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Ethics and Finitude: Heideggerian Contributions to Moral Philosophy

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FROM EARLY IN HIS THINKING Heidegger subordinated the question of ethics to the question of Being. Like other ontical matters, ethics could not be addressed adequately until the ontological question of Dasein's general mode of Being was given priority.[1] Heidegger often indicated that this should not be taken to mean a rejection of, or indifference toward, ethics; rather, ethics, again like other ontic regions, has concealed within its mode of thinking a primordial dimension that can open up the way in which Dasein *is* in the world. My reading of this ontic-ontological differentiation is as follows. Ethics is rich in its analysis of normative topics but poor in attention to our *being*-ethical-in-the-world, in the fullest sense that Heidegger would give to such a phrase. This coordination of ethics and ontology suggests the possibility of taking up ethics anew once we have clarified the overall existential constitution of Dasein. Although Heidegger often gives the impression of segregating ontology from "practical" disciplines like ethics, I am convinced that this was an analytical division and not a substantive one.[2] Much in the early Heidegger has seemed promising for an investigation of ethics.[3] But there is also a good deal of suspicion about the ethical possibilities in Heidegger (notably in the work of Habermas and Levinas). Given the Olympian distance of Heidegger's later thought (e.g., the claim that *Denken* has "no result" and "no effect"[4]) and given his fascist politics together with the deceit and galling silence of the postwar years, the segregation of ethics from ontology can be interpreted as a more heinous division—that Heidegger's thought was or became indifferent to ethics, or worse, inseparable from something dark and barbaric.

I am not entirely swayed by this suspicion. I am one of those who believes that we can distinguish Heidegger the human being from his thought in some way. We

[1]See *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 37.

[2]See ibid., pp. 340–41 and 332.

[3]See, e.g., *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), section 13, where Heidegger gives a very positive analysis of Kant's notions of moral personhood and respect, followed by a typical critique in section 14 that Kant's analysis does not go far enough ontologically. For an extended discussion of the possibilities for ethics drawn from Heidegger's response to Kant, see Frank Schalow, *Imagination and Existence: Heidegger's Retrieval of the Kantian Ethic* (Lanham: Univ. Press of America, 1986) and *The Renewal of the Heidegger-Kant Dialogue: Action, Thought, and Responsibility* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

[4]*Letter on Humanism*, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 236.

can even distinguish Heidegger's extant thought from the potential for ethical thinking contained therein (in all periods of his thought, but especially in the early writings). Moreover, I also think it is possible to show in some measure that Heidegger's political commitments were not consistent with certain basic elements of his thought and its ethical implications. This is not to deny that Heidegger himself affirmed an idealized version of National Socialism that followed his thought in essential ways. My motive is not to rehabilitate Heidegger but to explore the ways in which his thinking can make an important contribution to ethics, and I aim to do this in terms of familiar intellectual concerns and social applications, not through some arcane circulation of Heideggerian terminology. This is *my* project, then, and one that I will not shy away from calling moral philosophy; but most of my inspiration has come from Heidegger's way of thinking.[5]

Moral philosophy must give up the model of ethical "theory," the insistence on rational justification, and the privileging of abstract principles over concrete situations. Ethics should be understood as the heuristic engagement of basic practical questions: How should human beings live? How should we live together? What are better and worse ways of conducting our lives? Moreover, ethics must acknowledge a prephilosophical, traditional heritage that presents us with a degree of consensus ahead of time regarding better and worse ways of living (this is an Aristotelian point reaffirmed by Heidegger). Taking our own society, we tend to agree already in a rough fashion and to a certain extent that lying, stealing, and killing are undesirable actions, that injustice, violence, cruelty, and indifference are worse than fairness, kindness, and concern. I dare say that such values are not unique to our culture or time either.[6] The task of philosophy would not be to put our entire moral outlook into question or to discover some brand new system of values (nothing so radical has ever happened in history). Rather, moral philosophy should engage a fivefold task: (1) analyze moral values as cultural phenomena; (2) clarify the meaning of the values and norms we inherit; (3) ask the question: Why should people be ethical in this way? This question is not a call for demonstration or proof to banish doubt or disagreement but rather an existential and pedagogical question to address the developments, conflicts,

[5]Some other studies that take up the issue of Heidegger and ethics and related topics in the Continental tradition include two works by Werner Marx, *Is There a Measure on Earth?: Foundations for a Nonmetaphysical Ethics*, trans. Thomas J. Nenon and Reginald Lilly (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987) and *Towards a Phenomenological Ethics: Ethics and the Life-World*, trans. Stefaan Heyvaert (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); Charles E. Scott, *The* Question *of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990); *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought*, ed. Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott with P. Holley Roberts (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); and Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). A recent study that came to my attention too late to work into this essay is Lawrence Vogel, *The Fragile "We": Ethical Implications of Heidegger's* Being and Time (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1994).

[6]Although there is certainly much disagreement and controversy in ethical matters, students are misled when we concentrate primarily on dilemmas and disputes in moral considerations or on the shortcomings of moral paradigms. We should at least start with areas of agreement (for example, all students agree that they should be graded fairly) before we take up controversies, to avoid the impression (very common among students) that moral values are completely undecidable. Stressing "lifeboat" scenarios, for example, is like beginning physics instruction with the uncertainty principle or the wave-particle paradox.

and tensions in the ethical life. In other words, moral philosophy should be inseparable from moral education. It should (4) ask the related questions: How do people become ethical or unethical? What conditions or attributes or developments are involved in actualizing or blocking ethical potential? And moral philosophy should (5) submit the tradition to critique in order to uncover internal inconsistencies, conflicts, or failures and to discover innovations needed to revise or alter tradition.

Given the difficulties that moral philosophy has faced so far in meeting this task, I think that ethics could benefit from Heidegger's thought in a way comparable to his revision of traditional ontology. Heidegger never claimed that rational or metaphysical models of thought are false or dispensable,[7] only that they are not primordial enough, that something is concealed in their disclosures—the radical finitude of Being—that needs drawing out to renovate our thinking about the world. Heidegger also never denied the importance of ethics or the need for it in our critical time of history.[8] I would propose an analogy between Heidegger's approach to traditional ontology and a possible approach to ethics. Traditional ethical theories are not false or dispensable; they all show us something important about morality. But they have missed or covered over the radical finitude of human existence and the preconceptual lived world, attention to which can renovate our thinking about ethics. So the ethics that is put in question would be the traditional philosophical and metaphysical presumptions about moral values and not the matter (*die Sache*) of how we should live our lives. If we attend in a Heideggerian manner to the existential *environment* (being-in-the-world) in which and out of which the ethical life arises, such a "pre-ethical" analysis should give us clues for a more adequate ethics in regard to its fivefold task described above. In the light of Heidegger's thought ethics can be seen as a finite, existential, ungrounded world dynamic, a configuration that I think can significantly improve upon traditional models in moral philosophy.

The task for ethics should not be the search for a theory or principle that can survive rational scrutiny, that can satisfy the objective cognitive standards inherited from traditional logic and the sciences, that can give us clear and certain criteria to guide adjudication. We already *are* shaped by ethics, before we reflect on it. We must attend to this prereflective ethical world to understand better how values function in our experience, to open up the ethical *life*, its conditions, demands, and difficulties. In this way ethics is not simply a philosophical specialty but a social project that keeps the existential *claim* of morality alive as an *issue* that people must continually engage. And I think that Heidegger's constellation of being-in-the-world can be effectively translated to prepare such an approach.

I. *BEING*-ETHICAL-IN-THE-WORLD

Many ethical theories have searched for an objective, rational standard that can be as decisive in morality as in the domains of mathematics, logic, and the sciences (e.g., Platonic forms, the Kantian categorical imperative, the utilitarian

[7]See, e.g., *Letter on Humanism*, p. 210.

[8]See ibid., pp. 231–32, and *Nietzsche*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, vol. 4 (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 245.

happiness calculus). One way or another the hope is that we can discover a measure to legislate the affective conflicts and empirical contingencies of the ethical field. From a Heideggerian perspective the futility of such a search is forcefully shown in the fact that even the most objective ontologies are deconstructed into the dynamics of an existential lived world. Since *no* form of knowledge can claim a purely objective, fixed warrant, it is short work to show that objective certainty is a chimera in ethics. Being-ethical-in-the-world can be specifically drawn along the same lines as Heidegger's general ontological configuration. Everyday normative involvement gives us access to a non-cognitive environment that opens up the following conditions. The radical finitude of being-toward-death is the existential thrust of care, the urgency of concern for our possibilities in the world that can bear us in, and in which we can bear, our finitude. Human norms are fully intelligible in such a setting as various modes of "shelter" for beings that are continually subjected to conditions of finitude: death, loss, pain, failure, etc. But norms as such are no less finite than the world in which they arise, so "having norms" must be understood in terms of the conditions uncovered in an existential analysis: temporality, historicality, unconcealment, facticity, particularity, plurality—none of which can support the search for an objective standard.

One insight that a Heideggerian analysis can give to ethics is this: we are not first or finally ethical in an objective manner, by way of some theory or rational demonstration, which operates by reflectively standing back from world involvement. We are first introduced to values by way of training, habits, and institutional influences, i.e., by way of a tradition already in place that gives us our ethical orientation in a prereflective immersion and transmission. Values become part of our nature before we reflect on them, and there is no reason to think that such a prereflective dimension ever can be or should be dissociated from the moral life. Even after maturation and reflection, being ethical will not be free of traditional influences, will not be detachable from our particular existential concerns, and will always require the moments of decision where reflection leaves off and action begins.

Being and Time gives us a model for orchestrating this range of non-cognitive elements: Dasein is first molded by a traditional heritage, in a self-world immersional whole that precedes subject-object differentiation; Dasein's concern for its existential possibilities, which concern is "mine" (cf. *Jemeinigkeit*), is never absent in its deliberations; and each Dasein is faced with the possibility of authentically taking up its traditional heritage in a unique way, in terms of decisions that will open up individual pathways in the course of life. All of this—precognitive training, existential concern, and decision—shows the shortcomings in purely objective, rational moral theories.

In some respects there is historical precedent for the kind of ethical analysis I am trying to draw from *Being and Time*, namely, the ethics of Aristotle. The recent publication of an early lecture course, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles*,[9] gives us some fascinating material regarding both the relationship between Heidegger's and Aristotle's thought and the possibilities for ethics

[9]*Gesamtausgabe*, Band 61 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985).

in Heidegger's early ontology.[10] In this text Heidegger mentions the problems in absolutistic, transcendental moral systems owing to their detachment from a more worldly, finite, lived morality.[11] It is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, particularly its critique of Platonic moral philosophy, that gives Heidegger a historical focus for another beginning, both in ontology and in ethics. Aristotle presents a phenomenology of ethics in that he does not bracket tradition or experience; he examines what "appears" (*phainesthai*) in culture and then submits it to analysis, clarification, and puzzle resolution (1145b3–7). What is shown are a number of elements that disrupt the Platonic tendency toward rationalistic, universalistic, and perfectionistic conceptions of goodness. The good will be a human good (1095b3, 1178a5–15) reflecting the finite conditions of a desiring being, not to be measured against divine perfection; the good first requires habituation (1103b24–25), then mature deliberation in the complex choices of life; the good is pluralized, not uniform (1096a24–25), particular, not universal, inexact, not precise (1094b20–25), difficult, not easy (1106b30–35).

In a similar manner Heidegger suggests an ethics that will accord more with the human world, that will renounce the comfortable, undisturbed, lofty distances of moral theories that in their insulation foreclose any realization of ethical possibilities in the actual experience of finite conditions.[12] One interesting connection in this regard is that between *Verstehen* (Heidegger's notion of prereflective understanding) and Aristotle's *phronēsis* or practical wisdom. *Phronēsis* is an inexact, deliberative finesse that guides our actions regarding a desired end (*telos*), that for the sake of which (*hou heneka*) we act. Here the human good involves natural potentialities that we strive to actualize through deliberative choices. This fits Heidegger's sense of *Verstehen*, which is connected with *Seinkönnen* (Dasein's potentiality-for-being), and *das Umwillen* (the for-the-sake-of that animates Dasein's actions). Ethics, for Aristotle, involves human potentials and the means and conditions needed to actualize these ends. A similar kind of ethical developmentalism can be read out of *Being and Time*, although there we notice a radicalization of Aristotle's formulations. The Kierkegaardian influences in *Being and Time* show an even more dynamic, open, and contingent atmosphere than Aristotle would allow. For Heidegger, Dasein's potentiality is never filled up in any way or even compensated for by the comfort taken in a metaphysics of divine actuality. Dasein *is* potentiality, and so full actuality is ruled out in principle. Moreover, despite the acceptance of tradition in Heidegger's analysis, the notion of authenticity opens up issues relating to the tension between individuation and conformity, which goes far beyond the gesture toward particularity in Aristotle and which presents a more contemporary range of ethical topics regarding how we should engage social norms and controls.

The focus on potentiality in *Being and Time* permits two basic applications that pertain to ethics. First, so many of our values address the supports for and obstacles to human development (e.g., homelife, child rearing, meaningful work,

[10]See John van Buren, "The Young Heidegger, Aristotle, Ethics," in *Ethics and Danger*, pp. 169–85. See also Robert Bernasconi, "Heidegger's Destruction of Phronesis," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28, supplement (1990), 127–47, which includes a survey of the literature on this topic.

[11]*Gesamtausgabe*, 61, p. 64.

[12]See ibid., pp. 164–65.

social relationships, cultural pursuits). On a political level certain social programs should be seen to stem from asking basic ethical questions: What are the desirable ends of human activity? What are the ways in which a human life can flourish and turn out well? What are the material, environmental, and educational needs that make such flourishing more likely?

Second, ethics itself is a human potential, the possibility of becoming a person who can live well with others. Attention to the human condition in all its facets would be an essential ingredient in moral education. The kind of analysis Heidegger offers in *Being and Time* is useful because it helps us understand what *becoming* ethical involves or requires—not simply moral education but knowing how values constitute our very being-in-the-world and what it takes to be able to enact our values. Attention to our sense of self and to the existential demands and difficulties of the ethical life have usually not been the focus of moral philosophy. I will develop some examples that address this problem shortly.

II. BEING-ETHICAL-IN-THE-*WORLD*: THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVITY

It seems that ethics must involve something of a "call," something having a claim on us, something that draws us and motivates a commitment in the midst of counter-impulses. Such a call need not reflect the traditional force of a "command," but since normative matters always imply the human potential to alter one's behavior in the face of other (and likely more ready) inclinations, then some sense of a "self-transcendence" is needed to capture the tone of "obligation" that seems so indigenous to ethics. In this regard I think that Heidegger's ontological critique of subjectivity can also bear fruit in moral philosophy.[13] Many problems in ethical theory can be traced to the modernist tendency to ground values in a "subject," variously conceived in individual, collective, or cognitive terms. One way or another, Hume's division of fact and value retains its force as long as values are restricted to a subjective realm when measured against, and not measuring up to, the strict conditions of scientific objectivity. But since Heidegger's thought permits a deconstruction of objectivity, this opens up the possibility of reconciling the fact-value divorce that has made ethics so problematic since the Modern period.

Consider emotivism, the notion that moral values are merely an expression of affective preferences that have no cognitive status. A phenomenology of values would, I think, call into question the idea that my objections to torture, for example, are nothing more than personal preferences (and what could I say about those whose preferences support torture?). And is the objection to fraud in scientific research nothing more than a preference? Consider also moral egoism, which in my view amounts to an oxymoron. In effect it says that the right thing to do is whatever an individual wants to do—when it is this very condition of individuals pursuing any and every desire that generates normative thinking in the first place. Individual subjectivity, then, is somewhat incoherent as an ethical reference, and it certainly seems to lack any sense of a "call" (what would it mean to say that I am obligated to follow my desires?).

Utilitarianism is somewhat of an improvement in asking individuals to adjust

[13]See, e.g., Werner Marx, *Is There a Measure on Earth?* ch. 2.

their actions to the general well-being of the community. But the community in this case is simply an aggregate of individual subjectivities, which does not therefore supercede the assumption that the good is nothing more than an internal affection having no external claim. Moreover, the criterion of collectivity contains the danger of majoritarian tyranny that has often plagued this theory, and the emphasis on instrumental reason seems to leave no room for the dignity of persons.

The one modern approach that most satisfies the need for an ethical call is the kind of deontological theory inspired by Kant. Here the subject is the rational subject that discovers universal ethical principles solely through the exercise of reason by way of the categorical imperative, principles that are completely independent of personal or collective inclinations and empirical conditions, and that should command our thinking in the same way that other rational truths claim the mind's assent. But we can notice in Kant's detached, abstract route to universal consistency something analogous to metaphysical subjectivism, as critiqued by Heidegger, particularly technicity's totalistic oblivion of Being and finite dwelling. The strict segregation of the good from personal concerns and from the contingencies of experience makes possible a kind of tyrannical formalism that becomes blind to the actual conditions of existence and thereby not only inapplicable but dangerously inflexible (the good at any cost).

In different ways, then, the orientation toward the subject in modern moral theory can be implicated in various problems that have continued to frustrate ethical discourse. Without claiming that Heidegger's thought can solve all these problems, I think his critique of subjectivity can give us a good start in addressing the underlying assumptions that foster these difficulties. First, we can see that Heidegger would object to "grounding" values in the subject no less than he would object to the "grounding" of any region of Being. But this does not annul values; it opens the realm of values to the overall configuration of finite being-in-the-world. As with other concerns of Dasein, values can be understood as uncovered in Dasein's *world* and not simply in some inner subjective zone. As part of the world, values can be seen to have as much a "claim" on Dasein's understanding as other factical conditions into which it is "thrown." Notions such as facticity, thrownness, historicality (and, as we will see, *Mitsein*) that operate in *Being and Time* can give relief from individualistic and subjectivistic conceptions of values, as well as from a hyperbolic conception of existential freedom that in the end sees values as arbitrary choices. And regarding the difficulties indicated in utilitarianism and Kantian theory, I think that the phenomenological analysis of being-in that subverts the subject-object bifurcation initiated by Cartesian ontology can likewise open our understanding of values to a dimension "ecstatically" situated in world involvement, rather than simply the rational calculation of human preferences or the pure abstraction of universal consistency.

Perhaps now we can better understand Heidegger's notorious objections to the term "value." We know that much of this came from his obsession with protecting Being from a reduction to human interests. Beyond ontological considerations, I am convinced that the same can be said for the moral domain, that renouncing the value paradigm is not a rejection of ethical concerns but a protection of

their authentic meaning from the distortion of reducing them to merely human, subjective estimations.[14]

In general terms here we run up against the perennial problem of moral knowledge, of whether morality can have any cognitive status comparable to other modes of knowing. Much of modern philosophy has challenged the possibility of truth in ethics (especially positivism's inheritance of Hume's classic critique). But here again is the beauty of Heidegger's phenomenology. Ethics is indeed not a form of knowledge if truth is presumed to be the objective warrant of scientific rationality; values inhabit a realm of affectivity, uncertainty, contingency, and disagreement. For Heidegger, however, *all* knowledge must be deconstructed into the lived environment of the care structure, which amounts to a revision of what "knowledge" and "truth" mean. The aforementioned conditions of existential finitude are implicated in any form of knowing. In *Being and Time* traditional assumptions about strict objectivity are demolished but not in the direction of a radical skepticism or anti-realism.[15] The difference between supposedly objective and non-objective disciplines can be understood now as the *degree* to which existential concerns are implicated in their disclosures. Consequently, the so-called exact sciences are simply *less* existentially operational than history, art, or ethics.[16] Given this *continuum*, ethics, in being simply *more* animated by existential concerns, cannot on that account alone be deemed any less "real," any less "knowable," or, especially, any less "true"—if we employ Heidegger's interpretation of truth as *alētheia*, as a finite, ungrounded, process of unconcealment that can work for any form of disclosure. Heidegger should be read as a phenomenological realist, or, if you like, a radical realist, in that Being is *disclosed* through Dasein, not produced *by* Dasein (confusion and ambiguity on this point was part of the reason for the *Kehre*). But the disclosure of Being is a finite, dynamic, and pluralized process that subverts traditional philosophical confidences. The irony is, and this is a major contribution to moral philosophy, that the features of ethics that had often weakened its claims to knowledge and truth in traditional discourse can now be seen to strengthen those claims as long as knowledge and truth are given proper postmetaphysical alterations.

III. ETHICS AND DWELLING

Dwelling (*Wohnen*) is a word that occupied Heidegger's later thinking. But it is completely consistent with, and expressive of, the non-objective/non-subjective configuration of being-in-the-world delineated in the early writings.[17] The word "dwelling" captures both "subjective" and "objective" tones (human meaning

[14]Joseph Kockelmans makes this point in *On the Truth of Being* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 258 and 261. A passage from *Letter on Humanism* lends credence to this interpretation: "To think against 'values' is not to maintain that everything . . . is valueless. . . . through the characterization of something as a 'value' what is so valued is robbed of its worth. . . . what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation" (p. 228).

[15]See *Being and Time*, p. 195, where Heidegger speaks against randomness and bias-laden obstacles to knowledge, and p. 251, where he offers a partially favorable gesture toward philosophical realism.

[16]Such a demarcation is suggested in *Being and Time*, p. 195.

[17]See *Being and Time*, p. 80, for the connection between dwelling, being, being-in, and being-in-the-world. Also, in *Letter on Humanism*: "dwelling is the essence of being-in-the-world" (p. 236).

and the environment which we inhabit) but in a single, indivisible, existential term. The word in all its resonances becomes Heidegger's replacement for traditional subject-object ontologies. In *Letter on Humanism* Heidegger takes up the Greek word *ethos* in its sense of abode and dwelling place[18] and concludes that his ontological investigations might then be called an "original ethics" (p. 235). Although this answer is a typically unsatisfying "end run" around the specific question regarding the possibility of ethics in Heidegger's thinking, I believe that we can go beyond Heidegger's ontological fixation, that a normative ethics can benefit from attention to *ethos*-as-dwelling, that we can ask questions about how we dwell ethically, and how we should dwell in the world. Heidegger's notion of dwelling offers two main contributions to moral philosophy; the first points back to and summarizes preceding sections of my text, the second points forward to the rest of my essay: (1) values cannot be understood as either objective or subjective conditions—they are modes of being-in-the-world; (2) being-ethical-in-the-world must be understood as radically finite.

For Heidegger, from beginning to end, from being-in-the-world to the fourfold (*Geviert*), dwelling means being at home in the finitude of Being, in its mixture of presence and absence, especially in terms of human mortality and the limit conditions of unconcealment. Dwelling is contrasted with the "flight" from Being indicated in the closure of metaphysical systems and the quest for certainty and control. Dwelling names something like what the poet John Keats called "negative capability," the capacity to live with conditions of uncertainty,[19] or as I would put it, a reconciliation with finitude. Although dwelling has a positive content suggesting a sense of placement in the world to counter radical versions of skepticism, phenomenalism, or anarchism, it also presents a deep *challenge* in that we must exist in a world without foundations, guarantees, or ultimate resolution of existential difficulties.

The same radical finitude can be shown in our ethical dwelling. In fact, this finitude has always been acknowledged in moral philosophy, but it was deemed a deficiency that either needed correcting or prevented ethics from achieving intellectual legitimation. The moral life is always faced with cognitive, psychological, empirical, and practical limits, which are effectively expressed in the mixture of presence and absence that rings in Heidegger's favorite word, *alētheia*, unconcealment: values are not grounded in proof or demonstration; the moral arena is marked by disagreement and conflict; moral situations are often complex and ambiguous, where outcomes are uncertain, where goods conflict with each other, where a balance of differing interests is hard to gauge—but we have to decide and sometimes all we are left with is an abyssal moment of choice; we sometimes fail in our aim for the good, or in doing good we sometimes instigate harmful effects; extreme or degraded environments can ruin ethical potential; ethical commitments often require risk and sacrifice, which makes anxiety and mixed dispositions inevitable. The value of Heidegger's notion of dwelling is that we are forced to give up the idea that such conditions of finitude are "deficiencies." This *is* the ethical world, and the myth of pure "presence" must be surrendered in moral philosophy no less than in ontology. The problem with

[18]See Charles Scott's evocative reading in *The* **Question** *of Ethics*, pp. 142–47.

[19]"Letter to George and Thomas Keats," December 1817.

ethical beliefs that insulate the good from limit conditions is not simply a philosophical flaw. There is an irony that history has demonstrated all too often: the "purer" the concept of the good, the greater the capacity to do evil on its behalf. With a definitized ideal the world now appears "fallen" and in need of reform; when elements in the world continue to resist or fall short, there arises a potential to commit terror in the name of "salvation."

IV. HUMAN NATURE AND FINITUDE

Heidegger's thought challenges traditional essentialist assumptions about human nature that have played an important role in moral philosophy. Do we not need to discover or posit something essential, universal, and unified in human nature to shape the idea of a "common good" that can overcome the divisive strife that plagues us? Is not the denial of a metaphysics of humanity a significant threat to ethics? This is an important question that faces postmodern thought, but I believe that a non-essentialist description of human existence can speak to many important problems in ethics. In the early Heidegger Dasein's radical finitude is indicated in its "transcendence," which means—as is made clear in *What Is Metaphysics?* and in the notion of being-toward-death—being held out into the Nothing. The core of Dasein is not a definable essence but an abyss that is not reducible to any state of being. But the abyssal dimension of human existence makes questioning and disclosure (from concealment to unconcealment) possible. It is also, for Heidegger, the origin of freedom, which addresses the need for decision and choice in ethics; radical finitude is also radical openness, the antithesis of deterministic closure.

In addition, abyssal transcendence leaves us with a non-essentialist version of personhood that can, I think, intercept a number of morally problematic beliefs and practices. Many human abuses can be traced to reductionistic pictures of human nature, where the self is traced to some positive property or condition, be it individual, group, or universal reductions (e.g., egoism, tribalism, or Enlightenment universalism). The trouble starts when an "other" is encountered (when the egoist encounters another ego, when the tribalist encounters another tribe, or when the universalist encounters differences or resistance to the presumed definition of "human nature"). To see the human person in non-essentialist terms is to refuse all reductions, to weigh potentiality more than actuality, concealment more than full disclosure, process more than finished states, uniqueness more than universality. What humans ultimately have in common, then, is the negativity of finitude, i.e., the fact that we do *not* have a definable "nature." But this negativity can help disrupt all the definitional references with which we frequently promote ourselves and demote others. Since human persons cannot ultimately be fixed by any designation, then all the abstract categories of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and the like that fuel so much trouble can be intercepted by a negative correction. Such categories do have a use but not as substantive designations. The "other" becomes a mystery (in relation to our presumptions), which can cash out in ethics as a warning against fixed beliefs that are implicated in hatred, discrimination, exploitation, and abuse.[20] Although the negativity of radical

[20]John D. Caputo gives suggestions for ethics in this regard in *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), chs. 9–10.

finitude might be unsettling, we should attend to the ways in which "positive" ascriptions are implicated in injustice. Renouncing such ascriptions can have an important consequence in ethics by gathering a Heideggerian word that has much moral resonance: *Seinlassen*. In letting-be there are tones of non-interference, openness, recognition, respect, and release.[21]

V. *MITSEIN* AND *MITLEID*

The negative tone of the preceding analysis can be balanced somewhat by attention to the world configuration in *Being and Time*. The world in which Dasein dwells is the rich array of meanings and concerns that, though finite, give positive content to existence. One of the features of the world structure that is most pertinent to ethics is the phenomenon of *Mitsein*. "Dasein is essentially Being-with."[22] Being-with-other-Daseins is equiprimordial with being-in-the-world. *Mitsein* is the basis of Dasein's everyday sense of self, which is not strictly speaking an "I" but *das Man*, the "they-self." Even authenticity is not a departure from *Mitsein* or even from *das Man*.[23] Here Heidegger is continuing a tradition (inspired by Hegel) that sees human existence as essentially social; the human self is primarily a "social self." We are not first and foremost isolated ego-atoms that relate to other selves only secondarily. Everything from mutual dependence to child rearing to education to the phenomenon of recognition lends support to the idea that we become individuals only in and out of social relations. This is the sense in which Heidegger describes *Mitsein* as a world-phenomenon, as something *in* which we find our being.[24]

One of the consequences of *Mitsein* for ethics is that we are liberated from the philosophical problematic of "arguing" for a social context to challenge egoistic or individualistic paradigms. In various ways the individual *is* others; relationships come first. Being-in-a-with-world suggests the following. Like other conditions that Dasein is *in*, that are *there*, in which Dasein ec-statically dwells, the individual self and other selves are not separate or even merely in a "relation." We are co-constituted by each other, we "exist" in each other in certain ways (being "in" love is a significant example). Such a structure provides an effective

[21]Derrida addresses the ethical possibilities of letting-be in "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978).

[22]*Being and Time*, p. 156. See primarily sections 25–27.

[23]Authenticity is called a "modification" of *das Man* (*Being and Time*, p. 312).

[24]Much of the analysis of *das Man* in *Being and Time* is influenced by Kierkegaard's critique of bourgeois conformity, which gives the impression that authenticity would involve the liberation of the unique individual from ordinary social patterns. But then we are told that authenticity is not a departure from *das Man* but its modification, even that *das Man* "is an existentiale; and, as a primordial phenomenon, it belongs to Dasein's positive constitution" (p. 167). This can make sense if we interpret *das Man* in a less pejorative way as *socialization*, as the necessarily "common" ways in which a person is incorporated into a cultural setting. Authenticity, then, would involve the *tension* between socialization and individuation, something that would never have to mean an asocial break but rather the particular, creative ways in which individuals cut their path within a social world. In this way authenticity would not mean isolated individuation; in fact it would remain essentially *Mitsein*. See the connection between death, individuation, and *Mitsein* (p. 309); see also the essential connection between authenticity, resolution, and being-with-others in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, pp. 287–88.

challenge to the hegemony of liberal individualism and its effect on moral discourse since the Modern period. Consider the following passages from *Basic Problems*: "Self and world belong together in a single entity, the Dasein" (p. 297). Since other selves are part of the world, a unitary constellation of selves is implied: "Dasein is determined from the very outset by being-with-others" (p. 296). Even the I-thou relation is something made *possible* by a more primordial world correlation: "The basic condition for this possibility of the self's being a possible thou in being-with others is based on the circumstance that the Dasein as the self that it is, is such that it exists as being-in-the-world. For 'thou' means 'you who are with me in the world' " (pp. 297–98). Such a structure opens up the topology of ethical relations. Since "self" is not ontologically individuated in the strict sense, even the "mineness" of Dasein does not suggest a confinement to individual self-interest but rather an openness to the interests of others. The for-the-sake-of-itself of Dasein "does not assert ontically that the factual purpose of the factical Dasein is to care exclusively and primarily for itself and to use others as instruments (*Werkzeug*) toward this end" (p. 296). In fact selfhood as a *world* phenomenon is "the ontological presupposition for the selflessness in which every Dasein comports itself toward the other in the existent I-thou relationships" (p. 298).

The idea that Dasein dwells with and in others helps us illuminate a phenomenon that is often addressed in ethics, namely, compassion. Some moral philosophers have made compassion the centerpiece of their ethics (e.g., Hume and Schopenhauer), and I think the notion of finite being-in-the-world can go a long way toward strengthening such reflections and opening up important possibilities for moral philosophy.

Many of our values prescribe that we help others in need and refrain from abusing each other. The presence of compassion can be an effective force in living out these values (and its absence can account for not living them out). As shown in the words com-passion, sym-pathy, and *Mit-leid*, here we encounter an experience that "suffers-with," i.e., we share the pain of others. Compassion occurs when someone's misfortune actually touches us and alters our experience toward their pain and "calls" us in a visceral way to do something about it. The marvel of compassion is that the pain arises in us even when we ourselves are not directly undergoing the misfortune. How is something like this possible? I think that the notions of *Mitsein* and being-in help to show how compassion is possible, and indeed the phenomenon of compassion is a perfect illustration of the existential validity of Heidegger's configuration of being-in-the-world. In compassion we are decentered, desubjectivized, our experience dwells in the other, and so it cannot be understood as a subjective or objective condition but rather as a curious, compelling, ecstatic being-with-the-other. Compassion, then, may be the deepest indication of *Mitsein*.[25] There are a number of studies

[25]In *Being and Time* Heidegger speaks to this point by saying "only on the basis of Being-with does 'empathy' become possible" (p. 162). The German word here is *Einfühlung*, not *Mitleid*. These two words are not exactly synonymous in German, but they overlap enough in the matter of sharing the experiences of others to make this passage fit my point well enough. In fact, *Einfühlung* is the stronger, more heartfelt experience, and the "*ein*" captures an ecstatic sense of dwelling more sharply than "*mit*" does; moreover, "*fühlen*" can apply to more positive ecstases and not simply to the sensitivity to misfortune.

suggesting that compassion is something natural in humans, even in very young children, that it is not simply a matter of social conditioning.[26] If this is right, then moral theories like egoism or utilitarianism that focus exclusively on self-interest are seriously flawed. But indifference might be no less natural, either. Nevertheless the issue of compassion and indifference can be given more force if we see them as basic existential conditions; this would deepen ethical discourse to the heart of our being. Might it be, for example, that compassion is a basic ethical disposition (*Befindlichkeit*) or mood (*Stimmung*) that attunes us to the moral life in a way that mere knowledge, theories, or rules cannot? And might there be ways to cultivate this attunement or prevent its eclipse by other factors in the social environment?

One thing is clear (and this is a thoroughly Heideggerian insight): attention to our finitude can open up the world in new ways; there is a fundamental connection between limit conditions and the disclosure of meaning. Specifically, our own sufferings can open us to noticing and feeling the sufferings of others. As in the relationship between being-toward-death and care, our experience of limits and loss can not only illuminate the urgency of our own concerns and vulnerability; it might be the best teacher in coming to care for others as well. Although human beings and cultures might differ in their forms of life, there is, I think, a common human understanding of finitude, of what it means to *lose* one's interests. Compassion in the face of pain, loss, and death can be the starting point for a cross-cultural ethics.

It should also be clear that compassion cannot be sufficient for an ethics. It is not possible for human beings to experience compassion universally or continually. There will always be a limit to our experiential concern; some people will always count more to us than others, and heightened compassion whenever it occurs will not last indefinitely. But ethics can still draw on compassion as a familiar and esteemed phenomenon that helps articulate the ethical field, that serves as a reference for many of our values, and that therefore can function as a kind of "measure" (this is Werner Marx's term) for our ethical *thinking* and our allegiance to moral formulations that are cast in the non-affective, abstract form of rules, principles, obligations, etc. It would be naive to think that ethics and moral education can do without principles or the duty-inclination dynamic. But compassion can still serve as an effective focus for public discourse about regulations, maxims, laws, and government, all of which can in a way be called the ethical "lieutenants" of compassion; that is to say, laws and principles "stand in" for compassion, direct our behavior in its absence in accordance with its "measure," and in so doing ensure a more ethical world when its existential fuel is empty or low.[27]

VI. COURAGE

Aristotle's ethics focuses on virtues, or character traits and capacities, that are needed to lead a good life and to decide and act in the proper manner in ethical

[26]See Alvin I. Goldman, "Empathy, Mind, and Morals," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 66, no. 3 (1992), 17–41.

[27]See Werner Marx, *Towards a Phenomenological Ethics*, pp. 56–67. For another perspective that considers justice in terms of the tension between universals and singularities, see John D. Caputo, "Hyperbolic Justice: Deconstruction, Myth, and Politics," *Research in Phenomenology* 21 (1991), 3–20.

situations. Virtue ethics has made something of a comeback recently,[28] focusing less on rules and principles and more on the kind of person it takes to act ethically. Much in my analysis relates to such an approach, and I want to focus briefly on the virtue of courage with respect to an ethics of finitude.

Aristotle defines courage in relation to pain. The courageous person is one who can stand fast in pursuit of a good in the midst of pain or the risk of pain. A coward is someone who cannot or does not act for the good because of pain or fear of pain.[29] Although Aristotle's discussion generally focuses on the obvious example of courage in battle, I think we can add in all sorts of pains, losses, and risks and consequently greatly expand the meaning of courage and cowardice in the ethical domain. In fact to a large extent I think that courage could be called the primary virtue in the moral life, and our analysis of finitude can help articulate why this might be so.

I have said that Heidegger's analysis of being-in-the-world involves a reconciliation with finitude, with the limit conditions of existence. One way of understanding the notion of fallenness (*Verfallen*) is that it is a hyperimmersion in beings as a refuge from radical finitude. Part of authenticity, then, involves a release from this fixation and a capacity to dwell finitely, to accept the movements of presence and absence more readily. It seems to me that such a capacity is exactly what courage means in our being-ethical-in-world. So much of our possessive and abusive behavior that is morally problematical can be understood as stemming from the *fear* of finitude, of the pain of lacks and losses. A good deal of greed, anger, and violence can be traced to the "fallenness" of self-absorption as a refuge from losses or the threat of losses (which losses can be material, psychological, social, ideological, etc.). Even moderation and self-control can involve courage in that the person who indulges appetites at the expense of himself or others is cowardly in the sense of not being able to withstand the "pain" of an unfulfilled desire (experienced as a "lack").

Moreover, courage and cowardice help explain how and why we often fail to live up to an ethic we affirm in principle and want to enact. In many respects acting according to moral values involves risks, sacrifices, and uncertainties, which makes such enactment difficult and challenging. Honesty, for example, is not something that is risk-free or cost-free. The honest person is courageous in the sense of accepting such conditions, and the liar is in this respect a coward. So we could conclude that liars are not really affirming deceit as a "good" as much as they are fearing the consequences of telling the truth. If we recall a previous point about the role of tradition, we can say that a key task in ethics is not a radical challenge to our values (who would want to propose the abandonment of truth-telling?) but a recognition of how much courage it takes to lead a moral life.[30] It might even be possible to extend this virtue to the question of compassion and say that compassion takes courage and that indifference is a subtle form of cowardice, a psychological strategy to ward off the pain of real attention to

[28]One work responsible for this is Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[29]See *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 6–9.

[30]Sometimes the risks come from social pressures against being ethical. This is why it is wrong to assume that everydayness is the realm of ethics and that authenticity is a non-ethical sphere. Sometimes *das Man* is a strong anti-ethical force, as in the case of honesty.

human suffering. This analysis of the virtue of courage augments a central conviction of my essay, that an authentic ethical existence can be seen to mirror Heidegger's broader conception of authenticity, in being able to dwell in the finitude of ethical situations and decisions.

VII. DECISION

Given limit conditions and uncertainties in ethical dwelling, we must still decide. And often we must decide to rebel against an established convention, to disrupt it in our resolve. And even if we are clear about the good, ethics is finally action, which means that we must decide to enact the good in the midst of counter-possibilities, which makes *being* ethical in the end spontaneous, without cognitive or social support. The openness of Dasein's temporal futurity is an ineradicable condition of moral engagement. Ethics at bottom is groundless, but we must accept its finitude and still decide how to act.

The problem with traditional moral theories is that they want to "definitize" ethics by grounding the good in some fixed scheme; and they bypass the abyssal element of existential decision by modeling ethical deliberation along the lines of demonstrative and calculative techniques that in a sense decide things "for" us (I do not "decide," for example, that 2 plus 2 is 4 or that "Socrates is mortal," in the classic syllogism). Demonstrative "decidability," in fact, would erase the sense of *responsibility* for choices that also animates ethics.[31] As I have said, it is not that these theories are mistaken. The familiar models in moral philosophy all show us something important in ethics but fail in their reductive groundings and exclusions. The ongoing and unsettled debates between egoism, utilitarianism, deontology, libertarianism, communitarianism, and so on, deconstruct into the elements of finitude sketched in this essay. Ethics, like any other form of unconcealment, is a mixture and oscillation of presence and absence. When we focus, for example, on group interests, we conceal individuality, and vice versa; when we focus on principles, we conceal empirical contingencies, and vice versa; when we focus on obligation, we conceal inclination, and vice versa. The point is that ethical *situations* usually involve a complicated interplay and tension of these concerns—this is the difficulty of ethical life. Authentic decisions do not have to mean "correct" decisions but something like the attentive ethical finesse of Aristotle's *phronēsis*, a deliberative capacity for responsive and responsible choice. But as radically finite, an existential finesse would hold more of a tremble than Aristotle's comfortable tone would suggest. To balance this discomfort we should keep in mind the non-subjective features of Heidegger's world configuration so that ethics is not taken to be so radically finite as to seem arbitrary. Moral commitment, though uncertain, has its truth.

[31]Derrida develops this point in terms of the connection between ethical decisions and undecidability in the Afterword of *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graf (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1988).