

THOUGHT'S PATHWAY

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Thought is not made of atomistic, distinct moments; it is a path, a flow, a movement. Thoughts affect and effect each other, causing alterations in their terrain as they unfold. The paths of thought that go beyond convention are those that wander far from the mainstream, far from the manufactured, rationalised thoroughfare, like the road made for an economic purpose, for a technology that imposes itself and itself only, overlaying the natural with the artificial. On these routes we are the same, the mechanised. We move the greatest distance, yet the least development is made.

Going much further beyond the habitual, a pathway of thought deep in the likeness of nature is a space to think. We enter thought and something catches our attention, something from instinct guides us. An opening is glimpsed towards somewhere dense and difficult. Each movement of thought provides the next foothold. Each step is needed. The direction is maintained. We may always take a false step, but such mistakes are needed for the proper way forwards to be revealed. We notice an area in which progress is impossible. We retreat to go back to where our feet are able to stand. We notice an area in which progress appears to open. We start to look into it as if a light has been glimpsed inside an abyss.

This is a thought that wanders. It is not focused on any definite outcome. It doesn't have a purpose overwhelming it, but neither is it purposeless. Purposes influence its movement, but there isn't a single dominant one, a purpose which demands that a route is forced, that a linearity is imposed. These other pathways far from the crowds do not require a formula to navigate. They are not subject to an absolute precision. We approach the unknown as such, searching within it for unseen, hidden tracks. To do this we may enter again and again into a space outside. It becomes almost a ritual. The repetition of the same allows the new: we are so at home in our surroundings that the entirety of thought can be focused on its own internal areas. We have not coalesced among busy roads that require constant care and attention. There is no noise other than our own feet and the soft movement of the place itself.

Heidegger thought about the word 'Holzwege'. 'Holz', he explained, is an old name for a forest, and the 'Wege' are the paths used by woodcutters and forest keepers. Extending

into the trees, these paths are overgrown and end abruptly where the ground is untrodden. Each one goes its separate way, but they all belong to the routes in which the same forest is navigated. '*Holzwege*' was Heidegger's title for a collection of essays. The essays were themselves many different ways and routes taken to approach the same aim: the aim of saying something not just about visible things, but also about the open, temporal space in which visible things appear. They were attempts to approach not just beings but being itself.¹

Heidegger's own place for retreating to his work was a hut in the Black Forest of South West Germany. His presence there was well known to the locals, and their way of life served as inspiration for the inner pathways his own thoughts explored. In one of the *Holzwege* essays, he writes about a painting by Van Gogh of a pair of peasant shoes.² These shoes are not merely things; they become what they are when they are worn in the field. Van Gogh's image brings this usage to light. They are not depicted in an abstract way; the shoes are well-worn, revealing the toil they have accompanied, the signs of dampness and soil remaining on the leather. Heidegger explains that the shoes reveal an uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread. They belong to the earth, to both the joys and troubles of rural life. Their every detail belongs to the existence of which they are a silent part. The artwork depicts the shoes not as pure objects in the mode of a technical drawing, but as beings that illuminate the surroundings of their temporal-spatial world.³



Ascending from the fields and forest foothills, we appear among mountains in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Climbing over difficult terrain, high above civilisation, Zarathustra finds a gateway called 'Moment' where two paths meet: the first going on to eternity backwards, the second going on to eternity forwards. As both are eternal, what can pass through this gateway will have already passed countless times. What can happen has

already happened. The gateway draws together both paths that unfold as a single line through the eternal return of the same.⁴

The vision of the pathway allows Zarathustra to find the solution to a fundamental problem: the problem of how the human will can affirm the past.⁵ In this sense, to will is to want something that is not yet here, but the past is always behind us. The past is like a burden, appearing encased in granite, unmovable and independent whether we accept it or not. The difficulty is how to break the past out of its rigidity, to open it once again to the affirmation of human will. The paths extending to eternity provide the answer: we can will the past if the past always returns again as our future. If all things return, the will is able to will both forwards and backwards at the same time. It wills backwards as it wills forwards because the past is ahead of it, because the past returns into the present endlessly. If we aim to will what is locked within the past, we can only do so if the past will be our future again and again for eternity.

The idea of the eternal return belongs among mountains. It is a mountain shepherd who is chosen as the image of the one who tries to incorporate it.⁶ This shepherd is the one who can affirm that all things will always return in the same way, the one who has immersed this terrifying idea into his physical body, the one who in doing so reaches beyond the human itself. The shepherd achieves what Zarathustra is not yet able to. The latter retreats from the most terrible thought; he lies in convalescence for a week until he is able to affirm it himself.⁷

As with Heidegger, Nietzsche both incorporates a natural environment into the presentation of his ideas and has used that environment as the outward place for his own thinking. His concept of the eternal return first occurred to him high in the Swiss Alps. In the notebook he had with him at the time, he wrote the outline of a plan for a new yet never completed work. *The Recurrence of the Same* was to be an exploration of the history of human thought, culminating in what it refers to as the heaviest weight: the idea of the eternal return which we will incorporate into ourselves through becoming the teachers of it. In the notebook Nietzsche specified his location as follows: "Early August 1881 in Sils-Maria, 6,000 feet above sea level and much higher above all human things!"⁸

Thought's pathway is its own inner movement, a movement that can take many forms. Some of its routes are well-worn and easy to traverse; some are less so and thereby require effort. The modern road represents the sameness of thinking common to us all, a thought where everything is already prescribed. The rural track represents the wandering into the unknown, the places beyond the familiar. Thought must travel among both if it is to

engage in the world and push itself beyond it. It must cross the symbolic threshold from town into country if it is to struggle and create within itself.

Thought's pathway is also the physical place in which we go to think. It is the environment in which thought may flow, the setting in which thought may arise with a purity of focus. But what form of nature is my own preference? What has been the most conducive to thought? What surrounding area has been the most abundant? It is open, expansive, isolated, and desolate. Its pathway does not go anywhere, or if it does we need not follow it to its end. It is much more about the path itself than the destination. We are not merely following a route; we are following thought itself. We are allowing ourselves to think, to pay attention inwardly as we find ourselves among nature outwardly.



Open, expansive, and isolated: a view of the North York Moors, an area traced by moorland paths extending beyond the woods of the Cleveland Hills. Centuries old, these routes owe their existence to the movements of the local rural communities. They are interconnected lines cut into the surface, gateways to all the life and death contained in their cumulative history. The dual-meaning of thought's pathway makes the photograph a dual-representation: the thin line proceeding to some indefinite point is both a physical line in a landscape and also an image of a line of thinking. The point is visible at which the route appears indeterminate. Along uncertain terrain thought's view ahead of itself is concealed, the next waypoint being unveiled only as we approach it. We never know when we may stumble upon a connection to an adjoining route. We never know exactly where thought will take us. As an operation, it is guided by instinct throughout. In the photograph all of this is represented: the open expansiveness of the area is the freedom for the possibilities of thought's creation; the isolation is the singular focus of thinking, undistracted and unforced; the desolation is the movement away from the habitual, from the places of thinking where so many have already gone before.

Through seeing this double vision of thought's pathway – the dual-meaning of the internal and the external, the physical pathway and the inner line of thinking – we see an approach to thought, a tactic, a method: we take ourselves to the preferred place as needed, for when a certain level of focus is required unavailable elsewhere. The image of the inner and outer become one as we enter thought together with our entry into the natural environment. In this way the open country becomes the image of an openness of thinking, an image that reflects a parallel movement of sense and situation, a possible unity of freedom: a freedom of thought in itself that is also a freedom in the world.

Notes

¹ GA5: *Holzwege* (1950/1977). Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann. Translated into English as *Off the Beaten Track* (2002). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. In both editions the note on the title occurs without a page number, preceding the contents page.

² Van Gogh, *Shoes* (1886). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. (F255; JH1124.)

³ 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in: *Off the Beaten Track*, pp. 13-19. – According to François Gauzi, Van Gogh bought the shoes from a market stall in Paris and made them muddy himself. (See *Lautrec et son Temps* (1954). Paris, David Perret, pp. 31-32.) The important point is, however, the artist's intention, and Van Gogh's may well have been along the lines of Heidegger's basic reading. Inspired by Millet and Breton, peasants were a regular theme of Van Gogh's paintings. In a letter to his brother, he discusses spending many hours in the rural homes of miners, peat-cutters, weavers, and peasants, becoming so immersed in their world that he couldn't think of anything else. This was the way, he thought, to allow his paintings to authentically express the subject matter of their hidden way of life. (See the letter to Theo van Gogh on the 13th April 1885.)

⁴ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-91/2006). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 124-126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-112.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁸ KSA 11[141] from the M-III 1 notebook in: *The Nietzsche Reader* (2006). Oxford, Blackwell, p. 238.

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