything is an entity, being₂ must be an entity as well and, as such, it must be grounded in something else too. Let’s say that being₂ is grounded in being₃. At this point, it is easy to see that we are off on an infinite regress. Such an infinite regress is vicious if one believes that, in our *explanans*, we cannot invoke that very thing for which we are seeking an explanation. Indeed, in explaining why there are entities in the first place, we are always invoking an entity (namely being, being₂, being₃ . . .). Such a vicious infinite regress is broken if we assume that being, which grounds all entities, is not itself an entity.³⁶

³⁵ Macquarrie and Robinson (1962), p. 26.

³⁶ A similar argument in favour of the ontological difference is presented by Nicholson (1996).

Let's move on with the second argument—the grammatical one.³⁷ Consider a proposition such as 'the wall is'. The noun 'wall' refers to an entity, namely the wall behind me. But what shall we say about 'is'? If we assume that 'is' (namely 'being') refers to an entity, then the proposition 'the wall is' would be nothing more than a simple list of two entities: *the wall* and *is* (namely being). However, this cannot be the case because, in an obvious sense, the proposition 'the wall is' has a meaning that a list of two entities (such as *the wall* and *is*) does not have. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the 'is' of the proposition 'the wall is' does not refer to any entity because being is not an entity. As Heidegger himself suggests in his *The Principle of Reason*:³⁸

only an entity 'is'; the 'is' itself—being—'is' not. The wall in front of you and behind me is. It immediately shows itself to us as something present. But where is its 'is'? Where should we seek the presencing of the wall? Probably these questions always run awry.

In the metaphysical picture defended by Heidegger, the influences of neo-platonism and medieval philosophy are clear. On the one hand, as for Plotinus' One, being is that in virtue of which all entities are. Being is the ground of all entities. On the other hand, as for Angelus Silesius' God and Meister Eckhart's *Gottheit*, being is completely transcendental. It is beyond all entities because being is not itself an entity. In other words, Heidegger thinks that being is that in virtue of which the world is, and the world needs to be interpreted as the collection of *all* entities. Moreover, since being is not an entity, being transcends the world. Therefore, being (namely the reason in virtue of which everything is, including the world itself) is not part of the world.³⁹

³⁷ This can be found in Priest (2002), 15.3.

³⁸ Lilly (1991), p. 51.

³⁹ Concerning the relation between Heidegger and neo-platonism, see his lectures on Greek philosophy (Rojcewicz (2007)) and Plato (Rojcewicz and Schuwer (2003)). See, also, Cimino (2005) and Narbonne (2001). Concerning Heidegger and medieval philosophy, see Fritsch and Gosetti-Ferencei (2010) and Caputo (1986).

3.2 The Paradox of Being

As presented till now, the path taken by Heidegger to answer the question of being does not seem particularly troubled. To understand why this is not the case, it is necessary to focus our attention on what, according to Heidegger, should be taken as an entity. In *Being and Time*, we read that an entity is:⁴⁰

everything we can talk about, everything we have in view,
everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way.

If we speak, dream, or fear about something, we speak, dream or fear about some *thing*, namely an entity.⁴¹ Since we say that “‘the earth is’, ‘the lecture is in the auditorium’, ‘This man is from Swabia’, ‘the cup is of silver’ ...”⁴², the earth, the lecture in the auditorium, the man from Swabia, and that cup made out of silver are all entities. Indeed:⁴³

when we say something ‘is’ and ‘is *such and so*’, then that
something is, in such an utterance, represented as an entity.

Now, assuming this definition of entity, the problem that Heidegger faces is evident. According to the ontological difference, being is what determines entities as entities, without being an entity. Nevertheless, in saying that being determines entities as entities, we treat being as an entity because we talk about it and, above all, we describe it as ‘*such and so*’. Therefore, being is not an entity (because of the

⁴⁰ Macquarrie and Robinson (1962), p. 26.

⁴¹ Heidegger uses different terms to talk about entities [*Seiendes*]: for instance, he uses the term ‘thing’ [*Ding*], the term ‘being’, and the term ‘object’ [*Objectum*]. All these terms have different (phenomenological) meanings for him. Nevertheless, this is not relevant here, and for our purposes we may simply take these terms as synonyms.

⁴² Fried and Polt (2000), p. 93.

⁴³ Lilly (1991), p. 15.

ontological difference) and being is an entity (because we talk about it and we describe it as '*such and so*').

Bad news never comes alone. Indeed, it is not only the case that we cannot answer the question of being because it is impossible to think and speak about it. We cannot even ask the question of being. According to Heidegger, any question presupposes an entity the question is about. For instance, if we ask something about a city, then we ask something about a thing, an entity. It follows that, since questions are always questions about some things (namely entities) and since being is not an entity, nothing can be asked about being. Using Heidegger's words in *Being and Time*:⁴⁴

Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way. As we have intimated, we always conduct our activities in an understanding of Being. Out of this understanding arise both the explicit question of the meaning of Being and the tendency that leads us towards its conception. We do not *know* what 'Being' means. But even if we ask, 'What *is* 'Being'?', we keep within an understanding of the 'is', though we are unable to fix conceptionally what that 'is' signifies.

So, Heidegger finds himself stuck in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, being is ineffable. Indeed, if we try to speak about it, we talk about some *thing* (namely an entity) and being is not a thing (an entity). On the other hand, being is not ineffable because we can and we do talk about it. Moreover, since everything we talk about is an entity, being is an entity as well. Therefore, being is ineffable (because it is not an entity) and being is not ineffable (because it is an entity).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Macquarrie and Robinson (1962), p. 25.

⁴⁵ The paradox faced by Heidegger has been extensively discussed in the secondary literature. For instance, see Whitherspoon (2002), Moore (2012), Priest (2002).

Heidegger is perfectly aware of this situation, and that such a contradiction leads his whole metaphysical project to a dead-end. Indeed, the aim of Heidegger's metaphysics is to answer the question of being; and in order to answer the question of being, it is necessary to talk and think about being. However, as we have seen, talking and thinking about being leads one to claim something contradictory. This makes any attempt of answering the question of being meaningless because:⁴⁶

a contradictory speech is an offense against the fundamental rule of speech (*logos*), against logic. ... Logic is taken as a tribunal, secure for all eternity, and it goes without saying that no rational human being will call into doubt its authority as the first and last court of appeal. Whoever speaks against logic is suspected, explicitly or implicitly, of arbitrariness.

It is not easy to understand what Heidegger has in mind when he talks about logic. However, for the purpose of the present essay, it is enough to say that, according to Heidegger, logic is "a set of rules" for "a good way of reasoning" grounded on "two main principles: the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of identity".⁴⁷ As we have seen, answering the question of being violates one of the fundamental principles of good reasoning, namely the principle of non-contradiction. Since Heidegger says here that any violation of such a principle cannot be accepted by any rational human being, then his own theory cannot be accepted by any rational human being either. He writes: "[CP: Talking and thinking about being] is contradictory and, therefore, senseless".⁴⁸

Since Heidegger does not want to abandon any of his metaphysical assumptions and since he endorses the account of logic sketched above, he coherently concludes that thinking and speaking about being is impossible. Being remains unfathomable. Tragically, Heidegger faces the evidence that his whole metaphysical project is self-defeating and, until the well-known methodological

⁴⁶ Fried and Polt (2000), pp. 25-27.

⁴⁷ Gregory and Unna (2009), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Fried and Polt (2000), p. 27.

turn of his thought, he did not know how to escape from such a dead-end. Such a turn is called the *Kehre* and it took place around the 1930s.

3.3 Beyng

As the problem has been framed here, Heidegger has two available options. Either he revises some of his metaphysical assumptions or he revises his logical assumption. After the *Kehre*, Heidegger started to focus his attention on the first option, trying to find a way to talk and think about being without turning it into an entity. According to Heidegger, such a way is represented by poetry and, more generally, art, because a genuine work of art can show being without saying anything about it.

The work of art opens up in its own way the being of entities. This opening up, i.e., this revealing, i.e., the truth of entities, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of entities has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work.⁴⁹

A solution to the question of being may, therefore, lie in how art can open people's eyes in this way.

At this point two remarks are necessary. First, it is important to state clearly that it is unquestionable that Heidegger tried to solve the problem of the ineffability of being by endorsing a poetic way of talking and thinking about it. As has been extensively discussed in the secondary literature, Heidegger thought that poetic language was a way of referring to being that did not imply any reification or objectification of being itself.⁵⁰ We do not wish to deny that Heidegger pursued this strategy. However, the fact that Heidegger engaged with a poetic solution to the ineffability of being does not mean that Heidegger engaged with *only* this solution.

⁴⁹ Krell (1977), p. 166.

⁵⁰For a discussion about the poetic solution, see Moore (2012), pp. 479-485. We note, however, that it is not clear that it really succeeds in this aim: it would appear that for one who appreciates the poetry/art, being is still an object of intention, and so an object.

The second remark is about the efficacy of Heidegger's poetic solution. A discerning eye will itself still perceive a problem here. Never mind answering the question of being; as already noted, if one cannot refer to being with a noun phrase, one cannot even ask it. Indeed, for exactly this reason, one can say nothing at all of being. Yet, Heidegger's own works are replete with statements about being. To bend a comment from Russell's introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—which finds itself with a similar aporia:⁵¹ Everything involved in talking of being cannot, grammatically, be said. What may give some hesitation about this fact is that, despite his arguments to the contrary, Mr Heidegger manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said. Nor, we note, is this necessarily incompatible with poetry/art showing us being; for, *pace* Wittgenstein, what can be shown *can* often be said.

So we are left with the second option: challenging the receive logic. Did Heidegger ever consider this? Did he ever try to abandon the Principle of Non-Contradiction? According to the secondary literature, the answer is negative. In what follows, we disagree with this interpretation, showing that, after the *Kehre*, Heidegger challenges the Principle of Non-Contradiction and openly endorses dialetheism (the view according to which some contradictions are true).

The complete and clear realization that being requires us to abandon the Principle of Non-Contradiction was formulated in years of both private and public philosophical attempts. To begin with, Heidegger starts to cast some doubts about the Principle of Non-Contradiction in his lecture of 1929, *What is Metaphysics?* And he asks: “Are we allowed to tamper with the rules of logic?”⁵² Nevertheless, the first essay in which Heidegger seems to endorse a dialethic approach to the paradox of being, accepting its contradictory nature, is contained in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. He writes:⁵³

⁵¹ Pears and McGuinness (1961), p. *xxi* .

⁵² McNeill (1998), p. 85.

⁵³ Fried and Polt, p. 82.

the word 'being' is thus indefinite in its meaning, and nevertheless we understand it definitely. 'Being' proves to be extremely definite and completely indefinite. According to the usual logic, we are here on obvious contradiction. But something contradictory cannot be. There is no square circle. And yet, there is this contradiction: being as definite and completely indefinite. We see, if we do not deceive ourselves, and if for a moment amid all the day's hustle and bustle we have time to see, that we are standing in the midst of this contradiction. This standing of ours is more actual than just about anything else that we call actual—more actual than dogs and cats, automobiles and newspapers.

In this paragraph, Heidegger rephrases the paradox of being. On the one hand, he claims that the word 'being' refers to something that does not have any determination (something about which nothing can be either said or thought because there are no determinations to be said and thought about it). On the other hand, he claims that the word 'being' refers to something that has some determinations (something about which it can be said or thought: at least, the determination of not having any determinations). In other words, being is indeterminate (it has no determination at all) and it is determinate (it has the determination of not having any determination at all).

It is important to notice that, in this paragraph, Heidegger does not simply rephrase the contradiction of being. He also states that this contradiction is *actual*. Here, Heidegger explicitly endorses the idea that the contradiction of being has to be accepted as true because unavoidable. According to Heidegger, such a contradiction is as actual and real as all the other actual and real things in the world. It is as actual and real as dogs and cats, automobiles and newspapers.

It would be intuitive to expect that, as he explicitly accepts the idea that there is one actual contradiction (namely the contradiction of being), Heidegger systematically accepts the idea that contradictions are not necessarily unacceptable too. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The idea that the Principle of Non-Contradiction should (or simply could) be abandoned, accepting the contradiction

of being as true, is not consistently presented throughout his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Besides the paragraph just noted, there are no other significant indications of this direction of thought.

However, some years after the publication of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the dialetheic solution to the paradox of being *was* systematically presented in his *Contributions to Philosophy*—a philosophical diary written between 1937 and 1938, but published only after Heidegger’s death. In this work, Heidegger presents a full defence of the position according to which being should be taken to be both an entity and not an entity. In order to mark the difference between his old consistent account of being and the new inconsistent one, he starts to write being [*Sein*] as beyng [*Seyn*]. Following Heidegger, in discussing his dialetheic approach to the paradox of being, we will start writing *being* as *beyng* too.

In the *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger claims that metaphysics needs a new beginning.

These ‘contributions’ question along a way which is first paved by the *transition* to the another beginning, the one Western thought is now entering. ... [CP:An]other beginning must be attempted.⁵⁴

This new beginning is represented by the introduction of the ‘event’ [*Ereignis*] which is

the self-eliciting and self-mediating center in which all essential occurrence of the truth of beyng must be thought back in advance.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 6.

⁵⁵ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 58.

The event is described as the occasion in which the truth of beyng is disclosed, and such a truth is disclosed though the human being's "thinking of beyng".⁵⁶ Here, the truth of beyng needs to be interpreted as something true about beyng. In the event, the human being, thinking about beyng, reveals something true about it. For this reason, Heidegger metaphorically characterized the event as the human being's appropriation (*Er-eignung*) of the truth of beyng.

At this point, even though the contradictory nature of beyng has not been explicitly accepted yet, a dialethic solution is definitely implied by Heidegger's event. On the one hand, according to the metaphysical premises of Heidegger, thinking and speaking about beyng leads to a contradiction. Such metaphysical premises are certainly not rejected in *Contributions to Philosophy*. On the other hand, in the event, thinking about beyng discloses something true about it. It seems to follow that the truth of beyng precisely consists in thinking something contradictory, but still true, about beyng itself. This position becomes explicit when the real content of the event is properly described.

According to Heidegger, in the event, not only is beyng held as the complete opposite of an entity (because, according to the ontological difference, beyng is not an entity), but beyng is also held as something that is not the complete opposite of an entity (because, since we think and speak about it, beyng is an entity too). This is the reason why, even though the ontological difference still holds, ensuring the fact that beyng is not an entity, Heidegger thinks that, "beings [CP: or entities] are, Beyng essentially occurs" as well.⁵⁷ If so, according to the truth of beyng disclosed in the event, beyng itself is both an entity and not.

Consistently with this position, in *Contributions to Philosophy*, paragraph number 47, Heidegger questions the idea that it is necessary to choose between the following two options: either beyng is an entity or beyng is not an entity. Heidegger wants to question exactly this either/or. He wants to challenge the

⁵⁶ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p.59.

⁵⁷ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 26.

necessity of choosing one of these two options because choosing both would mean to claim something contradictory and, thus, senseless. He provocatively asks:⁵⁸

Whence the either-or? Whence the *only this* or only that?
Whence the unavoidability of this way or else that way? Is there
not still a third (...)?

One paragraph later, Heidegger answers that the third available option is to challenge the Principle of Non-Contradiction, accepting that beyng is both an entity and not. For this reason, Heidegger writes that the truth of beyng is represented by “the being of a nonbeings [CP: non-entities]”.⁵⁹ Consistently with what we have said before, this truth is contradictory because a non-entity, namely something that is not an entity (like beyng), cannot be. As such, there cannot be any being of a non-entity either. Nevertheless, in Heidegger’s event, the essence of beyng reveals being itself as something that is not (because, according to the ontological difference, it is a non-entity) but, nonetheless, is. Therefore, beyng is (an entity) and not. Such a contradictory truth about beyng is fully endorsed by Heidegger:

Non-being as a mode of being: it is and yet is not. And likewise
being: permeated with the ‘not’ and yet it is.⁶⁰

Those who fancy themselves only too clever and immediately uncover a contradiction here, since indeed nonbeings [CP: such as beyng] cannot ‘be’, are thinking in much too narrow way with their ‘non-contradiction’ as the measure of [CP: beyng, namely] the essence of beings.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 80.

⁵⁹ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 80.

⁶⁰ Rojcewicz and Vallega-New (2012), p.80.

⁶¹ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), pp. 59-60.

According to the late Heidegger, then, thinking the essence of entities requires us to revise our logical beliefs, abandoning the Principle of Non-Contradiction. So, there are books, dreams, mathematical theorems, and cherry-trees because of beyng. Beyng makes all entities be, while beyng itself is an entity and not.

Heidegger's rejection of the Principle of Non-Contradiction is at its most explicit in the *Contributions to Philosophy*. However, there are certainly many other allusions to the matter in his later work. Thus, in a seminar given at the University of Freiburg during the summer semester 1934, Heidegger claims that his philosophy has "the necessary task of a shaking up of logic".⁶² About six years later, in a collection of essays entitled *The History of Beyng*, written between 1938 and 1940, we find:⁶³

a contradiction is not a refutation..., but rather fathoming the ground of an inceptual fundamental position within the truth of beyng.

And again, in an essay entitled *What is a Thing?*, published in 1962, Heidegger writes that:⁶⁴

the Principle of Non-Contradiction is not a basic principle of metaphysics. ... Logic cannot be the fundamental science for metaphysics.

The statements are, perhaps, somewhat coy, compared with the remarks on the matter in the *Contributions to Philosophy*; but given these remarks, their intent is clear.

3.4 Silence

⁶² Gregory and Unna (2009), p. 6.

⁶³ McNeill and Powell (2015), p. 15.

⁶⁴ Deutsch and Barton (1968), p. 137. By 'logic', he of course means *Aristotelian logic*.

So far so good; but it still remains the case that being is ineffable; and if it is ineffable, approaches to it must deploy silence. The matter is not lost on Heidegger. In his *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger reaches the following conclusion: given the right conditions, keeping silent about being helps us to get closer to the truth of being without completely reaching it. This is also why Heidegger claims that “the other beginning is carried out as *bearing silence*”.⁶⁵ As we explained in the previous section, the new beginning is the one in which, through the event, the truth of being is disclosed. Of course, *bearing silence* cannot fully represent what happens in the new beginning because, exactly in the new beginning, Heidegger is not silent at all. On the contrary, he speaks in great length about being and its truth. So, how is the new beginning related to silence? What is the connection between the action of *bearing silence* about being and the truth of being expressed in the new beginning of metaphysics, celebrated by Heidegger himself?

According to Heidegger, in some specific circumstances, silence communicates something or, in other words, it has a content. Silence is not silent at all. This idea is already endorsed by Heidegger before the *Kehre*. In *Being and Time*, he writes:⁶⁶

Keeping silent is another essential possibility of discourse, and it has the same existential foundation. In talking with one another, the person who keeps silent can ‘make one understand’ (that is, they can develop an understanding), and he can do so more authentically than the person who is never short of words.

From this quotation, it is clear that, according to Heidegger, a silent person can still convey something. Clearly, however, not all kinds of silence are equally communicative. One person might be silent because they are sleeping, and another might be silent because they do not understand the topic of a conversation. In these cases, the silence does not communicate much.

⁶⁵ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 62.

⁶⁶ Macquarrie and Robinson (1962), p. 208.

In his *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger seems to suggest that, in order to move closer to the truth of being, silence and language need to be necessarily entangled: on the one hand, silence needs language and, on the other hand, language needs silence. Let's begin discussing why silence needs language. According to Heidegger, in order to be able to convey something about being, the silence requires us to speak about being. Keeping silent about being makes sense if and only if we speak and ask about being in the first place. In Heidegger's words:⁶⁷

When this restraint [CP: the restraint of language into silence] reaches words, what is said is always the event [CP: namely the truth of being]. ... The saying that bears silence is what grounds [CP: the event or the truth of being].

The silence that is able to communicate something about being is the one that "grows only out of restraint [CP: namely the restraint of talking about being]".⁶⁸ As such, it needs the language that talks about being in the first place. Exactly the context in which the silence is placed, namely the context of a discussion about being, gives the right meaning to the silence that follows such a discussion.

Now the other direction: according to Heidegger, language needs silence as well. This is the case because it is the silence that shows the failure of the language in talking about being. In other words, the failure of language is completely revealed by the necessary silence to which a speaker is forced when they understand that being is actually ineffable and, as such, nothing can be expressed about it. Moreover, such a failure is important because, according to Heidegger, it discloses something about being itself, namely the impossibility of talking about it and the relative limits of the language. Heidegger expresses this idea in the following way:⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 64.

⁶⁸ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 29.

⁶⁹ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 30.

Words fail us; they do so originally and not merely occasionally, whereby some discourse or assertion could indeed be carried out but is left unuttered... Words do not yet come to speech at all, but it is precisely in failing us that they arrive at the first leap. This failing is the event as intimation or incursion of beyng.

To conclude, Heidegger holds that silence and language are necessary entangled. This is also the reason why Heidegger writes that the truth of being is revealed in the union or mutual entanglement of “bearing silence and questioning [CP: being]”.⁷⁰ In order to get closer to the truth of being, the pair of speaking and keeping silent is necessary: each requires the other.

4. And So to Nothingness

What we have seen so far is the following. Both Dōgen and Heidegger think that there is something that is ineffable; both talk about it; both recognise the contradictory nature of this, and accept the contradiction. Moreover, both see that the speech of ineffability and the silence of ineffability are entangled: each necessitates the other. Both Heidegger and Dōgen are philosophers who are sometimes difficult to understand; and the parts of their thought about which we have been writing are certainly so.⁷¹ Seeing the thought of each through the lens of the other can help us to understand both.

It might seem, none the less, that, for all the similarities, Dōgen and Heidegger are dealing with quite different topics. Heidegger’s being, after all, would appear to be quite different from Zen’s ultimate reality. The appearance is deceptive. In the thought of both, what they are concerned with can be seen as exactly the same thing: nothingness. In this final section, we shall see why.

⁷⁰ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 64.

⁷¹ Though, we note, this is partly because interpreters often insist on trying to find interpretations which square with the Principle of Non-Contradiction. Of course this generates a quite needless obscurity.

4.1 Heidegger: Being and Nothingness

Let us start, this time, with Heidegger. For him the connection between being and nothingness is clear: he states that they are identical. In *What is Metaphysics?* Heidegger states the matter as follows:⁷²

‘Pure Being and pure Nothing are therefore the same.’ This proposition of Hegel’s (*Science of Logic*, vol. I, *Werke* III, 74) is correct. Being and the nothing do belong together, not because both—from the point of view of the Hegelian concept of thought—agree in their indeterminateness and immediacy, but rather because Being itself is essentially finite and reveals itself only in the transcendence of *Dasein* which is held out into the nothing.

Heidegger's reason for supposing that being and nothing are identical is somewhat opaque, but appears to be the following simple argument:

Being is what it is that makes beings be.
Nothing is what it is that makes beings be.
Hence, being is nothing.

The first premise is true by definition. The conclusion follows validly if there is just one thing that makes beings be. So perhaps the most contentious part of the argument is the second premise. The thought here is that what makes something be is the fact that that it “stands out against nothingness”. So if there were no nothingness, there could be no beings either. As Heidegger puts it:⁷³

⁷² Krell (1977), p. 110. And again: ‘Only because the question ‘What is Metaphysics?’ thinks from the beginning of the climbing above, the transcendence, the Being of being, can it think of the negative of being, of that nothingness which just as originally is identical with Being’. (Heidegger (1959), p. 101.)

⁷³ Krell (1977), p. 105.

In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: they are beings—and not nothing. But this ‘and not nothing’ we add in our talk is not some kind of appended clarification. Rather it makes possible in advance the revelation of beings in general. The essence of the originally nihilating nothing lies in this, that it brings *Dasein* for the first time before beings as such.

Or again:⁷⁴

The nothing is neither an object nor any being at all. The nothing comes forward neither for itself nor next to beings, to which it would, as it were, adhere. For human existence the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather it originally belongs to their essential unfoldings as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs.

This is not the place to discuss the details of these views. Here, we merely note Heidegger’s conclusion: that being and nothing are identical.

4.2 Heidegger: Ineffability and Nothingness

If being is nothingness, and being is ineffable, then so too, presumably, is nothingness. But, in fact, there are independent reasons for supposing that nothingness (and so being) is ineffable.

To say something of something, it has to be an object—a thing of which one can predicate some characterisation. But this is exactly what nothingness is not. By definition, nothingness is the *absence* of all objects. There is then no thing there of which to predicate anything. As Heidegger puts it:⁷⁵

What is the nothing? Our very first approach to the question has something unusual about it. In our asking we posit the nothing in advance as something

⁷⁴ Krell (1977), p. 106.

⁷⁵ Krell (1977), pp 98 f.

that ‘is’ such and such; we posit it as a being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from. Interrogating the nothing—asking what, and how it, the nothing, is—turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object. Accordingly, every answer to the question is also impossible from the start. For it necessarily assumes the form: the nothing ‘is’ this or that. With regard to the nothing question and answer are alike inherently absurd.

Nothingness, then, is ineffable.

Of course, it is just as obvious that one *can* say something about nothingness. We and Heidegger just have. We have been over this matter already, however. The point of this section is simply to establish that, for Heidegger, being is the same as nothingness, which we have now done.

4.3 Nishitani: Absolute Nothingness

Let us, then, return to Dōgen. According to Heidegger, nothingness is the absence of all things:⁷⁶

If beings are taken in the sense of objects and objectively present things... nothingness signifies the utter negation of beings understood in this sense.

Such is also the ineffable ultimate reality of Mahāyāna Buddhism. For, as we noted in 4.3, this ultimate transcends all dualities; and if it contained objects, it would contain dualities (thises and thats).

The nature of nothingness comes out most clearly in the East Asian forms of Buddhism, in which Dōgen was working, and which was heavily influenced by

⁷⁶ Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu (2012), p. 194 f. It is also important to acknowledge that some interpreters disagree with the idea that Heidegger characterizes nothingness as the absence of everything (cf. Witherspoon (2002), Severino (1994)). However, this is hard to believe because Heidegger himself endorses such a characterization of nothingness in many different essays. For instance, see Mitchell and Raffoul (2012), and Krell (1991).

Daoism.⁷⁷ In Daoism (or, at least, the version of it which influenced Buddhism), behind the myriad things of the phenomenal world there is an originating principle, *dao* 道. This can be no particular thing, or it could not engender all things. As Wang Bi (226-249 CE, an influential Neo-Daoist) puts it:⁷⁸

The way things come into existence and efficacy [*gong*] comes about is that things arise from the formless [*wuxing*] and that efficacy emanates from the nameless [*wuming*]. The formless and the nameless [the Dao] is the progenitor of the myriad things. It is neither warm nor cool and makes neither the note *gong* nor the note *shang*. ... If it were warm, it could not be cold; if it were the note *gong*, it could not be the note *shang*. If it had a form, it would necessarily possess the means of being distinguished from other things; if it made a sound, it would necessarily belong among other sounds.

Unlike the beings (Chin: *you*, 有) comprising the myriad things, then, it is nothingness, no thing (Chin: *wu*; Jap: *mu*, 無).

The ineffability of nothingness, and the contradiction involved in speaking of it, comes out very clearly in the thought of Nishitani Keiji (西谷 啓治, 1900-1990). Nishitani was professor of philosophy and religion at Kyoto University, and one of the most important members of the Kyoto School of philosophy. Members of this school drew on aspects of both Zen philosophy and Western thought. Nishitani's thought is heavily influenced by both Dōgen and Heidegger, with whom he studied in the late 1930s.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ See Chan (1963), pp. 336-7.

⁷⁸ Lynn (1999), p.30.

⁷⁹ Thus, the index of one of his major works, *Religion and Nothingness* (Van Bragt (1982)), contains 15 references to Dōgen, and 11 to Heidegger.

Nishitani often refers to the nothingness of ultimate reality as absolute nothingness (*zettai mu*, 絶対無) to distinguish it from the nothingness of simply non-being (nihility). Absolute nothingness is “beyond being and non-being”. What is and what is not, constitute conventional reality; absolute nothingness, being ultimate reality, transcends both. Nishitani puts the point this way:⁸⁰

Viewed in terms of this process [CP: of moving from being to absolute nothingness], śūnyata⁸¹ represents the endpoint of an orientation to negation. It can be termed *absolute negativity*, inasmuch as it is a standpoint that has negated and thereby transcended nihility, which was itself the transcendence-through-negation of all being. It can also be termed as an *absolute transcendence of being*, as it absolutely denies and distances itself from any standpoint shackled in any way whatever to being.

4.4 Nishitani: Ineffability and Nothingness

Unsurprisingly, then, and as the last quotation itself suggests, Nishitani endorses the ineffability of this nothingness. As he says:⁸²

On the field of emptiness, however, the selflessness of a thing cannot be expressed simply in terms of “being one thing or another”. It is rather something laid bare as something that cannot on the whole be expressed in the ordinary language of reason, nor for that matter in any language containing logical form.

There is of course, no language whose sentences do not have logical form—except perhaps simply pointing (*tathā*), if that be a language.

⁸⁰ Van Bragt (1982), p. 97.

⁸¹ ‘Śūnyata (emptiness)’, is another Mahāyāna term which may be used to refer to ultimate reality.

⁸² Van Bragt (1982), p. 124.

Nishitani is well aware, however, that he has been talking about nothingness in a language (Japanese—of course, a language whose sentences have logical form). He embraces the paradox. The quotation continues:⁸³

Should we be forced to put it into words all the same, we can only express it in terms of paradox, such as: “It is not this thing or that, therefore it is this thing or that”.

Nishitani’s thought is frequently dialetheic. Thus, for example, we have:⁸⁴

In other words, true nirvāna appears as *samsāra-sive-nirvāna*. Here life is sheer life and yet thoroughly paradoxical. We can speak, for example, of essentiality in its true essence as non-essentiality. If we could not speak in such terms as these, life would not truly be life. It would not be life at once truly eternal and truly temporal.

Indeed, a few lines later Nishitani quotes Dōgen with approval on the matter:⁸⁵

In Dōgen’s words, “Birth itself is non-birth; extinction itself is non-extinction.”

No reference to Dōgen is given, but we take this to be a reference to the passage from *Shoji* which we quoted in 2.4.

Nishitani, just as much as Dōgen, then, deploys contradiction; and deploys it, in particular, to endorse speaking of the ineffable. The main point of this section is, however, simply to show that for these thinkers ultimate reality is nothingness.

⁸³ This is an allusion to the *Diamond Sutra*, which repeats many times statements of the form: x is not x ; therefore it is x .

⁸⁴ Van Bragt (1982), p. 180.

⁸⁵ Van Bragt (1982), p. 181.

For both Heidegger and the Zen philosophers, then, the topic of the aporia which has been the central concern of our paper may be seen as exactly the same: nothingness.

5 Conclusion

Heidegger and Dōgen might seem to be very different philosophers, with different concerns and agendas. And so they are. Each is concerned with many things which do not concern the other. However, at the heart of each of their projects is a core notion: being for Heidegger, and ultimate reality for Dōgen; and in their thought, as we saw with the help of Nishitani, both of these, under inspection, morph into nothingness. Moreover, for both of them this is ineffable; and so both of them face the issue of talking about the ineffable. Fainter hearts—at least, hearts in thrall to Aristotle—might have tried to wriggle out of the contradiction. Both, however, have the courage of their arguments and endorse it. One *can* speak about certain ineffable notions. Moreover, both go *beyond* simply endorsing the contradiction involved. Both grapple with what this means for the relationship between speech and silence in the matter; and both come to the conclusion that the two are indelibly entangled. What one might not have expected, but what we have now seen, is that the thoughts of Heidegger and Dōgen are themselves indelibly entangled.

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