The 'Principle' of *In*-sufficient Reason
Jacques Lezra

The "principle" of sufficient reason, generally attributed to Leibniz but found in Spinoza and, inchoately, earlier and elsewhere in the history of philosophy, stipulates that "Nothing is without reason," or, in an expanded form, that "Nothing exists whose sufficient reason for existing cannot be rendered." Heidegger's controversial lectures on *Der Satz vom Grund* (1955-56) show how the "principle" of sufficient reason, after a long "incubation" period, comes after Leibniz to underwrite the designation of the human animal as *animal rationale,* and in consequence as what in 1956 Heidegger calls "the creature that requires accounts and gives accounts" (129). The thinking that is particular to and definitive of this "reckoning" creature, Heidegger says, "brought the world into the contemporary era, the atomic era." But does the "determination [*Bestimmung*] that humans are the *animal rationale* exhaust the essence of humanity," Heidegger asks? And if not, "[A]re we obliged to find paths upon which thinking is capable of responding [*entsprechen*] to what is worthy of thought instead of, enchanted [*behext*] by calculative thinking, mindlessly passing over what is worthy of thought? That," he writes, "is the world-question of thinking. Answering this question decides what will become of the earth and of human existence on this earth."
The stakes could not be higher. Our time and our world may have lost the anxious dread that informs the cold-war expression "the atomic era," but not because the question that Heidegger poses has been answered, or because the question has been forgotten. The contemporary era is no longer the "atomic era." It is the era of catastrophic global warming, of environmental depredation, of massive, increasing social and economic inequity linked closely and complexly to both of these. The question whether the "essence of humanity" is "exhausted" [*Erschöpfen, erschöpft*] is not particularly or necessarily tied to a concrete existential threat to "human existence on this earth," whether this particular threat is nuclear war among superpowers, environmental disaster, or a pandemic spread on the wings of those aircraft that so enchanted Heidegger. It *is* tied to the way in which thinking imagines, or thinks, "the essence of humanity." If the "essence of humanity" is among those things that are indeed "worthy of thought," Heidegger is saying, then, like all such things, "the essence of humanity" is not to be reckoned with. What is worthy of thought takes shape poetically and in the form of poetic expression to which Dasein then responds, non-calculatively. The principle of sufficient reason is enchanting, it casts a spell, not because it is wrong—this is the wrong way to imagine the principle of sufficient reason—but because it establishes or determines as the principle of thought, as the ground for thinking, what the principle *reveals*: that being and reason have a relation, that they can be thought to hang together. When this hanging-together of being and reason is thought as a *principle,* then "the essence of humanity" can only be reckoned with. When, however, we learn to attend once again to what is worthy of thought, then we have rethought, or rather we have disclosed "reason's limiting of *logos*" *to logos,* rather than *to thought.* To the limitations of the Leibnizian

1

formulation of the principle of sufficient reason, Heidegger opposes the archaic sufficiency of *logos.*

If there *is* a "principle" of *in*-sufficient reason, or of insufficiency tout court, it will bring to an end the sufficiency of reason and of *logos.* A principle of insufficient reason will stress again that the limits of the extension of reason are not sufficiently established within the field of reason—and that the field of reason is never, for this and other reasons, identical with itself. (Reason has violently axiological dimensions.) A corollary: the limits of the extension of the discipline of philosophy cannot be established philosophically. Philosophy too has violently conditioning axiologies. More interestingly, however, a principle of insufficient reason will help us to ask the sorts of questions that Heidegger wants us to ask, that is, "world-questions," questions that bear upon the way the "world" can be thought as a world. (Here, on the possibility of posing "world-questions" *as* "world-questions," apophantic *as,* though within the horizon of their defects, I am diverging from Blumenberg.)

If there *is* such a thing, then, the principle of insufficient reason will allow us to ask "world-questions" while avoiding two sorts of outcomes. On one side, I would like to think that a principle of in-sufficient reason will avoid the pitfalls into which the later Heidegger falls—a chthonian naturalism, linguistic essentialism, different forms of quietism. This side of Heidegger's thought too quickly allows his "world-questions" to become global questions, questions regarding the reach of empires and markets, the flow of commodities, languages and products. These are urgent questions, but when based upon an unexamined notion of the "world" they limit their scope and quickly become proxies and devices for installing the very sorts of power- and resource-inequities they seek to diagnose, and to change. On another side, I would like to avoid the deflationism of much contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, which rules out certain sorts of questions because they seem misformed, in the sense that they over-reach: on this description, "world-questions" clothe themselves in sublimity when, and because, they venture outside the rather small, conventional fields in which the pertinence of questions can be assessed, their claims and consequences reckoned —when they abandon philosophical "realism." The Anglo-American tradition asks questions that concern states of affairs in "worlds" in which those particular questions can be asked and in which, and for which, they can be answered: the "world" in question is reflexively defined by the questions it permits us to ask and answer concerning states of affairs in that world. But such a "world" is not a state of affairs "in" the "world," and so asking "world-questions" must mean asking questions about, and within, a "world" in which particular "worlds" become states-of-affairs with respect to one another and to that higher-order "world." A poisonous regress threatens—and worse. For "state of affairs" substitute "individuals," for "world" substitute the word "set," and you have described nothing other than the intractable paradox that Russell hit upon in his efforts to mathematize the field of philosophical logic at the turn of the 20th century.

Both of these outcomes see to me undesirable. The "principle" of insufficient reason as I imagine it has an uncanny similarity to a term discarded for the rather bad company it has kept historically—the concept of *mediation*, always to be found where the roughest of trades are practiced, dialectical materialism, critique, psychoanalysis, translation. Of course for my purposes I'd like to rough the term up even more by marrying it to a couple of my favorite modifiers. "World-questions" are and should remain ungovernably and incalculably over- and

under-determined, and they are and remain so because they are always wildly and *in*determinately mediated.

But why should we want to ask "world-questions," wild or tame, determined or indetermined, in the first place? Isn't it possible for human animals to address economic inequity, climate change, pandemics, and other existential threats, in other ways? To address them more narrowly, with greater focus, more realistically? Our lexicon here would include terms like "know-how," "enterprise," and craft; we would be speaking the horribly familiar language of "precision," "targeting," and "outcomes." Our ethics would be consequential rather than deontological; our aesthetics, serviceable. Here Heidegger seems to me indispensable, since he allows us to see that this "narrowing" of the focus, this greater "realism," the more "practical" or technical approach to these questions begs the question in a most disturbing, but predictable way. It will turn out that these ways of approaching the catastrophe, and the whole lexicon we deploy in this narrowed field, are themselves, in the most important way, the disaster. To the extent that we address circumstantial threats from the perspective of calculative reason, as threats to ourselves imagined as *animales rationales,* Heidegger will suggest, we will have already consigned what he calls "the essence of humanity" to the domain of reason alone, and hence to the disaster of the camp's efficiencies.

On the other hand, I have no interest, myself, in "the essence of humanity," nor should any other human animal. My aim is not to recover such a thing, or to discover it or to invent it if it isn't there to be recovered. Indeed I think it's a surprisingly silly concept, even a dangerously silly concept in Heidegger in most ways. In most ways, but not as a logical operator. Para-concepts, or mythological concepts, or defective concepts like the "essence of humanity" work to un-finish or un-determine the field of reason by presenting, for reasoned thought, the indeterminacy of the axioms, or the *principles,* of reason. They make possible what we should call, in the Fregeian lexicon to which I would return us, radically *unsaturated, ungesättigt,* propositions. The eventful task of making, forming, and defending such propositions concerning that other defective concept, "the world," is wild or indeterminate mediation. "The essence of humanity" is what I call the "principle" of insufficient reason, of wild or indeterminate mediation.

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3