

The Ethics of Thinking: Heidegger, Levinas, and Kierkegaard Rethinking Ethics

*Megan Altman
and Lee Braver*

ABSTRACT: Ethics usually focuses on actions, with thinking or unthinking only having significance insofar as they lead to good or bad behavior. Heidegger and Levinas, however, argue that thinking in certain ways, or not thinking in general, is ethical or unethical on its own rather than just by having good or bad consequences. Heidegger's early work makes unthinking conformity (regardless of to what) an important part of inauthenticity, while his later work turns the thinking of being into our central "ethical" task, intentionally blurring the distinction between thinking and acting. Levinas makes thinking about humans in a certain way – namely as thinkable, as fitting into and exhausted by comprehensible categories – itself an act of conceptual violence, regardless of what deeds follow from it. We conclude with Kierkegaard who criticized humanity's tendency to sleepwalk through their own lives, only waking up by confronting something unthinkable. This thought can be seen as a common source for both Heidegger and Levinas, as well as a way to keep the two in a continuously off-balance strife with each other.

KEYWORDS: Heidegger, Levinas, Kierkegaard, ethics, thinking

CONTACT: Department of Philosophy, Cornell College;
maltman@cornellcollege.edu
Department of Philosophy, University of South Florida;
lbraver@usf.edu

Thinking – more precisely, the attempt and the duty to think – is now approaching an era when the high demands which traditional thinking believed it was meeting, and pretended it had to meet, become untenable. (GA 8: 163/159)

How can we give thanks for this endowment, the gift of being able to think what is most thought-provoking, more fittingly than by giving thought to the most thought-provoking? The supreme thanks, then, would be thinking? And the profoundest thanklessness, thoughtlessness?... Thinking devotes its thought to what is to be thought, to that which in itself, of its own accord, wants to be thought about and thus innately demands that we think back to it. When we think what is most thought-provoking we think *properly* [*eigentlich*]. (GA 8: 146–7/143)

Ethics is about what we do. That seems like a self-evident proposition – ethics judges the things we do and don't do to and for others and ourselves. In Ethics classes, we lead students through thought experiments on whether it is right to lie to an axe-murderer, or sacrifice one for the good of many, and so on. Even when focused on virtue or character rather than deed, virtue gets cashed out in behavior and how we feel about it, and character is determined by the accretion of repeated behavior. Philosophers argue over which aspect of an act is the morally relevant one – consequences, motivation, character – but all agree on organizing the inquiry around this as the central notion. Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, is praxicentric.

It is, perhaps, the surest sign of a great philosopher that she uncovers those entrenched assumptions, agreed upon by all disputants to a debate, and subjects them to scrutiny. These assumptions are usually so deep and self-evident that they may never have been expressly stated, making their uncovering that much more difficult, and that much more important. When Nietzsche scrutinizes epistemology, for instance, he does not ask standard questions such as how to define truth, or what kind of evidence counts as justification; he opens *Beyond Good and Evil* with “strange, wicked, questionable questions!” that go all the way down.

That famous truthfulness of which all philosophers so far have spoken with respect – what questions has this will to truth not laid before us!... Indeed we came to a long halt at the question about the cause of this will – until we finally came to a complete stop before a still more basic question. We asked about the *value* of this will. Suppose we want truth: *why not rather* untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance?... And though it scarcely seems credible, it finally almost seems to us as if the problem had never even been put so far – as if we were the first to see it, fix it with our eyes, and *risk* it. For it does involve a risk, and perhaps there is none that is greater.¹

All those philosophers searching for truths, even seeking the truth of truth – have they once questioned why they ask the question of truth? Have they sought the truth of the pursuit of truth? The risk Nietzsche speaks of here in this “rendezvous...of questions and question marks,” imbues the reader not with the safe, gentle wonder at starry sky and moral law, but with a vertiginous wonder, an awe that easily transmutes into horror at the abyss beneath all seemingly solid grounds. As Heidegger says, “for close by essential anxiety as the horror of the abyss dwells awe” (GA 9: 307/234), a formula that works both directions, surely.

It is Heidegger who, perhaps more than any other philosopher, refuses to accept the self-evident notions that have been handled and worn down to banality. Even philosophers, those charged with the Socratic duty to examine presuppositions, use them without examination, as if doctrines and concepts “had fallen from heaven as a truth as clear as daylight” (GA 7: 9/QCT 6). The unquestioned relation between its titular topics is what inspired *Being and Time*, a self-evidence he notes in distinctly Nietzschean terms: “time, in the sense of ‘being [Sein] in time’, functions as a criterion for distinguishing realms of Being. Hitherto no one has asked or troubled to investigate how time has come to have this distinctive ontological function, or with what right anything like time functions as such a criterion.... ‘Time’ has acquired

this ‘self-evident’ ontological function ‘of its own accord’, so to speak” (GA 2: 25/SZ 18). His favorite question, “what is?”, brackets our presumption that we know how it is with the entity questioned.

This is perhaps the true significance of the ontological difference. We must open ourselves to radically different possibilities of how to conceive of, well, anything. The possibilities of just about everything are higher than their present actualities. The central problem addressed by *Being and Time* (as we have it) is that the Western philosophic tradition has conceived everything that is on a single model of being – presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) – whereas entities with radically different behavior crowd even our most immediate everyday experiences, as we use various tools to get through the day, let alone the tool-user’s way of being or the temporality of getting through our days. In the later work, he sees communities monolithically viewing the world from a single understanding of being for an epoch, shifting radically with the dawning of a new one but never going beyond beings or metaphysical theories of their beingness. This beyond is what is opened up by the ontological difference.

So when it comes to ethics, Heidegger does not simply accept the handed- and worn-down praxicentric model. Indeed, the text that most directly addresses the question of ethics, “Letter on Humanism,” begins precisely on this question: “We are still far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough” (GA 9: 313/239). Along with so much else, this essay sets itself the task of thinking anew what it means to act and to be an actor, for these questions must be considered before we can turn to those of how we should act. In other words, ontology must precede ethics because ethics presupposes ontology, though we should not trust these terms very far. Heidegger’s approach is holistic, impugning taken for granted divisions. Here, he rejects the distinction between ethics and ontology as well as that between thought and action.

Heidegger wants to rethink these divisions by rethinking, among other topics, thinking itself. As he says in the aptly titled lecture course *What Is Called Thinking?*, “we can learn thinking only if we radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally” (GA 8: 10/8). For one

thing, we need a concept of thinking that comes before its division from action: “such thinking is neither theoretical nor practical. It comes to pass before this distinction” (GA 9: 358/270). Given the near identity between theory and thought, any such redefinition will also alter our understanding of what the theoretical is, which then ripples out to reconceiving the nature of action, as the opening to the “Letter” indicates. Instead of opposing deed to thinking, or assembling some combination of their present understandings, we must transcend the distinction as a whole: “the deed of thinking is neither theoretical nor practical, nor is it the conjunction of these two forms of behavior” (GA 9: 362/275). Such a reconception would have a significant impact on anything presupposing them as preconceptions.

And here we come to our question. If one liberates traditionally praxicentric ethics from this center to organize it instead around thinking rethought, what might such a noocentric ethics be like? How would an ethics of thinking provoke us to rethink ethics? How can we think of an ethics of thinking, and of non-thinking? Many have written about the dangers of non-thinking in that it leads to unethical behavior. However, the fact that it is condemned for *leading* to evil indicates that it is not *itself* evil; it is only blameworthy insofar as it conduces to bad behavior, a badness independently determined. As philosophers, thinking is rather important to us, and we have certainly thought a lot about cognitive norms: be honest, only believe what you have thought through for yourself and have sufficient reason for, give your opponent the best possible argument consistent with the text, and so on – an ethics of scholarship and responsible belief, somewhat on the model of Aristotle’s virtues of thought. In this paper, however, we are going to ask about the notion of thinking as *intrinsically* good or evil, not because of what it leads to or what it means for scholarship, but ethically considered. We will consult with Heidegger, the great thinker of thinking, and Levinas, the thinker devoted to ethics, to examine this issue. This will bring a broader examination of what ethics is in its wake.

I. EARLY HEIDEGGER

It would be hard to find a more thoughtful thinker of thoughtlessness than the early Heidegger. *Being and Time* makes it the cornerstone of inauthenticity and the subject of numerous descriptions and analyses (this is, after all, the man who spent 100 pages in another work from this period cataloging boredom in fascinating detail). The Introduction defines phenomenology as the study of what shows itself, yet it finds its true essence when it turns to the underside of the apparent. “What is it that by its very essence is *necessarily* the theme whenever we exhibit something *explicitly*? Manifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does *not* show itself at all: it is something that lies *hidden*” (GA 2: 47/SZ 35). This idea, that the search for the manifest is the search for the hidden, has itself been hidden, in particular from the philosopher who created this philosophical search for the manifest. Husserl’s *epoché* shows us the undergirdings of experience, the processes of thinking that constitute the manifest world in its manifestness from backstage. While this thinking is proximally and for the most part hidden, bracketing the manifest manifests it. Heidegger’s response is that even this second-order manifestation – the manifestation of the hidden machinery of manifestation – still hides something. Husserl’s endless quest to bring forth the structures of thinking leaves those of unthinking unthought. And unthinking, it turns out, is imperative to think.

For we find ourselves fallen, always already underway, having made innumerable decisions without deliberateness, without deliberation. We awaken to our lives as on-going, finding ourselves heir to our as-yet unowned thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), to the guilt of debts incurred and commitments made long ago. We have lived in the world as one does, in the frictionless flow that carries one along on an existential inertia, and it is light and comfortable and we barely know we’re doing it because we’re barely aware in general and not really *doing* anything. We are disburdened of the heavy task of leading our lives if we merely follow, never having to worry about doing wrong as long as we do what every “one” knows to be right.

But the thing is, we do awaken. No one gets a completely smooth ride here; everyone receives their share of shocks and outrages, disappointments and defeats. These are what bring one to the precipice where one can choose to choose or, paradoxically, choose not to choose by choosing inauthenticity and sink once more into the warm embrace of *das Man* (the “they” or “anyone”).

To the extent that this Being towards its potentiality-for-Being is itself characterized by freedom, Dasein *can* comport itself towards its possibilities, even *unwillingly*; it *can* be inauthentically; and factually it is inauthentically, proximally and for the most part. The authentic “for-the-sake-of-which” has not been taken hold of; the projection of one’s own potentiality-for-Being has been abandoned to the disposal of the “they” (GA 2: 256-7/SZ 193).

This is the inauthenticity of thoughtlessness, where we do not own our own lives, do not make our own selves or make them our own, but settle for and into ready-made, off the shelf lives. This is to not be my self, this self that I have become and must take up, and more broadly it is to not be myself as the kind of being that I am. We do not own up to the obligation we owe ourselves to own ourselves.

By performing the various projects associated with the for-the-sake-of-which’s that define our selves – e.g., showing up to class to be a teacher, to our kids’ sports games to be a parent – we satisfy ourselves that we have satisfied our responsibilities, and we have, since performing a range of actions is what makes up a social role. But we’re not taking responsibility *for* these responsibilities, the ontological responsibility to be the one who took them on and takes them forward, to own up to the fact that it is we who have chosen and continue to sustain them, what Heidegger means by the Kierkegaardian phrase, “choosing to choose.” Instead, we perform our worldly functions as one does, acting out our personae in actions so thoughtless they barely count as acts, adding up to a self that barely counts as a self. “Proximally and for the most part,

Dasein *is not itself*” (GA 2: 155/SZ 116) because, for the most part, Dasein is not really *a* self at all. “As they-self, the particular Dasein has been *dispersed* into the ‘they’, and must first find itself. . . . *Proximally*, it is not ‘I’, in the sense of my own Self, that ‘am’, but rather the Others, whose way is that of the ‘they’” (GA 2: 172/SZ 129). I am, for the most part, as the others are because I am as others, as one of the crowd, as, to use Hegel’s phrase, an I that is a we, or a they. To be oneself thoughtlessly, because that’s what one has always done, because that’s what one does, is to not *be* a self.

Thoughtlessness sounds like a simple absence, but Heidegger portrays it as a strangely alert business, continuously minding our mindlessness by seeking out and disarming those terrible experiences that threaten to awaken, less a passive *not* doing than an active *undoing*. All meaning in the world starts slipping away into horrifying nothingness – “it was nothing,” we tell ourselves. The dread of death strikes in the middle of the night, scarcely allowing breath – “that’s years away, no need to think about that gloomy stuff now.” Conscience calls on us to recognize our complicity in our sleepwalking through a life we witness more than we live – “this is just what one does.” If we are the being who thinks, as so many philosophers have defined us, then to be thoughtless is a betrayal of who we really are, a failure to live out and live up to that ancient motto of perfectionist ethics: become who you are (GA 2: 194/SZ 145). We must first find ourselves ontologically so that we may become ourselves ontically;² we must intentionally make ourselves be the beings who must make their selves with intention and resolve (*Entschlossenheit*), fighting the tendency to drift through what we have fallen into.

We become ourselves by choosing deliberately, a choice that must be made thought-fully and care-fully. This is no longer a thinking limited to theory, but rather a thoughtful engagement with our choices, with the world, with ourselves. Heidegger describes understanding (*Verstehen*) not as thematic knowledge but as a kind of know-how, the ability to navigate and handle situations, and says that in our primordial understanding, “as an *existentiale*, that which we have such competence

over is not a ‘what’, but Being as existing” (GA 2: 191-2/SZ 143). This is a thinking that has broken free from the theoretical-practical division, no longer defined in its opposition to acting-in-the-world but in terms of it. What we must come to understand, ultimately, is how to exist, how to be the kind of being we are: “the meaning of Dasein’s Being is not something free-floating which is other than and ‘outside of’ itself, but is the self-understanding Dasein itself” (GA 2: 430/SZ 325). Moreover, this understanding waxes and wanes along with our authenticity: “this understanding develops or decays along with whatever kind of Being Dasein may possess at the time” (GA 2: 22/SZ 16). Authentically understanding oneself, understanding one’s authentic self, is not comprehended but enacted, lived out by (along with other factors) pressing forward into possibilities that we recognize *as* possible, i.e., as our responsibilities since they arise only in response to our projections the way the Situation only springs up in response to our moment-of-vision (*Augenblick*). Our being self-defining defines our being, and resolutely assuming our guilt requires us to take up and take over the unending project of defining ourselves, the project of projecting. “As projecting, understanding is the kind of Being of Dasein in which it *is* its possibilities as possibilities” (GA 2: 193/SZ 145). Understanding is a thinking that is an acting that is a way of being; it is understanding our way of being and taking responsibility for it, choosing the form of existence we’ve been thrown into. This is our ethical obligation to think for ourselves.

II. LATER HEIDEGGER

Heidegger’s early work on the ethics of thoughtlessness is innovative in many ways, but it does follow in quite a few footsteps – all of those philosophers startling somnolence, starting with Socrates’ attempt to wake the sleeping horse of Athens. The later work, on the other hand, has no predecessors, aside perhaps from the gnomic sayings of the Pre-Socratics (at least, on Heidegger’s reading of them).

Heidegger now reconsiders not just what kind of activity we can be held responsible *for*; but also what it is that we can be responsible *to*. In *Being and Time*, the primary source and object of our responsibility

was ourselves, as both caller and called of conscience. This self is re-conceived quite originally there, but it is still recognizable as me, as the self I call mine – indeed, mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*) is the very first way he defines selfhood once he begins his inquiry proper, in the second sentence of the body of the book (GA 2: 56/SZ 41). His explanation of care, the penultimate self-defining structure, then closes Division One’s analysis of Dasein on the same note: “‘care for oneself’...would be a tautology” (GA 2: 256/SZ 193). While there is a discussion of authentic and beneficial versus inauthentic and harmful relations to others (GA 2: 163-4/SZ 122), it is brief and sketchy almost to the point of self-satire. No wonder that, “soon after *Being and Time* appeared a young friend asked [Heidegger], ‘When are you going to write an ethics?’” (GA 9: 353/268).

Nevertheless, obligations to oneself are a long-established category of responsibilities explored by many ethical systems; Heidegger just focused on these to the exclusion of others. This was perhaps inevitable given the ultimate isolation of Dasein. The anticipation of death “makes manifest that all Being-alongside the things with which we concern ourselves, and all Being-with Others, will fail us when our ownmost potentiality-for Being is the issue. Dasein can be *authentically itself* only if it makes this possible for itself of its own accord” (GA 2: 349-50/SZ 263). The equi-primordially awarded being-with earlier in the book seems to wilt “under the eyes of Death” (GA 2: 506/SZ 382), relegating relations to world and others to an essentially secondary status – decidedly *less* equi-primordial than my mineness. In the end, towards our end, we are left with a lonely pledge: “resoluteness constitutes the *loyalty* of existence to its own Self” (GA 2: 516 /SZ 391). Dasein’s authenticity is the tautology of self-care writ large, an echo chamber where we only hear our own voice commanding us to honor our commitments to ourselves. This self-to-self salvation, redemption concentrated into a solitary, cloistered point, is why the dispersion into *das Man* is so terrible in its banality.

His later work goes much further in abandoning traditional assumptions and categories, leaving behind this trace of ethical solipsism with them. Perhaps the most radical idea for our interests is the notion

that our primary obligation is not due to humans, nor to society, or animals, or any kind of agent – in fact, not to any being whatsoever. His “Letter on Humanism” dispenses with humanism alongside ethics as part of the same thinking.

Does such thinking – granted that there is something in a name – still allow itself to be described as humanism? Certainly not so far as humanism thinks metaphysically. Certainly not if humanism is existentialism and is represented by what Sartre expresses: *précisément nous sommes sur un plan où il y a seulement des hommes* [We are precisely in a situation where there are only human beings]. Thought from *Being and Time*, this should say instead: *précisément nous sommes sur un plan où il y a principalement l’Être* [We are precisely in a situation where principally there is Being]. (GA 9: 334/254)⁵

Sartre argued that existentialism is a humanism and a kind of ethics because it focuses on human freedom and responsibility, addressing how we should act towards each other. Heidegger’s thought does neither, turning instead to an entirely new kind of consideration.

Every conception of humanity, like every conception of everything, emerges from and depends upon an understanding of being specific to a particular epoch. Heidegger is interested in these epochal understandings, looking downstream to see how they determine our experience of beings (such as humanity), but he is primarily interested in peering upstream to their source. He follows the direction of their pointing backwards, to try to catch a glimpse of being itself. Here, of course, we must keep the ontological difference in mind: you cannot think of being in any terms used for beings or for metaphysical theories of their beingness. Nor should we think of ourselves as a being, at least not *simpliciter*; we have an ontico-ontological nature as the being with a special relationship to being itself.

If we are not thinking of being as in any way a being, then neither can we think of this relationship in metaphysical terms, as some

kind of connection or intertwining mixture. That kind of relationship casts the relata as entities and their association as a correlation of two entities, a relationship that can only be external and secondary to their independent natures. Instead, we must rethink being and humanity from their relationship to each other instead of starting with the terms and then trying to hook them together. This extraordinarily different perspective causes endless difficulties of expression: “but how – provided we really ought to ask such a question at all – how does Being relate to ek-sistence? Being itself is the relation” (GA 9: 332/253). Just asking the question – the question he considers “in fact the one single question which all traditional thinking must first be brought to face” – prevents us from answering it, since it retains an ontic grammar that forces our thinking into inappropriate conceptions. “It is a question of abysmal difficulty, simply because our seemingly correct posing of the question in fact muddles the question fundamentally. . . . To speak to the heart of the matter: there is no such thing here as members of the relation, nor the relation as such” (GA 8: 85/79). Truly understanding the relationship between the two means understanding that they are not two, nor are they in a relationship, for that implies that they could also not be related.

His struggle with language on this issue reached its zenith when he began crossing out the word, “preventing the almost ineradicable habit of representing ‘being’ as something standing somewhere on its own that then on occasion first comes face-to-face with human beings” (GA 9: 393/310). In order to avoid this ontic depiction of humanity and being as independent entities that contingently conjoin, Heidegger stretches our ontological imaginations into unprecedented shapes. It is not the case that we are *in* the clearing; “the human being occurs essentially in such a way that he is the ‘there’ [*das ‘Da’*], that is, the clearing of Being” (GA 9: 325/248).⁴ Nor is being what occurs within the clearing; “the clearing itself is Being” (GA 9: 332/253). It is not that we *have* a relationship with being; “man is essentially this relationship of responding to Being, and he is only this” (GA 11: 39/31). Nor does being have a relationship to us; “being itself is the relation” (GA 9: 332/253). We are the clearing, and

so is being; we are the relationship, and so is being – the Same but not identical. We belong together such that neither can be nor be understood apart from the other; we both *are* only at the meeting point. “The fundamental idea of my thinking is exactly that Being, relative to the manifestation of Being, *needs* man and, conversely, man is only man in so far as he stands within the manifestation of Being.”⁵ Being is the appearing of all that appears, humanity the perceiver of that appearance. Nothing can appear without someone appeared to, so being needs humanity, but nor can anyone perceive without something appearing to her, so humanity needs being. We only think because thoughts strike us, and being presses in upon us to be thought.

To the degree that we succeed at this extraordinarily difficult cognitive task, stretching our unlimber ontological imagination to encompass radically new shapes, we become capable of accommodating radically new thoughts. “Opposition to ‘humanism’ in no way implies a defense of the inhuman but rather opens other vistas” (GA 9: 348/265). Along with reconceiving humanity, being, and thinking, what ethics is and what it can be also comes in for reexamination, especially in its traditional distinction from the study of being.

Before we attempt to determine more precisely the relationship between “ontology” and “ethics” we must ask what “ontology” and “ethics” themselves are. It becomes necessary to ponder whether what can be designated by both terms still remains near and proper to what is assigned to thinking, which as such has to think above all the truth of Being.

Of course if both “ontology” and “ethics,” along with all thinking in terms of disciplines, become untenable, and if our thinking therewith becomes more disciplined, how then do matters stand with the question about the relation between these two philosophical disciplines? (GA 9: 353-4/269).

Heidegger's new vistas open out onto what we can call an ontological ethics, retaining the terms he is trying to get rid of, momentarily, to make the transition more intelligible. Ontological ethics is not locked into praxicentrism, nor an anthropocentrism where those who count as moral agents and who can make claims on us are limited to humans or rational beings or beings who can suffer. It transcends the traditional limitation to those beings. Indeed, it transcends beings entirely.

In ontological ethics, our primary responsibility is to being, and this is because of the kind of onto-ontological being that we are, modifying the earlier "existence" into "ek-sistence" to emphasize the sense that we are always already outside of ourselves in the clearing of being.

If the name "ethics," in keeping with the basic meaning of the word *ēthos*, should now say that "ethics" ponders the abode of man, then that thinking which thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of man, as one who ek-sists, is in itself the original ethics. However, this thinking is not ethics in the first instance, because it is ontology. (GA 9: 356–7/271)

He is retaining the word "ethics" but because of its root in *ēthos*, which "means abode, dwelling place. The word names the open region in which man dwells. The open region of his abode allows what pertains to man's essence, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear" (GA 9: 354/269). Ontological ethics cares for our essence,⁶ which is still ek-sistence but which now fully means standing in and as the clearing. It lets our essence be as the "letting-be" (*Gelassenheit*) of being, fulfilling itself by accomplishing (*Vollbringen*) its essential non-relation with being. This replaces traditional ethics' focus on agentic actions with dwelling in the place where our essence takes place as making a place for the taking place of anything at all. This grateful celebration of the ability to think, of our openness *per se*, could be the kind of festival or sacred game called for by the madman to follow the death of god,⁷ hence Heidegger's use of religious tones and terms. This thinking "means as much as devotion. This word possesses the special

tone of the pious and piety, and designates the devotion of prayer, only because it denotes the all-comprehensive relation of concentration upon the holy and the gracious" (GA 8: 150/WCT 145). This is why the "Letter" approvingly quotes Heraclitus' proclamation about his homely abode, his *ēthos*: "for here too the gods are present" (GA 9: 355/270). Our clearing, itself cleared and gleaming, can be a place for the new gods to visit, as temple statues were for the Greeks.

Ontological ethics remains perfectionist because it allows us to become who we are by tending to our essence as the clearing, which we do by attending to the world as it manifests itself to us. However, while Heidegger does phrase it this way at times, this does not return the commitment to the loyalty to the self of *Being and Time*'s authenticity. Instead, "the point is that in the determination of the humanity of man as ek-sistence what is essential is not man but Being" (GA 9: 333-4/254). Our obligations and responsibilities are not to ourselves but to being, and something like our self enters into it insofar as it is the way we have responsibilities and the way to fulfill them. We have a responsibility because we have a response-ability, a duty to respond because of the capacity. Kant got it backwards: in ontological ethics, possibility implies necessity; it's because we can that we ought to rather than because we ought to that we can.

If being is the appearing or manifestation of reality and we are the only ones (as far as we know) who can bring this to occur, we have a heavy responsibility indeed, albeit one which is simultaneously the greatest gift possible. It is only around us that the universe is not dark, silent, cosmically unnoticed, comprehensively uncomprehended. This mute darkness is merely how we must imagine it, of course; as Berkeley pointed out, we cannot help but imagine it *qua* imagined, and hence as appearing, thereby omitting precisely what is so tragic here. The mere occurrence of occurring is not all that is possible, however. If being is manifestation, then the more something manifests of itself, the more it is. We can serve as midwives to creation, bringing more layers and details into existence through our ek-sistence: "to think of appropriating as the event of appropriation means to contribute to this

self-vibrating realm” (GA 11: 46/37-8). Heidegger seems to believe that we have an obligation to bring the things of this world into the light, to let them be and to let them be as much as we can. Here is where the radicalness of his anti-humanism comes through: our responsibilities are to inanimate objects, to artworks, to rocks and rivers and stars, and only further down the line does it seem that we start thinking of what we owe to each other.

It’s a little like Leibniz’s system, where God surveys all possible things yearning to be, tacitly imploring Him to be created. God chooses the combination that maximizes the number of entities existing because being is good; the more of it, the better. He does this by creating the largest number of monads that can fit together into a harmonious whole – the best of all possible worlds – but also just by selecting monads as his building material. These are minds, entities that represent to themselves the entire universe from beginning to end from their particular perspectives. The universe is thereby effectively repeated with and within each monad; any significant difference between these recreations and the “real” creation largely rests on a confusion, time and space being merely well-founded phenomena anyway. Instead of just one universe, God gets the number of monads squared number of universes with no extra construction, picking up a massive ontological expansion on the cheap.

Similarly, Heidegger seems to see things as bursting with a *conatus* or drive to be revealed, to manifest themselves and show all that they are. Metaphysically, this leads into all sorts of paradoxes about the being of unrevealed entities,⁸ but phenomenologically, it captures the phenomenality of phenomena. Being is thought-provoking; instead of our conscience, now it is being that calls on us, calling us to think it because it “always wants to be thought about” (GA 8: 131/126). This is what he learned from the experience of doing phenomenology. More important than any particular experience that phenomenology showed him was just the experience of showing itself, the experience *that* experience shows itself. Patiently examining entities, dwelling on or “staying with things” (GA 7: 153/PLT 149), revealed them to have so many more layers

than thoughtless everyday brushes with them suggest. Turning the light of attention onto things makes them grow, stretch, and unfurl layer upon layer of precise subtleties which in retrospect seem like they were just waiting for the heedful eye to display their hidden intricacies. This is perhaps most apparent in the appreciation of artworks. When one spends time on a great work – absorbed by a painting, listening raptly to a piece of music – it keeps revealing more and more strata of fascination, teeming with details of beauty that draw one in as one draws them out in an exquisite *pas de deux*.

This revelation takes many forms, although Heidegger privileges those of language. Philosophy – or what he comes to call thinking – draws forth the world in its non-totalizable structure of interlocking questions and answers, puzzles and reasons. Each past epochal understanding of being that he lovingly reconstitutes resurrects a dormant way for beings to be, like deeper versions of those long-dead worlds whose ghosts haunt museum antiquities (GA 2: 503/SZ 380). Poetry articulates reality in such a way that we become explicitly aware of the language that is doing that articulation. More intense than ordinary unconcealments, this is “the revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearance...that which shines forth most purely” (GA 7: 35-6/QCT 34).

Heidegger’s stated objection to humanism is that it doesn’t place humanity high enough, not fully appreciating the unique role we have to play. “This dignity lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment – and with it, from the first, the concealment – of all essential unfolding on this earth... Everything, then, depends upon this: that we ponder this rising and that, recollecting, we watch over it” (GA 7: 33/QCT 32). This is the task we have been charged with; this is the obligation we must discharge. In another redefining of terms from *Being and Time*, Heidegger spins thrownness from the idea that we have been abandoned purposelessly in an uncaring universe into the giving of a destination in our destiny (*Geschick*), a for-the-sake-of-which we are fated for (*Schicksal*). “Man is rather ‘thrown’ from Being itself into the truth of Being, so that ek-sisting in this fashion he might guard the truth of Being, in

order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are” (GA 9: 330/252). We owe gratitude for this ability, a gratitude best expressed simply in exercising it: thinking is thanking. This thinking is a “devotion: a constant concentrated abiding with something” (GA 8: 144/140) where we lovingly let beings become what they are by helping them come to appearance as thoroughly and vibrantly as possible. As there is no agent to whom we owe thanks – being is not a being, after all – this takes place well outside any standard ethical consideration. “Original thanking is the thanks owed for being. That thanks alone gives rise to thinking of the kind we know as retribution and reward in the good and bad sense. But thanking enacted by itself, as payment and repayment, remains too easily bogged down in the sphere of mere conventional recompense, even mere business” (GA 8: 145/141). This is not beyond good and evil, but before them.

Heidegger’s notion of original thanking brings out the two levels of ontological ethics, which align with the ontological difference. The first level is letting beings be, while the second lets being be.

The clearing grants first of all the possibility of the path to presence, and grants the possible presencing of that presence itself. We must think *alētheia*, unconcealment, as the clearing that first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other. The quiet heart of the clearing is the place of stillness from which alone the possibility of the belonging together of Being and thinking, that is, presence and apprehending, can arise at all. The possible claim to a binding character or commitment of thinking is grounded in this bond (GA 14: 84/OTB 68).

The clearing is the opening to any kind of presence, enabling anything to present itself. The first level of ontological ethics cultivates this presence by allowing the richest presentation of the world that we can. But we can reach further – or rather, nearer – and bring that very presence itself to presence, appreciating this unthinkable generous opportunity

of thinking that we've been given by thinking it. Poetry does this by making what is present shine in linguistic splendor, bringing words as words into their own saying; thinking does this by thinking being, bringing the clearing into its own clearing. "It is necessary for thinking to become explicitly aware of the matter here called clearing" (GA 14: 81/OTB 65). When we give thought to that which gives us thinking, when we allow that which allows presence to present itself, then "the essence, the coming to presence, of Being enters into its own emitting of light" (GA 79: 74/QCT 45). This is the highest duty of thinking; this is what authenticity is in an ethics of thinking.

How can we give thanks for this endowment, the gift of being able to think what is most thought-provoking, more fittingly than by giving thought to the most thought-provoking? The supreme thanks, then, would be thinking? And the profoundest thanklessness, thoughtlessness?...Pure thanks is rather that we simply think – think what is really [*eigentlich*] and solely given, what is there to be thought....Thinking devotes its thought to what is to be thought, to that which in itself, of its own accord, wants to be thought about and thus innately demands that we think back to it. When we think what is most thought-provoking we think *properly* [*eigentlich*]. (GA 8: 146-7/143)

Being authentic (*eigentlich*) is authentically thinking being which authentically gives us thought; this is our loyalty and this is our gratitude. We are beholden to behold and to hold in safekeeping the beholding in which all that is to be is held.

Just to drive the point home, Heidegger continues his recasting of his early terms with care (*Sorge*). Whereas before, care for anything or anyone was essentially derivative of care for myself, my caring about being a caring person who cares about and for others,⁹ I now have a higher calling. "As ek-sisting, man sustains Da-sein in that he takes the *Da*, the clearing of Being, into 'care'" (GA 9: 327/249). Care is now,

above all, care of and for being. This comes first, before the possibility of caring for myself can even arise – an impossible priority in the conceptual structure of *Being and Time* – since the self is now understood *from* its relationship to being.¹⁰ To make sure we haven't missed the point, he also redefines fallenness (*Verfallen*), eliminating any whiff of traditional values in favor of his ontological ethics.

Forgetting the truth of Being in favor of the pressing throng of beings unthought in their essence is what ensnarement [*Verfallen*] means in *Being and Time*. This word does not signify the Fall of Man understood in a “moral-philosophical” and at the same time secularized way; rather, it designates an essential relationship of man to Being within Being's relation to the essence of man. Accordingly, the terms “authenticity” and “inauthenticity,” which are used in a provisional fashion, do not imply a moral-existential or an “anthropological” distinction but rather a relation which, because it has been hitherto concealed from philosophy, has yet to be thought for the first time, an “ecstatic” relation of the essence of man to the truth of Being. (GA 9: 332-3/253)

Fallenness is forgetting being while care is caring for being, which we do authentically or inauthentically depending on how we think – these, not good and evil or kind and cruel, are the poles of ontological ethics.

Earlier, it was conscience that called to us in silence, a voice that turned out to come from ourselves in the insular circularity of self-care, tuning out all others in the silent anticipation of death. Now, the heart of stillness is not our ownmost non-relational individuality, nor our authentic selves calling to our fallen selves. Now it is the place of belonging, our most relational relation, our ek-static intimacy with being that draws us out of ourselves and binds us to this commitment, to take up the responsibility to be a responding. “A belonging to Being prevails within man, a belonging which listens to Being because it is appropriated to Being” (GA 11: 39/31). We are not called up to take up a

debt of guilt, but of gratitude. Heidegger's later work restores the early work's primordially of being-with, now in the form of Being-with.

This is the ultimate deed of thinking, its self-fulfillment through bringing being to its fullest. We may be thinking at all times, yet proximally and for the most part we do so unthinkingly, thoughtless of what we have been given just to be able to think. If the early work commands us to choose to choose, the later implores us to think our thinking. "Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man," which here "means to unfold [it] into the fullness of its essence" (GA 9: 313/239). Thinking brings this relationship to its most complete, most generous, and most fertile fulfillment, to its opulent and opalescent luminosity, thereby bringing each of the two to theirs in their singular Sameness. Much is made of the connection between "response" and "responsibility," but for ontological ethics the two are virtually indistinguishable. Our ethico-ontological responsibility is precisely to respond, to respond to beings and to being calling us to attend to them and to tend the call itself, and in so doing, letting them be, letting being be, and becoming who we are.

III. LEVINAS

Levinas is having none of it. To conceive of our responsibilities as owed to being is not a higher ethics or an ethics reconceived; it simply isn't ethics. In fact, it's worse than that – it's a way to dodge our actual responsibilities, which can only be to others. There can be no ethics regarding non-humans,¹¹ for they lack the face that calls and commands – the origin of the very possibility of ethics. It is our response to *le visage d'Autrui* ("the face of the other") that enables us to have responsibilities at all, and these never escape that orbit.

Ethics is obedience – or at least responding – to the command issued from the other's face: the command not to kill, not to harm the vulnerable, to clothe the destitute and feed the hungry, and one of the lessons we learn from it is that all faces are vulnerable, destitute, hungry. These responses are deeds, yet thinking, and non-thinking, play crucial roles here. Just as Heidegger believes that, as far as we know,

only we are open to the call of being and so can let being be, Levinas thinks that only we receive the commandment to be ethical and so only we can be or fail to be good. We are the precious possibility of goodness in a universe of cold actuality. However, the shock and pain of staring into the blinding light of judgment forever finding us wanting encourages us to turn away, to dampen the awful call. We try not to see the other *as* an other, turning their face from the numinously seeing, accusing, commanding force into the seen casing of a colleague or stranger. Rather like Sartre's analysis of "the look" (*le regard*), we seek to disarm its intensity by turning it into a known identity, an arrangement of features – thus placing a cover over the howling sublime.

This is Levinas' analog to fallen Dasein going along to get along, dismissing the dread of conscience, anxiety, or death as melodramatic dwelling on unpleasanties, but instead of self-harm, this is genuinely ethical since it is something we do to others. This is the first Levinasian evil that non-thinking does. Turning a blind eye lets us get on with our day instead of standing transfixed and paralyzed under the weight of an unbearable guilt; we can do what we need to do, which may, after all, include inflicting some form of pain – giving a bad grade, say, or rejecting a paper. Disobeying God's imperative as channeled through the sacred being in front of me is shattering, so I tune it out. This is an intentional inattention, a purposeful unthinking, and it is what enables us to hurt each other without hurting ourselves. *Not*-thinking the other is a positive act, a choice made, a guilt incurred. We deaden the raw nerve of the other, dampen the blazing shard of incandescence burning us, and so dim the light of the world.

Yet, like Heidegger, Levinas adds a further level. It is true that this non-thinking is conducive to causing harm, but, as we saw in the beginning of this paper, that way of seeing it separates the non-thinking from the harm caused, making the former into merely a tool that brings the latter about as something distinct. Non-thinking would then be a way that evil could happen, not evil in and of itself.

Levinas, however, believes that just the act of seeing the other as a non-face, not allowing the other to come across in their full otherness,

is already harm done. This is where his ethics takes on some of Heidegger's rethinking of non-thinking, borrowing some of the structure of ontological ethics (though he would never admit it). According to Levinas, if I do not recognize you as a full person, inexhaustible in your infinity, then I am subsuming you under a category that reduces you to the same, and that is an ethical wrong perpetrated by committing an ontological cruelty, regardless of what actions may follow. My obligation to the other, in addition to not harming them and to providing them aid and succor, is also one of thinking about them in the right way, which is quite a challenge. "The unique is the other in an eminent way: he doesn't belong to a genus or doesn't remain within his genus."¹² Thinking for Levinas is by its nature a way of categorizing and, hence, totalizing; understanding understands its subject as an instantiation of a known type, branding it with an identity, a handle to grasp it by. "Knowledge is a relation of the *Same* with the *Other* in which the Other is reduced to the Same and divested of its strangeness;...the other is already appropriated, already *mine*."¹³ Dasein's mineness keeps her within an ontological shell of selfness where care can only be for oneself in the end; Levinas extends this self-centered mineness to the other, because Dasein absorbs them into her world as just another tool to be used for her self-making project. This is aided by thinking: to think is to conceptualize which is to strip away the uniqueness of entities and, more importantly, the infinite facets of the face. It is not just non-thinking, but thought as traditionally conceived which is unethical, since thought is intrinsically thoughtless: "when the Other enters into the horizon of knowledge, it already renounces alterity.... It *infinitely* overflows the bounds of knowledge."¹⁴

So the impossible task before us is to think the other in the right way, which means as unthinkable. As Levinas put it, "the idea of the infinite consists precisely and paradoxically in thinking more than what I thought while nevertheless conserving it in its excessive relation to thought. The idea of the infinite consists in grasping the ungraspable while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable."¹⁵ Intriguingly, this paradoxical relationship echoes what Heidegger says of artworks: "earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate it. It causes

every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction.... The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undisclosable" (GA 5: 33/25). Art, though, is nothing but a distraction for Levinas, a way to disburden ourselves of the one true responsibility. It can never amount to more than Nero's fiddling as people burn. The way Heidegger feels about van Gogh's painting of shoes is the attitude Levinas wants to instill in us for the other: to let them come forth in all of their unassimilable otherness, their incomprehensible complexities that we embrace instead of analyze, cherish rather than sort into categories and thereby master.

As with Heidegger, this ethics alters how we conceive of subjectivity. Where Heidegger wants us to understand humanity from its relationship to being, Levinas sees us in light of the face. We are open to anything outside ourselves, we are something like a clearing, only because the commandment of the other breaks into our narcissistic reverie and yanks us into the cold realm of unsatisfiable responsibilities and unavoidable guilt. When we seek to disarm this through understanding, we are seeking to regain mastery over our world and our selves. But any such mastery can come only after we have been pulled open like an oyster, traumatically exposed, and it cannot but be a betrayal of the other, a retreat into safety where nothing genuine is at stake. Levinas, too, frames his new conception as a reformation of Husserlian phenomenology, which only fills empty intuitions with meanings that it constitutes within an already set horizon of expectation. For Levinas, however, the true encounter occurs "through the overturning of intentionality – by the fact that contrary to the perfect mastery of the object by the subject in intentionality, the Infinite unseats its idea. This overturning consists in the fact that the I *receives* absolutely and learns absolutely (though not in the Socratic sense) a signification that it has not itself given."¹⁶ Contra Kant, it is heteronomy alone that can truly command, but where Heidegger hears only being's call to think it, Levinas sees the face imploring us not to understand it. Being calls us home; the other summons us to a pilgrimage that will take us into foreign lands, far from all we have ever known or found comfort in.

IV. CONCLUDING UNTHINKING POSTSCRIPT

Both philosophers rethink ethics with a new emphasis on and understanding of thinking, but they think about it differently, disagreeing about what is most basic and what is most authoritative. Heidegger's revenge, or the return of the ontological, is that Levinas is himself acknowledging the crucial importance of getting the ontology of the other right, or perhaps better, not getting it wrong. The relationship between the two thinkers in general, and specifically on ontology, and even more specifically on the ontological difference, is a topic of considerable debate. The only point we wish to make here is that the negative clearing away that the ontological difference does, liberating philosophy from thinking exclusively in terms of beings, no matter however various, is a necessary step for Levinas's ethics as well. It is only if we can think the other otherwise than as an entity, not as just another me over there the way Husserl did when he brought the solipsistic tradition to its logical conclusion, it is only apart from this thought that ethics can occur. Without this thought, we can only conceive of God as an entity, locking us into what Levinas calls superstition or paganism; it is a short step from even the philosophers' sophistication of an omniscient being to the child's drawing of an old man with a beard and sandals walking around in the clouds, keeping an eye on who's been naughty and nice. Without this thought, the other can only be a limited entity contained within its finite meaning. No being can be different enough from the others or distant enough from me to create the transcendent height necessary to exert a command. No matter how I feel about beings, my fundamental relation with them for Levinas is still a cognitive one, cashed out in meaning, knowledge, concepts, all expressed in informational propositions – none of which ultimately matters.

Lifting these ontic limits lets us think the other otherwise than as a being. God can then be the ethical force in my quailing before the terrifying pressure of the face. I do not understand the other; I stand under the unredeemable guilt of never living up to my obligations to them. They manifest not as beings but as accusations, blows, traumas. Ethics takes place in the grammar of imperatives rather than descriptions, as

Kant knew, and he accordingly secured their transcendence by removing their source from the phenomenal realm of things. I do not know what the other is, for if I did they would no longer be wholly other; they would not be beyond me but grasped, taken into what is mine. The problem of other minds is no longer about establishing the existence of another mind. If it is an other mind, then it isn't other; if it is an other mind then it can only be an other mine, something else I have constituted as part of my world which therefore cannot command me from outside, from on high. The problem of other minds for Levinas is that if we *could* establish the existence of other minds – *that* would be the problem. Instead, there is – *es gibt – il y a* – the other as a break in the plenum of reality, an interruption in what is and what is known and what can be said, and the thought of the ontological difference helps free us from reducing them to an object with thought-dampening thoughts. Thus, Levinas needs Heidegger to make his case that ethics is first, thereby proving Heidegger's case that ontology is first.

Of course, Levinas could respond, whom are you teaching these wonderful lessons, Heidegger? What is the object of your writing? Perhaps you are helping being to its manifestation, but you are writing of this manifestation *to* someone. You are engaging in a dialogue with Heraclitus, but you tell *us* about it, performing the dialogue in front of students and readers. Becoming authentic is a matter of my making mine what is mine,¹⁷ but the project of teaching this project can only be ours. Being calls upon you to call it into the clearing, a calling you've spent decades calling out to us. This is similar to Derrida's comment that the question – Heidegger's favorite form of philosophizing – is not absolutely primary, but takes place on the basis of a more originary affirmation: the affirmation that the question is worth asking – that it is *fragwürdig*, as the German says so much better than the English: literally, question-worthy rather than question-able – the affirmation that I will take up the calling to question, that I will speak to another. For Levinas, regardless of what is said, saying is always already interpersonal, for-another in-itself, and being just doesn't cut it as a conversation partner. Thus, Heidegger needs Levinas to explain why he is making

his case that ontology is first, thereby proving Levinas's case that ethics is first.

It seems that each rejects the other while also presupposing them, forming an unresolvable strife. So in the battle between Heidegger and Levinas, who emerges as victor? Kierkegaard, naturally. For it is Kierkegaard's version of dialectic as an unending unsettling of unthinking that best captures not only each of these positions, but especially their conjunction. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus describes the dialectic as follows: "in a human being there is always a desire, at once comfortable and concerned, to have something really firm and fixed that can exclude the dialectical, but...as soon as I take away the dialectical, I am superstitious and defraud God of the moment's strenuous acquisition of what was once acquired. It is, however, far more comfortable to be objective and superstitious, boasting about it and proclaiming thoughtlessness."¹⁸ Before Heidegger's discussion of thoughtless *das Man* or Levinas's unthinking of the other's face, Kierkegaard explored the either/or choice between on the one hand, the comfortable settling into fixed lives and answers – where people "marry, they enter occupations, in consequence of which they must out of decency finish something, must have results.... So they believe that they themselves actually have arrived, or they must believe it out of custom and habit" – and on the other hand, the life and thought of "the genuine subjective existing thinker...[who] always keeps open the wound of negativity, which at times is a saving factor (the others let the wound close and become positive – deceived); in his communication, he expresses the same thing."¹⁹ The link between thinking, despair, and evil had already been forged: "it could bring a sensate person to despair, for one continually feels an urge to have something finished, but this urge is of evil and must be renounced. The perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain."²⁰

Here we have Kierkegaard's ethics of thinking, an ethics dedicated to combating thoughtless thinking as much as faithless believing. The masses mumbling words once a week in Christendom have their counterpart in philosophical systems culminating in final definitive

answers, the tranquil certainty where thinking goes to die. We must keep the wound of uncertainty open, stress the strenuousness of acquiring beliefs and the tenuousness in sustaining them. Philosophers can *either* deny all of this, pretending “one knows all about world history and our Lord’s most private thoughts,” *or* embrace it and let it pervade their thinking and writing through and through.²¹ “Every subject is an existing subject, and therefore this must be essentially expressed in all of his knowing and must be expressed by keeping his knowing from an illusory termination.... His thought must correspond to the form of existence.”²² The thinking of subjectivity – subjective thinking about our subjective form of existence, undertaken in constant awareness that it is being done by a subject – is ethical thinking, a kind of thinking that is not distinct from acting or choosing. Thinking and ethics meet in choosing a thinking that acknowledges the responsibility to make our thinking reflect our existence in full knowledge of the groundlessness of its knowledge. “Whereas the Hegelian system in absentmindedness goes ahead and becomes a system of existence, and what is more, is finished – without having an ethics (the very home of existence), that other simpler philosophy, presented by an existing individual for existing individuals, is especially intent upon advancing the ethical.”²³ The Hegelian system here stands in for all traditional praxicentric ethics in separating ethical actions from theoretical absentmindedness, without realizing that this reassuring theorizing of certainties represents an act, a choice – the attempt to evade the task of existing, the very home of ethics. Like turning away from the god in the face, it is an abdication of responsibility; like inauthenticity, it is to strive to not be what we are: “the thinker who in all his thinking can forget to think conjointly that he is existing... makes an attempt to cease to be a human being.”²⁴ This is the unthinking that is unethical.

As unsettling as Heidegger and Levinas’s views are, Kierkegaard might very well have found them insufficiently so, too resigned to their own resignation. This problem concerns the conundrum at the heart of Kierkegaard’s Anxious Imperative: we must accept the fact that there are unacceptables in life, reconcile ourselves with the unreconcilable mixtures that make up our being by preventing us from *being*

anything, those combustible combinations that define us by robbing us of any stable definition: temporality and eternity, faith and hope and irrefutable despair, the inescapable yearning for immortality and the dead-certainty of the hard end waiting for us. The paradox is that we must reconcile ourselves to this irreconcilability while maintaining its discordance else we lose the very thing we are to accept, make peace with the ever-warring strife within us without letting it pacify. This applies to Kierkegaard's absolutely confident assurances that nothing in this world is certain, spoken like an unshakeable conviction. Making the form of his communication match the existential message he is communicating presents significant difficulties here.

The negativity of the existing subject (which his thinking must render essentially in an adequate form), is grounded in the subject's synthesis.... In direct utterance the illusiveness is left out, and consequently the form of the communication interferes.... The existing subject is eternal, but as existing he is temporal. Now, the illusiveness of the infinite is that the possibility of death is present at every moment. All positive dependability is thus made suspect.²⁵

This contradictory synthesis is the human condition, so perfectly captured in the God-man whose unforgivable ordeal relieved us of sin and whose dying brought us immortality. Kierkegaard tells us that we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that we can never find reconciliation, a task which, if successful, fails.

That is why he works so hard on the perverse design of his project: he is trying to accomplish the complete blockage of accomplishments, to keep the wound of negativity so open that it also includes negativity regarding this keeping the wound open. We cannot settle even for a settled form of unsettlement, but must keep this too ever unstable, which is extraordinarily difficult to express thoughtfully. "It is not possible (except for thoughtlessness, for which all things are indeed possible) for this contradiction to become manifest in a direct form....

Direct communication requires certainty, but certainty is impossible for a person in the process of becoming.”²⁶ Thoughtful writing means writing ever with the thought of our form of existence in our thinking, and how we are beholden to that which exceeds us.

Most writing communicates directly, conveying a sense of settled answers and finished labors of thought, which contradicts what Kierkegaard wants to say. “In this way, one is exempted from becoming aware, in action [*exequerende*], of the strenuous difficulties contained in the simplest statement about existing *qua* human being.”²⁷ Maintaining dynamism within a completed volume with its tendency towards verbal rigidity seems impossible, as even a writer as great as Nietzsche despaired.²⁸ Yet Kierkegaard pulls it off. The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is a book whose author proclaims in the middle of it that he will make his livelihood making living harder for society; since everyone else is working for the ease of humanity, we now risk suffering from a shortage of suffering, lacking enough lacking to be alive to our lives. We must take Climacus’ proclamation in light of the fact that the work in which we encounter him is his authorship – the point that introduces his ruminations: “it is now about four years since the idea came to me of wanting to try my hand as an author.”²⁹ What he is actually writing here then is that he intends to make his writing an intentional problem, conspicuously difficult, to use a Heideggerian term, which can prevent the reader’s withdrawal into mindless reading the way a faulty hammer keeps our mind on it.

Climacus brings this ambition to a climax at the book’s end when he makes the peculiar move of ending the book by revoking it, taking back the 600 pages the reader has fought through to get to that point.³⁰ We can no longer take these as straightforwardly asserting his views for he now forswears them, explaining that he can only speak for himself. He cannot present himself as an authority, and so as an author who could speak about what is the case for everyone – which of course is the case for everyone. He tells us to ignore everything he has told us – “the book is superfluous. Therefore, let no one bother to appeal to it, because one who appeals to it has *eo ipso* misunderstood it”³¹ – yet he knows

perfectly well that this instruction lies within the book it instructs us to ignore, and that we must appeal to it just in order to determine that we ought not make any such appeal. Moreover, as it is part of the book it is recanting, is he not simultaneously recanting his recanting, thereby reinstating all the statements just recanted, including the recantation, setting off an ironist's paradox? Despite what he says, this ending of the book does not actually make it superfluous, as he goes on to explain: "to write a book and to revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it."⁵² Kierkegaard is setting a hermeneutic trap, ending the book so that it can never come to an end. This bends the writing into a dialectical shape and, since this is where we find his explanation and endorsement of the dialectic, it leaves us with a dialectic *of* the dialectic. We cannot attribute even the dialectic, a technique of discomposing all that it touches, to the author as a composed doctrine or method. Such an attribution would be entirely inappropriate, an incompatibility of form against content like when A the Aesthete dreamed he had asked the gods to always have the laughter on his side, their response was just to laugh. He saw "that my wish was granted and decided that the gods knew how to express themselves with good taste, for it would indeed have been inappropriate to reply solemnly: It is granted to you."⁵³

Climacus' "Understanding with the Reader," where this recanting occurs, lets the reader understand that they can never reach any determinate understanding of the book, at the close of a *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* which concludes that we mortals can never reach conclusions. This is the proper way to understand existence: "it is exactly right not to be understood, for one is thereby protected against misunderstanding."⁵⁴ His "Understanding with the Reader" reaches an understanding with the reader that they can never understand what they are reading, a difficult conclusion to establish and communicate since "if anyone fancies that he understands this, he can be sure that he misunderstands it."⁵⁵ But, by both writing and revoking it, and making the pair into an unceasing paradox, the work accomplishes the kind of unthinkable relationship to the other that Levinas desires. Kierkegaard believes a drive towards what it

cannot understand is built into the nature of the understanding, as Climacus explains in the *Postscript*'s prequel, *Philosophical Fragments*. "This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think"³⁶ which, as a definition of thinking, is itself rather an unthinkable paradox.

Climacus recants because he cannot find someone who could write appropriately of existence, the teacher sought in the *Fragments*.³⁷ This would be a teacher of the thinking of existence, with the ambiguous genitive Heidegger is so fond of: a thinking about existence that thinks it appropriately because it is a thinking that belongs to existence, and does so thoughtfully. These thoughts about the thinker of existence reflect back onto the thinker of the thinker of existence, i.e., Climacus himself. "The teacher of whom I speak and in a different way, ambiguously and doubtfully, is the teacher of the ambiguous art of thinking about existence and existing."³⁸ He presents the art by drawing attention to the artfulness in his presentation of it. If it takes extraordinary measures to teach the thinking of existence, then it seems that teaching about this teacher does as well. What immediately grabs one's attention about Climacus' description of his own difficult authorship here, an authorship dedicated to making difficulties, is the way it matches its description of the teacher's art. The art of thinking about existence is as "ambiguous" as his own speaking of the artist, creating an ambiguous ambiguity that applies as much to the art of the teacher as to the speaking of the writer of the teacher. Ambiguity must pervade the practice of this art since no certainty is given to us mortals, no conclusion available to dialecticians, and this must apply to thoughts *about* the art as well, for the same reason. Perhaps this is why the preceding *Fragments* of philosophy posed its thoughts on the teacher as an open-ended thought-experiment rather than a conclusion and argument.

In this incomprehensible "Understanding," Climacus teaches the reader the impossibility of teaching and thereby succeeds at teaching. Only one who knows he cannot write of existence can do so, just as Socrates' knowledge that he knows nothing makes him the only one who knows anything. The sentence we are reading both rejects the

possibility of a teacher and implies that its author could be it because of the ambiguity of his different speaking, and because of the ambiguity of the sentence: Is Climacus a successful teacher or not? Does the reader understand something or not? The only way he might answer yes to these is by making it impossible to answer them. Climacus creates a semantic ouroboros that swallows itself, but the swallowing is still something since to write something and then revoke it is not the same as not writing it.

If there is any doubt about the doubt created, it is removed, or rather more deeply instilled, on the next page of the book, which is not a numbered page in the book: “A First and Last Explanation” follows the “Understanding” on unnumbered pages. To give another spin to this hermeneutics spiraling in on itself, the “true” author now steps forward – not to claim responsibility but to forswear the entirety of the writing, along with all of his other pseudonymous works. *Either/Or* used multiple pseudonyms within a single work, and the book’s editor, Victor Eremita, calls attention to this by unmasking the innermost of them – A’s disguised authorship of “The Seducer’s Diary” – as “an old literary device to which I would not have much to object if it did not further complicate my own position, since one author becomes enclosed within the other like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle.”³⁹ By calling attention to a pseudonym within the book, Kierkegaard draws attention to the question of authorship of the book itself; it’s no accident that Eremita found the mass of papers in “a writing desk.”⁴⁰ These mutual unravelings, however, are more suggestions to the reader, who is allowed to draw her own conclusions. The situation we are discussing, coming at the apparently planned end of the pseudonyms, is different, further complicating the authors’ positions. The conclusion of these unnumbered pages coming literally after-the-writing of this *Unconcluding Post-script* also nests authors, but now to overtly decompose the literary corpus within a coil of self-deconstructing and mutually disrupting denials. Kierkegaard renouncing Climacus’ writings, which includes Climacus’ own self-renunciating renunciation just before it, further convolutes the contradiction: if Kierkegaard is rejecting Climacus’ rejection, does this double

negation not reinstate it? Or does it double it, laying layer upon layer of doubling authorship? This is how the dialectic spreads from the said to the saying, to use Levinas's distinction, which then taints everything said.

Now the status of every sentence in the book hangs in suspense, all interpretations dangling "out on 70,000 fathoms of water,"⁴¹ rendering questions of what these texts "really" mean or who "really" meant them obsolete with a stroke of the pen. Our determinations of what Kierkegaard means are as rigorously indeterminate as Abraham's futile deciphering of God's command, all meaning set trembling. And like *Either/Or*'s internal echo of its own pseudonymous status, the *Postscript* contains Climacus' praise of Lessing: "if I wanted to be Lessing's follower by hook or by crook, I could not; he has prevented it. Just as he himself is free, so, I think, he wants to make everyone free in relation to him."⁴² Just as Climacus appeals to his readers to not appeal to him since such an appeal would conflict with the message, the same applies to Lessing: "I do not put him forward in order to appeal to him... because with such an appeal I would also have contradicted myself and canceled everything."⁴³ Instead, Climacus maintains consistency *by* cancelling everything, thereby creating an absolute inconsistency. His admiration for Lessing

pertains to something in which the knotty difficulty is precisely that one cannot come to admire him directly or by one's admiration enter into an immediate relation to him, for his merit consists precisely in having prevented this: he closed himself off.... Wonderful Lessing! He has none, none at all; there is not the slightest trace of any result.⁴⁴

Climacus admires Lessing for having rendered himself unadmirable, his magnificent results being that there are none, like the conclusions of an *Unconcluding* book that closes by revoking itself.

What Kierkegaard has done is render our relationship to his dialectic dialectical, so that we cannot even come to rest upon a definite

restlessness. He introduces the explanation of the dialectic quoted above (or someone does – authorship is all at sea now) thus:

on the whole, the infinite reflection in which the subjective individual is first able to become concerned about his eternal happiness is immediately recognizable by one thing, that it is everywhere accompanied by the dialectical. Whether it is a word, a sentence, a book, a man, a society, whatever it is, as soon as it is supposed to be a boundary, so that the boundary itself is not dialectical, it is superstition and narrowmindedness.⁴⁵

As with eternal happiness, so with knowledge, including that of what a text means: we must maintain the dialectic in our relationship with it, even to this dialectical relationship itself, and Kierkegaard's pseudonymity has done this. It is no coincidence that the first three examples listed here are textual, and the third can be the author.⁴⁶ Kierkegaard has created an apposite style to communicate existence, to think thoughtfully and ethically, precisely by not creating *a* style but a proliferation of squabbling voices all at odds with each other. This keeps the dead words on the page alive, actively interacting and interfering with each other to leave all assurances uncertain. Only so could he capture that which cannot be captured: "the perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain."⁴⁷ The greatly admired unadmirable Lessing accomplished the same thing by having no results:

with regard to the religious, he always kept something to himself, something that he certainly did say but in a crafty way, something that could not be reeled off by tutors, something that continually remained the same while it continually changed form, something that was not distributed stereotyped for entry in a systematic formula book, but something that a gymnastic dialectician produces and alters and produces, the same and yet not the same.⁴⁸

What Lessing said “in a crafty way,” and Climacus said “in a different way, ambiguously and doubtfully,” is expressed by Kierkegaard through the multiplicity of pseudonyms.⁴⁹ Here, ironically, the crowd is truth. The ambiguity he wishes to express is appropriately said by the multiplicity of voices, who can say together what none can say alone – a collective ambiguity achieved through playing a miscellany of certainties and uncertainties against each other, and revoking the collection, and playing the religious works against the entirety. This is how one teaches “the ambiguous art of thinking about existence and existing,” which makes, perhaps, Kierkegaard the teacher he has been seeking, the author whose last explanation is to revoke all the pseudonymous works he had written.⁵⁰

Where Heidegger has being-with being and Levinas wilting before the transfixing face, Kierkegaard’s internal heterogeneity shows his need for a diversity of speakers. We are absolutely alone before God, but Kierkegaard uses a multitude of authors writing to each other to express this solitude. It is in these clashes, which prevent any doctrine to settle or any settled tenets to be attributed to Kierkegaard, that Kierkegaard’s thinking happens, the thinking of existence that is an ethical choice. This is the same shape that we see in the conflict between the two accounts we have been examining, the peculiar interdependent contradiction they form together. Thus does Kierkegaard need both Heidegger and Levinas to explain why nothing is first, nothing is last, nothing final or originary, thereby proving both of their theses even though they’re incompatible, precisely because they’re incompatible, proving Kierkegaard’s case that there are no conclusions or proofs, just dialectics.

NOTES

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966) §1.
- 2 “Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence – in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. Dasein has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or grown up in them already. Only the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting. The question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing itself” (GA 2: 17/SZ 12).
- 3 Heidegger attributes this to his early work, but this is another instance of his terrible readings of Heidegger. For a different perspective on these readings as poor self-interpretations, see the Introduction to this issue.
- 4 This idea is present in the early work, but not developed: See GA 2: 177/SZ 133.
- 5 See *Martin Heidegger in Conversation*, ed. Richard Wisser, trans. B. Srinivasa Murthy (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977), 40.
- 6 Heidegger understands essence as a dynamic, active *Wesen* that we enact rather than passive properties we possess or are, though we are this enactment.
- 7 “How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage Books, 1974] §125)).

- 8 For a discussion of these issues, see Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), Chapter 5.
- 9 “The Being-possible which is essential for Dasein, pertains to the ways of its solicitude for Others and of its concern with the ‘world’, as we have characterized them; and in all these, and always, it pertains to Dasein’s potentiality-for-Being towards itself, for the sake of itself” (GA 2: 191/SZ 143).
- 10 Heidegger certainly aspired towards this priority of relationship over *relata* in, e.g., being-in-the-world, but it gets much more developed and emphasized in the later work. Could this be one of the reasons he turned away from his early project?
- 11 In an interview, Levinas expresses uncertainty about whether animals have faces, but he makes it clear that even if they do, “the prototype of this is human ethics. Vegetarianism, for example, arises from the transference to animals of the idea of suffering” (Levinas et al., “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988), 172). Animals could only be owed obligations by having a partial humanity extended to them, since there can be no other source of ethics.
- 12 Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 205.
- 13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 151.
- 14 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 12.
- 15 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 19.
- 16 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 19.
- 17 “As modes of Being, authenticity and inauthenticity (these expressions have been chosen terminologically in a strict sense) are

- both grounded in the fact that any Dasein whatsoever is characterized by mineness" (GA 2: 57/SZ 43).
- 18 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, Volume I, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 35n.
- 19 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 85.
- 20 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 86.
- 21 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 85.
- 22 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 81.
- 23 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 121.
- 24 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 93.
- 25 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 82.
- 26 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 73-4n.
- 27 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 85.
- 28 Nietzsche ends *Beyond Good and Evil*: "Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colorful, young, and malicious, full of thorns and secret spices - you made me sneeze and laugh - and now? You have already taken off your novelty, and some of you are ready, I fear, to become truths: they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull! And has it ever been different?...But nobody will guess from that how you looked in your morning, you sudden sparks and wonders of my solitude, you my old beloved wicked thoughts!" (Nietzsche, 1966 §296). Kierkegaard worries about the same problem for his holy thoughts.
- 29 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 185.
- 30 "What I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot. One can ask for no more than that, either before or afterward" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 619).
- 31 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 618.
- 32 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 621.

- 33 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Volume I, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 43.
- 34 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 83.
- 35 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 579n., see also 561-2.
- 36 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*, trans. D. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 37.
- 37 Immediately after the discussion of “the genuine subjective existing thinker” keeping the wound of negativity open and expressing that in one’s communication, Kierkegaard writes: “he is, therefore, never a teacher, but a learner, and if he is continually just as negative as positive, he is continually striving” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 85).
- 38 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 622.
- 39 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 8-9.
- 40 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 4.
- 41 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 204.
- 42 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 72.
- 43 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 66.
- 44 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 65.
- 45 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 35n.
- 46 There is another, internal solution to this problem that is contained within the “First and Last Explanation,” as explained in Braver’s “Martyrdom of the Author,” unpublished.
- 47 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 86.
- 48 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 68.
- 49 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 622.
- 50 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 622.