

A FINITE THINKING

Jean-Luc Nancy

Edited by Simon Sparks

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Originary Ethics

There is a threefold difficulty involved in presenting Heidegger's thinking about ethics, whose terms inevitably need to be set out, at least briefly.

First of all, Heidegger's Nazi engagement, followed by his almost complete silence about the camps, have marked him (even aside from any properly political judgment) with a moral taint that many have seen as invalidating any ethical proposition on his part, if not the whole of his thinking. It isn't my concern to analyze these particulars (and the case has already been well investigated in the important work of Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, Jean-Pierre Faye, Otto Pöggeler, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jacques Derrida, Gérard Granel, Nicole Parfait, Dominique Janicaud, Richard Wolin, Hans Sluga, etc.). Instead, I want to restrict myself to saying this: while it is certainly correct to infer from Heidegger's moral error a certain style or a certain professional intellectual conduct (across all his works), it is wrong to draw such an inference when what is at issue is the logic by which his thinking sought to analyze what it is that constitutes man as the being through whom *being* has as its original *sense* (or *ethos*), the choice and conduct of existence. That this thinking wasn't equal to the dignity (*Würde*) which it took thus as its theme is something that ought to give rise to further thinking. But that is only possible if we take Heidegger's thinking as our point of departure (not forgetting to ask ourselves about to the precise ethical expectation to which his political engagement was intended to respond).

Second, over and above all this, there are those who think it's possible to deny any ethical dimension to Heidegger's thinking, basing their claims on his own objection to ethics as a "discipline," on the corresponding absence of a "moral philosophy" in his work, and on his refusal of any moral interpretation of the analytic of *Dasein*. Now, in order for the present essay to have any relevance whatsoever, we would need to begin by demonstrating the falsity of this argument, and by reconstructing the possibility of a properly ethical approach to Heidegger. However, not only is there no space for this here, but it can even be considered quite unnecessary.¹ Only those who have read Heidegger blindly, or not at all, could think him a stranger to ethical preoccupations. Moreover, there are already enough works in existence to refute this prejudice. It should be enough, then, to spell out the following (which will be complemented by what I have to say): there is no "morality" in Heidegger, if what is meant by that is a body of principles and aims for conduct, fixed by authority or by choice, whether collective or individual. In fact, however, there is *no* philosophy that either provides or is itself a "morality" in this sense. It isn't philosophy's job to prescribe norms or values: instead, it must think the essence or the sense of what makes up *action* [l'*agir*] as such; it should think, in other words, the essence or the sense of what puts action in the position of having to choose norms or values. Perhaps, incidentally, this understanding of philosophy is itself already Heideggerian or, at least for us, today, necessarily Heideggerian in tone. Of course, this wouldn't prevent us from showing how appropriate it is to Spinoza or to Kant or to Hegel or to Husserl, or prevent us from showing how, and doubtless for specific historical reasons, it chimes with Heidegger's contemporaries (each very different from the next) Bergson, Wittgenstein, or Levinas. All of which amounts to saying that, in general terms, there would be a case for showing how, with Heidegger and with Heidegger's period, philosophy understood itself (once again) as "ethics" and not, let us quickly say, as "knowledge," presupposing, in particular, a distinction between "ethics" and "morality" inherited (if at times confusedly) by the whole of our own time. But this isn't my concern here; rather, I want to sketch out an internal interpretation [*explication*] of Heidegger himself, striving to be as faithful as possible while avoiding piety.

The third difficulty runs counter to the second. If, paradoxically, ethics constitutes both a discreet and unobtrusive theme in Heidegger's work *and* a constant preoccupation, an orientation in his thinking, then we

would need to undertake a general examination of that thinking. We would have to show the extent to which the "thinking of being"—which is, after all, the main or even the exclusive title of Heidegger's thinking—is nothing other than a thinking of what he called "original ethics," and that it is so throughout, in all its various developments. In particular, it would not be difficult to show that the celebrated "turning" (the *Kehre*), characterized most succinctly in the words of the *Beiträge* as a "passage from ontology to ontology," basically corresponds to an accentuation, a reinforcement or a "folding" of the ethical motif. And this, we might suppose, wasn't wholly unrelated to a reflection silently tensed and perturbed by the National Socialist aberration. In much the same way that constraints of space mean that we cannot *de facto* cover the whole of Heidegger's work, then, so *de jure* there can be no isolation of a Heideggerian "moral philosophy." Instead, let me confine myself to addressing the basic intention of the text in which the motif of "original ethics" is brought to light, namely, the "Letter on 'Humanism.'" Linked to this will be some essential reminders of what paved the way for this motif in *Being and Time* and *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. As for the rest, suggestions will have to suffice (and by "the rest" I mean: 1. The thinking of freedom as an "ungrounded foundation"; 2. The thinking of language and poetry as a true *ethos*; and 3. The thinking of "technology" as a retreat from moral foundations and the delivery of a different ethical demand.)

To sum up the situation, two overwhelming objections could be raised: "Heidegger has a bad morality"; "Heidegger has no morality." These are not so much ruled out here as reserved for a different sort of analysis. Instead, the only kind of analysis that is appropriate here needs to take as its theme Heidegger's thinking itself conceived of as a fundamental ethics.

The "Letter on 'Humanism'" announces itself forcefully and distinctly, in its very first sentence, as a reflection on *Handeln*, action.² It is very clear that the question of humanism is, for Heidegger, the question of what man is (of his *humanitas*) insofar as he has to act or to "conduct himself." (*Conduct* or action, insofar as it is its own end, action that does not "cause an effect,"³ seems to me an appropriate term with which to render the German *Handeln* as well as the Greek *praxis*, especially in the present context.)

But what man is insofar as he has to act is not a specific aspect of his being, but his very being itself. If Dasein—according to the opening for-

mulations of *Being and Time*—is the being for which, "in its very being, that being is *at issue* for it,"⁴ it is because this "is at issue," this *il s'agit de*, this *es geht um*, this "it is about," doesn't bring into play an interest that is merely theoretical or speculative. Rather, it destroys the supposed autonomy of such an interest. If, in Dasein, it is being that is at issue [*il s'agit de l'être*] (and if, without playing on words more than language itself does, being is a matter of action [*l'être est de l'agir*]), it is because being, as the being of Dasein, is what is at stake [*l'enjeu*] in its conduct, and its conduct is the bringing into play [*la mise en jeu*] of being.

This point of departure—and more than that, this axiom or this transcendental absolute of all thinking of being—could also be expressed as follows: because the difference between being and beings is not a difference of being (it is not the difference between two kinds of being), it is not a difference between two realities, but the reality of Dasein insofar as it is, in and of itself, open and called to an essential and "active" relation with the proper fact of being.⁵

This relation is one of *sense*. In Dasein, it is a matter of giving sense to the fact of being—or, more exactly, in Dasein the very fact of being is one of making sense. This "making sense" is not theoretical, nor is it practical in a sense somehow opposed to the theoretical (on the whole, it would be more in keeping with Heidegger's thinking to call it practical "in the first instance"). Knowledge or the understanding of being as sense is identical with the action of sense or with action *as* sense. To be is to make sense. (In a direct line from Kant: pure reason is practical insofar as it is theoretical.)

This "making," however, is not a "producing." It is, precisely, acting, or conducting oneself. Conduct is the accomplishment (*Vollbringen*) of being. As sense's conduct, or as the conduct of sense, it is, essentially, "thinking." The essential act is thinking. But that doesn't close action back up on "a (merely) theoretical practice." If the "Letter on 'Humanism,'" along with many other texts, appears to restrict action—and with it original ethics—to an activity that we might be inclined to call abstract, speculative, and only metaphorically "active" ("active" through the metaphor of the "thinkers" and the "poets"), then this is the result of an inadequate reading. In reality, "thinking" is the name for action because sense is at issue in action. Thinking (and/or poetry) is not an exceptional form of action, the "intellectual conduct" to be preferred to others, but what, in all action, brings into play the sense (of being) without which there would be no action.

This is indeed why action *qua* thinking—the bringing into play of sense—is “desired” by being. This desire is love thought as ability (*Mögen*),⁶ in other words, as having a taste, an affection, or an inclination for, as wanting something, as having the ability to do something. Being desires thinking (and here we might draw a direct connection with Hegel: “the Absolute wants to be close to us”). Being desires thinking insofar as thinking can accomplish the sense that it is. What thinking names is this: the fact that sense desires itself as its own action. (And we would need here to develop the question of how the concept of such a “desire” is not that of an object-desire.)

This means that being as the fact of being—the fact that there is something in general—constitutes by itself the desire that this fact be accomplished (unfolded, acted) as sense. But this proposition needs to be understood in all its radicality and originariness. There is not first a brute fact (the being of beings, the “there is”), *then* a desire for sense (for this being). If this *were* the case, sense, action, and ethics would have to come after and from somewhere other than the fact of being. Now, on the one hand, being is not a “fact” in this sense—it is not something given, the “fact” that there is a gift—and sense cannot be conferred on it as an external signification. (Moreover, such a problematic is never truly encountered in any great philosophy. It shows through only wherever it has been possible to posit being as a brute fact of existence “in itself,” in the face of which a subjectivity has to assume a giving of sense “for itself.” This is true of Sartre’s thinking—explicitly targeted in the “Letter on ‘Humanism’”—or of philosophies of the absurd. The specificity of Heidegger consists, however, in thinking being as the fact of sense and sense as the gift of being.) On the other hand, sense conceived as signification conferred on or found in addition to being itself could not properly be the sense *of* being, still less being itself as sense, Heidegger having established in *Being and Time* that “the sense of being can never be contrasted with beings, or with being as the supporting ‘ground’ of beings, for a ‘ground’ becomes accessible only as sense, even if it is itself the abyss of senselessness.”⁷ The fact of being—as Dasein—is *eo ipso* the desire, ability, and love (ability-love) of sense. But what is given [*donnée*] or “handed out” [*donné*] is precisely the “gift of essence” in which being gives itself essentially as the action of sense.⁸ The “given,” therefore, is the making-sense of being and what is given or desired thus, given as what is desired (even if, once again, the sense of these

words would need to be reevaluated), is for the “truth of being” to be said,⁹ for it to be “brought to language.”¹⁰

Making-sense is not the same as producing sense. Let me say, in order to make things absolutely clear, that it isn’t an activity that could be compared to that by which, according to Lévi-Strauss, an existential given, itself reducible to a senseless materiality, is turned into an operative sense. (To which we might add, still by way of clarification, that in a world that is not related to the other world of a principle, a donor origin, a creator, or a world-subject in general, there is, strictly speaking, no other “fundamental” possibility than the alternative represented in these ways by Heidegger and Lévi-Strauss. Unless there is a different way of going beyond both formulations of the alternative, which is another story—ours, perhaps.)

If action is an “accomplishing,” that is because being itself accomplishes itself in it as the sense which it is. But being is itself nothing other than the gift of the desire of or for sense. So making-sense is not of sense’s making; it is making being be, or *letting* it be¹¹ (depending on how we want to stress the ambivalence of German *lassen*: *bauen lassen*, to have something constructed, also means to let or to give to the constructing activity as such; *sein lassen* means to let be, to give, to entrust to the activity of being as such).

Letting be isn’t passive; it is action itself. It is the essence of action insofar as action is the essence of being. It is a case of allowing being to be or to act the sense which it is or desires. Being as such—the fact that there are beings in general—is no more “present” in Dasein than anywhere else (the being of beings in general is no more present or absent in one place than another); rather, it is the “that there is” of being as sense. This sense is not a property of the “that there is.” It properly *is* (or *makes*) the “that there is” as such. It engages it and engages itself in it: “that there is” is what is at stake in sense. Being, absolutely and rigorously considered as such (which also means, to allude to other developments in Heidegger’s thinking, considered according to its unnominalized value as a verb—being *is* or *exists* being, it “makes” them be, makes them make-sense), is essentially its own “engagement” as the action of sense, therefore:¹² such is the decisive axiom of this thinking. From which it follows that ontology is, from the outset, within or beyond itself, being’s *conduct of sense* or the conduct of the sense of being, depending on which of these two expressions has the strongest value (the most ethical and least directional value).

Sense's conduct—or the conduct of sense—makes being as being acted by and as Dasein. Dasein is being insofar as it is at stake as the being that man is. The conduct of sense is indissociable, then, from a “liberation of man for the dignity of his *humanitas*.”¹³ Dignity (*Würde*) exceeds any assignable value, any measure of action regulated by a particular given. *Humanitas* needs to be measured against this measurelessness of action or, rather, against action itself as the absolute measure. The inadequacy of humanism stems from the fact that it rests on an interpretation of beings that is already given,¹⁴ on an interpretation that has already fixed sense (through a definition variously characterized as Christian, Marxist, etc.). By fixing sense—the signification of sense—humanism conceals or loses sight of the importance of Kant's fourth question—*Was ist der Mensch?*—as a question concerned *not* with a determinable essence of man but with what is more originary in man than man, namely Dasein *qua* finitude.¹⁵

The finitude of Dasein is the finitude of being as the desiring-action of sense. “Finitude,” then, does not mean a limitation that would relate man—negatively, positively, dialectically—to some other authority from which he could derive his sense, or his lack of it. Instead, it means precisely the non-fixing of such a signification: not, however, as the powerlessness to fix it, but as the power to leave it open.

“Finitude” thus means: unaccomplishment as the condition for the accomplishment of action (or for the accomplishment that action *is*) as sense. This does not mean a “loss of sense” or a “sense produced through the mediation of its loss.” Rather, it means that sense itself has to be seen as “the relation of being to the essence of man,”¹⁶ that is, it is being that is at issue in man, or that man consists in (has his *humanitas* in) the making-be of sense, and the making-sense of being, which could therefore never be reduced to a fixing of the sense of being. For such fixings (significations) to be brought about (to be determined, to be chosen, and to regulate conduct), being still has to be exposed to—and as—the action of sense as such, or as the gift of the desire of and for this action, as, in other words, the *non-given of sense*, which is the very fact of being as sense—and thus as finitude.

This is why “there is and has to be something like being where finitude has come to exist.”¹⁷ But existence is not the factual given. One could say: there precisely is no “factual given” before there is the gift of the “there is” itself. There is no “fact” before the gift of being, which itself constitutes the gift [*le don*] of or the abandonment [*l'abandon*] to sense. Nor is exis-

tence *actualitas*, the entelechy of an essence.¹⁸ It is “ek-sistence,” the way or conduct of being as being “outside” of itself: in other words, as being-to-sense, or, again, as making-sense or action. (We might try saying: ek-sistence is the entelechy of what is neither essence nor power but the sense of being.)

Yet for all that, we mustn't think of ek-sistence as an ontological category alien to concrete existence. Just as this word is but a different way of writing “existence,” so the structure it designates takes place only right at concrete existence. What *Being and Time* calls the “facticity” of Dasein is doubtless not the *factum brutum* of some being that lies “within the world,”¹⁹ nor is it detached from the simple factuality of a concrete existence. The “fact” *that* Dasein *is* in that it is desired as the action of being takes place *right at* the fact *that* such and such a concrete human, in each case, exists, and that his “ontical” existence *as such* has the ontological structure of Dasein. In general, what people have gotten into the bad habit of translating “authentic” but which is, in fact, the “proper” (*eigen*, *Eigentlichkeit*), takes place nowhere other than right at the “improper,” right at everyday existence—and, what's more, in the very mode of the improper's “turning-away” from the proper.²⁰ Put in another way, factual existence is “proximally and for the most part” constituted in ignorance of the facticity of sense that is the ontological fact of existence itself. “The pure ‘that it is’ shows itself, but the ‘whence’ and the ‘whither’ remain in darkness.”²¹ But it is precisely this darkness, this being-not-given of sense, that leads onto the proper dimension of sense as what is, in being and of being, desired and to be accomplished (acted out). In the ordinary impropriety of simple existing, being's propriety of sense—which consists precisely in having to make sense, and not in the disposition of a given *proper sense*—both dissimulates *and* reveals itself.

From which it follows:

1. that ontic existence has, as such, the structure of ontological ek-sisting;
2. that, correlatively, the fact of being (of Dasein) has, as such, the structure of making-sense or of action.

In principle, the ethics thus announced refers to nothing other than existence. No “value,” no “ideal” floating above concrete and everyday existence provides it in advance with a norm and a signification. But this everyday existence finds itself asked to make sense.²² This request, in turn, stems neither from heaven nor from an authority of sense: it comes from

existence, being the proper request of its being. Only on the basis of this original request will it be possible for beings, in their action, to give themselves ideas or values—and, what's more, this will make *sense* only according to the original action which is at issue in the request.

Hence, this thinking strives to take most rigorously into account the impossibility, which has arisen with and as modernity, of presenting an already given sense, with the evaluations which would be deduced from it. (And although this is not the place to do so, we ought to ask ourselves whether this problematic is not in fact that of the whole of philosophy, already present in Plato's *agathon* and first radicalized in Kant's imperative.)

To clarify, we could say: the ethics engaged in this way is engaged on the basis of nihilism—as the general dissolution of sense—but as the exact reverse of nihilism: as the bringing to light of making-sense as action requested in the essence of being.²³ So it also engages itself according to the theme of a total and joint responsibility toward sense and toward existence. (I can only signal in passing the importance of the motif of responsibility. Discreetly explicit, like that of ethics itself, this motif tends toward nothing less than “being's being-responsible towards itself, proper Being-itself,”²⁴ the latter having, in principle, nothing solipsistic or egoistic about it but, on the contrary, containing the possibility and the necessity of being-responsible toward others.)

Ek-sistence, then, is the way in which Dasein *is* as Dasein, its way of being.²⁵ This way of being is immediately a conduct: the conduct of being-open to making-sense, a being-open that is itself opened by (or whose opening consists in) the desire/ability of sense. Insofar as it is opened in this way, this conduct is a setting-outside-itself or ex-position as the very position of the ek-sistent. This being-outside-itself, this “ecstatic essence,”²⁶ doesn't happen to an already given “self.” On the contrary, through it something like a “self” (a subject, and a responsible subject) can come about. “Ecstasis,” as it needs to be understood here, is not exaltation beyond the bounds of the ordinary. (Besides, *ecstasis* as exaltation is in no way the hallmark of an accession to authenticity.²⁷ This is why the word “ecstasis” also undergoes a modification into “standing-out.”²⁸)

Being in ek-sistence consists in “being the there.”²⁹ Dasein has to be understood not adverbally and locally, as being-there, but verbally, actively, and transitively, as being-the-there. Hence, Dasein is definitely *not* the name of a substance but the sentence of an action. “Being-there” in fact

presupposes the prior given of both a being and a place. “Being-the-there,” however, implies that being properly ek-sists as its “clearing.”³⁰ By this “clearing” we need to understand not, or not in the first instance, an illumination or revelation that brings being to light, but being itself as an opening, a spacing-out *for* possibilities of bringing to light.³¹ Being ek-sists (is) in that it opens being. The *there* is the open in which, right at an existence *hic et nunc*, making-sense is at issue. The *there* is the place in which, on the basis of it, on the basis of its opening, something can take place: a conduct of sense.

The *ek* of ek-sistence is the conduct proper to being the there in full measure (indeed, it is itself to be understood as measure insofar as there is no ethics without measure), in which, by being the there, by being *that there is there* an existence, being *is* sense. Sense, indeed, is “the structure of the opening.”³² But such a structure is not the setting up of a distance (like the given opening of a source, for example, from which sense could spring); it is the activity of opening or of opening oneself as making-sense. (Let me note in passing that action as essentially opening implies “being with one another” as its “foundation.” The opening of making-sense is utterly impossible in a solipsistic mode.³³ Nonetheless, we cannot take from this the prescription of an “altruistic” morality. What is established, rather, is that, whatever the moral choice, the other is going to be essential to opening, which is essential to sense, which is what is essential in the action that makes up the essence of being.)

Essentially, then, being is a making-sense(-of-itself) and we can specify the scope of this expression by considering all the definitions that have now been acquired. But the fundamental definition is undoubtedly this: the sense which it is a matter of “making” is no more a sense that can be assigned according to something other than being than one can make sense of being by simply positing a being-there. There is, in principle, neither a simple transcendence nor a simple immanence. If it is entirely legitimate and not simply verbal acrobatics to say that the sense of being is the being of sense, this means that sense (the sense of human existence, but also, and along with it, the sense of the world) is in principle nothing other than action, or conduct. Conduct is thus the proper transcendence of the immanence that is.

Now, let me pause for a moment in order to address the objection that will doubtless be raised at this point: sense is thus identical and coextensive with all action, whatever its signification and whatever its value. As

such, this supposed "ethics" leads to an indifferentism (a subjectivism or a moral relativism), even if that indifferentism is of the kind "morality of action." To this objection, two responses:

1. In fact, the determination of being as the desire/ability of making-sense is ontologically and logically prior to any evaluation of a determinate sense. This is indeed necessary if what is at stake in the first instance is an absolute *dignity* as the character of Dasein. Transposed into different terms: only a subject which is entirely responsible for sense, and for its own existence as making-sense, without prior subjection to any fixed sense, can be a fully-fledged ethical subject. Already, nothing else was at stake in the Kantian notion of dignity, for which (setting aside the model of a "law of nature," which precisely is *only* an analogical model) the "universality of the maxim" meant the totality of responsibility, while the condition of "respect" meant engagement by and before oneself as "*acting self*."³⁴ There is no more subjectivism in Heidegger than there is in Kant. For subjectivism, in fact, evaluative moral decision making is represented as a good in itself (the "freedom to choose"), the only real "good," already appropriated by every subject as such: fundamentally, subjectivity itself as good. By contrast, the dignity of Dasein consists in needing, in each choice, to engage what can be called, for want of a better term, the objectivity of being (and, so of humanity and the world). Remarkably, what is undoubtedly one of the most significant contemporary ethical investigations in the Anglo-American context, Charles Taylor's investigation into the "ideal of authenticity," is left as though hanging halfway between these two directions. To the extent that it challenges subjectivism without invoking a transcendent authority, it actually indicates—albeit unconsciously—the necessity of an ontology of making-sense. In general, it is instructive to note the extent to which the contemporary Anglo-American debate on the (non-)foundation of morality (between Aristotelian-Thomist proponents of a determinable "good" and liberal proponents of "justice" concerning individuals with differing subjective "goods") has the same ontological demand unwittingly behind it. What is at issue here is nothing other than the end of a metaphysico-theological foundation to morality *so as to arrive at ethics as the ground of being*. So Heidegger will at least have marked out the particulars of the problem.

2. Even though no norm or value can be determined on the fundamental level, where what is at issue is valueless value, the unevaluable dignity of making oneself the subject (or the agent) of possible evaluations, we

can, by contrast, take this to indicate a positive hint in the direction of what can quasi-orient action as such, if I may put it that way: nothing other than the truth of ek-sistence. But we must not fail to remember that this truth takes place right at existence, or that it is its very event (its every event and appropriation, *Ereignis*—a theme that I can't develop here). The imperative, we might be tempted to say, is this: *respect existence*. But this imperative provides no sense or value. What it does require, though, is that we make sense of existence *as* existence. It cannot be reduced, for example, to a "respect for life," as though the sense of life or life as sense were something given. On the contrary, talk of a respect for life immediately exposes one to all the problems of determining what "life" is, what "human life" is, and how it does or does not differ from "animal life" (or "plant life"), what its conditions of recognition, dignity, and so forth, might be. From this we can grasp how all the problems being raised today by bioethics as well as by human rights bring to light the necessity of heading back toward an ontology of action: not so that they can be resolved once and for all, but so that we can apprehend the absolute making-sense of the action that puts itself in the position of having, for example, to decide what a "human life" is—without ever having the ability to fix this *being* as a given that has been acquired once and for all. (I'm well aware that these considerations are wholly extrapolated from Heidegger, but we need at least to indicate that such an extrapolation, of which Heidegger will doubtless have been unaware, is not only possible but necessary.)

The "proper dignity" of the human,³⁵ which doesn't depend on any subjective evaluation,³⁶ derives thus from being having entrusted itself to him by ex-posing itself as the opening of making-sense. Man, no longer the "son of God," the "purpose of nature," or the "subject of history"—no longer, in other words, a being that is or that has sense—is the being through which being ex-poses itself as making-sense. Indeed, we could even risk an expression such as the following: the human is no longer the signified of sense (that would be the human according to humanism), but its signifier; not, however, in the sense that man designates its concept, but in the sense that he indicates and opens its task as one that exceeds all assigned senses of the human. "Dasein" means: the making-sense of being that exceeds in man all significations of the human.

Exposed in this way, being properly *is* the entrusting to Dasein of the "guarding" of its truth. In this sense, Heidegger calls man "the shepherd of

being."³⁷ We ought to pause here for a moment, since this sort of "pastoralism" has often raised a smile. Granted, terms like "shepherd," "guarding," and "protective heed" aren't entirely free of evangelistic, backward-looking connotations. They evoke a sense of preservation, a conservation of what ought to be open and to be risked. There's a reactive if not out and out reactionary tone here, one that Heidegger wasn't alone in taking, a tone that often befalls moral discourses ("preserving values," etc.). It is as though inaugural dignity were brought to light without any acquired protection, without the reassurance of any given sense, itself needing to be protected or safeguarded. Now, what has to be "guarded" is the open—something that the "guarding" itself risks closing back up again. For the dignity of the open we might then substitute the emblematic value of its guardians, which will soon be identified, moreover, in terms of the determinate figures of the "thinker" and the "poet." All of this has to pose a problem, one that needs to be addressed. For it's still the case that, quite logically, the "guarding" of the "open" can only ever be the opening of the open itself, and that the pastoral tone ought not to conceal the indication of an absolute responsibility. Here we doubtless find the crux of a radical thinking of ethics: in the possibility of confusing original making-sense with an assignable origin of sense, an opening with a gift (and, again, what is lodged here is the whole ambiguity of the "gift"; I will come back to this). Thinking the origin as *ethos* or conduct isn't the same as representing an originary *ethos*, even though it is all too easy to slide imperceptibly from the one to the other. (The difficulty here isn't specific to Heidegger and could probably be found in Levinas or Spinoza as well.)

Be that as it may, let us recall for the moment that these very terms—guarding, protective heed, the solicitousness of the shepherd—indicate the order of a *conduct*. It is less a case of leading [*conduire*] a flock than of conducting ourselves in such a way that "beings might appear in the light of Being."³⁸

This "appearing," however, isn't the effect of a production. Man doesn't produce beings, nor does he produce himself; his dignity is not that of a mastery (which, in general, is not susceptible of dignity, merely of prestige or impressiveness). In fact, "man does not decide whether and how beings appear." This is a matter for the "destiny of being."³⁹ That there is something, and that there are *such* things—*this* world—is not for us to decide. This, then, is given. But what is properly given with this gift, or what is properly the destination of this "destiny" (and without which

there would be neither "gift" nor "destiny," but *factum brutum*) is what is not, in other words, the being of beings as the desire/ability of sense. What is properly given—what being gives and that as which it gives itself—is the need to make sense of and in beings as a whole (their "appearing in the light of being"). It is in this sense that humans are responsible for being, or that the Dasein in them is the being-responsible of/for being itself.

We need to replace for "being is" the expression "*Es gibt*" *das Sein*."⁴⁰ "The essence of being" is an essence "that is giving, that grants its truth."⁴¹ What being gives is being itself. Being gives of being. (The) being (of beings) is not a "gift" that it "gives," therefore. And therein lies the whole ambiguity of the theme of the "gift," and it is for this reason that we might well prefer the term "letting" to that of "giving." Being lets beings be. Being does not "give" anything: being is the letting-be through which something is. Hence the very being of beings, their essence, "gives" itself, "lets" itself or "transfixes" beings as "truth," in other words, as that which opens onto sense—and precisely not as a sense or as an appropriable horizon of signification. The "gift" is inappropriable *qua* "gift," and this is exactly what it "gives" or "lets" (hence, what we receive as a present doesn't become our property in the way that something we have acquired does; the gift becomes "mine" without alienating its inappropriable essence *qua* gift; for the essential reason that what, on account of the idiomatic expression *es gibt*, tends to be called the "gift," cannot designate "a gift"). The gift becomes "mine" without alienating its inappropriable essence *qua* gift. Conversely and correlatively, what is "let" becomes "mine" without retaining any sense of a giver; where this not the case, it would not *let*—or *make*—be its own letting-be.

This is why it is a matter of corresponding to this "gift," to this "letting-be/-make" as such. It is a matter of responding to it and of being responsible for it, of being engaged by it. It is a matter of finding the fitting gesture, the right conduct (*das Schickliche . . . , das diesem Geschick entspricht*, as Heidegger says) toward the giving or the letting-be/make as such.⁴² Toward being, in other words, since being is definitively not the giver of the gift (*es gibt*—however we look at this, the gift has no owner; and let me say that throughout our dealings with the motif of the gift in Heidegger, Derrida's analyses must be borne in mind). Being is the gift itself; or, rather, being *is* letting-be, just as it *is* "the clearing,"⁴³ just as it *ek-sists* beings. Being doesn't "give" being existence, therefore; being *is*, in a transitive sense, *ek-sisting*.

experience of the *transcendens* as such, rather than of transcendence), but as that which structures existence itself into a "beyond," into ek-sistence.⁵⁵ The transcendence (of the sense) of being is a transcendence of and for immanence: it is nothing other than the desire/ability of making-sense, and this desire/ability *as* making-sense.

On this basis, the transcendence of being can and must be explicitly expressed as "originary ethics."⁵⁶ Sense, in fact, does not relate a particular to a transcendent signification that sublimates it outside of itself. Sense appears instead as "the demand . . . for an obligating intimation and for rules that say how man, experienced from ek-sistence towards being, ought to live in a manner befitting his destiny."⁵⁷ Such an intimation is unnecessary, since there would need to be an obligation to enforce a law, about which, moreover, we would still know nothing. It is, on the contrary, the manifestation of sense as such, as the sense of action. (If you like, we could say: sense is the law.) As regards Kant, Heidegger writes: "the respect before the law . . . is in itself a making-manifest of myself as acting self," whereas "Reason, as free, gives to itself that for which the respect is respect, the moral law."⁵⁸ (Let me take the opportunity here to emphasize once again the importance of Kant to all this. It is as though Heidegger's concern was to regain the point at which Kantian subjectivity frees itself, by itself, from its subjective foundation—from representation, from signification—and confirms itself as acting, in other words, as exposed to a sense that isn't given.)

Here, *ethics* isn't the effect of a distribution of disciplines that would distinguish the order of moral significations (values) from the order of cognitive or natural significations ("logic" or "physics").⁵⁹ In fact, "disciplines" can find their place as regimes of signification only "after" making-sense as such. Making-sense as such is prior to any such division, an "intimation" of it, just as the conduct of existence is prior to any determination of significations (from which we ought logically to deduce that all disciplines are "originarily ethical"—the cognitive, the logical, the physical, and the aesthetic just as much as the moral).

Ethos needs to be understood as "abode" (following Heraclitus's saying: *ethos anthropoi daimon*.)⁶⁰ The abode is the "there" in that it is open. As such, the abode is much more a conduct than it is a residence; more accurately, "residing" is principally a conduct, the conduct of being-there. To think this conduct is thus "originary ethics," since it involves thinking *ethos* as the conduct of/according to the truth of being. This sort

of thinking is more fundamental than any ontology, therefore; it doesn't think "beings in their being" but "the truth of being." It was in this sense that the thinking that took place in *Being and Time* had already been described as "fundamental ontology."⁶¹ What becomes clear now, however, is not simply that the thinking of being involves an ethics but, far more radically, that it involves itself as an ethics. "Originary ethics" is a more appropriate name for "fundamental ontology." Ethics *is* what is fundamental about fundamental ontology. Nonetheless, we cannot simply substitute one name for the other without losing sight of the following essential point: *ethos* isn't external to or superimposed upon being; it is not added to it, does not happen to it, does not give it rules that come from elsewhere. Rather, being *is*—because it is in no sense a being—what ek-sists beings, what ex-poses them to making-sense. Being is the ek-sistent conduct of *Dasein*. And this is also why, in preference to any term that might evoke a "moral philosophy" deduced from a "first philosophy," Heidegger retains the expression "the thinking about Being," stating that it is "neither ethics nor ontology," "neither theoretical nor practical."⁶²

This thinking "has no result."⁶³ It gives neither norms nor values. It does not guide conduct but conducts itself toward the thinking of conduct in general⁶⁴—not as something to be normalized or finalized, but as what constitutes dignity itself, namely, having, in one's own being, to make sense of being. Besides, if thinking as originary ethics were to provide "maxims that could be reckoned up unequivocally," it "would deny to existence nothing less than the very *possibility of acting*."⁶⁵

What is deliberately provocative in the expression "this thinking has no result" requires careful consideration. It also amounts to saying that such a thinking is its own result, or "effect"⁶⁶—not because the purity of its speculation leads it around in circles, but because it is only possible as a thinking (in the manner of all true thinking) insofar as it is itself a conduct, an existential action. It posits and posits itself actively, which is also to say that it obligates itself to encounter human dignity insofar as the latter is incommensurable with a fixing of signification and a filling out of sense: in other words, it is ultimately incommensurable with any "thinking" in the usual sense of the word (idea, concept, discourse, etc.). Neither a sense projected indefinitely beyond (a "philosophy of values") nor sense captured and fixed as pure autonomy (the subjectivism of free choice) can ensure such a dignity. Both, moreover, lead to bitter disappointments that are rather different from what initially seems to emerge from Heidegger's

notion of thinking as having "no result." Indeed, this is shown by contemporary moral confusion, which fails to find either values or free will. Doing so, however, it shows that it has no sense of an ethics.

Dignity is possible only if it measures up to finitude, and finitude, as will now be clear, means the condition of a mode of being whose sense *makes-sense* as a ground and a truth. (Infinitude, by contrast, would be the condition of a mode of being that results in a sense being produced, acquired, and related back to itself.) Schematically speaking, therefore: ek-sistence *is* sense; it *has* no sense.

Existence, however, still has various senses (and non-senses). It can and must have them, can and must receive, choose, and invent them. Their number and scope is incommensurable with the unitary sense of dignity. *Touching* on this sense—not absorbing it as a signification, therefore, but exposing ourselves to it—such is the conduct toward which thinking strives. What marks it out as a conduct is the fact that it knows that it is conducting itself toward the "shattering" that consists in "shattering against the hardness of its matter."⁶⁷ This is a long way from being either a conduct of shattering or a way of "philosophizing" about shattering.⁶⁸ Rather, it is a conduct that conducts itself in such a way as to take the measure of the incommensurable interval between every "thinking" (idea, representation, etc.) and the fundamental action through which it makes itself think. It takes the measure of the absolute interval that sense is.

There's nothing mystical about all this; what is mystical, though, is thinking that immediately projects its insufficiency onto the sufficiency of a signified effusion that somehow lies beyond it. Here, however, thinking merely experiences the relation of the improper to the proper as what properly needs to be thought, despite its being precisely *not* an "object of thinking" but the gesture of conduct or, more than this, the event of being that ek-sists as the conduct of sense. What we call "thinking" is not a discursive and representational elaboration "about" this conduct, therefore; it is being-engaged in it.

Let me recall briefly just how this event of being comes to be described in *Being and Time* as a "call of conscience."⁶⁹ The call "makes" Dasein *schuldig*, guilty or in debt.⁷⁰ However, this idea of *Schuldigsein* isn't simply a matter of "having debts" and law-breaking.⁷¹ Rather, it is "a predicate for the 'I am.'"⁷² In this sense, then, it is the "responsibility" that is incumbent upon me insofar as I am "the ground of a nullity [*Nichtigkeit*],"⁷³ in other words, the "ground" of ek-sisting as such. In the terms used by the "Letter on 'Humanism': I am responsible for the gift as such.

At the same time, responsibility isn't played out between an impersonal "being" and an isolated "self." There is no "impersonal being." Rather, being is, if you like, the being-person of Dasein or, a little differently, in a formulation that would be both provocative and humorous, the personal being of Dasein.⁷⁴ Hence, responsibility only ever takes place as a responsibility with and toward others.⁷⁵

Thinking in the sense of "originary ethics" is the experience of this absolute responsibility for sense. Nevertheless, this way of "experiencing" isn't a "feeling" (a word that isn't used in the text, and that I'm only using here as a provisional recourse). This ethics is no more an aesthetics than it is a mysticism. It is not a matter of feeling the sublime sentiment of incommensurable dignity, and the action of thinking doesn't consist in savoring its mixture of pleasure and pain . . . It is a matter of exposing ourselves to the absence of concept and affect (we should think, once again, of Kant's notion of respect—but also, if we reread the texts carefully, of the sublime as *apatheia*) that constitutes the articulation of being as ek-sistence or as making-sense. The intimation of sense and/or its desire is without concept and without affect. Or rather, the original *ethos* is the ek-sistent *a priori* synthesis of concept and affect in general. And it is only thus that, rather than being the object of thinking, it is its very matter.

Opening ourselves to making-sense as such, as what is at stake in being, means at the same time opening ourselves to the possibility of evil. "Being nihilates—as being."⁷⁶ In other words, the gift, as the possibility/intimation of making-sense, also gives itself as the possibility of not receiving the gift as a gift (without which it would be neither a "gift" nor "desire" nor "intimation"—nor what is more properly the synthetic *a priori* of these three categories). It isn't a matter of denouncing human "badness" as opposed to the generosity of being.⁷⁷ This generosity itself offers the possibility of the "nothing" within the essence of being. This isn't to say that there is no difference between the two antagonistic possibilities; were that so, they could hardly be called "good" and "evil." Rather, then, it means that evil is possible as the "rage" that precipitates being into the nothingness that it also is.⁷⁸

How can ek-sisting, precipitated thus into its nothingness, be distinguished from ek-sisting exposed to its ownmost possibility of sense? Basically, how can one nothingness be distinguished from the other? Heidegger wants us to understand that no distinguishing ("normative")

proposition can have any real sense if thinking is not firmly upheld in the face of the possibility that making-sense might "nihilate" or destroy itself as such. No doubt the glaring tension in this text's refusal to attempt even the slightest determination of evil can seem a touch worrying. This would need to be addressed elsewhere. What has to be conceded is the fact that any determination of evil would lead us away from the necessity of thinking the possibility of evil as a possibility of ek-sistence. It would lead us away from the possibility of being as ek-sistence.

This is what Heidegger indicates in the passage in which he sketches out a recent history of negativity "in the essence of being"⁷⁹ (revealing "nihilation" to be indissociable from "the history of being"—or from being as history—that brings it to light in its essential character). He notes that it's with speculative dialectics that negativity appears in being, but he does so merely in order to observe that "being is thought there as will that wills itself as the will to knowledge and to love";⁸⁰ in other words, dialectics sublates evil in this knowledge and this love. In this, the most recent form of theodicy, "nihilation" remains "essentially veiled." "Being as will to power is still concealed." Hence it is as will to power that nihilation has manifested itself without dialectical resorption. We can gloss this indication by thinking of the date of the text: 1946. If Heidegger isn't more explicit, that is surely because he refuses to separate the question of Nazism from that of an essential *Weltnot*,⁸¹ a distress or deficiency in the modern world linked to the unleashing of "technology" (which it's not enough to oppose with a moral protest). This means, at least, that the modern world—or being in its most recent "sending"—brings to light, to a harsh light, an unreserved "engagement" of ek-sisting in the complete responsibility for sense (which may mean, moreover, that the demand to which the Nazi engagement was intended to respond was ethical *and* that Nazism ultimately showed itself to be the movement of this demand over into "rage"). In this, "originary ethics" is not only the fundamental structure or conduct of thinking, it is also what is delivered at the end of and as the accomplishment of the history of "the West" or of "metaphysics." We can no longer refer to available senses; we have to take absolute responsibility for making-sense of the world. We cannot ease the "distress" by filling up the horizon with the same "values" whose inconsistency—once their metaphysical foundation had collapsed—allowed the "will to power" to unfold. What this means, however, is that the ground needs to be thought somewhat differently: as ek-sistence.

This is how original ethical conduct encounters its law, its proper *nomos*: the *nomos* of the "abode," of "upholding" according to ek-sistence.⁸² It is a matter of upholding ourselves and "bearing" or "carrying" ourselves in a way that befits the injunction of being—the injunction to be-ek-sistent. Conduct, dignity, is a matter of bearing. We have to bear ourselves, bear up before the responsibility for making-sense that has unfolded unreservedly. Man has to understand himself according to this responsibility.

This bearing is above all that of language. "Thinking" action consists in "bringing to language." What has to be brought to language isn't of the order of maxims. These, as such, don't need to be brought to language; they are, at least to a certain extent, available significations. (To take up the example once again: we can express a "respect for life," yes, but that says nothing about what does or does not make sense through "life" and our "respect" for it.)

This bearing of and in language is nothing more than respect or care for the job of making-sense; the refusal, consequently, to reduce it to facile moralizations or aestheticizing seductions (whence, for example, the reason why *Being and Time* was to dismiss interpretations of "responding to the call" as "wanting to have a 'good conscience'" or as "cultivating the call voluntarily."⁸³ None of which rules out the fact that the "Rectoral Address" fell into both of these traps.)

Hence it is with regard to the bearing of language that the "Letter on 'Humanism'" expresses what are, properly speaking, its only maxims, the maxims of "bearing" itself: "rigor of meditation, carefulness in saying, frugality with words."⁸⁴ These three maxims propose no values. Nor could they be used simply to measure the "ethicity" of any given discourse. The careful—even fastidious—restraint that they evoke, which has a whole Kantian and Hölderlinian tradition behind it, can just as easily be turned into puritanical affectation. The ethics of "bringing to language" should not be confused with a morality, still less with a policing of styles. These three maxims are merely the maxim of the measure of language in its relation with the unmeasurable character of making-sense.

All of which explains why Heidegger takes as his example of "the inconspicuous deed of thinking" the use of the expression "bring to language itself," an expression that he has just said needs to be taken "quite literally."⁸⁵ If we think it, he says, then "we have brought something of the essence of being itself to language." This means that "bringing to language" doesn't consist in expressing through words a sense laid down in the

thing that we call being (being is precisely *not* a thing). It means literally (and we probably ought to say "physically," had we the time to explain ourselves on this point) *bringing* being itself, as ek-sisting, to the advent or the event that it is: to the action of making-sense. Language doesn't signify being but makes it be. But "making being being" means opening it to the conduct of sense that it is. Language is the exercising of the principle of responsibility. Hence, saying "man" or the *humanitas* of man—provided we have "bearing"—cannot amount to expressing an acquired value. It will always mean, so to speak, letting ourselves be conducted by the experience of a question—What is man?—that is already experienced as being beyond any question to which a signification could respond. Language is action in that it is indefinitely obligated to act. "Bringing to language" doesn't mean entrusting ourselves to words; on the contrary, it means entrusting the acts of language, as all acts, to the conduct of sense, to the finitude of being, in other words, to the ek-sistence in which "man infinitely exceeds man."

If it isn't going too far, allow me three brief concluding remarks, which will extend beyond the scope of an article such as this. This isn't the place to develop them, but it's relevant to mention them, since it would demonstrate a marked failure of integrity not to indicate the perspectives from which it has here been possible to present my remarks on Heideggerian ethics (and it should be pointed out that these perspectives are in line with a whole history of post-Heideggerian elaboration, particularly in France, Italy, and the United States).

a. Unquestionably, Heideggerian ethics is a long way from stressing the "being-the-there-with-others" that is, according to *Being and Time*, co-implicated in ek-sistence. That sense is or makes sense only in the sharing that finitude essentially *is*, this is what is not emphasized. And this is doubtless the reason why it will have been possible, without further ado, to treat a "people" as an individual. In order to be rigorous, the analysis would need to extend to plural singularity as the condition of ek-sistence. Such singularity isn't that of the "individual," but that of each event of being in "the same" individual and "the same" group. Moreover, the singularity of the event of being also needs to be considered insofar as it affects the totality of beings. It would also be necessary to "bring to language" the being or the ethical sense of nonhuman beings. At any rate, "bringing to language" is indissociable from a "communicating," something over which Heidegger

does not linger. This isn't the communication of a message (of a signification), but that of making-sense-in-common, something that is quite different from making common sense. It is finitude as sharing.

b. At the same time, the attention paid to language—particularly in the form of poetry—is always, and above all in the Heidegger of the essays on language, on the point of privileging a silent enunciation, one that might well prove to have the structure, nature, and appearance of a pure utterance of sense (and not of what I have been calling the "conduct of sense") as the sole and final (no longer "original") action. Poetry—and/or thinking—would give sense, even if silently, instead of opening onto it. At this precise point, at the apex of the action that "brings to language," we would need to think how the "bringing," bringing being itself, is action properly speaking, more so than language, and how existing ex-poses itself outside language through language itself, something that would take place, in particular, within making-sense-in-common; in other words, through a language that is first and foremost an *address*. We might well say: ethics would need to be "phatic" rather than "semantic." And I would also suggest that we put it in the following way: making-sense *ex-scribes itself* rather than being inscribed in maxims or works.

These two points amount to saying that "originary ethics" still fails to think the responsibility for its own ex-position (to others, to the world), an ex-position that constitutes its true logic.

c. By claiming the title "originary ethics" and by identifying it with a "fundamental ontology" prior to every ontological and ethical partition of philosophy, Heidegger cannot but have kept deliberately quiet about the only major work of philosophy entitled *Ethics* that is itself an "ontology" as well as a "logic" and an "ethics." His silence about Spinoza is well known, but it is doubtless here that it is at its most deafening. There would be lots to say about this, but the most summary of observations will suffice: to say that *ethos* is the ek-sisting of existence itself might be another way of saying that "blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself."⁸⁶

Translated by Duncan Large