

The Priority of “Relation” over Being in World Disclosing:
Autism, Identity, & the “Gravity” of the Situation

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“Once upon a time on a small, green,
quiet planet.

Autisman: So-welcome to my home
world.

Earthling: Don’t you feel weighed
down? It feels as if I’ve got weights
strapped to my arms and legs.

Autisman: Ah, but on your planet, *I*
always feel as if I’m swimming around
in space, weightlessly.

Earthling: Okay. Now I understand
you. I really understand.

[Higashida laments] If only there was a
planet somewhere with a gravitational
pull perfect for people with autism, then
we’d be able to move around freely”

Naoki Higashida, “Earthling and Autisman”¹

In “Earthling and Autisman,” thirteen year old autistic writer Naoki Higashida imagines the relationship between the non-autistic Earthling and himself as living on two different planets—planets with distinct environments, especially in terms of *gravitational pull*. Free associating a bit with Higashida’s

metaphor, we might think of the relation between Autisman and Earthling as perhaps “alien” to each other, as in aliens meeting from distinct planets. Along this line of thinking, I was surprised to find that the notion of linking autism and aliens together is not that uncommon. Philosopher Ian Hacking, in his essay, “Humans, Aliens & Autism,” states, “A persistent trope in some autism communities is that autistic people are aliens, or symmetrically, that non-autistic people seem like aliens to autistics. . . I wonder less what this phenomena shows about autism than what it reveals about what it means to be human.”²² While Hacking wonders less about autism, I do wonder about autism, not in terms of being alien, but in terms of how Autisman and Earthling, as representatives from distinct planets, come into “relation” with each other today. That is, what is the “gravity” of their situation that can draw them into a “productive,” informative contact with each other? After having addressed this concern, I then ask with Hacking: what does this meeting reveal about what it means to be human?

Philosopher Hubert Dreyfus might join in and elaborate here on Higashida’s planets, emphasizing that the planets are, “distinct contexts or worlds,” where each world exhibits distinct ways in which one perceives, acts, and thinks. As such, “Each world makes possible a distinct and pervasive way in which things, people, and selves can appear and in which certain ways of acting make sense in distinct local worlds, local contexts.”²³ If this is the case, then I suspect that Dreyfus and Higashida would agree that both Earthling and Autisman do have something in common: they are both “world disclosers.”²⁴ As world disclosers, Earthling and Autisman are essentially ontological travellers, so to speak, in that while each is from distinct planets, through their respective travels they disclose to each other new worlds with distinct modes of gravity.

Here then we might also think of the contact between these two worlds as an event of sorts. For Heidegger, this would be something akin to the event of Appropriation (*Ereignis*). In one of Heidegger’s last works, *Time and Being*, he states, “*Ereignis* will be translated as Appropriation or the event of Appropriation. One should bear in mind, however, that ‘event’ is not simply an occurrence, but that which makes any occurrence possible.”²⁵ Here we begin to wonder, what are the conditions that make this event for Autisman and Earthling

happen in the first place?

For Heidegger this moment of “contact” via the event of Appropriation, “does not designate a ‘realm’ as does Being, but rather a relation, that of man (sic) and Being. What is radically new and non-metaphysical about Appropriation is not only is it an activity—a non-static process—Appropriation is non-metaphysical because in the relationship between man and Being as appropriated to each other, *the relation is more fundamental than what is related.*”⁶ That is, in the event of Appropriation there is a priority of ‘relation’ over Being! Why? Because each world is constituted by and through a “relation,” with each other, and where simultaneously in “relation” each is in the process of making one’s self. As such, for Heidegger no world exists unto itself prior to the event of relation—Appropriation. Hence, at issue then is not simply what constitutes the world of Autism or the world of Earthling; rather at issue for Heidegger are the conditions that make their respective point of contact happen in the first place, a relation between the two worlds that become distinct through relation.

Indeed, as separate worlds we note that the relation will not be symmetrical in “weight,” as each world for Higashida exerts a different gravitational pull. But however different the gravitational pull is on each planet, it is nonetheless “gravitational” in nature. Hence we might postulate that it is the “gravity” of this situation that draws these worlds to interact in the first place. What “is” the gravity that creates the initial attraction for relation to commence between autistic and non-autistic worlds? To address this concern, we will first delve into Heidegger’s understand of what relation “is.”

As such, if gravity is the common force that brings together worlds, then is it plausible to claim that Autisman and Earthling’s worlds are “differently the same,” not as equals but as a display of the uniqueness that occurs at the moment of contact within the gravitational field? Here we explore what philosopher Erin Manning refers to as the “wor(l)ding of words” and the “ethics of relation.” And here surprisingly we begin to see how autism may reveal an ethical dimension to Heidegger’s otherwise abstract notion of Appropriation.

Finally, we will explore implications for world disclosing, and what this

venture reveals for us, humans. Here we uncover autism's classical Greek root word *autos*: to be alone in the presence of another and with one's self without being defensive. That is, at the ontological core of autism is *autos*, where, as I hope to show, *autos* "is" the "gravity" of this situation. *Autos* appropriates how the autistic and non-autistic worlds, each with different gravitational "pulls," can meet and mingle and yet remain sovereign to one's self—to co-exist, perhaps, peacefully, without exploitation.

BELONGING-TOGETHER, PART ONE: IDENTITY

What does it mean to state that *autos* "is" the gravity of *this* situation? It means, *autos* = gravity of this situation. Notice that the form this equation takes resembles the principle of identity. Why? Because I'm claiming that *autos* is identical to the gravity of this situation, and by doing so I'm highlighting the "is" of this situation. For Heidegger, unlocking the "is" in the principle of identity holds the key to understanding the very nature of what we mean by "relation." To unpack what Heidegger means, let's turn to the text *Identity and Difference*. Regarding this text, philosopher Joan Stambaugh notes, "It comes as no surprise ... [when] ... Heidegger stated that he considered *Identity and Difference* to be the most important thing he published since *Being and Time*."⁷

Traditionally Heidegger tells us, "The usual formulation of the principle of identity reads: $A=A$."⁸ Here the principle of identity has been viewed as a unity, as in Leibniz's concept of unity, "if two things have absolutely nothing which distinguishes them from each other, they are identical, they are the same thing."⁹ Here Leibniz defines unity in terms of one thing being equal to the other in all respects—they are the same. As such, the very ground of the relation between $A = A$ is assumed to be Being; that is, relation itself is founded upon an *a priori* existence where things are then brought into contact with each other, and where if they are the same, they are identical.

Heidegger, however, conceives the problem of identity, and hence the meaning of relation, somewhat differently. Taking a different tack, instead of privileging Being as the ground for relation to occur, Heidegger asks, what would

"identity" look like from the perspective of the operative term in the equation: is = "the same"? That is, what does "relation" look like from the perspective of the middle term of the relationship itself, where the "is" in A is the same as A? Here, Heidegger notes the classical Greek root for the term "the Same," is *to autos*, which he interprets to mean, "belonging together."¹⁰ From this discovery, Heidegger next uncovers how "is" in the principle of identity operates to bring forth a relation; more radically stated, what brings forth things into a relation with each other is that they mutually appropriate each other. In this appropriation, things constitute themselves both as things and that they belong-together, and in that process of things belonging together they constitute a world, such that in the formation of a "relation" the world is simultaneously born, so to speak, through this event of Appropriation.

Here "belonging together" is loosely akin to Plato's Allegory of the Sun, in that the sun is both the source of light and what illuminates the world such that it is knowable. Analogously, belonging together for Heidegger constitutes relation, in that it is the source of relation—if there is no world prior to things "belonging-together" then we can say that there is no ground to relation until the terms are brought together. And simultaneously it illuminates the very terms of the relation in that these two terms "belong-together" in this fashion: $A=B$. Further as Andrew Mitchell states, "If [our] essence is a bringing of the particular being to a clearing [the truth], if it is an entry into the world, then this entails an entry into relations. Nothing can appear without relation to anything else ... There can be no relational being for us, without a relation to us. When a thing enters the world, we are called by it."¹¹ This is an event of Appropriation. That is, "relation" constitutes itself, self-creates itself in the very process of bringing-together terms into relation.

As such, the event of Appropriation is *the* act of relation itself: the very belonging-together of things in the world. Now what does the Same (*to autos*), belonging together, mean? Heidegger notes that each term in "belonging together" inflects a different meaning to the term. That is, one inflection—the customary way Heidegger claims to inflect this pair—is belonging *together*, where *together* is stressed over belonging such that "belonging is determined by the

word together, that is by its unity.”¹² In this articulation, “together” operates as the center of gravity, so to speak, such that “to belong” orbits around the term “together”; “to belong” become a secondary trait to the emphasis on “together”: *to join*, to merge into one, a union in Leibniz’s sense, to equalize!

The alternate articulation Heidegger claims would be *belonging* together, where the stress is on “belonging” as the operative term and where “together” is now determined by “belonging.” Here with “belonging” as the operative term, A and B belong to each other as finite beings, as in a couple within the “same” relation, yet each remaining *separate, sovereign parties*. They are the same within the relation, yet each is different from the other; that is, they are differently the same! As in “two peas in a pod.”

It is with this second articulation of *belonging*-together with the stress on “belonging,” that Heidegger finds his breakthrough. For now he turns his attention to the very relation of human beings to their existence. For humans do not exist for Heidegger independently of existence, but rather they exist only in relation; humans belong-together with existence. If this is so, then the question becomes: why do humans and existence *belong*-together? They *belong*-together because “man’s (sic) distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as the being who thinks, is open to Being ... thus man remains referred to Being and so answers to it. Man is essentially this relationship of responding to Being, and he is only this.”¹³ Human beings ontologically “are” only when in relation. Why? Because, as finite beings, as mortals who will die, our essence is to think—not as cognitive act but rather as a moment of unconcealment of the truth of our existence. As finite beings our essence is forged through world disclosing. Why? Because we are responders to existence where both, “Man and Being appropriate to each other. They belong for each other.”¹⁴ Human beings only exist insofar as they partake in witnessing existence, and conversely existence exists only insofar as human beings witness it. This very relation—the identity between human beings and existence—is the “coming to presence” of the relation of human beings with existence, where humans partake as world disclosers.

However, the event of Appropriation is not static, as it endures over time in the form of what Heidegger refers to as epochs. That is, while the relation

between human beings and existence endures, the character of relation-itself has altered. In our time, Heidegger's "atomic age," the very relation between humans and existence "is" positioned, by the essence of modern technology (*Gestell*).

The essence of modern technology (*Gestell*), as signified by Heidegger, is not about equipment per se, but more importantly about our relationship with existence itself, and by extension other worlds. Hence, the current manifestation of our relation with existence is positioned by and through the coming to presence of the essence of modern technology (*Gestell*), where "our whole existence everywhere sees itself challenged."¹⁵ Here the challenge to humans comes from the transformation in the very act of appropriation between humans and existence.

For the early Greeks, the relation between humans and the earth was made manifest through *techne* (craft) that brought-forth and revealed the world in a certain fashion: a way of revealing that brought-forth a more "ecological" way of thinking about the relationship between human beings and existence. As philosopher Shunsuke Kadowaki states, "In the epoch of Greek craftsmanship ... *techne* and its context were so tightly fitted together that there was ... no danger of [the mutual correspondence] being neglected."¹⁶ Today, however, *Gestell* has supplanted *techne's* "more original appropriation" of human beings with existence. Kadowski continues, *Gestell* "is the supreme danger in the sense that every mode of understanding is at risk of being restricted to regulating and securing what is encountered within a total system of ordering ..."¹⁷ That is, *Gestell* challenges us by claiming us, hence "holding sway" over "every mode of understanding" such that our encounters are brought into "a total system of ordering."

Fortunately, philosopher Catherine Malabou adds to Heidegger's thinking on *Gestell*, suggesting that:

At play in the *Gestell* are in it two regimes of change and exchange: on the one hand, the reign of equality—all things being equal, everything equivalent ... [which] governs the metaphysical concept of the essence of an object on the

other, sameness, the relation of exchangeability between instances that are nonetheless unique and incomparable, that have no equivalent but are metamorphosable and displaceable by each other.¹⁸

Gestell is not monolithic! At play for *Gestell* are two regimes: first, is the regime of “equals to,” which reduces all difference into equivalence, as standing reserves. The second regime, “sameness” (*to autos*) allows for mutual appropriation, “exchangeability ... that are nonetheless unique and incomparable, that they have no equivalent” between terms. That is, “Being the same does not mean being the *same as the other*, which is what *equality* conveys.”¹⁹ In the first regime, *Gestell* transforms both human beings and existence to a “standing reserve,” that is potential material for future use within an integrated technological system. Here humans and existence are reduced to “the reign of equality.” Within this regime, both Autisman and Earthling are rendered into standing reserves, and hence integrated within the larger world of techno-discourse.

Within the second regime, we find Sameness, *to autos*, where *Gestell* affords a moment of “saving grace” within the very moment of there being the most danger. Just as there is the danger of existence being transformed into standing reserves, there is also a moment of unearned “grace,” so to speak. Here a metaphorphasis occurs where each world—say Earthling’s and Autisman’s—are brought in metaphorically from the darkness by a “flash of lightning” that radiates out towards each other, and in the process of radiating out, they simultaneously affirm the sovereignty of their own respective worlds. That is, in the process of Earthling coming into presence with Autisman’s world, Earthling is affirming her own world as she is pulled out by gravity of this situation into relation! The converse holds for Autisman coming into presence with Earthling. Hence each can be said to *belong* together in relation.

BELONGING-TOGETHER, PART TWO: AUTISM

Heidegger’s notion of *Gestell* can position both Autisman and Earthling into a relation whereby they are reduced to “standing reserves.” Conversely,

Gestell can afford them a moment of "saving grace" where our ontological travelers may meet and mingle, albeit within the very techno-discursive field that constitutes their relation. Determining which direction will be the case lies outside the scope of this paper. Let me say, however, for Heidegger the workings of *Gestell* lay outside the control of humans, hence whichever direction *Gestell* takes, our part as humans demands that we think and unconceal the truth of *Gestell* as witnesses to the event!

As witnesses to the event of relation, we ask: what defines these two worlds as distinct? Canadian philosophers Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's engagement with autism draws upon a number of autistic writers whereby we may get some sense of the distinction between the world of autistics and the neurotypical world. One such autistic writer is Jim Sinclair who states:

Autism isn't something a person has, or a "shell" that a person is trapped inside. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate autism from the person—if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with.²⁰

As Sinclair claims, autism is pervasive as it pervades "every aspect of existence." Given the pervasiveness of autism that "colors every experience," it is not hard to see why autism represents a "world." As such, as a world autism "makes possible a distinct and pervasive way in which things, people, and selves can appear and in which certain ways of acting make sense in distinct local worlds, local contexts."²¹ As a distinct world, however, autism is not monolithic; "Autism comes in many modes."²²

What distinguishes autism from the non-autistic world of the neurotypical is what Manning and Massumi refer to as "autistic perception." "Autistic perception dances attention, affirming the interconnectedness of modes of existence, foregrounding the relationality at the heart of perception, emphasizing how experience unfolds...in a dynamic field of becoming alive with co-composition. For autistics, language comes late, and it is this that

perhaps marks most starkly their difference with neurotypicals.”²³ Here we find a fleshing out of the distinction between the autistic and the neurotypical as distinct worlds. Central to this distinction is the claim that since language comes late for “classic” autistics, their mode of perception, their autistic perception, attends to the relational dance of things in the world prior to their world being conceptualized by and through words. Hence there is a time lag in conceptualizing perception for autistics.

On the other hand, “neurotypical experience tends immediately to align to beyond the milieu of relation ... separating out of the object from its background [its] intrinsic relationality of the field’s coming to expression, [hence] clearing the stage for an overshadowing human subject to cast his presence in its place, in order to take personal credit for the field’s environmentally emergent accounting for itself.”²⁴ Here then we get the clearest expression of the neurotypical world in terms of perception: neurotypical perception “subtracts” out the object that is to be perceived from its background field, hence allowing one’s field of “vision” to focus solely on the object at hand, say a flower. In doing so the neurotypical eliminates the dance of attention between the object and its background, thus allowing the neurotypical to assert ownership, take “personal credit” for the emergent object—the flower within a field of dynamic perceptual flow now becomes *my* flower. Hence neurotypical perception privileges the ownership of the object over the dynamic relational field by “subtracting” it out for one’s attention.

From this insight, Manning teases out what she refers to as the “wor(l)ding” of the world in the making, the composing, of one’s autistic life through words. The “wor(l)ding of words” is found within the sphere of “classical” autism; autistics that have severe difficulty in speaking (such as Higashida), and as such working with words to express themselves, has special significance and takes center stage in their lives. Here, “language becomes a force of expression, a more-than of subtraction... Writing the more-than is to feel-with the world as it comes to expression, to feel-with the bare activity of wor(l)ding.”²⁵ While neurotypical perception subtracts out the object of perception, autistic perception remains focused on the full-ground of the environment being perceived, and as such it is “more-than” what is perceived by the neurotypical. For autistics,

the relationality of the perceived field remains in tact as objects “dance” before one’s attention, meeting and mingling, perhaps like Autisman and Earthling! How do Autisman and Earthling meet and mingle amid distinct gravitational pulls? Perhaps the answer is through “autie-type” writing, where through autie-type writing, “writing never seems to be separate from the ethics of relation it calls forth.”²⁶ That is, for autistics the process of writing is not simply a mode of communication; rather it is an ethic, a way of living in the world with words, hence a wor(l)ding! Furthermore:

What is significant about autie-type is that autistics ... write autistic perceptions ... Rather than disconnecting from the field of relation, it bridges it, conceptually, propositionally ... To write-with language in the making is to dance-with experience rather than exclude it from the dance.²⁷

If autie-type writing is the “is” that brings Autisman and Earthling into mutual appropriation, into relation, then perhaps it is also an ethic in the making of writing. That is, as each word in the composition unfolds for Higashida, he is both constituting his world through his story and embodying an ethic of relation with the neurotypical world. Indeed, this ethic of relation found in autie-type writing is perhaps the “is” in Heidegger’s event of Appropriation! If so, then we begin to see the “bridge” between autism and Heidegger, where autie-type writing adds an ethical dimension to Heidegger’s notion—an ethic of relation in the wor(l)ding of worlds that *belong* together.

DISCUSSION: THE “GRAVITY” OF THE SITUATION

In the end, we arrived at a conceptual place to discuss the “gravity” of the situation. Generally speaking, *Gestell is the gravity*: the one who positions, brings worlds together within the very techno-discursive field that constitutes their relation. But further we ask, is the specific manifestation of *Gestell* in *this* situation relative to Autisman and Earthling? Specifically, the gravity of this situation is *autos*—the Classical Greek term and the root word for autism.²⁸ More specific, *autos* means the making of oneself, as in the process of adopting to or making one’s soul, where in this making of one’s self, the tacit assumption is

that it is in the presence of another.²⁹

Within today's techno-discursive field, *autos* is the specific manifestation of Malabou's second regime of *Gestell*, the Same, *to autos*, that allows for mutual appropriation—the exchangeability between worlds—that are nonetheless unique and incomparable, in that they have no equivalence. Hence within the very techno-discursive field that constitutes their relation, the worlds of Autisman and Earthling become “differently the Same”—different, in that each world is unique and incomparable; the same, in that they *belong* together. Indeed, Ian Hacking observes, “Neurotypicals and severely autistic people do not initially share a form of life because the bedrock is lacking, and so an artificial platform must be constructed. That is one way to describe what is going on right now. In retrospect, we shall almost certainly see today's Internet making it possible for a form of life in which autistic people can thrive. It is precisely the medium for communication that does not depend on body language or eye contact.”³⁰

Indeed, the speculative efforts in this paper begin with a rather abstract concern revolving around the event of Appropriation and end with a hopeful response to Hacking regarding the formation of “bedrock” to be formed between the neurotypical and the autistic, and it is this: “bedrock” is generated through speculation because at the heart of speculation lies “relation” itself, specifically *autos*, where *autos* is manifested in autie-type writing.

What does this meeting between Autisman and Earthling say about what it means to be human (Hacking's central concern)? Given distinct worlds with distinct modes of perception, *autos* as manifested in the digital age reveals the ontological impulse to *belong-together* through relation.

Without relation there can be no “artificial platform” to construct in the first place, no wondering how it is possible to make contact with distinct worlds. Furthermore, as *autos* suggests, it makes possible an ethic of relation between these worlds. This ethic is infused in a specific kind of speculative thinking located within the wor(l)ding of the world through words in the making. Perhaps then through the artificial platform of the Internet, world disclosing is possible where two worlds can meet and mingle and where, in this mingling,

Earthling may experience a moment of saving grace and begin to dance with the world of autism as partners.

- 1 Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump* (New York: Random House, 2013), 26.
- 2 Ian Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism," *Daedalus* 138, no. 3 (2009), 44.
- 3 Hubert Dreyfus, "Highways Bridges and Feasts," in *Background Practices: Essays on the Understanding of Being*, eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 199.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Martin Heidegger, *On Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 19.
- 6 Ibid., x (my emphasis).
- 7 Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), 7.
- 8 Ibid., 23.
- 9 Ibid., 9
- 10 Ibid., 28.
- 11 Andrew Mitchell, *The Fourfold* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 17.
- 12 Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 29.
- 13 Ibid., 31.
- 14 Ibid., 32.
- 15 Ibid., 34.
- 16 Shunsuke Kadowaki, "Ontology, Pragmatism, and Technology," in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 473.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Catherine Malabou, *Heidegger Change* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 171.
- 19 Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 170 (author's emphasis).
- 20 Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6.
- 21 Dreyfus, "Highways, Bridges, and Feasts," 199.
- 22 Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 6.
- 23 Ibid., 7.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Erin Manning, *Always More than One* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 156.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., 157.
- 28 Douglas Biklen, *Autism and The Myth of the Person Alone* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 51.
- 29 Georgios Babiniotis, "Autos," in *The Dictionary of Modern Greek* (Athens, Greece: Lexicology Centre, 1998).
- 30 Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism," 56.