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## Passivity as a way to the yet-to-be-disclosed-place of a sustainable, respons-i/a-ble environment for man and nature

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AALBORG UNIVERSITY  
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TEN  
- Time, Existence &  
Nature Connectedness

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Tromsø, Norway

**Passivity as a way to the yet-to-be-disclosed-place of a  
sustainable, respons-i/a-ble environment for man and nature.**





## Abstract (422 words)

*What happens when we look at a rose? What do we do as we become aware of color and form? Our soul is passive and receptive. We are, to be sure, awake and active, but our attention is not strained; we simply 'look' – in so far, that is, as we 'contemplate' it and are not already 'observing it' (for 'observing' implies that we are beginning to count, to measure and to weigh up).* (Pieper 1952, p. 26). We find a similar understanding with Nietzsche (1889) who said, that 'seeing' is "to accustom the eye to quietness, to patience, to reserve; to postpone judgement, to survey and comprehend each case from all sides" (p. 36). And we find affinities to both in contemporary German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, to whom "einen unmittelbaren und intensiven Welt-beziehungsweise Sachbezug" is prerequisite to obtain *Resonance* as a "durchstimmende Angesprochenheit" (Rosa 2016, cp. V.3). In short: what makes the human being human is, that he is a contemplative being (Heidegger 1959, p. 47).

But in the late-modern *society of positivity* (Han 2012b), we shun everything that is other, foreign, different, secretive and opaque, as it constitutes *a negativity* (Han 2012b, p. vii – viii; Han 2019b, p. 32) that causes friction and inertia (Han 2009, 2010, 2012a, 2019a, and 2019b). We have "taken leave of both dialectics and hermeneutics" (Han 2012a, p. 5); of that which gives the spirit its power by "tarrying with it" (Han 2012a, p. 5). In the late-modern society of positivity, hyperactivity has forces out the patient dwelling (Han 2010). Processing has replaced questioning, calculation has taken the place of contemplation, speed and acceleration has ousted presence and attention. Human existence is being increasingly machinated (Heidegger 1936 – 1938; Heidegger 1959).

By applying some of Heidegger's early work, Mølholm (2019) demonstrates how stress as an existential "call from afar, to afar" (Heidegger 1927, p. 251) is both a reaction to what can be described as 'a hasty, sidestepping attitude of life', as well as a 'warning-call' that attempts to 'wake us up', listen and answer. It is the 'sound' reaction to an existential anxiety that calls us, to what Mølholm (2019) names "a-yet-to-be-disclosed-place". In this paper I will expound on how a passive attitude as an unstrained, receptive, awake and active attention towards human existence and nature allows us to *contemplate* this yet-to-be-disclosed-place and meander around the phenomena, around that which is unsayable in apophatic wonder (Hansen 2022, 2023; Visse, Hansen and Leget 2020), so as to forward a sustainable, respons-i/a-ble environment for both man and nature.





## At awe in astonished remembrance of that which is near...

It was a scorching Sunday morning in the beginning of July just outside Torremejia, a small village a couple of hundred kilometers north of Sevilla, Spain. Still early in the day and only a couple of hours after sunrise, the temperature had just passed 35 degrees Celcius. Above my head a burning sun; beneath my feet a parched and dusty road; before my eyes an infinite and naked horizon, flickering in the heat haze; behind me a feverish buzzing world fading further and further away. And while my body was an overabundance of sensations: vital strength and a dawning fatigue; sizzling<sup>1</sup> muscles and searing<sup>2</sup> skin; the thrusting force of the ground as my feet touched down, and the compression from the backpack on my shoulders, hips and back, I myself in my very Being was pervaded by a deep calm. From a permeating feeling of peace and tranquility, I heard a poet sing:

Today I have felt the dents, cracks and chinks  
beneath my feet;  
My soul has bathed in the sounds of the Symphony of Nature;  
The gaze of my eyes has swum to the horizons of the world,  
and beyond the firmaments cloister<sup>3</sup>;  
My skin has been caressed by the hot panting<sup>4</sup> of gentle winds;  
My tongue has tasted the dry warmth of the rays of the sun.

But suddenly the poet stopped singing, the sensations of my body fell silent. The sun held back its heat, the dusty road came to a halt, and the world stopped turning. Time stood still, as my eyes caught glimpse of the tiniest of movements between pebble rocks on the right-hand side of me. Everything appeared to freeze: time, my body and me, as I was held back by the smallest of creatures scuttling about<sup>5</sup> withered sprigs<sup>6</sup>. I was awestruck. Yet, it was not until weeks later that I realized the significance of that moment, (which I am hesitant to call ‘an experience’ as that connotes and suggests an ontic relation or ‘state of mind’)<sup>1</sup>. It came to me in the middle of the night and may have dawned on me in a dream that I have now long forgotten, but which I nonetheless suddenly woke from, filled with the strangest, most wonderful and joyous feeling of *clearing*. Half awake and half asleep I was ‘back’ on the parched and dusty road, stupefied and holding back my breath as if even the smallest of motions would break the spell and dissolve the magical moment. It was a clearing, not in the meaning of ‘brightness’, but clearing as “what is cleared is the free, the open” (Heidegger & Fink 1966 - 1967, p. 161) - an experience of unconcealment/*αλήθεια* (Aletheia) as “the unthought” and as a “pre-philosophical understanding” (Heidegger 1927, p. 202; Heidegger & Fink 1966 - 1967, p. 161 - 162). So, right there in the middle of the night I suddenly found myself in the clearing, once again struck by awe. This, in lack of a better word, ‘experience’ is significant for several reasons of which I in the following will highlight two in particular that are interrelated.

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<sup>1</sup> I have decided not to pursue this question any further but fundamentally agree with the concerns of Abrams brought forward by Toadvine (2005) in *Limits of the Flesh: The Role of Reflection in David Abram's Ecophenomenology* who writes, that “David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* [...] is concerned precisely with the relation between our pre-reflective, sensuous experience of the world and the reflective, abstract mode of thought to which this experience give rise. The culminating motif of Abram's investigation is that of the ‘turning inside out’ of consciousness, the ‘rediscovery’ of mind's sensuous aspects in such a way as to render thinking organic and to disclose the perceptual kinship of all forms of experience through their common bodily experience” (p. 156 - 157).

Instead of going with Toadvine and Abrams, this article endeavor to demonstrate how in particular the late Heidegger had similar concerns, and how his work can be fruitful in a further attempt to lay the ground for a ‘metaphysical turn’ in both science and the human societal life, to the benefit of life itself.





First of all, the experience of being awestruck - or rather: the gradual loss of the late-modern human beings' ability and capacity of being awestruck - is essential to our understanding of a variety of phenomena dominating the late-modern society, from the climate crisis, the deterioration of biodiversity and the human beings' estrangement from nature to the upsurge<sup>7</sup> in the prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression and burnout - to mention but a few. Therefore, to understand what Heidegger meant when emphasizing *awe* (German: *die Scheu*)<sup>11</sup> as the "originally firm and collected keeping to oneself, in the face of what is awesome [makes it shy]", and "the mood of a homecoming which *commemorates and remembers* the origin" (Heidegger 1943a, p. 153) is critical if we endeavor on making a positive change in not only the life of the human being, but life on earth as such.

When reading through Heidegger's work it becomes clear, that he had a reckoning with in particular the *metaphysical thinking*. His multiple text on metaphysics alone bear witness to this fact. He repeatedly criticized the metaphysical thinking for not moving beyond the representation of "'being' as beings in terms of a being, namely as *eidōs, actualitas, ego, nature, Spirit, and the like*" (Capobianco 2010, p. 16), and think "the ontological difference in its primordially: Being (namely presencing itself) and beings (that which comes-to-presence in any form)" (Capobianco 2010, p. 17). In *Postscript to 'What is Metaphysics?'* from 1943, which predates his inaugural lecture *What is Metaphysics?* (1929) with some fourteen years and *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) with eight, Heidegger writes:

Metaphysics is the history of this truth. It says what beings are in bringing to a concept the beingness of beings. In the beingness of beings, metaphysics thinks being, yet without being able to ponder the truth of being in the manner of its own thinking. [...] it is necessary to ask what metaphysics is in its ground. This questioning must think metaphysically and at the same time think out of the ground of metaphysics, i.e., in a manner that is no longer metaphysical (p. 232).

To 'think' - if thinking is the right word at all - a thinking that thinks *beyond* and out of the ground of metaphysics, Heidegger introduces the concept of *awe*, and does so in an, for Heidegger, unusually straightforward and plain manner in his commemorative paper *Remembrance* from 1943. *Awe* is the sensation that we feel, when we are literally speechless and feel as if we are nailed to the ground; when we stand "hesitant and does not rush toward the source", and by not doing so instead "undertakes the authentic path to it" (Heidegger 1943a, p. 154). As such, when in awe we are passive and awaiting, keeping a respectful distance and holding back any thought and talk, meandering around the phenomenon in an apophatic approach so as not "to capture it by appropriation", but instead "actively seeking out a relationship with it" (Visse, Hansen & Leget 2020, p. 2). It is a "shrinking back before ... that is surely not any sort of flight but rather a kind of bewildered calm" that "takes its departure from the nothing" and "brings *Da-sein* for the first time before beings as such" (Heidegger 1929, p. 102 - 103). I too, was nailed to the ground and held speechless when overwhelmed by what in that moment was not (just) a mouse, but 'nothing', a no-thing: not a rodent, not a pet, not a Disney-character, not an enemy, not any-thing. It was simply life itself - simply Being. No thoughts or words tried to capture the moment, conceptualize it, grasp it, define it, explain it. Something deep inside me understood that that, in lack of a better word, would be sacrilegious<sup>8</sup>. Instead, I was in 'a bewildered calm', dumbfounded<sup>9</sup> and right there and then simply in a relationship with the no-thing. No more, no less. I was in awe as

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<sup>11</sup> Directly translated, the German word *Die Scheu* means *shy*. When I, nevertheless, translate *Die Scheu* with *awe* it is because I agree with Capobianco (2010) that this "better captures the resonance of the word" (p. 159, endnote 25) in Heidegger's 'Remembrance' (1943a), from the German 'Andenken' (1943b). Capobianco does not elaborate further on, why he believes so. But in *Andenken* (1943b), in his *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, Heidegger (1936 - 1968) writes that "Die Scheu ist wohl ein anderes als de Schüchternheit", the latter meaning *shyness, uneasiness, coyness or modesty*, "die im allem, was ihr begegnet, nur zaghaft und unsicher bleibt" (p. 131).





that reserved, patient, astonished remembrance of that which remains near in a nearness which consists solely in keeping something distant in its fullness, and thereby keeping it ready for its arising from its source” – an origin that “cannot be directly experienced” (Heidegger 1943a, p. 153).

When in awe we are, as human beings, in a mood (*Stimmung*) which guide Being home, back to its origin as Being – what Heidegger eventually ends up calling ‘das Ereignis’: “the Originating of the beginning”, where “beings are let to arise in the there. *Das Ereignis* is Beyng”<sup>III</sup> (Heidegger 1941, p. 16). In that sense, awe as a mood, a ‘feeling’, a ‘sensation’ is a *pre-metaphysical, pre-ontological* ‘state of Being’ which takes Being into the clearing of the un-thought, and “get into view what metaphysical thinking simply could not: the pure appropriating, giving, letting of what appears” (Capobianco 2010, p. 50). It is a leaving be in a non-calculative thinking that does not try to capture, contain, own, utilize and consume; that is gentle and holds a reverent attitude towards the world and everything in it. An attitude that is becoming still more scarce in a world that, with Heidegger’s more than half a century old words “appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought [...]. Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry” (Heidegger 1959, p. 50) where we do not even, Heidegger continues, “stop to consider that an attack with technological means is being prepared upon the life of nature and man” (Heidegger 1959, p. 52).

Is the human being then doomed, inevitably headed towards a technologically driven apocalypse? No, says Heidegger. But the human being must “pit<sup>10</sup> contemplative<sup>IV</sup> thinking decisively against merely calculative thinking” if it is to avoid to “fall into bondage to them (the technical devises)” (Heidegger 1959, p. 53 - 54). And to do that we must once again learn to appreciate the richness of patience, reservedness, the courage to go slowly, hesitation and to be speechless in awe. For they, quoting Hölderlin, who are in awe “like painters, bring together the beauty of the earth”, a beauty that “is the earth in its beauty” (Heidegger 1943a, p. 155).

Thus, contemplative thinking *follows* being at awe. Or rather... Awe as a ‘gateway’ to *Being itself* as das Ereignis, as the Origin(ating of the beginning), is prerequisite to the ‘beingness of being’ of the *Human* being (lower case b) as “a *thinking*, that is a *contemplative* being” (Heidegger 1959, p. 47). When in contemplation then, the human being sets the world in motion. Something - or: some thing which is no longer a no-thing, yet still not *a* thing - happens! It is a state in which, says the German philosopher Josef Pieper (1952)

our soul is passive and receptive. We are, to be sure, awake and active, but our attention is not strained; we simply ‘look’ - in so far, that is, as we contemplate it and are not already ‘observing it’ (p. 26).

Contrary to the calculative thinking, which has affinity to what Pieper calls *observing*, the human being is careful *not* to begin figuring out, counting, measuring and to weighing up. Rather, the act of contemplation is a *metaphysical, ontological* ‘state of Being’ in which the human being “open its [one’s] eyes receptively [...] without calling for any effort or strain on its [our] part to possess them” (Pieper 1952, p. 26) - a reverent gazing of deep and solemn respect, “dwell(ing) at what lies close” (Heidegger 1959, p. 47). A seeing that has accustomed “the eye to quietness, to patience, to reserve” so as to “postpone judgement” (Nietzsche 1889, p. 36). Yet, nonetheless, active in the sense of setting in motion and allowing “whatever offers itself to one’s vision” (Pieper 1952, p. 26) to happen and which “passeth all understanding” (King James version of the Bible, Phillipians Ch. 4, v. 7).

<sup>III</sup> From German: “die Anfängnis des Anfangs” where “das Seiende in das Da aufstehen läßt. *Das Ereignis* ist das Seyn”.

<sup>IV</sup> In the English translation here quoted from, the German term ‘Besinnliches Denken’ is translated to ‘meditative thinking’. I believe that to be a distortion of the meaning in German as ‘Besinnliches’ is related to the word ‘Besinnung’ which means to ‘regain one’s composure’ and ‘peaceful reflection’, and ‘Besinnliches’ thus can only rightfully be translated with *contemplative*.





And so was I: dwelling at the wonder that caused me to hesitate and sojourn; for an eternal moment to keep the time from going, rest the hands on the clock, holding back the wind and stop the rotation of the earth. I stood there in astonished correspondence with a being that appeared and shined forth “in the appearance of Being” (Heidegger 1955, p. 49), in the clearing of *das Ereignis*, and gazed in a soundless, bewildered admiration and calm, wondering:

*What is that - that life itself!*

Not as a question *about*, but as a wondering *at* something (Visse, Hansen & Leget 2020, p. 7), hence the exclamation mark. It was a wondering, not “in the ‘pale’ intellectual sense that we might use today”, but in “the deep and abiding joy that comes with profound discovery” (Capobianco 2010, p. 82). It was a wondering at “a living phenomenon seen as a wonder” (Visse, Hansen & Leget 2020, p. 7). It was a wondering at the wonder of life. A permeating feeling of peace and tranquility came upon me, as I described it in the beginning of this paper.

In that eternal moment I was ‘at home’ in what I call the *yet-to-be-disclosed-place* (Mølholm 2019) of authentic Being. Out there in complete solitude and the total silence of the wasteland, where the only living organism besides the mouse was a trillion olives, cut off from the buzzing, hectic, noisy, flickering and constantly changing work-life I was, if only for a fleeting while, able to not only ‘hear’, but also answer, the “call from afar to afar” of the existential anxiety (Heidegger 1927, p. 251) and allow that “peculiar calm” that comes from it, to pervade me (Heidegger 1929, p. 100). For a moment I had managed to “unweave from the fabric of the world” (Mølholm & Hansen 2024/in press) and the losing of myself “in the publicness of the They and its idle talk” where I “fail to hear my [its] own self” (Heidegger 1927, p. 250). I was ‘at home’, freed from the stress of the everyday work-life.

In a late-modern society where the human being has succumbed to the imperative of performance and exploitation, where matters have to be smoothly integrated into “the stream of capital, information and communication”, and actions have to be “made operational - subordinate to a calculable, steerable and controllable process” (Han 2012, p. 1), everything that calls us to take a deep breath, slow down, be patient and reserved, hesitate, contemplate and let our hearts fill with wonder and awe is perceived as a poisoning of the well. They are each other’s negation. In a late-modern society where the ontic curiosity demands: *Tell me! Reveal your secrets and make yourself transparent! Let me know so I can control!*, everything that causes the late-modern human being to be dedicated to that which gives itself to it “as not yet, as to be... for the first time” (Heidegger 1923, S. 78)<sup>v</sup> is deemed a dangerous friction to unrestrained development, growth, innovation, creation and consumption. In that society, Hansen & Mølholm (2024, in press) writes, “the scientific and technological pursuit of the unattainable have brought the late-modern human being in a situation and relation with the world where they somehow have lost their connection to it, and to the rhythm of life itself.” The world and everything in it: the flora and fauna, materials and minerals has been turned into a storage room with no closing hours, ceilings or walls; with no-one to guard and run it, and with no-one currently taking the responsibility of filling it up again.<sup>vi</sup> Or, as Heidegger was quoted earlier, as *a gigantic gasoline station* treated with no consideration for the life of nature and men.

<sup>v</sup> Heidegger calls these moments *kairological moments* (Heidegger 1923, p. 78).

<sup>vi</sup> Each year, the *Global Footprint Network*, an international research organization, provides a report documenting “the date when humanity’s demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year”, called *Earth Overshoot Day*. “In 2023, Earth Overshoot Day lands on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. See: <https://www.overshootday.org/about/>. Richardson; K. et al (2023) concludes in a research article published on September 13<sup>th</sup>. 2023 that “the scientific updates and analyses presented



The late-modern human being is therefore no exception. It, too, is a resource to be exploited and utilized to its fullest. Tapping into what is today known as the *cognitive capital*, e.g., cogito, emotions, dedication, commitment, curiosity, attention, fantasy, innovation, creativity and empathy (Andersen 2013, p. 27ff), the human being is now living in what the German philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls the *Achievement Society* with its credo “yes, we can” (Han 2010, p. 8). Guided by the ethical imperative *if better is possible, then good is not good enough* (Hjortkjær 2020, p. 15), it has become “an *animal laborans* that exploits itself – and does so voluntarily, without external constraints [...] it is predator and prey at once” (Han 2010, p. 10); a performance subject that is both holding and using the whip that whips it (Han 2021, p. 27 - 28). To the individual human being the result is an alarming increase in the rate of stress, depression, burnout and anxiety. And not only psychologically, but to an extended degree also - and maybe first and foremost - existentially. Cut off from its authentic Being, from its “ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self” (Heidegger 1927, p. 258) and being ‘home’ in its Origin as Being, a deep sense of emptiness and alienation, and a feeling of increased isolation, pervades the late-modern human being (Rosa 2017) so that it has become still more difficult to *actively seek out a relationship* with that which rushes us by in still larger numbers and in a still more accelerated pace (Rosa 2013; Rosa 2017). For it cannot establish a deep and intimate relation to that which it only has a shallow connection and a fleeting, superficial contact. With no time, no calm and no patience to dwell and mesh with that which appears, it is impossible to be touched and affected, and to be ordained to serve the Other (Levinas & Levinas 1984, p. 195). Consequently, the late-modern human being is losing its ability to be “tuned through-and-through in addressed-ness” and attain to “an immediate and spontaneous, intensive relation to the world and nature”<sup>vii</sup> (Rosa 2016, cp. V.3) so that the world (including the self) is now becoming “silent, cold, indifferent or even repulsive” (Rosa 2013, p. 100).

The mounting crisis of the late-modern world, and not only the human societies, is a crisis of both detachment and dis-attachment stemming from the cutting off from authentic Being: from patience and reserve; from hesitation and leaving be; from the joyous clearing and the bewildered calm; from the marveling and wondering of the marvels and wonders of life. From awe. From understanding the insignificance of human life and “avoid emphasizing any particular, individual being, not even focusing on the human being”, Heidegger writes in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935, p. 4) and continues:

For what is this being, after all! Let us consider the earth within the dark immensity of space in the universe. We can compare it to a tiny grain of sand; more than a kilometer of emptiness extends between it and the next grain of its size; on the surface of this tiny grain of sand lives a stupefied swarm of supposedly clever animals, crawling all over each other, who for a brief moment have invented knowledge. [...]. And what is a human lifespan amid millions of years? Barely a move of the second hand, a breath. Within beings as a whole there is no justification to be found for emphasizing precisely *this* being that is called the human being and among which we ourselves happen to belong” (Heidegger 1935, p. 4 – 5).

But more than anything else, the crisis of the late-modern society is a crisis of *sense-ability* and *attainability*. It is a crisis stemming from a late-modern life in a high-speed society that has become so intense, that we have no time for rest, yet nonetheless crave for more because intensity “can be indistinguishable from presence” and “speed is an intoxicant” (Skårderud 1998, p. 18); where the human being has no defence- and regulatory system, no ‘mental immune system’ to ward off or limit the afflux of

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here confirms that humanity is today placing unprecedented pressure on Earth systems. Perhaps most worrying in terms of maintaining Earth system in a Holocene-like interglacial state is that all biosphere-related planetary boundary processes providing the resilience (capacity to dampen disturbance) of Earth system are at or close to a high-risk level of transgression. [...]. This update of the planetary boundaries framework may serve as a renewed wake-up call to humankind that Earth is in danger of leaving its Holocene-like state” (p. 11).

<sup>vii</sup> From German (own translation): *durchstimmende Angesprochenheit; einen unmittelbaren und intensiven Welt-beziehungsweise Sachbezug.*





*the positive* (Han 2010, p. 1), e.g., personal and professional growth and development, influence, flexibility, dedication, involvement, enthusiasm, causing a ‘constipation’ of an intoxicated, un-sense-able mental system. As a result, it is a crisis where a growing number of people do not realize how serious a mental condition they are in, before they are literally burned out, unable to perform even the simplest trifles of their everyday life; where they on Tuesday are speeding in the outer fast lane, but on Wednesday lying help- and hopelessly wrecked on the hard shoulder. Furthermore, it is therefore also a crisis of *attainability*. For without a ‘mental immune system’ regulating the intake, and a system that is mistaking speed and intensity with presence, and hyper-attention with intimacy, love and care, the patience and gentleness, reservedness and nearness that it takes to become present, attentive, intimate, loving and caring is becoming still more unattainable. Not to mention being able to actually take the time that it requires to reach the patience, gentleness, reservedness and nearness that it takes to get there at all. So, it has become a privilege for the very few to do, what I did in that month of July: for six weeks to disattach and disconnect from the everyday life; from electronic communication and from social media; from urgent matters and pressing responsibilities and walk across the Iberian Peninsula.



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<sup>1</sup> Sydende, stegende hede.

<sup>2</sup> Brændende, svidende.

<sup>3</sup> Klostergang, buegang, søjlegang (mod indre gård).

<sup>4</sup> Fremstønne (ytring); gispe, stønne.

<sup>5</sup> Pile, vimse eller rende rundt, stikke af.

<sup>6</sup> Visne kviste (sprigs er små kviste fra eksempelvis et blad).

<sup>7</sup> Voldsom stigning; pludselig stigning – an upward surge (sudden powerful forward or backward movement, especially by a crowd or by a natural force) in the strength or quantity of something; an increase.

<sup>8</sup> Involving or committing sacrilege – helligbrøde.

<sup>9</sup> Dumbfounded: forbløffet, målløs, lamslået.

<sup>10</sup> Pit contemplative thinking: sætte den kalkulative tænkning op imod...