

September 2016

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Recommended Citation

Ó Muireartaigh, Rossa (2016) "Eschatology and Infinite Non-linear Time on the Field of Absolute Emptiness," *Chiasma: A Site For Thought*: Vol. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/chiasmaasiteforthought/vol3/iss1/3>

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‡ ESCATOLOGY AND INFINITE NON-LINEAR TIME

On the Field of Absolute Emptiness

ROSSA O' MUIREARTAIGH

1 – Following the ends of history

Alexandre Kojève in a footnote to his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* describes, most likely in jest, Japan as a society at the end of history. On this account, Japan has managed to perfect a way of life that involves immersion in form without content, a heightened snobbery where actions are done purely for their own sake and not for the sake of any natural survival or political or social motives. Japan has become a land defined by the ethic of the Edo samurai, a social class that did not fight, or work, but still followed intensely the ways of select refined arts (such as Noh Theater, the tea ceremony, and flower arranging). Japan's version of the End of History is posed as a contrast to an alternative End of History which would involve a move in the opposite direction, a return to animality, a version Kojève saw most exemplified in the USA.¹

Kojève did actually visit Japan, but his observations seem quaint and clueless. The idea that “all Japanese without exception are currently in a position to live according to totally *formalized* values – that is, values completely empty of all ‘human’ content in the ‘historical’ sense”² – comes nowhere close to describing the struggles of the average Japanese family in contemporary capitalist society. Furthermore, it is puzzling that Kojève sees *Noh Theater*,

1 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 161-162. For a summary of Kojève's views on this issue see also Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

2 Kojève, *Hegel*, 162.

Chanoyu tea ceremony, and *Ikebana* flower arranging as such radically distinct human activities. Surely every society has its ritualized performances and stylized decorative arts. Perhaps, Kojève was focusing on the fact that the art-forms of Noh and tea-ceremony, are, at least in the official descriptions of them, formalized to the extent of seeming historically frozen. In Noh and, maybe the tea-ceremony, artists struggle to repeat the old rather than to express something new. I am here imagining that when Kojève saw these art-forms he saw in them a mode of human action where everything moves with deliberate slowness and precision so as to ensure that surprise, contingency, newness, dissatisfaction, and all the other ingredients of dialectic history are erased. This is just my speculation, yet whatever may have been going on inside Kojève's mind as he sat through Noh-theater, tea ceremonies and all the other tourist delights during his trips to Japan, his inability to see Japan as just another country illustrates two particular problems that will haunt any philosophy that espouses the concept of an "End of History." These are, first of all, the problem of where to draw the line of history so that it will have a coherent beginning, middle, and end. And secondly, the problem of imagining how humans could "do" an end of history.

Fitting Japan and East Asia into a linear account of history has always been a challenge for historians of a dialectical persuasion (materialist or otherwise), since the isolation of this region from European conquest for large swathes of time has meant that it stands outside the causal chain that is seen to have shaped the rest of the World. Karl Marx, for instance, saw history to be composed of a series of modes of production. One of these modes was the Asiatic Mode of Production. This, of course, raised the problem of whether this mode of production is inside or outside the progression of history. As Raymond Aron describes it "the Asiatic mode of production does not seem to constitute a stage in Western History. Hence Marx's interpreters have endlessly debated the unity or non-unity of the historical process."³ A line, in history or anything else, implies a unity, a continuity between each part of the line leading in a particular direction. To include the Asiatic mode of production would mean drawing another line through history. However, in drawing more than one line we are unwittingly demonstrating the contingency and exclusionism that is implied in any linear narrative. This becomes a problem

3 Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought 1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 124.

for the End of History because it means that the End of History at the terminal point of one line could be, theoretically, intersected by a line coming from another history. For there to be a coherent End of History there needs to be one line through history. However, as the difficulty in including the Asiatic Mode of Production demonstrates, such a line through history must either be all-inclusive to the point of being warped and beyond narrative cohesion, or all-exclusive, in which case it becomes an impoverished and embellished account.

The other problem that Kojève's quirky observations of Japan raise is the difficulty in both imagining and recognizing what the End of History would be like. History makes sense to us when we read it as a line of causes producing effects. We can see how events lead to other events, forging out a linear narrative. But what happens when the process of history stops, when there are no dialectical tensions or contradictions, and events no longer necessitate social transformation? Will human life become one of constant repetition of harmonious and happy activities? It is always hard, of course, to imagine the future after the End of History since the End of History will come after transformations that will have produced new structures and conditions that we cannot imagine and hence speculate about. However, in one famous passage in *The German Ideology*, Marx does have a go at imagining a post-end-of-history scenario, that is, a society without divisions and potential conflict. Marx wrote:

For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now.⁴

4 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 53-54.

In reading Marx's description, one cannot but be struck by how fragile a utopia it is, and how easy it would be for everything to go wrong and history (the natural state of conflict) to crank into gear once more. What happens if nobody wants to do a bit of hunting in the morning? Do we starve or do we coerce each other into heading out for some fresh venison? To be sure, modern technology with hunting and fishing robots could help with things but then what about other non-manual activities, such as becoming an after-dinner critic? Will a society of critics deem some people to be greater poets than others? Will this create new *amor en soi* become *amor propre*-style Rousseauian tensions? What if we absolve the great poets from hunting and fishing robot maintenance duties? Does this create a new division of labor and hence kick-start history into action again? What about anti-hunting, anti-speciesists, for whom history will not have ended? In the end, what exactly does this phrase that Marx uses, "society regulates the general production," really mean? How does this work without coercions and tensions, and the potential for structured division?

It seems fair to say that the utopia being described at the end of history is only sustainable if humans themselves undergo a radical transformation. As Kojève has argued, one way is for humans to become animals again, as Kojève believed America had become. Animals never create new social structures to facilitate new means of production. Humans could become like this, residing in a world where people engage in activities (such as hunting, fishing, poetry appreciation) without ever feeling the need to change society since society nourishes and fulfills all biologically (as distinct from socially) derived impulses and desires. We would be completely content and calm with our changeless comforts like cows munching grass in pastures of plenty.

On the other hand, humans could become, as Kojève believed he saw in Japan, highly formalized entities that stand aloof from the allure of biological instinct. In a word, humans will be like Bodhisattvas, those beings that can resist the temptations of the sensuous, and see with complete clarity the falsity of social status and competition. Only a society of Bodhisattvas or of beasts can sustain the harmony and stasis implied in the End of History. However, the problem in essence is that humans at the End of History, whether by becoming animals or purely formalized beings, will have lost their ability to see the unfolding of history and to read the line of time, with its chain of conflicts and progressions. This is because humans at the End of History must effec-

tively lose their ability to reflect and evaluate, to compare actions and events, since such comparisons risk once more generating *dukkha* and dissatisfaction, and once more setting in spin the *samsara* of the master-slave dialectic.⁵

We humans trudging through the dark tunnel of history can see clearly the promised light ahead at the end. Anticipated utopias, with their end to present drudgery, will obviously be better than what we have now. But we know this because we can compare. When one is in dark, the value of light is obvious. But when we reach the end of the tunnel, and emerge into the light, the light will become invisible to us. It will need to flicker again for us to see it and appreciate it once more.

2 – Flickers at the end of history

The problem the End of History and utopian liberation poses the human, that creature which uniquely reads and responds to modal change in its world, was actually well summarized by the magician David Copperfield during the few minutes in 1983 when he made the Statue of Liberty disappear. Copperfield not only made the Statue of Liberty vanish but also managed to summarize most eloquently, in a direct to camera speech, the challenges of the semiotico-epistemological caesura generated by eschatological finitude. This is what Copperfield had to say:

I want to tell you why I did this [make the Statue of Liberty disappear for a few minutes.] My mother was the first one to tell me about the Statue of Liberty. She saw it first from the deck of the ship that brought her to America: she was an immigrant. She impressed upon me how precious our liberty is and how easily it can be lost. And then one day it occurred to me that I could show with magic how we take our freedom for granted. Sometimes we don't realize how important something is until it's gone. So I asked our government for permission to let me make the Statue of Liberty disappear... just for a few minutes. I thought that if we faced emptiness where, for as long as we can remember, that great lady has lifted up her lamp, why then...we might

5 The terms *dukkha* and *samsara* are part of the technical vocabulary of the basic doctrines of Buddhism: *dukkha* is generally rendered in English “suffering”, but covers a broad spectrum of possible meanings, some more general and others more precise than “suffering” normally connotes; it is also the first of “The Four Noble Truths” of Buddhism. *Samsara* – literally “wandering” or “world” – refers both to the doctrine of the karmic cycle of re-incarnation in Buddhism and Hinduism as well as to the quality of unending, circuitous change of the mundane world [Ed.].

imagine what the world would be like without liberty and we realize how precious our freedom really is. And then I will make the Statue of Liberty reappear, by remembering the word that made it appear in the first place. The word is freedom. Freedom is the true magic. It's beyond the power of any magician. But wherever one human being guarantees another the same rights he or she enjoys, we find freedom. [The curtain between the live audience and the Statue of Liberty used to hide the secret of its disappearance is raised.] How long can we stay free? About just as long as we keep thinking, and speaking, and acting as free human beings. Our ancestors just couldn't. We can. And I will show you the way. Now! [The curtain is lowered and the Statue of Liberty reappears.]⁶

What Copperfield is pointing out is that to appreciate liberty we have to experience what non-liberty is. We must go through a process of negation (non-liberty becoming something that it is not) in order to attain liberty. On the one hand, this is straight-forward semiology. We understand what "A" is by comparison and reference to all that is not A (the "non-A"). The Statue of Liberty is an object for us because it stands in contrast to all that is not the Statue of Liberty. However, there is more than semiology at stake here since what is being articulated in Copperfield's analysis is also a view of time that sees any moment of time as dependent on past moments for its intelligibility and articulation. The Statue of Liberty, in itself, has no significance for us unless we can place it within its history, its emergence from a prior "emptiness" (Copperfield's term). Time moves in a line and any point on that line takes its meaning from the prior contrasting point.

However, what happens when we have reached the end of the line and found ourselves at the End of History where the master-slave dialectic has been negated and liberty is ours? As Copperfield surmises, when "one human being guarantees another the same rights he or she enjoys, we find freedom." However, as Copperfield asks "How long can we stay free?" The answer, Copperfield reminds us, is "...just as long as we keep thinking, and speaking, and acting as free human beings." And therein lies the problem: thinking, speaking, and acting human beings, unlike animals and Bodhisattvas, can only know they are free from the notion of unfreedom. Copperfield's

6 *The Magic of David Copperfield V: The Statue of Liberty Disappears*, directed by David Copperfield, aired April 8, 1983, on CBS, accessed January 8, 2016, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/David_Copperfield_%28illusionist%29. My italics.

remedy to this is, in fact, a common strategy in any post-revolutionary utopian society. It is to use performances to re-enact the becoming of freedom, the moment of liberation, the magical gestures and utterances that ushered in something new. This attempt to freeze the moment when history ended and liberty appeared so as to constantly reenact it explains much of the obsessive pageantry and outdated paranoia that seems to be an endemic feature of a self-declared “End of History” society such as North Korea. The mass choreographed celebrations in Pyongyang and the constant belligerent proclamations to keep wars that are decades over still hot in the memory are all about keeping the magical appearance of revolutionary liberation alive. Indeed, North Korea is in many ways just performing a more extreme version of what any modern nation-state in the formation of its own identity seeks to do, namely, put an end to history through the conjuring of an eternally returning narrative of the nation’s emergence as the final legitimate (i.e. sole and legal) solution to our historical struggles. However, magicians repeating their tricks always risk undoing the illusion. Whereas an animal, a being existing in a world where there are never new forms, only new content may be tricked eternally, or a Boddhisattva existing in a world where there is never new content, only shifting forms, may remain eternally nonchalant, for those creatures that “keep thinking, and speaking, and acting as free human beings” the magic is bound to wear off.

And here lies the problem. The end of history is a concept that relies on a vision of history as a line where every now is part of a chain that is moving forward due to contradictions that must work themselves out, with the result that every now is being shaped by its prior moment and, in turn, is shaping its next moment. The result is that history will go on forever or history will stop. If history goes on forever, every society will have difficulty in claiming its historical legitimacy and right to declare a final peace since there will be always be a better society on the horizon due to the innate contradictions in the society we have now. Why be loyal to a society that denies you the liberty that inevitably awaits? The other possible result is that the series of contradictions in societal development will resolve themselves, history will stop, and we will reach a stage where prior moments have no bearing on future moments since nothing needs to be worked out or resolved. We can just chew the cud in our new unchanging Eden. The former result is a society of constant dissatisfaction. The latter is a society of eternal vacuity. Neither view of the future seems appealing. But perhaps the problem is not history but our

view of it, a view that is linear and hence limited.

3 – Getting back now here

One philosopher who has tried to go beyond a linear view of history is Keiji Nishitani.⁷ First of all, Nishitani emphasizes the infinite nature of time and how this infinity undermines the signification processes that a linear concept of time generates. When time is infinite, the ultimate beginning and end of events remain obscure to those events. The beginning and end of an event is not the prior moment before the event or next moment after the event since these moments themselves do not have a discernable prior or next moment. The chain of moments has emerged infinitely, or rather has never emerged, was always there, so no moment can be seen as primordial or originary or ultimately defining of other moments. For instance, Nishitani comments:

While the beginning and the end of time in itself without beginning or end can be sought within this actual presence, that presence itself implies something that remains out of reach, no matter how far back or how forward we go. It involves something of another dimension, as different as a solid body is from a flat plane, something like a true infinity that can never be attained no matter how much something finite is enlarged. Seen from this perspective, it stands to reason that the beginning and end of time and being are not to be found within time. In the same way that a three-dimensional solid can never be reduced to a two-dimensional plane (for example, the angle of vision at which a mountain top is viewed by someone standing on the plain below never reaches zero, no matter how far one distances oneself from the mountain), we never encounter the beginning or the end of time, no matter how deeply we step back into the past or how far ahead we reach into the future. For this, at bottom, is the essence of time.⁸

Similarly, Nishitani would assert that all moments of time are of equal value. We do not live in the shadow of greater moments and events in history. Our time now is just as significant and creative as when the Big Bang or Genesis happened and it is just as significant and consequential as any *eschaton* our future world may bring. Furthermore, on this infinite plane of time there is no other ground to observe time or to be in time than now. To see oneself as

7 Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

8 *Ibid.*, 224.

moving along a line of time between past and future is to get raveled in finite linear optical illusions. When time is infinite there can only ever be now, never lines of time. As Nishitani writes: “Even so, the unshakable fact remains: I am actually existing here and now. Let time be without beginning or end; this being that is present is actually present.”⁹

This infinite concept of time undermines the stand-alone identity of objects in our world. In line with this, the idea that, for instance, the Statue of Liberty is a sign or symbol of an eternal truth because it emerges from an emptiness, whilst true on a surface level, is also, according to Nishitani’s infinite schema, based on a viewpoint that places the true meaning and value of things in our world on the wrong level. It gives ultimate value to that which is contingent and ignores the value of that which is eternal, the pure thusness of the statue itself as it stands. The emptiness before the Statue of Liberty appears and the appearance of the Statue of Liberty are of equal value. The value created by the contrast is a value generated by an attachment to a process that is essentially detached from the fuller truth of the thusness of the universe. We break down time into parts, reading causes and effects, ignoring that this is a pragmatically motivated line we have drawn. For any object in our world gets its true meaning not from its contrast with the earlier moments of history when it was not there but from its contrast with itself as emergent from the ground of absolute emptiness (*Sunyata*). This perhaps can be expressed by the idea of, what is called in Japanese, *sokuhi* logic, a logical format first proposed by D.T. Suzuki, who derived it from the formulaic statements in the Diamond Sutra. *Sokuhi* is the idea that: A is A, therefore it is not A. Alternatively, A is not A therefore it is A.¹⁰ The Statue of Liberty is the Statue of Liberty therefore it is not the Statue of Liberty.

How does this paradoxical *sokuhi* logic work? One temptation is to read it as an idealist statement, the belief that since I see the world through the filter of my consciousness anything I see must be logically different to what it really is. However, this is not the fullest expression we can wrench from this formula. Instead, perhaps, a better take on it would be to see it as

9 Ibid., 223. Non-linear infinite time should also not be reduced to a block of time in the sense of J. M. E. McTaggart’s B-series since McTaggart’s two series work on a 2-D schema whereas Nishitani’s temporal metaphors are distinctly 3-D. See J. M. E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” *The Philosophy of Time*, edit. Robin Le Poidevin and Murray MacBeath (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23-34.

10 Nishitani 118.

the consequence of a non-linear view of time. In such a view, there is only (a/the) Now “existing” but this Now is only an infinitesimal pinpoint on the infinite plane (of emptiness) from which time arises. As an infinitesimal point it does grant lingering but zero-time moments for which objects can have ontological “content.” An object is there and not there. It is itself, in itself, but it is not different from the totality of all that it is not from which it has emerged and which it remains a part of. At the moment Copperfield made the Statue disappear, it was already gone. At the moment he made it reappear, it was already there. As Nishitani writes: “In short, it is only on a field where the being of all things is a being at one with emptiness that it is possible for all things to gather into one, even while each retains its reality as an absolutely unique being.”¹¹

One important point to add is that we must reject the idea of eternity. Now as being a frozen moment, the view that there is nothing but the Now, so nothing is moving. This is not what Nishitani asserts. Time does move and this does have clear implications for us. There are connections between the moments of now, which pile up consequences of the past for us, which push us on. Nishitani writes:

Two points have been emphasized in connection with the time without beginning or end implied in the expression ‘from time past without beginning.’ First, time without beginning and end bestows on existence at one and the same time the character of a burden or debt, and the character of a creativity or freedom, while in the background a kind of infinite drive is seen to be at work. Secondly, time without beginning or end can come about only if it contains at its ground the presence of an infinite openness.¹²

There is nothing but now, but now does nothing but change. This is not a description of a finite line (something which requires an initial Now) but of time on the plane of infinity that is emptiness (Sunyata) where there was never anything but nows. The consequence of this vision is that existence in the now means newness and creation at every moment. But it also means that time has never, and will never, stop. According to Nishitani:

To repeat, only as something in infinite openness without beginning or end

11 Ibid., 148.

12 Ibid., 237.

does time become something perpetually new at each now. But this newness has a double meaning. The constant origination of new things, on the one hand, has the positive significance of genesis or creation...On the other hand, this same constant origination is not something we could put a stop to even if we wanted to. It gives us no rest, but pushes us ever forward.¹³

Conclusion

Going back to Kojève's views on those three traditional arts in Japan (tea ceremony, Noh, and flower arranging) and his belief that they were indicative of snobism – all form and no content – perhaps what he was failing to see was that these arts are, I would argue, in their slowness (or sparsity, in the case of flower arranging) manipulations of time which, when properly done, serve to demystify the delusional notions we garner from daily distractions as to how time passes. Such manipulations work best when played within assumptions and appreciations of the infinite and non-linear nature of time. When time is infinite, fast and slow, long and short passages of time are utterly relative. The seemingly eternal, glorious past of a civilization is merely the blink of a celestial eye. The promised paradise of an enduring future utopia will last no more than the nonchalant yawn of cosmic being. When time stretches forever into the past or future, only Now can be of eternal value. And that Now is the one we are physically experiencing. Even when unaware, we are still here utterly in its emptiness. What Kojève saw as vacuity and superficiality in those Japanese arts were, in fact, purposeful and intense explorations of this emptiness and the eternal value it gives to those who have the endurance to look.

However, awareness of infinite time is more than a coping mechanism for individuals feeling the hopelessness and despair of time's unrelenting and merciless march, it is also a powerful anecdote to ideologies that obsess with historical narratives, that bully individuals into sacrificing all for a duty to a national or tribal history that is a mere moment in an infinite cosmos, or that harass the masses into enslaving themselves for future utopian visions that will be mere seconds in the eternal scale of time. Freedom and salvation are only meaningful Now or not at all.

13 Ibid., 220.