

Transitional Identity: Becoming, Nothingness, and Event in Heidegger and Ueda

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Abstract: Referring to Martin Heidegger's thought, this paper argues that identity should be understood not as self-preservation or formal self-coincidence ($A = A$), but as a dynamic process constituted through becoming, transition, wandering, and distress. Rather than confining identity to Heidegger's later conceptual-historical discussions, the paper reconstructs it through an experiential structure running across his work—an "inability to fully identify." Methodologically, the paper reconstructs Heidegger's account of identity along three interrelated dimensions: the provisional and ongoing identity of becoming Dasein; a differential identity articulated within the difference between entities and Being; and the eventual identity of thinking and Being as mutual belonging (*Ereignis*). On this basis, the paper examines Shizuteru Ueda's interpretation of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures as a phenomenology of self-existence culminating in absolute nothingness. Through a comparative analysis centered on becoming, nothingness/bottomlessness, and event, the paper clarifies both affinities and differences between Heidegger's and Ueda's accounts, proposing a framework for rethinking identity beyond self-coincidence and for advancing East–West dialogue.

Keywords: Heidegger, Shizuteru Ueda, nothingness/absolute nothingness, event (*Ereignis*)

Heidegger rejects the assumption that identity and non-identity form a fixed opposition; instead, he views them as mutually interrelated. His distinctive idiom arises from the use of metaphysical terms while displacing their meanings, thereby reshaping the very framework of thought and language.

This paper reconsiders Heideggerian identity not by confining it to the later conceptual-historical discussions, but by reading it through an

experiential structure that runs across his work: an “inability to fully identify.”¹ Identity, in this view, is constituted not as preservation but within becoming—transition, wandering, and distress. It is not the achievement of identification (“I am I”) but a movement, a *transition*, that generates itself with questioning while bearing non-identity and resisting fixation. This differs both from (1) the logical law $A = A$ and from (2) the modern subject centered on self-identity: identity in Heidegger’s thinking appears rather as resistance against forces that stabilize the self and the world. This perspective provides a basis for comparison with Japanese philosophy, including the Kyoto School. It also invites a reconfiguration of identity through terms such as nothingness (無), emptiness (空), and place. Shizuteru Ueda (上田閑照: 1926-2019)²—both a Heidegger scholar and an interpreter of Kitarō Nishida—offers a particularly promising site where Eastern and Western approaches intersect, allowing the contrast in their grasp of identity to come into view.³

Methodologically, this paper reconstructs Heidegger’s account of identity as its guiding axis—namely, (3) the provisional and ongoing identity of Dasein, (4) the differential identity within the difference between entity and Being, and (5) the eventual identity of thinking and Being. It then analyzes Shizuteru Ueda’s interpretation of the *Ten Ox-Herding Pictures* (十牛圖)⁴ and compares their respective conceptions of identity, focusing on becoming, nothingness/bottomlessness, and event, to clarify their commonalities and differences as a potential foothold for East–West dialogue.

Heidegger: Identity beyond $A = A$ ⁵

A Map of the Polysemy of Identity

In the conventional register, identity is expressed logically as $A = A$, or psychologically as the continuity of the self. Heidegger, by contrast, asks

¹ For detailed discussions on Heidegger’s interpretation of identity, see Hoko Nakagawa, “Grounding and Identification—The Reciprocal Spiral Movement of Dasein/Da-sein,” in *Heidegger Forum*, 20 (2026), forthcoming.

² Shizuteru Ueda was Professor Emeritus, Kyoto University, and primarily researched the philosophies of Meister Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Kyoto School, Zen. He was often classified as part of the Kyoto School.

³ A limitation of this paper is that while Heidegger’s works are treated comprehensively across all periods, only a limited selection of Ueda’s works is addressed.

⁴ The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures were created by Zen Master Shiyuan Kuoan (廓庵師遠) around the end of the Northern Song Dynasty. They liken the Buddha-nature/authentic self inherent in all humans to the ox. The process of seeking this Buddha-nature is likened to a herdsman taming an ox, expressed through ten paintings.

⁵ For further details, see also the *Heidegger Forum* manuscript.

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about identity as it is constituted in the human relation to Being. At a minimum, we can distinguish:

<Conventional >

- (1) Logical identity ($A = A$)
- (2) Psychological self-identity: maintaining a consistent self-image

<Heidegger >

- (3) provisional-continuing identity of becoming Dasein (Existential identity)
- (4) differential identity with the difference between the entity (*das Seiende*) and Being (*das Sein*) (Ontological identity)
- (5) eventual identity: co-belonging of thinking and being

The following focuses on (3) to (5), which mutually overlap rather than forming separate domains.

Provisional-Continuing Identity of Becoming Dasein (3)

Although *Being and Time* does not explicitly thematize identity, identity is operative throughout its analyses. Dasein is thrown into an already-given situation while projecting itself toward possibilities. This internal tension resists the self's fixation as a single, stable entity. The imperative "become what you are!"⁶ linked to projection (*Entwurf*), also points to a process of (non-)identification.

In anxiety, the impersonal "it" (*es*),⁷ excluded from ordinary meaningful relations, breaks automatic continuity; the self appears as discontinuous and unfamiliar—"from (*aus*) me, yet beyond (*über*) me." Identity is thus not given but constituted through a movement of calling and response: the self called "now" is already a possible self, oriented toward the future. "It calls us back in calling us forth (*vorrufender Rückruf*)"⁸ that calls us back from the everyday self to the authentic possibility of accepting facticity (*Faktizität*).

Accordingly, identity is not a completed unity but *Ständigkeit*— the ongoing trying to re-choose one's own existence while attempting to resist the pull of falling. Authentic selfhood is "questioning being," continually

⁶ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 19th ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006), 145.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 287.

renewing its groundlessness; identity of Dasein must be understood not as fixing an essence, but as repeatedly re-questioning it.

Dasein's identity is therefore the persistence of becoming—a “resistance to identity,” that is, resistance to the fixation of “identification” in “das Man” (conformity to self-images, customs, institutions). Whereas traditional self-identity privileges continuity from the past, early Heidegger emphasizes discontinuity with the past and orientation toward the future. Yet insofar as this dynamic persistence maintains a form of continuity, it remains intelligible as identity. As Heidegger's thinking develops, this identity of the self as “being able to question Being” is rethought through the ontological difference and through Being's transition into entities.⁹

The Identity of Entity and Being: Differential Identity (4)

Being is not an entity. Yet Being appears as a transition into entities and lets entities be; entities, in turn, indicate Being and provoke thinking. Identity here is not the coincidence of two terms but a reciprocal transition and demand that preserves difference.

In the space of “difference as difference,”¹⁰ through their distinctive movement—“play” (*Spiel*)—Being and entities appear each time in singular modes.¹¹ The substance-identity emphasized by $A = A$ (1) is only one constituent moment within this movement. Within this horizon, Dasein's identity increasingly takes the form of understanding of Being, especially “being able to question Being,” considering differential identity. This connects to the gradation that arises as Dasein becomes itself as both Being and entity [identity (3), (5)]: the Being of the entity (Being grasped from the entity), Being as Being, the entity of Being (the entity grasped from Being), and the entity as entity. This gradation tracks Dasein's being-on-the-way—wandering → distress → questioning and transition → provisional persistence → renewed fluctuation. The issue is not an either/or choice between Being and entities, but where the center of gravity lies within “their” relational identity.

The Identity of Thinking and Being: Mutual Belonging (Ereignis) (5)

Late Heidegger traces identity to Parmenides' saying that “thinking and being are the same.” This does not mean that thinking determines Being;

⁹ The following content in the main text responds to how the discussion of self-identity in the early period and the law of identity in Heidegger's later period can be connected as matters.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, GA 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

rather, thinking is entrusted to Being and responds to its appearing—*Ereignis*. Thinking can thus become the “place” that holds the duality of Being and entities.

Already in the middle period, Heidegger suggests that the essential occurrence (*Wesung, Wesen*) of Being—“Being first becoming itself”¹²—is the same event as the human being’s becoming itself: relating to Being, questioning it, and becoming what one is in that relation.¹³ This is not a rupture with early Heidegger but a continuing shift of emphasis within the same relation between Being and the human being. The continuity of provisional identity requires that Being’s essential presenting be sheltered within entities—“things, tools, works”—through “art, thinking, poetry, action.”¹⁴ In this way, a restoration of entities becomes possible, a transformation that can also prepare contemporaries and future generations.

Reducing the duality of Being and entities (4) to one side impoverishes thought. Only by respecting duality and remaining within the space of difference can thinking essentially occur (5). *Ereignis* names the event in which this mutual belonging occurs and in which both the human being and Being are brought “to themselves.” Yet for Heidegger, this is not a final answer. The Parmenides’ enigma of “thinking and being are the same” must be preserved. Dialogue with originally thinking is infinite; under the constraints of our age—and amid wandering—we must seek, each time anew, words that protect the enigma.

Comparative Chapter: Heidegger × Ueda

Ueda on Self-Existence and Absolute Nothingness— Through Shizuteru Ueda’s Interpretation of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures (十牛図)

Ueda reads the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures as a ten-stage deepening of the self’s relation to itself (existence) through the changing relation between the ox (the true self) and the herdsman (the self that seeks it).¹⁵ In my view, this progression resonates with Heidegger’s deepening from early to late thought.

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, GA 65 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2003), 470–475.

¹³ *Ereignis* refers to the realm where the difference between substance and being essentially oscillates. This fluctuation invalidates the essence of humanity (substance) and being as defined by metaphysics, enabling them to regain their essence.

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, 389 and 308.

¹⁵ Shizuteru Ueda, *The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures: A Phenomenology of the Self* (Tokyo: Chikuma Gakugei Bunko, 2015), 31.

Figure 1: In Search of the Ox (尋牛) – The herdsman awakes of losing the heart-ox and becomes questioning, “What is the self?”

Figure 2: Discovery of the Footprints (見跡) – He finds traces rather than the ox itself.

Figure 3: Perceiving the Ox (見牛) – The ox is seen but not yet caught: the question is enacted concretely, and the answer is anticipated; in the practice of continuing to question, a concrete self “as answer” becomes present.¹⁶

Figure 4: Catching the Ox (得牛) – Rope-tension for restraining the ox visualizes division and unity: while the person seems to restrain the ox, the ox more fundamentally restrains the person. Seeking reverses into being sought.¹⁷

Figure 5: Taming the Ox (牧牛) – The rope holding the ox loosens; the duality of the ox and the herdsman harmonizes through mutual interpenetration.¹⁸

Figure 6: Riding the Ox Home (騎牛歸家) – The herdsman riding the ox home while playing the flute, the unity of them deepens; the flute here is “played” by the unity itself.¹⁹ Stages 1–6 rise as a sustained movement in which each insufficiency demands the next.²⁰

Figure 7: The Ox Transcended (忘牛存人) – Forgetting the ox, the person preserves at home. The Completion of the practice brings danger: if movement stops at “I am I!,” it can reverse into static self-identity.²¹ Only the succession of practice sustains ascent;²² to move further is to cast oneself into bottomless nothingness.²³

Figure 8: Both Ox and Self Transcended (人牛俱忘) – Forget both the person and the ox. The empty²⁴ circle nullifies the entire path at once: the process thus far, seeking/being sought/obtaining/forgetting, becomes as though they never were. The eighth is “nothing”,²⁵ the place of “no-self,” “absolute nothingness (絶対無),”²⁶ which becomes the absolute origin. This nothingness is active: oppositions return to extinction in the pre-subject/object nothingness “before” division.²⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42–44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

²² *Ibid.*, 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁴ The emptiness in Buddhism means the absence or lack of (fixed) substance.

²⁵ Ueda, *The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures: A Phenomenology of the Self*, 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

Figure 9: Reaching to the Source (返本還源)— As the form of the true self, only a river and a flowering tree are depicted.²⁸ Nature appears as a simple, fulfilled event in the empty circle. “Absolute nothingness” (**Figure 8**) and nature as absolute affirmation (**Figure 9**) mutually penetrate and essentially influence.²⁹

Figure 10: Return to Society (入塵垂手)— This figure depicts the encounter between an old man and a young man on a city street. The true self appears not as the old man but as “him + a young man”, the encounter itself:³⁰ the self arises as the interval between self and other, enabling a genuine meeting with the other as itself.³¹ The tenth stage remains in mutual interpenetration with the eighth.³² Everyday questions—“Where did you come from?” “What is your name?”—strike Being with infinite range,³³ awaken self-questioning, and open the other’s path to becoming themselves.³⁴ The tenth of the self thus becomes the first for others, containing an infinite history.³⁵

Comparison Centered on “Becoming,” “Nothingness / Bottomlessness,” and “Event”— Resistance to the fixation of “I am I”

On this basis, we can clarify the situation of identity that includes non-identity by comparing Heidegger and Ueda. As commonalities: (i) both think the human being as the occurrence of a place (opened-ness) (For Ueda, the empty circle); (ii) both stress the need to recognize everyday falling (Figure 1) and to return to transformed everydayness (Figure 10); and (iii) both articulate a spiral model in which the self arises as a question and can “rise” as a sustained movement within the dynamics of authenticity/inauthenticity (ascent always includes the possibility of falling; only succession of practice sustains it).³⁶ This is a critique of fixed identity—echoed in Heidegger’s “not a work but a path,” and in Ueda’s warning that stopping at “I am I!” risks reversal into ontic self-identity.³⁷ In other words, being oneself is not a simple straight path or line, but always a winding path or tangled line accompanied by forks.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³² *Ibid.*, 66.

³³ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 47 and 51.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

Further similarities appear within the stages themselves: the turning movement (*Kehre*) is continuous with thrown projection (*der geworfene Entwurf*) in Heidegger's thought³⁸ and in Ueda's interpretation of Figure 4's reversal of seeking into being sought. The continuity with history as an infinite heritage succession³⁹ in Heidegger's philosophy is also like the encounter of others in Figure 10.

Concerning differences, a provisional contrast is evident between Heidegger's question of Being and Ueda's question of the self. From my standpoint, however, Heidegger's whole thought can also be read as a self-theory that consistently includes ontology,⁴⁰ and Ueda's self-theory—because it includes absolute nothingness—can also be read as one that includes the dimension of the question of Being (*Ab-grund*).

Still, whereas Heidegger's project includes a strongly scholarly ontological aim—discerning the essence of Western metaphysics and distancing himself from it—Ueda, perhaps under Nishida and Zen, seems to locate authenticity in remaining within religious awakening as practice/existence (if one may say so, a perspective of being-in-the-world) rather than in scholarship as such.⁴¹ Heidegger's identity-in-difference of Being and entities, and the Parmenidean identity of thinking and Being as co-belonging (*Ereignis*), do not appear in Ueda in that form. Heidegger must philosophize as ontology under the pressure of Western metaphysics; Ueda is at least relatively freer from that inheritance.

A major unavoidable question concerns the positioning of nothingness (無): Heidegger's nothingness, groundlessness/abyss (*Ab-grund*), concealment (*Verborgenheit*), and Ueda's "absolute nothingness" (Figure 8). As I see it, Heidegger's nothingness begins from the future-oriented groundlessness of the meaningless self in the early period, proceeds as the

³⁸ See Hoko Nakagawa, *Ab-grund(脱-底): der geworfene Entwurf in Heideggers Denken* (Kyoto: Showa-do, 2018), 175–190.

³⁹ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 382-387; *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 260.

⁴⁰ See also the point on Ueda, *The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures: A Phenomenology of the Self*, 40, emphasizing "Zazen when not sitting in Zazen," or "effort in motion."

⁴¹ Regarding the problem of self, what is the intention behind including not only early Heidegger, who explicitly discusses selfhood, but also late Heidegger in the examination? In discussing absolute nothingness in the eighth stage of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, Ueda contrasts it with late Heidegger's interpretation of Silesius' "The rose blooms because it blooms" as a form of "Ab-grund." While Heidegger's "Ab-grund" is close to his own and Zen thought, Ueda states that his (Nishida's) state of "absolute nothingness without any reason or cause whatsoever" is more in tune with the matter than "blooming without why." Therefore, comparing Ueda's interpretation of the Ten Ox Pictures with Heidegger's entire philosophy is not unreasonable. To the extent of my limited understanding, Ueda's ontology is fundamentally a theory of the self. Furthermore, in my view, the thought of Heidegger from his early to late periods can be seen as a single, consistent path that deepens. That is, Heidegger's reflections on identity and the self are only complete when understood as encompassing the dimensions of his later thought.

non-being (*Nichtsein*) of Being, and connects to groundlessness and late concealment.⁴²

Early Heideggerian nothingness as a meaningless self corresponds to Ueda's "the whole history of the self is extinguished at once"⁴³ and the "place of no-self."⁴⁴ However, Ueda also depicts not only such as the above nothingness "before" division that returns all relative oppositions to the pre-subject / object,⁴⁵ but also active nothingness as absolute origin.⁴⁶ Similarly, the nothingness in Leibniz's question—central for Heidegger from early to late—"Why is there something rather than nothing?" can be understood as primordial nothingness as possibility: the possibility that entities might not have existed before the birth of the universe.

If Ueda's absolute nothingness is an active, mutually interpenetrative nothingness capable of unfolding into nature and the human being, then an adequate comparison requires attention not only to early Heidegger but also to his middle and late thinking. For, as mentioned earlier, Ueda's thought extends beyond self-theory to encompass ontology, and Heidegger's later thought is not only a contemplation of Being but also, indeed, a theory of the self. A comparison between Heidegger's de-grounding through the "physis (nature)" in the sense of "it plays because it plays," the historical movement of unconcealing and concealing, and the return "from Being to entities," that is, entities becoming more existential⁴⁷—and Ueda's interpretation of the Ten Ox Pictures' Eighth to Tenth Pictures concerning nothingness, nature, and society would be meaningful. However, a detailed elaboration of this argument will be reserved for a separate paper that also incorporates interpretations of Nishida Kitaro's thought.

Finally, another major question concerns time. In broad strokes, one may contrast Heidegger's shift from the primacy of the future in the early period to the primacy of historicity (past) in the later period, with Ueda's—and Zen's—primacy of the present. Yet Heidegger ultimately emphasizes the present moment, and further discussion is needed regarding how this differs from Ueda's understanding. Owing to the limits of space, this remains a task for subsequent work.⁴⁸

⁴² See Nakagawa, *Ab-grund* (脱-底), 135–160.

⁴³ Ueda, *The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures: A Phenomenology of the Self*, 59–60.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁵ Ueda, *The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures: A Phenomenology of the Self*, 62.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

⁴⁷ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, 300 and 317.

⁴⁸ I believe the same applies when contrasting it with Nishida's interpretation of time.

Conclusion

In Heidegger, the identity/non-identity of being-in-the-world designates a self that is held together through tension: between possibility and actuality, and through the ongoing possibility of transformation. On this reading, the injunction “Become what you are!” does not affirm self-preservation but possesses multi-layered-ness as a provisional, persistent identity (3), and in essence, it points to a *differential identity* (4)—an identity constituted through the movement from entity to Being and back again toward entity. When such a differential identity is undergone as a play of history, as a process of becoming bottomless, thinking is entrusted to Being, and a becoming-based identity of thinking and Being (5) may occur. This spiral reciprocity, sustained by nothingness and groundlessness, condenses Heidegger’s account of identity; it could be called *transitional identity*, all things considered.

Ueda’s conception of identity can likewise be summarized as “I am not I (other, world, nothingness), and yet I am I.”⁴⁹ It foregrounds an original equality of self, others, and nature within the opening of nothingness. Despite differences of emphasis—existential, ontological, or everyday—the two accounts are structurally close. Their divergences can be traced, in part, to the distinct historical and cultural background of nothingness, nature, and humanity. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world can disclose that “we are not yet sufficiently present where we already are,” thereby reopening the question of identity: “Where are we?” and “Who are we?” Persisting in such questioning allows one to see through one’s historical situation and to become present where one stands. Ueda radicalizes this insight by locating it not only in philosophical reflection but in ordinary encounters. In everyday questions—“Where are you from?” “What is your name?”—the wandering toward/from oneself quietly begins anew.

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⁴⁹ Shizuteru Ueda, *What am I?* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2000), 36–40.

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