When Nothing Happens:
Autos, Autism, and "Disabled" Technology

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What is usually implied, but seldom addressed, in educational discussions is that education always appears to "do something"; it is useful. This is not startling, as we assume education has a *telos* — a purpose, where "the question of purpose, the question as to what education is *for* — should actually be the central and ongoing concern within educational practice, policy, and research."[1] Indeed, in this essay, I take it as a given that education is meant to do something — it has purpose — and that interrogating educational purpose matters. However, the mind boggles when we begin to entertain the thought of an educational space where "nothing happens!": Thinking education without purpose.

Strange as it may seem, this is precisely where I want this study to begin by considering the question, What would be revealed to us about the nature of education if all educational activity just came to a halt, where "nothing was happening," so to speak? To find out, I propose to explore from a phenomenological frame what happens when we "bracket" the purpose of education — by actually freezing it for the moment. Here, my hope is that what has been occluded, dwarfed by concerns about purpose, will be revealed. Analogously, I liken myself to an astronomer who listens in to the universe at absolute zero, where all atomic motion stops such that it is possible to hear the background noise of the big bang. Likewise, by bringing educational activity to as much of a standstill as possible, I hope to "hear" the background ontological conditions that structure education — those *a priori* conditions that do not rely on our intentional, purposeful acts.

To accomplish this task, I will first situate the discussion within a Heideggerian frame by focusing on the essence of technology, *Gestell*. I do this for two reasons: first, as Heidegger suggests, *Gestell* frames our current mode of thinking and, hence, thinking about education; second, to highlight that, when we bracket purpose, what may be revealed or located is another aspect of technology: its "saving power." Next, I draw from a recent study on the inclusion of autistic youth to illustrate and situation my educational investigation. Indeed, I want draw upon insights from this study as a means to shed light on hidden aspects of educational endeavors, hidden by concerns of purpose. Here, we find an instance where what is expected to happen doesn't, with unexpected results. Thus, what is revealed is the hidden "identical" relation between *autos* (autism's root term) and autism: two regimes of technology that come forth to frame education, an "ableist" technology and a marginalized, "disabled" technology occluded by the dominant ideology of techno-discourse. From this perspective, an investigation into autistic inclusion serves as a way to both critique and reframe modern technology's claim on education as well as to illustrate a moment of technology's "saving power," a moment perhaps to appreciate an inclusive space where "nothing happens."

NOTHING HAPPENS!

What do I mean by "nothing happening"? Placed within a philosophic context, it can first be loosely situated within Aristotle's stochastic arts, as I frame nothing happening within a context where something is expected to happen, such as education, but doesn't. Here, nothing happening is a claim, a diagnosis that something should have happened but didn't and requires fixing, such as putting a key into a car ignition, turning it, and … nothing happens. We expect the engine to start, and it doesn't. In the case of a car, we are somewhat surprised when it doesn't, as it causes us to take notice of that which was previously taken for granted.

Second, and more importantly, when placed within a Heideggerian frame, "nothing happening" would be akin to the car becoming present-at-hand: that is, when things break down, as with the car above, the background knowledge that we take for granted — the operations of the ignition system — becomes apparent. Here, the breakdown reveals the whole relevant background nexus that sets up, frames, orients our encounter prior to our using the car. Hence, the usage of a car is not so much a matter of our will, of what we want to do, as what the car within context allows us to do. Our modern context, in turn, is structured by the essence of technology — *Gestell*.

Gestell "claims" both humans and nature alike — not in how we use technological equipment, but rather through a prior dominant framework that shapes, sets up, and orientates the very way we think. And here there is danger:

> Man [*sic*] stands so decisively in attendance on the challenging-forth of enframing (*Gestell*) that he does not grasp enframing as a claim, and fails to see himself spoken to, and hence also fails in every way to hear…. The rule of enframing [that] threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth."[2]

For Heidegger, what's at stake is that, as human beings, we are in danger of losing sight of our own truth and, by extension, losing sight of our reciprocal interdependency, in which human beings and nature "belong together" in an original, identical relation. Here, one can say that humans and nature are "identical" in that their belonging together is not casual, but rather a gathering together of humans and nature in a primordial opening where each reveals to each other a sense of belonging to the other, such that each is being uniquely themselves yet somewhat the Same (*to autos*). This belonging to each other is *the* event of primordial appropriation (*Ereignis*) where each — human beings and nature — are brought into each other's presence, and where each, in its identification with the other, makes a "claim" on the other in a way that allows each to be unique such that "they belong to each other"[3] in "mutual appropriation."[4] This primordial event of appropriation, in turn, "determines and defines the experience of thinking."[5] The danger, then, for Heidegger, is that modern technology threatens not only to interrupt this "conversation" but to consume it, and, in doing so, frames the very ways we now think about our relation to the world, and, equally importantly, how we think and understand ourselves, our being. We are in danger of losing sight of our primordial roots.

Thinking with Heidegger, then, if *Gestell* claims human beings and the world today, then so, too, is education claimed, enframed. Strangely, as techno-discourse

threatens to gather all modes of thinking under its umbrella, "a danger in the highest sense,"[6] paradoxically "grows the saving power also."[7] Why? Because *Gestell* is a challenging-forth, a reaching-out to control, to order the world as standing reserves for use, to be useful. Hence, to "reach out," technology must reveal itself, which is glimpsed briefly as a flashing, and where, as the veil of its concealment is removed, we glimpse a "saving power"!

Thus, by bracketing the question of purpose, we may locate that hidden saving power within the essence of technology, within education *where nothing happens*: a place of "asylum" within a controlling world.

<div align="center">WHERE NOTHING HAPPENS: THE ASYLUM</div>

"Living in the Presence of Others," by Jan Masschelein and Pieter Verstraete[8] illustrates for me an educational context where, despite the efforts of educators, "nothing happens." This article explores the pioneering work of Fernand Deligny, whose writing and educational initiatives stress the importance of space in an inclusionary society: that capacity to "live in the presence of others," especially those marginalized, such as autistic youth. Deligny's focus on inclusionary space represents an interesting turn in the usual way one takes up Hannah Arendt's pearl diver. For Deligny, he "dives" to bring forth a crystalized "space" from the ruins of history: the space of the asylum. As such, he dives beneath the asylum as an historical and colonized psychiatric institution, as a site of incarceration to locate its pearl-like essence, to bring forth by retrieving "asylum" in its more primordial references in French language, uncovering it as a spatial entity, one that exists as a place of refuge.

In his work with severely autistic youth, Deligny likens the asylum to a space that forms around autistic children, just like a pearl is formed around some splinter lodged within "the mother-of-pearl" (LPO, 9) or perhaps like an island, where "all the indigenous people of that island are subjected to the same elements [and] where all inhabitants are bound up together, subjected to the same elements" (LPO, 9). Within the asylum-as-island, individuals live in the presence of each other, *under equal circumstances*. Yet, this shared space of the island is *not* "a common opinion, common history, but rather the fact of being surrounded by the same air [the same salt water]" (LPO,10).

For Deligny, the particular space of the asylum

> *does not result in the creation of communal entities [instead a rather different conception of community is a play here]…one that highlights the difference between subjects and individuals.* Where subjects [for Deligny] are human beings who are totally taken over by the meanings produced by psychological or educational discourses, such as subjects under investigation; while individuals seem to resemble the existence of the idiot. (LPO, 10, emphasis added)

The notion of the idiot[9] here does not imply that individuals are "dumb," but rather, from its classical Greek root meaning, it signifies one who disrupts the dominant order. The "idiot" in this context is similar in many ways to a member of Alphonso Lingis's "other community," where "this other community is not simply absorbed into the rational community; it recurs, it troubles the rational community.… this rational community forms not in work, but in the interruption of work and enterprises."[10] For Lingis and Delingy, the expressions and gestures of the individual in the

asylum, the "other community," have meaning; however, what is signified by their behaviors "cannot be immediately grasped by existing ideologies, ways of behaving or traditional discourses" (LPO, 10).

The idiot as outsider, however forms an essential part of the rational community, "in that s/he is one who slows the community down, who *resists* the consensual by the fact that if one should not ask the idiot what they are doing: the idiot will not reply nor discuss the issue, [because] s/he does not know" (LPO, 3). When addressed or questioned, the idiot has nothing to propose; hence, the engagement hinders the constitution of any common account of events by slowing down the situation. Likewise, the members of Deligny's asylum slowing down the events, perhaps by not replying or discussing the issue, in any case thwart something from happening that ought to have happened in the daily commerce of education living: the activity of pedagogical engagement. Thus, the conceptual figure of the idiot suggests that the inclusion of the other, "should not result in the confirmation of worldly routines, but actually should result in a temporal moratorium of thought" (LPO, 12).

This temporal moratorium creates interstices, spaces between the dominant discourses of the professional within the asylum. Spaces where autistic youth could seek refuge from the dominant use of language, theories, and programs that are prestructured to see them as subjects-under-scrutiny to be researched. As such, the asylum "allows the autistic child [to live] in their own singular way without having their existence reduced to a psychological theory or educational insight" (LPO, 10): providing a space where autistic youth can seek refuge from the judgment of others. From this vantage of the asylum, "to include the other … seems to run counter to the dominant ways of approaching the world, one another, and oneself. It results in the creation of interstices where the world stops turning — even if only was for a moment" (LPO, 12). In the asylum, as Deligny sees it, nothing happens, even for just a moment!

As such, asylums have two important characteristics:

> first, they provide a place where individuals can live without being subjected to the requirements of this or that professional language the "Truth." Second, they are places where the convictions and professional tendencies of the educator for the moment are put aside, where the water of the sea does not get any grip on the disorientated raft … [and] educators will be able to (re)find some of the pearls we have lost in our educational waters. (LPO, 12)

To find the pearls, the educator must dive for them. This dive to find the pearls puts the educator in a precarious place where one may become disoriented by one's very commitment to help the autistic youth! Jonathan Lear would describe this moment as "ironic."[11] That is where the educator may find oneself disoriented within the interstices of the asylum: where the world stops even for a moment. Imagine the disorienting feeling of trying to "do something" only to find no response, indeed, to be stopped in one's tracks. "This is the strangeness of irony: we seem to be called to an ideal — to do something — but this doing transcends our ordinary understanding, in the sense that something that has been familiar returns to me as strange and unfamiliar."[12] And this strangeness envelops the educator, disrupting one's world, as

one no longer knows one's way about, one is lost: nothing happens! And, here, all that is familiar seems weirdly unfamiliar, and, hence, one is drawn into oneself such that one is alone in the presence of others. Here, an educator occupies a "strange" space where one realizes that in one's striving for human excellence to be a "good" teacher, one's world becomes strange, unfamiliar, finding oneself alone in the very presence of others.

Diving, then, into such a space returns us to us. The classical Greek term for this strange return to ourselves is "*autos*," from which the term "autism" is derived. *Autos* means of one's true self, of oneself, of one's own accord, to be with oneself among friends. That is, *autos* can mean being alone, unto oneself while in the presence of others. It is in this moment, *autos,* that the educator is held responsible to the other by one's own aspirations, while simultaneously not knowing the way to put oneself forward and claim one's actions as one's own. At this moment the position of the educator is of the one who instructs nothing. Indeed, perhaps in this space of *autos,* of asylum, and when, for a moment in time, the educator enters the world of education, it is as if one did so for the very first time, and without the drapings of a purpose!

As Deligny writes, at this moment, it's as if it's "1940: Bombs are falling. Living, for hours long, under that same roof- roof which at every moment a bomb could penetrate: creates alliances" (LPO, 9). But what sort of alliance is formed at this moment when nothing happens? Here, we can begin to entertain the notion of a contiguous autism: a sideways to pedagogy. Within the asylum picture, for a moment, the educator and the autistic youth are literally sitting on a bench side-by side. Here, we have two people differently the Same (*to autos*) in Heidegger's sense of identical. On the one hand, we see the educator, who, in the ironic moment comes to a complete halt in her or his encounter with the youth. Here, the educator's intentional actions stop, as she or he doesn't know what to do next, and despite one's good intentions — wanting something to happen — alas, nothing does. The educator occupies a space of *autos*. On the other, we see the autistic youth as an individual, in Deligny's term: as not a theorized subject but being "allowed to exist in their own singular way without their existence reduced to a psychological or educational insight" (LPO,10). Here, we find a strange contiguous alliance between *autos* and autism occurring within the Same (*to autos*) common air of the asylum.

Within this strange "autistic space," we find two individuals who are alone in the presence of another yet engaged in an economy an exchange where meeting or mingling, not as a matter of mutual understanding but rather as two beings *belonging together, who are identical, the Same: to autos* (again, the original Greek meaning *from which "autism" is derived*). They are identical, albeit contiguously: indeed, sideways to each other. Here, it is not the autistic youth who is seen "in need of help or special support, but the educator her/himself. What should be transformed then [is] not so much the incurable child, but precisely the way of relating and the language used by the educator to approach the situation" (LPO, 10). Within the context of the asylum, both the educator and the youth are able to take refuge, and each "in the presence of others can open up unknown spaces for communication — not only with the other but, as Deligny stressed time and again, also with oneself" (LPO, 12).

At this point, we begin to realize that the notion of contiguous autism problematizes commonsense notions of inclusion in that "contiguity suggests the idea of different entities being in contact, in proximity to each other, without merging or blending into one another or becoming a whole … not with the intention of producing some overarching dialectical synthesis, but rather the truth emerges in a non-univocal manner … as that space."[13] *Here, we notice distinct language games, distinct worlds living contiguously, and, hence, being inclusive without a common ground, yet breathing common air!*

WHY NOTHING HAPPENS: SAVING POWER

Now, while it is the case that within the asylum the educator and the autistic youth can form a contiguous alliance, it nonetheless remains a question as to what the relation between *autos* and autism is. I find it curious that the "bringing together" of *autos* and autism is almost serendipitous. Hans Asperger, one of the "discoverers" of autism notes in his pathbreaking work, "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood,"

> I have chosen the label autism in a [*sic*] effort to define the basic disorder that generates the abnormal personality structure of the children we are concerned with here. The name derives from the concept of autism in schizophrenia.… The name "autism" coined by [Eugen] Bleuler, is undoubtedly one of the great linguistic and conceptual creations in medical nomenclature.… Human beings normally live in constant interaction with their environment, and react to it continually. However, "autists" have severely disturbed and considerably limited interaction. The autist is only himself (cf. the Greek word *autos*) and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by and which he influences constantly.[14]

As Asperger notes, Bleuler coins the term "autism" in 1919, and, originally, autism is connected with childhood schizophrenia, which was a popular subject of investigation at the turn of the twentieth century. Asperger, for his part, wants to separate autism from schizophrenia, as, "unlike schizophrenia patients, our children do not show a disintegration of personality" (APC, 39). Now, it is not my intent to document the history of the term "autism" but to tease out the relation between *autos* and "undoubtedly one of the great linguistic and conceptual creations in medical nomenclature": autism.

I believe that by exploring the "appropriation" of *autos* into autism, we can uncover something of the occluded aspects of the craft (*techne*) of education. Why do I believe this? Within the context of the asylum, where nothing happens, it becomes impossible to distinguish *autos* from autism. Imagine, in this context, the educator and the autistic child sitting sideways together, each in a contiguous moment of *autos*, unto themselves, each alone in the presence of the other. Now, ask yourself, where is the autism? Remember, the autistic child in this situation is allowed to "exist in their own singular way" without being reduced to a psychological term, autism. So, where does autism fit in? Why not say, simply, that, within the asylum, there are moments when *autos* can flourish?

Tacitly, Asperger gives us a clue when he writes, "these children raise questions of central importance to psychology and education" (APC, 37). With the appropriation of *autos* within autism, we find a deeper motivation in Asperger's bringing to light autism: the appropriation of autism into psychological and educational discourse!

With regard to education, Asperger is moving *autos*/autism into the mainstream of public discourse by claiming its import to education. Thus, we can ask, what does education do to *autos* and autism when they are brought within the education sphere?

Within the asylum to be alone in the presence of another (*autos*) is not a form of isolation; rather, *autos* refers to being alone in the sense of being with oneself in the presence of another without being defensive. It means being present with another, as oneself without masks, or badges, or rank, whereby being alone in the presence of others is a mode of being safe enough to *be* at home. In this regard, we can say that the asylum *saves* its inhabitants from the incessant work of labeling that occurs outside the walls of the asylum. Interestingly enough, Heidegger speaks of saving: "to save is to fetch something home into its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its genuine appearing … If the essence of technology, enframing, is the extreme danger … [then] the essence of technology must harbor in itself the growth of the saving power."[15] Extrapolating from Heidegger's definition, we can say that the asylum brings home "something," by bringing forth its "essence for the first time into its genuine appearing." What is this "something" that appears as if for the first time? Within the asylum — where on occasion nothing happens, I suggest it is the essence of technology, *Gestell*, that which frames the very way we think education, that which frames the very relation between *autos* and Autism that is brought forth for the first time.

Catherine Malabou explains that

at play in the *Gestell* are two regimes of change and exchange: on the one hand, the reign of equality — all things being equal, everything equivalent … [that] 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.[16]

Gestell, that which appears as if the first time in education, is not monolithic! Within the workings of *Gestell*, there are two regimes: first, "equals to," that which reduces difference into equivalence and essence, and, second, "Sameness" (*to autos*), that which allows for mutual appropriation, for unique instances to be present, instances that have no equivalent, other than by virtue of the fact that they belong together: they are differently the Same (*to autos*).

Within the asylum, then, what is revealed, on the one hand, is a regime of technology that seeks to order education into equals, as in all things being equal, as in all things being useful, and to make education something in which that which is without "use" is discarded, marginalized, ignored. As such, this regime of technology represents the danger Heidegger sees as it threatens to frame education as a system, a system that orders education into domains of usefulness. I suggest that it is within this regime of *Gestell* that Asperger wants to place autism. He envisions medical practices and educational endeavours as not only "useful" and beneficial but as "naturally" belonging together. In other words, as autism became a part of mainstream educational discourse, it ran the *risk* of being "claimed" by the dominant ideological discourse of education: the technological logic of social efficiency thinking.

Interestingly, disability theorist Tobin Siebers argues, "ideology creates, by virtue of its exclusionary nature, social locations outside of itself and therefore [those excluded] capable of making epistemological claims about it."[17] Hence, if it is the case that *Gestell* is ideological, then it is also the case that *Gestell* will marginalize that which stands in opposition to its agenda: uniqueness. Here, then, we may consider two regimes of technology: on the one hand, an "ableist" technology that takes as its purpose the radical ordering of the world into equals; on the other, there is also a coexistent regime that allows for uniqueness and sameness, that which is differently the same — a marginalized "disabled" technology that is occluded by the dominance of ablest notions of purpose.

Within this marginalized "disabled" technology, we find *autos*, ever-present but concealed until that moment when the ablest regime reaches out, challenges-forth to order and control. At that moment when *autos* appears — as if for the first time — it both challenges and critiques institutional autism. Here, disabled technology, as revealed in the asylum, challenges the dominant mode of framing autism on two fronts: first, it allows us to witness the lived experience of educators and youth in a nontheorized educational setting; and, second, it challenges us conceptually by pearl diving and bringing forth from the ruins of history *autos*'s hidden, occluded relation to autism. As such, the asylum serves, then, both as a critique of modern technology's claim on education as well as a moment of technology's "saving power," in that here we realize that education *is* a moment of witnessing, a saving moment, of letting-belong-together that affords us a glimpse at oft-hidden educational relationships. Indeed, Heidegger carefully puts forward a hope: "For all we have said that in technology's essence roots and thrives the saving power."[18] Perhaps, then, too, where nothing happens, educational roots thrive!

1. Gert J. J. Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2010), 3.

2. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell (New York: Harper Row, 1977), 309.

3. Martin Heidegger, "The Principle of Identity," in *Identity and Difference*, ed. Joan Stambaugh (New York: HarperCollins, 1969), 32.

4. Ibid., 33.

5. Ibid.

6. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 309.

7. Ibid., 310.

8. Jan Masschelein and Pieter Verstrate, "Living in the Presence of Others: Towards a Reconfiguration of Space, Asylum, and Inclusion," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 16, no. 11: 1–14. This work will be cited as LPO in the text for all subsequent references.

9. While "idiot" and "asylum'" do carry negative connotations, the intent here is to "pearl dive" in Arendt's sense and, hence, reclaim these terms in the spirit of active resistance to dominating power while acknowledging their negative historical connotations.

10. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 10.

11. Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 39.

12. Ibid., quoted in Glenn M. Hudak, "Contiguous Autism and Philosophic Advocacy: Socialization, Subjectification, and the Onus of Responsibility," *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014), 385.

13. Hudak, "Contiguous Autism and Philosophic Advocacy," 386.

14. Hans Asperger, "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood," in *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, ed. Uta Frith (1944; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 37–38. This work will be cited as APC in the text for all subsequent references.

15. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 310.

16. Catherine Malabou, *Heidegger Change* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 171.

17. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 8.

18. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 310.