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NIHILISM IN NIETZSCHE, HEIDEGGER AND LEVINAS

A thesis submitted by Toby Smith in accordance with the requirements of the University of Durham for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Philosophy
January 2006

'*Life and Death*

The two old, simple problems ever intertwined,

Close home, elusive, present, baffled, grappled.

By each successive age insoluble, pass'd on,

To ours today - and we pass on the same.' - Walt Whitman

'... is there any meaning in my life which will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?' - Count Leo Tolstoy

'Can you tell me, boss ... why do people die? ... all those damned books you read - what good are they? Why do you read them? If they don't tell you that, what *do* they tell you?' - 'Zorba the Greek' (Nikos Kazantzakis)

Declaration

I declare that no part of this work has been submitted by me for any degree in this or any other university. All the work presented was conducted by me, except where otherwise stated.

Toby Smith

CONTENTS

Abstract of *Nihilism in Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas*, a thesis submitted by Toby Smith for the degree of Ph.D. in Philosophy, University of Durham, 2006.

This thesis presents an account of nihilism in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and a critical response to it using the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas.

Chapter one gives an account of the three different types of nihilism in Nietzsche's writings, and of how the latest outbreak of nihilism, modern European, came about. Chapter two presents Nietzsche's own responses to modern European nihilism, focusing on the overman, the will to power, the eternal recurrence and his view of truth, and points out the disturbing ethical implications of Nietzsche's responses to nihilism. Chapter three places Nietzsche's philosophy within the context of Heidegger's account of nihilism as 'forgetfulness of Being', and considers Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche and the notion of 'values', Heidegger's account of the philosophical tradition since Plato, and his reflection on our 'technological' understanding of Being as an inevitable result of the 'forgetfulness of Being'. Chapter four discusses how *Being and Time* and its critique of Descartes and the subject-object distinction can be seen as a response to nihilism as the 'forgetfulness of Being', and as an implicit part of Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche. Chapter five considers Heidegger's response to nihilism in terms of his writings on authenticity, art, language, and thinking, and shows how all of these features of Heidegger's thought aim to attune us to Being as the mysterious 'source' of all particular understandings of being, a source to which we are beholden for the sense we are able to make in our lives. The potentially dangerous features of this picture of human life are then addressed, as is the lack of an explicitly ethical dimension to Heidegger's response to Nietzsche's explicitly ethical account of nihilism. Chapter six gives an account of Levinas's phenomenology of ethics and his critique of Heidegger and the philosophical tradition as 'philosophies of the Same'. It presents Levinas's theses concerning the importance of the other person in giving philosophical accounts of language, truth, and objectivity, and the heteronomous nature of the moral subject, as a way of making good the lack of an explicitly ethical response to Nietzschean nihilism in Heidegger's philosophy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Abbreviations

Martin Heidegger

BT   *Being and Time*, tr.J.Macquarrie and E.Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

BW   *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell, ed. (London Routledge, 1996).

DT   *Discourse on Thinking*, tr.John M. Anderson and E.Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

EGT   *Early Greek Thinking*, tr.David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

FCM   *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, tr.William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

IM   *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr.Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

N2   *Nietzsche II: the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, tr.Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

N3   *Nietzsche III: the Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, tr.Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell, Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

N4   *Nietzsche IV: Nihilism*, tr.Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1982).

Pa   *Pathmarks*, tr.William MacNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

PLT   *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr.Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

PR   *The Principle of Reason*, tr.Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

QCT *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays*, tr.William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

WCT *What is called Thinking?* tr.J.Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

Emmanuel Levinas

BPW *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

EI   *Ethics and Infinity*, tr.Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

EN   *Entre Nous: thinking-of-the-other*, tr.Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Athlone Press, 1998).

EE   *Existence and Existents*, tr.Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001).

FFL *Face to Face with Levinas,* ed.Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

HO   *Humanism of the Other*, tr.Nidra Poller (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

OB   *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr.Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

TO   *Time and the Other*, tr.Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

TI   *Totality and Infinity: an essay on exteriority*, tr.Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

Frederich Nietzsche

BG   *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr.R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990).

BT   *The Birth of Tragedy*, tr.Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

D   *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, tr.R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

EH   *Ecce Homo*, tr.R.J.Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1992).

GM   *On the Genealogy of Morality*, tr.Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

GS   *The Gay Science*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974).

HA   *Human, all too Human*, tr.Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (London: Penguin, 1994).

NR   *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1977).

PT   *Philosophy and Truth: selections from Nietzsche's notebooks of the early 1870s*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (London: Humanities press, 1979).

TZ   *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr.R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1969).

T/A   *Twilight of the Idols / The Antichrist*, tr.R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990).

UM   *Untimely Meditations*, tr.R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

WP   *The Will to Power*, tr.Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968).

Introduction

1. Why nihilism? Why Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas?

Hermann Hesse, in *The Glass Bead Game,* describes a people who

> ... assiduously learned to drive automobiles, to play difficult card
> games and lose themselves in crossword puzzles - for they faced
> death, fear, pain, and hunger almost without defences, could no longer
> accept the consolation of the churches, and could obtain no useful
> advice from Reason.[1]

These people are us. There was a time when being an 'atheist' or a 'nihilist'
was a costly business - it might cost one one's friends, one's mental health,
even one's life. People knew then how much was at stake. Not so now. There
has been a forgetting or, to use Karen Carr's excellent phrase, a
'banalization of nihilism', a collective ducking of the challenges that
nihilism thrusts upon us, an evasion that results in taking a corrosive kind of
relativism and commodification of life as 'the norm'. Martin Heidegger
refers to this as the 'homelessness' of modern man. My concern in this thesis
is to take nihilism seriously, to face the challenges it poses us in the form of
Nietzsche's philosophy, with the help of the work of Heidegger and Levinas.
If philosophers are the 'insomniacs of the age', those who remain awake
whilst others are sleeping, then I would argue that nihilism is one of the
issues that is most likely to cause us sleepless nights.

George Steiner, at the start of *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky?*(two men
deeply concerned with the question of nihilism, of course), writes:

> Great works of art pass through us like storm-winds, flinging open the
> doors of perception, pressing upon the architecture of our beliefs with
> their transforming powers. We seek to record that impact, to put our
> shaken house back in order.[2]

[1] Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.22.

[2] George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky?* (London: Penguin, 1967), p.11.

This was my experience of reading Nietzsche. I am still trying to register the shock of impact and put my house back in order, and this thesis is part of my attempt to do that. I have enlisted the help of Heidegger and Levinas in doing so. Heidegger, besides exerting a massive influence on contemporary philosophy, himself takes up the challenge of Nietzsche and nihilism. Levinas's approach to ethics offers a way of thinking about ethics that may escape Nietzsche's corrosive critique of morality.

Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas. A German philologist, son of a pastor, one time friend of Wagner, sickly loner, itinerant wanderer of Europe, jotting down notes during long hikes in the Swiss Alps, notes on the imminent collapse of a two thousand year old way of life and thought. A Swabian professor of philosophy, son of a sexton, one time member of the Nazi party, deeply rooted in provincial peasant life, writing away in his hut in the Black Forest, or preparing lectures for enraptured students - writings and lectures on the question of Being, the forgetfulness of this question going back to Plato, and the increasingly technological and objectifying modes of life and thought we are left with as a result. A Lithuanian Jew who settled in France, most of whose family were murdered in the Holocaust, deeply steeped in the Jewish tradition, writing essays and articles on the face of the other person, and the suppression of otherness through totalising modes of thought that lead to totalitarian regimes; writing always with the memory of the Holocaust and the voices of the Old Testament prophets in his mind. Writing a dialogue about what would happen if these three extraordinary men found themselves in the same room would be very interesting and good fun to do. This thesis is a attempt to do something similar, in a more academic format: to bring these three thinkers into dialogue, around the issue of nihilism.

2. Nihilism and the Impulse to Philosophise

There is a sense in which nihilism can be seen as latent in the impulse to philosophise itself. Socrates was executed for daring to question the city's gods, daring to ask for definitions of the virtues above and beyond the

cave of the particular culture within which he found himself. The powers that be in Athens were right to execute him insofar as they realised how important belief in the gods of the city is for the successful functioning of a society. Why is this? In the *Phaedo* Socrates describes philosophy as the practice of learning to die. More than anything else, we derive our 'courage to be' from our culture and its gods, from the roles which we play in it, the 'hero systems' that generate our sense of self-esteem, and enable us to evade our fear of death (this is Ernest Becker's admirable thesis in *The Birth and Death of meaning, The Denial of Death,* and *Escape from Evil,* none of which can be recommended too highly). So, in questioning those gods, in questioning that Athenian hero system, Socrates is questioning what enables people to live, above and beyond basic 'necessities' like food and shelter. To practice such questioning and to attempt to think beyond the cave was a revolutionary activity (which is why we have still heard of Socrates two thousand five hundred years later), and is a form of dying. As Becker puts it:

> It [renouncing the security of the values that have made life liveable up to this point] is, as the Stoics and Shakespeare had already taught us, the going through hell of a lonely and racking rebirth where one throws off the lendings of culture, the costumes that fit us for life's roles, the masks and panoplies of our standardized heroisms, to stand alone and nude facing the howling elements as one's self - a trembling animal element. ... when, like Lear, a person has thrown off his cultural lendings, he is as weak and helpless as a new born babe.[3]

Such is the challenge of Socrates, the challenge of philosophy. It is also the challenge of Nietzsche and nihilism. Nietzsche too is questioning the city's gods, questioning the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is why his thought is so frightening, and why we might so easily evade its challenge. With unparalleled audacity, Nietzsche tries to rip apart the Judeo-Christian 'hero system'. This raises serious problems. What might take its place? Is it possible to effect such a breach with the past? Are we willing to adopt Nietzsche's immoralism and elitism? Does his critique of morality entail such immoralism and elitism? Is it possible to live in the light of something

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[3] Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (London: the Free press, 1962), p.147-8.

holy or sacred, something beyond human measure, without it being God? And how are we to think of ethics after Nietzsche? These are all questions I shall be addressing in the thesis.

3. A Brief History of Nihilism - Jacobi, the Russians, Schopenhauer

I want to give a brief history of the emergence of the word 'nihilism'. 'Nihil' is the Latin word for 'nothing', so we can literally translate the word as 'nothingism'. As Critchley points out, the word 'nihilism' was first used, as far as we know, by Jacobi in 1799 in his 'Letter to Fichte'.[4] In this letter Jacobi accuses Fichte of nihilism because, in the latter's philosophy, nothing is permitted to exist outside of the ego. The word 'nihilism' first began to emerge more broadly as a part of a people's vocabulary amongst the Russians, which is hardly a surprise: the deep, dark depths of the proverbial 'Russian soul' seem an appropriate womb for it to issue out of. Bazarov in Turgenev's *Father and Sons* (1862) is described as a nihilist. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, perhaps more than Turgenev, grappled with the issue of nihilism in their lives and writings. In 'My Religion' (1884) Tolstoy describes most of his adult life - the period in which he raised a family, ran several estates, founded schools for peasants, and wrote two of the masterpieces of world literature, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* - as the life of a nihilist:

> I have lived in the world fifty-five years, and after the fourteen or fifteen years of my childhood, for thirty five years of my life I was, in the proper acceptation of the word, a nihilist, - not a socialist and revolutionist, as is generally understood by that word, but a nihilist in the sense of one who believed in nothing.[5]

We can also see the roots of nihilism in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, a philosopher much loved by Tolstoy and Nietzsche. Whilst

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[4] Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[5] Leo Tolstoy, 'My Religion', in *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus* Walter Kaufmann ed., (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

Schopenhauer does not himself use the word, a nihilistic mood pervades his thinking. Safranski, an astute biographer of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger, is surely right when he claims, 'Schopenhauer is the philosopher of the pain of secularization, of metaphysical homelessness, of lost original confidence'.[6] Nietzsche himself wrote, 'As we thus reject the Christian interpretation and condemn its 'meaning' like counterfeit, *Schopenhauer's* question immediately comes to us in a terrifying way: *Has existence any meaning at all?*' (GS: 357 / p.308). The question 'Has existence any meaning at all?' hovers like a palimpsest behind Schopenhauer's work. He argues that philosophy begins in a downbeat mood, a mood of disappointment, exasperation with, even despair of, life. In memorable lines he writes:

> ...philosophy, like the overture to *Don Juan*, starts with a minor chord. ... it is wickedness, evil, and death that qualify and intensify philosophical astonishment. Not merely that the world exists, but still more that it is such a miserable and melancholy world, is the *punctum pruriens* [tormenting problem] of metaphysics, the problem awakening in mankind an unrest that cannot be quieted either by scepticism or criticism.[7]

If this is where it begins, it ends, if practised rightly (or if you agree with Schopenhauer) in the recognition that the value of life is that it teaches you not to want it, and that, '... this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is - nothing.'[8] We can accommodate ourselves to these sobering facts by practising renunciation, and getting over the 'inborn error' of believing that man was made for happiness. However, for all its 'nihilism', Schopenhauer's philosophy evokes a much more sturdy, reassuring and comfortable world than the one we find in Nietzsche. The truths that Schopenhauer expresses rationally in his philosophy are, he argues, expressed mythically in the great world-denying religions - Buddhism,

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[6] Rudiger Safranski, *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Masachussetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[7] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, vol. II* (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 171-2.

[8] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, vol. I,* (New York: Dover, 1960), p.412.

Hinduism and Christianity - in order for the masses to be able to understand them, traditions and ways of life that have been built up over millennia to accommodate us to the true nature of things, so boldly - unforgettably - spelled out by Schopenhauer.

Thus, we can see the concept of nihilism emerging in response to Kant's critical philosophy, in Jacobi's worries about Fichte's idealism; in the Russian educated classes of the 1860s - in the lives and writings of Turgenev, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy amongst many others - and in the philosophy of Schopenhauer. However, it is Nietzsche that gave the concept the kind of centrality it enjoys to this day. Therefore, I begin the thesis with examining his treatment of nihilism.

4. Works on Nihilism

Nihilism is not a topic that has attracted a great deal of debate in Anglo-American philosophy, perhaps partly because it falls between the two stools of philosophy and religion in university departments, and perhaps also because it is too vague and 'sociological' a topic to attract the attention of more analytically minded philosophers. Nevertheless, there are a number of relatively recent books which do address themselves to this topic, and from which I have taken guidance and, in some cases, inspiration. Simon Critchley's *Continental Philosophy: a very short introduction* contains excellent introductory material on the Kantian background to nihilism, and a succinct summary of Russian and Nietzschean nihilism. His book *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* also contains a very lucid framing of nihilism in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger. James Edwards' two books, *The Authority of Language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein and the Threat of Philosophical Nihilism*, and *The Plain Sense of Things: the Fate of Religion in an age of Normal Nihilism*, have informed this thesis, not least because Heidegger looms large in Edwards's suggestions as to how to respond to nihilism. The former book, with its argument for language as a source of authority for our lives which exceeds human control, has influenced the section on language in chapter five. Karen Carr's excellent book *The Banlization of Nihilism* I found salutary for its indictment of Rorty's

pragmatism as a 'banalization of nihilism', and for its emphasis on a religious dimension to nihilism missing from Rorty. In Allan Bloom's classic *The Closing of the American mind* I recognized myself and my contemporaries in his portrait of students and the corrosive relativism, excessive freedom and lack of genuine 'eros' that can be found amongst us. I have also drawn inspiration from his account of the history of Western culture in terms of the gradual institutionalization of Socratic rationality, culminating in the Enlightenment project, and the need for a response to the failure of that project, a failure made so apparent by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Lastly, Jonathan Glover's book, *Humanity: a moral history of the twentieth century*, whilst not primarily a work of philosophy, emphasises the link between Nietzsche's attack on Judeo-Christian morality, and the atrocities of twentieth century history, a link that shall concern me especially when considering Levinas's contribution to the issue of nihilism.

5. The Structure of the Thesis

The specific way in which I have chosen to address the issue of nihilism is as follows. I have asked myself, 'What does Nietzsche mean by nihilism, and what is the nature of the challenge that it poses us?'. Then I consider the question: how successfully, and in what ways, does Heidegger answer it? Consideration of this question led me to a further one concerning the explicitly ethical dimension of Nietzsche's challenge, and the extent to which Heidegger's philosophy responds to this; which in turn led me to the work of Levinas, and to the question of whether Levinas achieves such a response.

In chapter one, I begin by distinguishing the three principal kinds of nihilism in Nietzsche's writings: original, ascetic and modern European. The concept of original nihilism - the idea that, as beings who know we are going to die, and who are self-conscious about their suffering, we are intrinsically prey to nihilism - runs throughout the thesis. I then trace the shift from a non-nihilistic to a nihilistic response to suffering, with reference to *The Birth of Tragedy* and Nietzsche's discussion of Socrates, which leads to a clarification of ascetic nihilism. Then I discuss the origins of modern

European nihilism, with particular reference to the rise of the scientific world view, and the critical philosophy of Kant. I then discuss Nietzsche's Kantian-Darwinian reflections on the nature of knowledge, as forming the theoretical basis for modern European nihilism.

Chapter two deals with Nietzsche's proposals for responding to modern European nihilism. Here I discuss the fear of an insipid relativism breeding an epidemic of soulless mediocrity which Nietzsche feared as one possible outcome of modern European nihilism. This is contrasted with the superman, who creates new values, and, crucially, has the strength to do so whilst recognising that value and truth are ultimately human creations that bear no direct relation to a reality that transcends human interests and concerns. I then discuss Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power, how 'metaphysical' a doctrine it is, and how it sits alongside his claims about the perspectival nature of all knowledge. I then discuss what, in Nietzsche's view, a non-nihilistic response to suffering involves, with reference to Zarathustra's teaching on the eternal recurrence. I also point out what kind of political structures Nietzsche thought would most favour the overcoming of nihilism and the production of the superman, and demonstrate how this is implicit in his doctrine of the will to power. Finally, I raise a number of criticisms about Nietzsche's account of nihilism, particularly: is it possible to live in the world and to create values without believing that one's beliefs and values have some degree of objective validity, that they are more than simply choices or posits? Can we be happy with a vision of overcoming nihilism that compels most people to live for the sake of the few 'higher men' whose creativity may render human life meaningful? More generally, is the creativity of the few the right place in which to search for a solution to nihilism?

In chapter three I turn to Heidegger, with the question of the feasability of Nietzsche's view of truth and value as 'all too human' products of the drive for greater power in mind. Having briefly introduced 'the question of Being', I give an account of Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, focusing on Heidegger's argument that to think of nihilism in terms of values, as Nietzsche does, betrays a 'forgetfulness of Being', and a

subjectivization of truth, which he contrasts with an attentiveness to Being that he claims to find traces of in the pre-Socratic philosophers. I show how Heidegger locates the beginnings of this forgetfulness in Plato, and explain Heidegger's notion of a 'history of Being', the place that Nietzsche occupies in it, and his relationship to Heidegger's reflections on our age as the age of 'technology'.

Chapters four and five are devoted to Heidegger's account of how to respond to nihilism - nihilism as he has demarcated it, nihilism as 'forgetfulness of Being', which includes Nietzsche's thought. I discuss *Being and Time* and its attack on the Cartesian subject-object distinction - which, Heidegger claims, underlies Nietzsche's thought - with reference to its account of our 'being-in-the-world' and language. I then point out that the very intention to overcome nihilism is itself nihilistic, in Heidegger's view, because it is symptomatic of thinking that nihilism is a product of human thinking and doing, rather than something 'sent' us by Being itself. I then discuss Heidegger's writings on authenticity and anxiety in terms of nihilism, arguing that within them we can see the roots of an attempt to become aware of ourselves as disclosers, and through so doing become more attuned to Being - not human agency or the will to power - as the source of this disclosing. I then examine Heidegger's meditations on art, language, thinking and the 'four fold' as ways of attuning us to Being, to a measure for our lives beyond mere human fabrication for the enhancement of power, which nevertheless does not become some Platonic style 'true world'. Finally, I consider the success of Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche and his own account of nihilism. I suggest that it addresses the feasability of Nietzsche's 'all too human' account of the origins of truth and value, and demonstrates how this strand of Nietzsche's thought is closely related to the prevailing tendency of our day towards a 'technological' understanding of Being, towards increasing objectivization, standardization and commodification. However, the same strand in Heidegger's thought that makes it such a potent opponent of Nietzschean nihilism also renders it dangerous in some respects, and this leads me to criticize the passivity of later Heidegger's picture of man in relation to Being, a passivity that has potentially dangerous social and political implications. Moreover, Heidegger

does not, in his response to Nietzsche and in his philosophy overall, give sufficient attention to the explicitly ethical dimension of Nietzsche's thought: to the abhorrent nature of the values that Nietzsche upheld as paramount as a consequence of viewing the essence of life as will to power, and the equally abhorrent nature of the kind of political structures Nietzsche thought were implied by those values. I argue that the events of twentieth century history, events that occurred as it were in Heidegger's backyard, might have been more than enough to alert him to this failing, and that one of the most significant aspects of technology is the dramatic change it has led to both in our capacity for good and evil and our ability to take responsibility for our actions, neither of which he devotes much explicit thought to.

These shortcoming in Heidegger's thought lead me, in chapter six, to discuss whether the work of Levinas addresses these failings. Here I discuss his critique of Western philosophy as a 'philosophy of the Same', with particular reference to Nietzsche and Heidegger, and argue that this critique sheds light on both of these thinkers. I explain the central features of Levinas's phenomenology of ethics, and argue that, by arguing that the ethical relation with the face of another person lies at the origins of language, self-consciousness and the very possibility of a shared world; that justice is ontologically prior to freedom, and that, prior to the autonomous act of choosing our values there is our heteronomous passivity in the face of responsibilities to others that originated prior to our birth and which we never freely took on, it offers a way of thinking about ethics that evades Nietzsche's scathing critique of Judeo-Christian morality, and points the way to a just politics. As such, it forms a much needed complement to Heidegger's response to Nietzsche's nihilism.

Chapter One: Nietzsche on what Nihilism is and how it came about

1. The Three Different Kinds of Nihilism: Original, Ascetic, and Modern European

As I have mentioned, the term 'nihilism' was first used by Jacobi, in a letter to Fichte. In words the prophetic nature of which will become apparent as we consider Nietzschean nihilism, Jacobi laments:

> But the human being has such a choice, this single one: Nothingness or a God. Choosing Nothingness, he makes himself into a God; that is, he makes an apparition into God because if there is no God, it is impossible that man and everything which surrounds him is not merely an apparition. I repeat: God is, and is outside of me, a living being, existing in itself, or I am God. There is no third.[9]

It was Nietzsche who brought the concept of nihilism centre stage in philosophy, and characterized it in the kind of ways in which people use the word now. Surprisingly, the concept of nihilism appears hardly at all in his published writings. It is in the unpublished *The Will to Power* notebooks in which Nietzsche explicitly explores the concept at some length. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that much of the published work can be seen as leading towards the concept of nihilism as Nietzsche unfolds it in his unpublished notes. Much of what I have to say concerning Nietzsche on nihilism will be drawn from the published writings. What I am initially going to do is to explain the main ways in which Nietzsche uses the term nihilism. There are three.

Actually, he sketches several more, but they need not detain us here: the following are the main three. Firstly, there is what we might call an 'original nihilism'. There are two main ways of looking at this. One is to say that human life is essentially or constitutionally nihilistic, and that we can

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[9] Quoted in Critchley (2001), p.27.

only endure life on the basis of particular interpretations which we impose upon the world in order to render the suffering that is coeval with life meaningful and therefore bearable. These interpretations form the basis of culture. This point was made in the 'Introduction', section two. Secondly, this original nihilism can be said to refer to a particular historical outbreak of nihilism, an outbreak that Nietzsche discusses in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. We might date this outbreak to the seven hundred year period 500BC. to 200AD., and call it the transition from a 'pre-moral' to 'moral' mankind. Nietzsche writes of a class of human beings, slaves, who were so oppressed, whose lives had becomes so miserable, so hard to bear, that is was absolutely imperative that they construct a new interpretation for their immense suffering. This sheds light on Nietzsche's enigmatic assertion that mankind would rather will nothingness than not will at all. According to the story that Nietzsche tells, this is exactly what a large portion of mankind did. Unable to exercise power in a material sense, such was the extent of their oppression by masters, the slaves had to take the drastic step of reconstituting their sense of what it means to be in the world, by affirming a 'beyond', another world in which they will be rewarded for their meekness and obedience in this world. This is now a familiar story. This is what Nietzsche outlines as the first outbreak of nihilism in Western history: the desperate need felt by slaves to render their suffering meaningful, culminating in the drastic measure of inventing another world in which they will be compensated for their woes in this world.

The second kind of nihilism is implicit in the first. Nietzsche characterises as nihilistic this new mode of valuation, on the grounds that it devalues this world in the name of another world. He terms this tendency the 'ascetic ideal', and attaches great importance to it, as we shall see. So nihilism also means the way in which our earthly life can be robbed of value by the transference of value into another, fictitious, realm. It is, of course, mainly Christianity that Nietzsche has in mind when he speaks of this mode of evaluating, and which he regarded as 'Platonism for 'the people'' (BG: Preface / p.32).

The third kind of nihilism is the one that is 'closest to home', as it were, for us citizens of twenty first century Europe. It is the form that Nietzsche is referring to when he writes, in *The Will to Power*: 'What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devaluate themselves.* The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer' (WP: 2 / p.9). It refers to a sense of tension between our inherited ways of interpreting the world, and our actual experience of the world. Because we have learnt to think of value as residing in another world or realm distinct from this one, largely due to Christianity, when such an interpretation comes to seem to us more and more fallacious, we are inclined to regard the world as completely lacking in meaning. This is because we have become so used to locating value in another world.

1.2. The Transition from Original to Ascetic Nihilism: from Tragedy to Socrates

Perhaps the central reason why the young Nietzsche was so taken with the philosophy of Schopenhauer was because of the latter's bold insistence on the centrality of suffering in human life. Nietzsche himself wrote that the lasting significance of Schopenhauer's philosophy consisted in a warning to us 'above all not to play down and obscure that indifferent, merciless, indeed evil original constitution of being'.[10] Schopenhauer's writings are littered with passages of Shakespearean pathos which evoke how deeply entwined suffering is into the fabric of life. Nietzsche's concerns largely revolve around the question of how particular cultures deal with suffering, how they render it meaningful and bearable. Nietzsche's reverence for ancient Greek culture prior to Socrates was due to his discerning in that culture, in its tragedies, a way of responding to suffering that unflinchingly faces up to the suffering and terror endemic to human life whilst at the same time affirming it. He calls such a response a 'pessimism of strength', of which he writes:

> Is there such a thing as a *strong* pessimism? An intellectual preference for the hard, horrific, evil, problematic aspects of

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[10] Quoted in Peter Poellner, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.200.

existence which stems from well-being, from overflowing health, from an *abundance* of existence? Might it even be possible to suffer from over-abundance? A tempting courage of the most intense gaze, which yearns for the fearful as for the enemy, the worthy enemy, on whom it can test its strength? from whom it wants to learn what 'fear' is? (BT: preface 1 / p.3-4).

Herein lies the importance of tragedy for Nietzsche. Through it the Greeks experienced something on which they could test their strength, from which they could learn what fear is, *and yet still affirm life*: namely, the chaos of a thoroughly inhuman life force, which Nietzsche terms the 'Dionysian'. This inhuman life force is similar to what Nietzsche will later term 'the will to power', the recognition and affirmation of which by the 'higher men' will be central to his account of how to overcome nihilism.

Nietzsche's analysis is based on the assumption that, 'that which truly exists and the original Unity, with its eternal suffering and contradiction, needs at the same time the delightful vision, the pleasurable appearance, for its continual redemption' (BT: 4 / p.30). The 'eternal suffering and contradiction' is the Dionysian element, which must be both acknowledged and redeemed. This requires the Apollonian, 'which must always ... triumph over a horrific depth of the contemplation of the world and the most sensitive capacity for suffering by resorting to powerful misleading delusions and pleasurable illusions' (BT: 4 / p.29). Thus the Greeks resorted to myth and tragedy, to the brilliant world of the dream-born Olympians, in order to live with their knowledge of the Dionysian element of life.

What is implicit in Nietzsche's account of tragedy is that *human life is in need of redemption and that, central to human cultures are ways of dealing with suffering*. As I have already mentioned, I am referring to this as 'original nihilism', by which I mean that nihilism - a sense of the meaninglessness of life - is endemic to the human condition, whether we realise it or not. We are placed in the uncanny position of both suffering and knowing that we suffer, dying and knowing that we are going to die. All of us, on one level or another, feel the pull of Tolstoy's question, 'Is there any

meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of the death which awaits me?'.[11] Thus we need ways of dealing with this predicament, and those social practices that enable us to do this constitute the most important part of a particular culture, in Nietzsche's view. His writing on tragedy is so important because it identifies a great parting in the ways in which Western culture has responded to suffering and to the inhuman life force, the Dionysian, we are thrust into at birth. We have, to put it in terms Nietzsche will use in his later writings, a shift from a non-nihilistic response to suffering, to a nihilistic one. This parting of the ways is symbolized by Socrates, 'the single point around which so-called world history turns and twists' (BT: 15 / p.83).

1.2.1. Socrates and the Beginnings of a 'Nihilistic' Response to 'Original Nihilism'

It is a remarkable testament to the unity of Nietzsche's writings that his two sustained reflections on Socrates occur eighteen years apart, in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Twilight of the Idols*. In both books he narrates how, at a certain point, the Greeks could no longer bear the tension of their Dionysian wisdom, embodied in their tragedies: they were no longer able to affirm suffering without recourse to metaphysics, to life-denying fictions. In response to this crisis, reason and consciousness are given priority over life and instinct, creating a restricted notion of life as subservient to ideas that originate in life. This shift can be detected, in Nietzsche's eyes, in Socrates and the birth of philosophy: 'While in all productive people it is precisely instinct which is the creative-affirmative force and it is consciousness which criticizes and dissuades, in Socrates, however, instinct becomes the critic and consciousness the creator - a true monstrosity *per defectum*.' (BT: 13 / p.75). In *Twilight of the Idols* he gives a more detailed account of why Socratic dialectic became such a strong force at precisely the time that it did in Athens, thereby eclipsing Dionysian wisdom:

Everywhere the instincts were in anarchy; everywhere people were a few steps away from excess: the *monstrum in animo* was the general

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[11] Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other religious writings* (London: Penguin, 1987), p.35.

danger. 'The drives want to play the tyrant; we must invent a *counter-tyrant* who is stronger' ... The fanaticism with which the whole of Greek thought throws itself on rationality betrays a crisis: they were in danger, they had just *one* choice: either perish or - be *absurdly rational*. ... Reason=virtue=happiness means simply: we must imitate Socrates and establish permanent *daylight* to combat the dark desires - the daylight of reason. We must be clever, clear, bright at all costs: any yielding to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads *downwards* ... (T: II 9 / p.43).

In Nietzsche's potted history of ancient Greek culture, Socrates, far from representing a pinnacle, in fact marks the beginning of a decline brought about by an anarchy of the instincts. We can see how Plato's theory of the Forms can be characterised as part of this decline, as well as 'Platonism for the people': Christianity. In all three we see 'ascetic nihilism', as ideas about life are raised to a higher status than life itself, culminating in the idea of another, 'true' world behind this one that compensates for the miseries and imperfections of this one. Nietzsche detects the birth of all of this in Socrates:

> Socrates was a misunderstanding; *the entire morality of improvement, Christianity included, was a misunderstanding* ... *The harshest daylight, rationality at all costs, life bright, cold, cautious, conscious, instinct-free, instinct-resistant: this was just an illness, a different illness - and definitely not a way back to 'virtue', 'health', happiness ... To have to fight against the instincts - this is the formula for decadence: so long as life is ascendant, happiness equals instinct.* - (T: II 11 / p.44).

With Socrates, the hegemony of reason and science begins. Socrates is the 'theoretical man', the 'despotic logician' (BT: 15 / p.80-1), and his creed is the following piece of 'sublime metaphysical madness': '... by following the guiding thread of causality, thought reaches into the deepest abysses of being and is capable not only of knowing but also even of *correcting* being. ... its purpose [is] to make existence appear intelligible and so justified (BT:

15 / p.82). So, Socrates is the grandfather of the ascetic nihilism propagated later on by Plato and Christianity. With Socrates ideas begin to lord it over life. Our original nihilism gets warded off by reason, we mask the abyss by means of concepts. Intelligibility becomes more important than creative energy, and the ability to explain, control and predict events becomes the new way of responding to suffering. The world now becomes an object of knowledge, rather than the dynamic, Dionysian process out of which we spring. It must now conform to predetermined frameworks rather than express truths which resist rational comprehension. As Ofelia Shutte puts it in *Beyond Nihilism*, 'The loss of the unified Dionysian ground of existence and the transfer of the centre for synthesizing experiences to the thought process constitutes a violation of ... all truly creative possibilities for human beings.'[12]

1.3. Ascetic Nihilism

As I have said, Nietzsche regarded the task of warding off nihilism as something essential to our constitution, as something as deeply a part of us as our need to imbibe food and drink on a daily basis. Thus he writes at the start of *The Gay Science*:

> Gradually, man has become a fantastic animal that has to fulfil one more condition of existence than any other animal: man *has to* believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists; his race cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life - without faith in *reason in life*. And again and again the human race will decree from time to time: 'There is something at which it is absolutely forbidden henceforth to laugh (GS: 1 / p.75).

Nietzsche thought that man, burdened as he is with the knowledge of his own existence and its inevitable end, as well as being self-conscious about his suffering, needs to find compensation for such terrible knowledge through meaning, an interpretation of the world that renders meaningful man's sojourn in it, despite suffering and death. He argues that the 'reason in life'

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[12] Ofelia Schutte, *Beyond Nihilism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.21.

which the human race has forbidden itself to laugh at for the last two thousand five hundred years is the 'ascetic ideal'. He writes, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

> Read from a distant planet, the majuscule script of our earthly existence would perhaps seduce the reader to the conclusion that the earth was the ascetic planet *par excellence*, an outpost of discontented, arrogant and nasty creatures who harboured a deep disgust for themselves, for the world, for all life and hurt themselves as much as possible out of pleasure in hurting (GM 3 11 / p.90).

What does he mean by the ascetic ideal? Basically, *a way of orienting oneself to the world, a mode of evaluation and interpretation, whereby man denigrates the things of this world - his body, his 'earthly life' - in the name of some other, 'higher', 'world' or principle*. Such an ideal can, obviously, take various concrete forms. The two that Nietzsche focuses on the most are Platonism and Christianity, the latter of which he considers to be, as I have already mentioned, 'Platonism for the people.'

Nietzsche locates the origins of the ascetic ideal in some unspecified time before the advent of Christianity. He writes of a time, prior to the invention of the ascetic ideal, in which:

> [Man's] existence on earth had no purpose; 'What is man for, actually?' - was a question without an answer; there was no *will* for man and earth; behind every great human destiny sounded the even louder refrain 'in vain!' ... something was *missing*, there was an immense *lacuna* around man, - he could think of no justification or explanation or affirmation, he *suffered* from the problem of what he meant. ... suffering itself was not the problem, but the fact that there was no answer to the question he screamed, 'Suffering for what? (GM 3 28 / p.127).

This is one of Nietzsche's most vivid evocations of 'original nihilism', a powerful feeling of the senselessness and futility of life. It was in order to

address this situation, he argues, that the ascetic ideal was created, and became so compelling. As we have seen, he locates the roots of this ideal in Socrates and the turn to the rationality of philosophy and away from the Dionysian wisdom of genuine tragedy. However, it is in the philosophy of Socrates' most famous student, Plato, that the ascetic ideal begins to take more definite shape.

1.3.1. Ascetic Nihilism in Plato's Theory of Forms, and in Philosophy Generally

Before considering Nietzsche's specific remarks on Plato, it is worthwhile briefly adumbrating the nature of Nietzsche's most common method of philosophical analysis. Typically, he does not argue for or against the truth of a particular proposition, but rather attempts to probe the psychological motives a philosopher might have for thinking in a particular way. As he puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; moreover, that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy have every time constituted the real germ of life out of which the whole plant has grown. To explain how a philosopher's most remote metaphysical assertions have actually been arrived at, it is always well (and wise) to ask oneself first: what morality does this (does *he*-) aim at? (BG 6 / p.38).

What, then, is the confession that Nietzsche, self-styled master psychologist, detects in Plato's theory of the Forms? He detects an ascetic nihilism, a flight from the harsh actualities of the world of becoming into a 'truer world' of greater stability and justice. As he puts it in *Twilight of the Idols*:

> To talk about 'another' world than this is quite pointless, provided that an instinct for slandering, disparaging and accusing life is not strong within us: in the latter case we *revenge* ourselves on life with the phantasmagoria of 'another', a 'better' life (T III 6 / p.49).

Nietzsche felt that the whole of Western philosophy - that 'series of footnotes to Plato' - had been similarly 'ascetic' in its approach to life, similarly hostile to that which really is, in the name of a mendacious beyond:

> *Why philosophers are slanderers.* It is a miserable story: man seeks a principle through which he can despise men - he invents a world so as to be able to slander and bespatter this world: in reality, he reaches every time for nothingness and construes nothingness as 'God,' as 'truth,' and in any case as judge and condemner of this state of being. ...
>
> ... The history of philosophy is a secret raging against the preconditions of life, against the value feelings of life, against partisanship in favour of life. Philosophers have never hesitated to affirm a world provided it contradicted this world and furnished them with a pretext for speaking ill of this world. It has been hitherto the grand school of slander (WP: 461 / p.253).

Elsewhere, he speaks of the 'peculiarly withdrawn attitude of the philosophers, denying the world, hating life, doubting the senses, desensualized, which has been maintained until quite recently to the point where it almost counted for the *philosophical attitude as such*' (GM 3 10 / p.89). In his brief history of philosophy, in *Twilight of the Idols*, 'How the 'Real world' at last became a Myth', he suggests that this ideal has dominated all of Western philosophy, in three main guises - Platonism, Christianity ('Platonism for the plebs'), and Kantian transcendental idealism. He argues elsewhere that this ideal also dominates modern science, (see, for example, GS 344 / p.280-3).

Nietzsche argues that the seeds of the ascetic ideal in philosophy are there in the way in which, according to him, we have to falsify reality in order to live at all, force, through metaphorical activity, disparate things into categories - a point I shall be considering in more detail later. What Nietzsche accuses Plato of doing, and with him much of philosophy since then, is *giving a moral colouring to this activity*, thereby valuing the dome

of concepts that we have to construct on the rushing river of life over and above life itself, as more 'perfect', more 'real', because more reliable and secure. Thus something that originated in order to serve life - our conceptual scheme - becomes something in the name of which we accuse life of, as it were, not being up to the mark. As he puts it in *The Will to Power*:

> This is the greatest error that has ever been committed, the essential fatality on earth: one believed one possessed a criterion of reality in the forms of reason - while in fact one possessed them in order to become master of reality, in order to misunderstand reality in a shrewd manner (WP: 584 / p.315).

This is the meaning of his enigmatic remark, ' 'Reason' in language: oh what a deceitful old woman! I am afraid we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar ...' (T III 6 / p.48). By 'God' here he means more generally another, better world than the empirical world. We are inclined to believe in such a world because we are bewitched by grammar into seeing the world in a particular way, a way which chimes with deep seated yearnings for escape and respite from ceaseless becoming and suffering. Nietzsche elaborates on the way in which the nature of reason has been misunderstood in order to denigrate life and to take flight from its unpredictability and flux in *Twilight of the Idols*:

> You ask me what are all the idiosyncrasies of the philosophers? ... For one thing their lack of historical sense, their hatred of the very idea of becoming, their Egypticism. They think they are doing a thing an *honour* when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni* - when they make a mummy out of it. All that philosophers have been handling for thousands of years is conceptual mummies; nothing real has ever left their hands alive. They kill things and stuff them, these servants of conceptual idols, when they worship ... Death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth, are objections - even refutations - for them. Whatever is, does not *become*; whatever becomes, *is* not ... Now they all believe, even to the point of desperation, in being (T: III 1 / p.45).

Later on in the same section Nietzsche points out how philosophers have concluded from the fact that we possess reason, a reason which is far more stable and perfect than the empirical world, that, ' 'we must once have been at home in a higher world ..., we must have been divine *because* we have reason!' ' (T: III 5 / p.48). So, ascetic nihilism has its roots in a mistake about the nature of conceptualisation, a mistake inaugurated by Socrates, and a mistake which has been so successful because it provided a way of overcoming our original nihilism. Now, however, its day is done, it has become unmasked. We are in the twilight of the idol of Reason.

Another, more sociological reason why philosophy has been so bound up with the ascetic ideal, in Nietzsche's view, is because it had to adopt the socially permissible garb of the ascetic ideal in order to survive, in order not to suffer the fate of Socrates:

> ... the philosophic spirit has always had to disguise and cocoon itself among *previously established* types of contemplative man, as a priest, magician, soothsayer, religious man in general, in order for its existence *to be possible* at all: *the ascetic ideal* served the philosopher for a long time as outward appearance, and a pre-condition for existence, - he had to *play* that part in order to be a philosopher, he had to *believe* in it in order to be able to play it. ... philosophy would have been *absolutely impossible* for most of the time on earth without an ascetic mask and suit of clothes, without an ascetic misconception of itself (GM 3 10 / p.89).

1.3.2. Ascetic Nihilism outside of Philosophy: Christianity

Thus we can see why philosophy might well be bound up with the ascetic ideal, but Nietzsche is claiming that the whole of Western culture has been simultaneously nourished and poisoned by it, for the same reason it has so appealed to philosophers - because it offers a release from suffering:

> ... *the ascetic ideal offered man a meaning!* Within it, suffering was given an interpretation; the enormous emptiness seemed filled;

the door was shut on all suicidal nihilism. ... man was *saved*, he had a *meaning*, from now on he was no longer like a leaf in the breeze, the plaything of the absurd, of 'non-sense'; from now on he could *will* something, - no matter what, why and how he did it at first, the *will itself was saved*. ... And, to conclude by saying what I said at the beginning: man still prefers to will nothingness, than not to will ... (GM 3 28 / p.127-8).

The ascetic ideal, then, originally arose as an artifice for the preservation of life. This may initially seem a curious claim, given that it is a life-denying ideal. However, it provided a satisfactory answer to the problem of suffering. In the form of the Christian faith, for example, with its belief in an after-life, it gave suffering meaning, thereby rendering it bearable. It "creat[ed] more favourable conditions for being here and being human" at a time when human beings "existence on earth contained no goal" (GM: 3 13 / p.93). In bestowing value on this life as a means to another, 'truer' world, the ascetic ideal created meaning where there was none. The key to all of this is held in the enigmatic phrase with which Nietzsche begins and ends his essay on ascetic ideals: 'man would rather will nothingness than not will'. Man needs a purpose, and will invent a purpose that is actually opposed to life - 'nothingness', by which Nietzsche means the 'true worlds' of religion and philosophy - rather than live without a purpose. Above all else, human suffering must have a meaning.

We have, here, then, Nietzsche's account of the ascetic nihilism at the heart of Western culture, a culture whose sole ideal has been viciously opposed to the world of the senses in favour of a fictitious other world, in Nietzsche's view. This ideal, as represented chiefly by Christianity, constitutes, for Nietzsche, the lies we have liked to tell ourselves in order to make our lives meaningful, but which, for various historical reasons to be considered shortly, we cannot believe in any longer.

Christianity has been the chief vehicle of ascetic nihilism, which is why Nietzsche devotes so much time to criticizing it, and why he refers to it as 'Platonism for the people' - because it takes over the two world scheme of

Platonism and popularises it by turning the world of Forms into an afterlife of heaven and hell, salvation and damnation. It is of the utmost importance to appreciate that Nietzsche, far from being the unalloyed God-basher he is sometimes portrayed as in the popular imagination, was deeply ambivalent about the 'death of God', an ambivalence conveyed in the doleful tone of the 'death of God' passage itself, the sense of awe that the madman's words evoke as he bears witness to such a staggering event. Why did Nietzsche consider it to be so staggering? Because he was aware how much was - is - at stake when God dies - how deeply embedded in our very sense of the way things are Christianity has become, how deeply our sense of morality, of how to live, depends on a whole world view at the centre of which is belief in God. More pertinently for now, he was aware of the deep-seated needs that the Christian faith, elaborated over two thousand years, had come to minister to. Here is one of Nietzsche's accounts of those needs, and the ways in which Christianity met them:

> What were the advantages of the Christian moral hypothesis?
> 1. It granted man an absolute value, as opposed to his smallness and accidental occurrence in the flux of becoming and passing away.
> 2. It served the advocates of God insofar as it conceded to the world, in spite of suffering and evil, the character of perfection - including 'freedom': evil appeared full of meaning.
> 3. It posited that man had a *knowledge* of absolute values and thus *adequate knowledge* precisely regarding what is most important.
> 4. It prevented man from despising himself as man, from taking sides against life; from despairing of knowledge: it was a *means of preservation*.
> In sum: morality was the great *antidote* against practical and theoretical *nihilism* (WP: 4 / p.10).

Christianity catered to a number of deep-seated needs in man. It gave him a feeling of his own power or value, a sense of his self-worth; a solution to the so-called 'problem of evil', a meaning for suffering; and a belief in the knowability of the world, in the efficacy of man's knowledge. We might add to this list the following, which were also facilitated by Christianity: belief

in a personal God, someone looking out for you; belief in the meaningfulness of history, in eschatology or providence; in nature's subservience to human beings and our special place in the world; and belief in an afterlife. Thus Christianity offers us solutions to profound human needs for security, and, above all, a sense of value and meaning in one's life. This, then, is what is at stake when this protective canopy begins to get punctured. Answers worked out over vast periods of time to the deepest of human needs become untenable, and so a new way of carrying on needs to be found. This raises the question of why, according to Nietzsche, the reign of ascetic nihilism propagated by Plato and Christianity, is coming to an end. How have we been so crazy as to undo the very basis of meaning in our lives? A good question!

1.4. The Transition from Ascetic Nihilism to Modern European Nihilism: three reasons

Nietzsche holds the view that, in both the lives of individuals and of cultures, we gradually grow out of certain interpretations of the world and into others, as our degree of power and life-affirmation grows or diminishes. Thus interpretations that at one point seemed true for a given individual or culture - true in the sense of life-enhancing - can, at a later stage in the development of that individual or culture, come to seem false or life-denying, due to an increase or decrease in the degree of their life-affirmation. As he puts it, '... that every elevation of man brings with it the overcoming of narrower interpretations; that every strengthening and increase of power opens up new perspectives and means believing in new horizons - this idea permeates my writings' (WP: 616 / p.330). Nietzsche is convinced that we, as a culture, are approaching a time in which, due to various factors shortly to be considered, it has become imperative to overcome the narrowness of the ascetic nihilist perspective of Christianity, in favour of new, as yet unclear, horizons, which will *potentially* - but only potentially - manifest an elevation in man's ability to affirm life. The factors that are, as it were, forcing us out of the Christian interpretation of the world are our (Christian!) commitment to truth, especially as manifested in the natural sciences; the increased 'standard of living' that more and more

people enjoy; and the 'Copernican revolution' of Immanuel Kant. I shall consider these in turn.

1.4.1. Truth Telling and Science

At the start of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes that the insights that have brought about the devaluation of our highest, Platonic-Christian, ascetic-nihilist, values, are the product of faith in morality, a morality inculcated by those values themselves. These values have instilled in us 'a two thousand-year discipline in truth-telling, which finally forbids itself the *lie entailed in the belief in God*' (GM: 3 27 / p.126). In the last book of *The Gay Science*, he goes into some detail about how this has come about. There he argues that the Christian conscience has become sublimated, over the centuries, into a scientific conscience and an intellectual conscience (as defined in *The Gay Science* 2 / p.76-7). This intellectual conscience has looked to nature as proof of God's goodness, history as testimony to His reason and to an ethical world order, and one's own experience as evidence of providence, and has found that this conscience, in the name of truth, forbids one from interpreting these phenomena in a 'Christian' way. The discipline of truth-telling has forbidden us from interpreting the wantonness of nature as evidence of God's goodness, the carnage of history as evidence of an ethical world order, and the disarray of one's own experience as evidence of providence (GS: 357 / p.307). Thus, 'Christianity *as a dogma* was destroyed by its own morality' (GM: 3 27 / p.127), undermining the very thing - God - that brought it into existence in the first place.

Moreover, the findings of natural science have dealt a severe blow to the traditional Christian picture of the world, according to which man is made in God's image, and abides at the centre of creation. This blow has come in two main forms: the Copernican revolution, and Darwin's theory of evolution. Of the former, Nietzsche writes:

> Has the self-diminution of the human being, its *will* to self-diminution, not progressed inexorably since Copernicus? Alas, the faith in human worth, its uniqueness and indispensability in the rank

order of creation has gone - the human has become an *animal*, without reservation or qualification; the human, who formerly believed itself to be almost divine ('child of god,' 'God-man'). Since Copernicus, humanity seems to have got itself on to a sloping plane - already sliding faster and faster away from the centre - into what? into nothingness? into the *'piercing* feeling of its own nothingness'? (GM: 3 25 / p.122).

The findings of Copernicus have caused us to imbibe the view that we are creatures perched on a rock in the middle of nowhere, on which relatively soon the lights will go out. As for Darwin's contribution to the undoing of Christianity: 'Formerly one sought the feeling of the grandeur of man by pointing to his divine *origin*: this has now become a forbidden way, for at its portal stands the ape, together with other gruesome beasts, grinning knowingly as if to say: no further in this direction!' (D: 49 / p.32).

1.4.2. Improved 'Quality of Life'

Another reason why the ascetic nihilism of Christianity is on the wane, in Nietzsche's view, is because we no longer need to have recourse to such an extreme way of lending suffering meaning as the Christian interpretation of the world provides:

> Actually, we have no longer such need of an antidote to the *first* [what I am calling 'original'] nihilism: life in our Europe is no longer that uncertain, capricious, absurd. Such a tremendous increase in the value of man, the value of trouble, etc., is not needful now ... the power man has attained now permits a demotion of the means of breeding of which the moral interpretation was the strongest. 'God' is far too extreme a hypothesis (WP: 114 / p.70).

For one thing, most of us, at least in the developed world, are no longer slaves. We do not need such extreme cures as God because our suffering is less intense than the slaves who, in Nietzsche's view, first fond solace in the ascetic ideal on a mass scale. There are, finally, another set of reasons for

the 'death of God', of a more intellectual and ultimately more important kind, which centre on Kant's critical philosophy, and Nietzsche's elaborations on that philosophy in his reflections on 'truth'.

1.4.3. Kant: the 'All-Pulverizing' Godfather of Nihilism

Kant is rightly cited as the source of all noteworthy Continental philosophy since him, and Nietzsche is no exception to this pattern. Kant is also characterised, quite rightly in my view, as the fountainhead of modern nihilism.[13] As Beiser writes with reference to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'A nightmare looms: that the self-criticism of reason ends in nihilism, doubt about the existence of everything'.[14] It is worth recalling that the word 'nihilism' first came into circulation in response to Kant's critical philosophy, in the letter by Jacobi quoted at the start of the thesis. His critical philosophy plays a central, if largely inexplicit, role in Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism. Kant was aptly dubbed by Moses Mendelson 'the all pulverizer', and it is the pulverizing aspect of his philosophy that Nietzsche emphasizes. Those of us living happily ever after in the postmodern world, sprawled out lazily on the easy chair of cultural relativity, might find it hard to appreciate the impact that Kant's work had on a much more 'innocent' world, that was horrified by the approach of the spectre of what they saw as epistemological nihilism. Nowhere is this better brought out than in von Kleist's letter to his fiancé, which Nietzsche quotes in 'Schopenhauer as Educator':

> 'Not long ago', he writes in his moving way, 'I became acquainted with the Kantian philosophy - and I now have to tell you of a thought I derived from it, which I feel free to do because I have no reason to fear it will shatter you so profoundly and painfully as it has me. - We are unable to decide whether that which we call truth really is truth, or whether it only appears to us to be. If the latter, then the truth we assemble here is nothing after our death, and all endeavour to acquire a possession which will follow us to the grave is in vain. - If the point

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[13] See Critchley (2001), chapter two.

[14] Quoted in Critchley (2001), p.22.

of this thought does not penetrate your heart, do not smile at one who feels wounded by it in the deepest part of his being. My one great aim has failed me and I have no other' (UM 3 3 / p.140-1).

As is well known, von Kleist killed himself shortly after writing this. It is this inability 'to decide whether that which we call truth really is truth, or whether it only appears to us to be so', which Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* so rigorously argues, which forms the kernel of Nietzsche's reflections on the rise and nature of modern European nihilism.

1.4.3.1. Reflections on Kant in Nietzsche's Early Philosophy

Nietzsche probably encountered Kant largely through the writings of Schopenhauer, who was both a strong admirer and stern critic of 'the astounding Kant', as he called him. Schopenhauer admitted that his work would simply not have been possible without Kant, and admonishes all readers of his own work to have, 'an acquaintance with the most important phenomenon which has appeared in philosophy for two thousand years ... the principal works of Kant'.[15] Nietzsche's notes, 'The Philosopher: Reflections on the struggle between art and knowledge', of 1873, are deeply informed by Kant's doctrine of the unknowability of things-in-themselves (see TP, e.g., p.10-11, 28), the significance of which for Nietzsche, in these notes, was not, as for Kant, that it created a space for faith by fencing off the activities of reason and therewith the natural sciences, but rather that it enhanced the importance for culture of art. As he writes, in a very important quotation which anticipates much of his later work: 'It is *unlikely* that this [belief in a mythical construction, creating a religion] will ever happen again after the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the other hand, I can imagine a totally new type of *philosopher-artist* who fills the empty space with a work of art' (TP: p.15). In a similar vein, in *The Birth of Tragedy* he praises the 'great audacity and wisdom of *Kant* and *Schopenhauer*' for winning out a most difficult victory over the optimism hidden in logic, an optimism on which our Socratic culture has been based, by arguing that 'all the enigmas of the world' cannot 'be known and fathomed', that 'real knowledge of the

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[15] Schopenhauer (1969), vol.1, p.xv.

[innermost and true essence of things]' is impossible (BT 18 / p.98-9). Most dramatically of all is his invocation of Kant at the start of the unpublished (in Nietzsche's lifetime) but now famous essay 'On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense':

> Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history,' but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die (TP: p.79).

This awesome image is designed to illustrate how 'miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature' (TP: p.79). It is Nietzsche's version of Schopenhauer's remark, 'Whatever torch we kindle, and whatever space it may illuminate, our horizon will always remain encircled by the depth of night',[16] and is essentially a radicalization of Kant's doctrine of the unknowability of things-in-themselves.

1.4.3.2. Kant's Undoing of the 'Real World' Hypothesis

Sixteen years later the central idea of the *Critique of Pure Reason* still deeply informs Nietzsche's philosophical outlook, as is evidenced by the pivotal role given to Kant in Nietzsche's, 'How the 'real world' at last became a myth'. In this passage Kant plays the transitional role, being the means whereby the 'real world' of Plato and Christianity, the ascetic nihilism concocted to counteract original nihilism, is finally exposed for the sham that it always was, in Nietzsche's view. Because Kant rigorously argues that the real world is 'unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable' (T 4 / p.50), the way is paved for Nietzsche to 'do away' with the real world (something that Kant was not able to do because he was, at heart, a *'crafty Christian'* (T: 3 6 / p.49)).

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[16] Schopenhauer (1969), vol.II, p.185.

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Kant leads Nietzsche to 'the death of God' and to modern European nihilism, that his *Critique of Pure Reason* is the fulcrum upon which these themes of Nietzsche's turn. This becomes more apparent when we consider the notes on nihilism in *The Will to Power*. For example, in the second aphorism of that work Nietzsche defines 'radical nihilism' as the devaluation of the highest values plus, 'the realization that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be 'divine' or morality incarnate' (WP: 3 / p.9). It was, of course, Kant who afforded us this painful realization. Nietzsche writes, 'We see that we cannot reach the sphere in which we have placed our values' (WP: 8 / p.11), and lists as one of four advantages of the Christian-moral hypothesis, quoted above, the belief that 'man had a *knowledge* of absolute values and thus *adequate knowledge* precisely regarding what is most important' (WP 4 / p.10). It was Kant who rendered this belief untenable, who shortened our reach so that we can no longer get to the place where we placed our values, amongst the 'things-in-themselves'.

1.4.3.3. Nietzsche's Elaborations on Kant

However, Nietzsche does more than simply take over Kant's philosophy uncritically and put it to a very different use to its creator. He elaborates on Kant's 'Copernican revolution' in a number of striking and original ways, advancing further arguments as to why our capacity for knowledge must be radically limited, and arguments against the very intelligibility of the notion of 'things-in-themselves.'

1.4.3.3.1. Criticisms of our Capacity to Know:
a. Truth as metaphor

In the early fragment 'On truth and lies in a non-moral sense', Nietzsche begins by impressing upon us to how great a degree deception is part of ordinary social life: both self-deception, and deception of others, a feature of life brought out brilliantly by some novelists and filmmakers (George Eliot, Jane Austen, Tolstoy and Woody Allen spring immediately to mind). Given this, he asks where a desire for truth can have come from, and

suggests that truth arose with society, as part of man's desire to live with other human beings, which necessitated agreeing to call certain things by certain names, and thus in this limited sense being truthful. However, Nietzsche then raises the more fundamental, Kantian style question, 'Are designations congruent with things? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?'. The answer that he gives is a resounding 'no'. His argument is that man, as the creator of language, has no interest in the 'thing-in-itself', and is entirely concerned with the relations between things and men. To express these relations, he engages in essentially metaphorical activity.

He argues that the metaphorical process is twofold: firstly, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image, and secondly, this image is transferred into a sound. What does Nietzsche mean by metaphor, here? Well, when I say, 'My love is a rose', I am not suggesting that my love literally is a rose, but rather, that there is an aspect of her - her charm, say, or her rosy cheeks - that can be likened to the blooming of a rose. His point is that the transference that we make from nerve stimulus to image, and from image to word, is similarly metaphorical. Both transferences involve identifying things which are only alike in a certain, very specific, respect. So, just as my love is not literally a rose, so the nerve stimulus is only like the image in a certain respect, and the word is only like the image in a certain respect:

> ... the mysterious X of the thing in itself first appears as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound. Thus the genesis of language does not proceed logically in any case, and all the material within and with which the man of truth, the scientist and the philosopher later build, if not derived from never-never land, is at least not derived from the essence of things (PT: p.89).

This leads him to conclude:

> Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins (TP: p.90).

We have here Nietzsche's early version of Kant's doctrine of the unknowability of 'things-in-themselves.' However, he argues for this claim in a different way to Kant. As we shall see in greater detail shortly, Nietzsche first questions why man would be equipped to know anything about the 'thing-in-itself' in the first place, given that it is of no practical concern to him, and that his life relies on dissimulation on a large scale anyway. Secondly, he argues that both our percepts and our concepts do not bear a direct relationship to reality, but are, rather, metaphors, creative transferences from dissimilar realms. So, to summarise what has been said so far, in Nietzsche's own words:

> ... it seems to me that 'the correct perception'- which would mean 'the adequate expression of an object in the subject' - is a contradictory impossibility. For between two absolutely different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression; there is, at most, an *aesthetic* relation: I mean, a suggestive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue - for which there is required, in any case, a freely inventive intermediate sphere and mediating force (PT: p.91).

This, then, is Nietzsche's first string of arguments in a Kantian vein, against the possibility of knowledge of 'things-in-themselves.' It does leave various questions unanswered, not least the question concerning to what extent the fact that we can build rockets that fly, houses that stay standing, and atomic bombs that blow up suggests that the relationship between our knowledge and the world might be considerably more than entirely aesthetic and metaphorical. However, rather than pursue this, let us now turn to his further arguments against the possibility of knowledge of 'things-in-themselves.'

b. 'Evolutionary Epistemology'

The following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* gives us a good idea of where Nietzsche most decisively parts company with Kant:

But let us stop and reflect: it is time we did so. Kant asked himself: how are synthetic judgements *a priori possible?* - and what, really, did he answer? *By means of a faculty* ... But answers like that belong in a comedy, and it is high time to replace the Kantian question 'how are synthetic judgements *a priori* possible?' with another question: 'why is belief in such judgements *necessary?'* - that is to say, it is time to grasp that, for the sake of preserving beings such as ourselves, such judgements must be *believed* to be true; although they might of course still be *false* judgements! (BG: 11 / p.42).

In Nietzsche's hands Kant's 'synthetic a priori truths' lose their metaphysical necessity and simply become tools that a particular species happens to operate with in order to survive and flourish. This claim is part of what is more generally known as 'evolutionary epistemology', which is the view that we are only equipped to know that which we need to know for the sake of our survival and enhancement, and therefore it is highly unlikely that we would try to or be able to obtain knowledge which did not serve these ends. Nietzsche accounts for our conception of truth in terms of that which interests, concerns, or resists us: "... we have only drawn the concept 'real, truly existing' from the 'concerning us'; the more we are affected in our interest, the more we believe in the 'reality' of a thing or an entity".[17] He tells us, "The utility of preservation - not some abstract-theoretical need not to be deceived - stands as the motive behind the development of the organs of knowledge" (WP: 480 / p.266-7); and, "It is improbable that our 'knowledge' should extend further than is strictly necessary for the preservation of life" (WP: 494 / p.272, see also GS: 354 / p.300).

This evolutionary epistemology leads Nietzsche to argue that deception, a will to *untruth*, might be just as advantageous for our survival and enhancement as a will to truth. He asks, in *The Gay Science*:

But why not allow oneself to be deceived? ...
...What do you know in advance of the character of existence to be able to decide whether the greater advantage is on the

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[17] Quoted in Poellner (1995), p.89.

side of the unconditionally mistrustful or of the unconditionally trusting? (GS: 344 / p.281).

His point is that we cannot assume *a priori* that the will to truth is more useful for us than a will to its opposite - falsehood, deception, lies. He goes on to say that, "... truth *and* untruth [have] constantly proved useful to life" (italics mine). Moreover, he argues that life seems to encourage us towards falsehood rather than truth:

> ... it does seem ... as if life aimed at semblance, meaning error, deception, simulation, delusion, self-delusion, and ... the great sweep of life has actually always shown itself to be on the side of the most unscrupulous *polytropoi*[18] (GS 344: p.282).

He gives as an example of this assertion that those who did not know how to find what is 'equal' as regards nourishment and hostile animals - those, in other words, who were less willing to draw hasty and ultimately false conclusions about reality, for 'nothing is really equal' - would have been less likely to survive than those with a greater capacity to erroneously equalise things, and hence procure food and flee from enemies more easily (GS: 111 / p.171).

It must be pointed out, however, that this ingenious argument faces two serious problems. Firstly, it presupposes a theory of truth which Nietzsche denies, namely the correspondence theory of truth. Moreover, it presupposes a realm of 'things-in-themselves', of which our 'knowledge' is a falsification, a realm which, as we shall see in the next section, Nietzsche argues against. Secondly, even when we grant the existence of this realm, for the sake of the argument, Nietzsche makes claims which he elsewhere forbids himself (and others, of course) from making. As he acknowledges in *The Gay Science*, 'We cannot look around our own corner: it is a hopeless curiosity that wants to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be' (GS 374 / p.336); and in *The Will to Power*, 'One would have

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[18] The Greek word used to describe Odysseus in the first line of the *Odyssey*. Its connotations include wiliness, versatility, craftiness, and virtuosity in deception.

to know what *being* is, in order to decide whether this or that is real ... but since we do not know this, a critique of the faculty of knowledge is senseless' (WP 486 / p.269); and in 'The Philosopher' he writes, 'Against Kant, it must always be further objected that ... it still remains entirely *possible* that the world is as it appears to us to be' (TP: p.32). Thus his claim that our beliefs must be false implies knowledge he elsewhere states that we cannot have.

The above argument emphasises the potential dangers of not apprehending reality falsely, and with it the apparent wrong-headedness of an unbridled 'will to truth', a search for truth for truth's sake. In the example above, those beings who apprehend reality in a truer way are the ones who perish. As Nietzsche puts it, 'Innumerable beings who made inferences in a way different from ours perished; for all that, their ways might have been truer' (GS: 111 / p.171). He is emphasising that not only are our beliefs about 'things-in-themselves' highly likely to be false given that they are developed for biological reasons; if they were true, or at least truer, our survival might be endangered:

> No living beings would have survived if the ... tendency ... to err and *make up* things rather than to wait ... to pass judgement rather than to be just - had not been bred to the point where it became extraordinarily strong (GS: 111 / p.172).

Thus the will to truth begins to seem positively dangerous, unnatural, as something to be eschewed, even. So we have here a further argument against knowing 'things-in-themselves.'

However, Nietzsche's marriage of Darwin and transcendental idealism faces a severe difficulty. By explaining our ability to know the world in terms of evolution, Nietzsche invokes an item of knowledge - evolutionary theory - in order to explain how knowledge is possible in the first place, which is surely a problematic endeavour. David Cooper highlights this kind of difficulty in *The Measure of Things*:

... it is surely problematic to understand how the world or nature can be a 'product' of human beings, something constituted through human agency, if men and women are simply 'parts of nature'. ... the more familiar, the more 'worldly', 'we' [who constitute the world] become, the harder it is to understand how, in any philosophically exciting sense, 'we' could be responsible for the world. ... Kant could avoid the problem of how 'we' could at once belong in nature yet be constitutive of it by viewing 'us' in a 'twofold way' - as phenomenal creatures and as denizens of the noumenal realm. Any such dual vision, however, is one of the targets of a Prometheanism [like Nietzsche's] which 'translates' 'us' back into ordinary, active, flesh-and-blood creatures.[19]

How Nietzsche might overcome this difficulty, whilst retaining simultaneously his naturalism and his commitment to a form of anti-realism, is not clear to me.

1.4.3.3.2. Abandoning the Very Idea of 'Things-in-Themselves'

However, there is another side to Nietzsche's attack on Kant's notion of 'things-in-themselves' than the 'Darwinian', pragmatic style arguments discussed above. He gives at least two more traditionally philosophical reasons for rejecting this idea. In order to understand the first one, it helps to consider a passage Nietzsche wrote in the early 1870s, at which time he readily embraced the Kantian-Schopenhauerian distinction between phenomena and 'things-in-themselves'. Here he argues that knowledge of 'things-in-themselves' is unattainable because a thing can only become known by a subject, at which point it ceases to be a 'thing-in-itself':

We can say nothing about the thing-in-itself, for we have eliminated the standpoint of knowing, i.e. of measuring. A quality exists *for us*, i.e. it is measured by us. ... What things are is something

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[19] David Cooper, *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility, Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2002) p.86-8.

that can only be established by a measuring subject placed alongside them (TP: p.37).

Knowledge and 'things-in-themselves' are incommensurate: by definition things-in-themselves cannot be known. A known 'thing-in-itself' is a contradiction in terms, like a triangular circle. So much was established by Kant. However, in the mid-1880s Nietzsche radicalises this point into the notion that because 'things-in-themselves' cannot be known, the very idea of such things is unintelligible, and therefore should be abandoned as a hypothesis.[20]

This claim first finds expression in his published writings in 1886 in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he writes, '... I shall reiterate a hundred times that 'immediate certainty', like ... 'thing in itself', contains a *contradictio in adjecto*: we really ought to get free ourselves from the seduction of words' (BG: 16 / p.46). Postulating a realm of 'things-in-themselves' is a case of being 'bewitched by language', to put it in Wittgensteinian terms. Nietzsche's point is that terms like 'thing', 'exist' and 'reality' have their places in particular 'forms of life', and when they are abstracted from such concrete contexts - for example, when doing Kantian philosophy and talking about 'things-in-themselves' 'really existing' - we have a case of language 'going on holiday', and we are now talking, quite literally, nonsense.

Nietzsche's reasons for thinking this can be further gleaned from *The Will to Power* and *The Gay Science*.[21] In *The Gay Science*, in a passage called 'The consciousness of appearance', he writes:

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[20] Throughout this part of my discussion I am indebted to Maudemarie Clark's perspicacious analysis of Nietzsche's gradual abandonment of the idea of thing-in-itself. See Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1990), p.95-103.

[21] Of course, *The Gay Science* was written in 1882, i.e. prior to Nietzsche's abandonment of the idea of the thing-in-itself, according to my (and Clark's) reckoning. However, as Clark convincingly argues, Nietzsche *gradually* came to recognise the unintelligibility of the notion of a thing-in-itself, and dates this recognition as beginning in *The Gay Science*. She argues that it was not until *Beyond Good and Evil* and afterwards that this insight 'crystallises'. Again, for a detailed analysis of this, see the Clark reference cited above.

What is "appearance" for me now? Certainly not the opposite of some essence: what could I say about any essence except to name the attributes of its appearance! Certainly not a dead mask that one could place on an unknown x or remove from it! (GS: 54 / p.116).

His point is that we have no way of conceiving of a thing's 'essence' except in terms of its 'appearance', and hence the dichotomy between phenomena and 'things-in-themselves', existence and essence, is fallacious. To put it another way, the idea of subject-independent entities having properties or 'structures' in themselves is incoherent because it is inconceivable[22]. He writes in *The Will to Power*, 'As if a world would still remain over after one deducted the perspective' (WP: 567: p.305); and, '[the hypothesis that things possess a constitution in themselves] presupposes that interpretation and subjectivity are not essential' (WP: 560 / p.303). Thus, because we cannot conceive of what a non-perspectival reality would be like, it is 'an idea with no further use ... an idea become useless, superfluous, *therefore* a refuted idea: let us do away with it!' (T: IV / p.50).

His second and closely related argument against the concept of 'things-in-themselves' is that for something to be a 'thing', it has to fulfil requirements which 'things-in-themselves' by necessity cannot fulfil. Primarily, it needs to affect us in certain ways: 'The properties of a thing are affects on other 'things': if one removes other 'things', then a thing has no properties, i.e., there is no thing without other things, i.e., there is no 'thing-in-itself' ' (WP: 557 / p.302). In a similar vein he writes: 'But the psychological derivation of the belief in things forbids us to speak of 'things-in-themselves' ' (WP: 473 / p.263), and '... thingness has only been invented by us owing to the requirements of logic, thus with the aim of defining, communication' (WP: 558 / p.302).

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[22] This point is, of course, very similar to Berkeley's '*esse est percipi*' argument against Locke's 'matter'.

1.4.3.3.3. Nietzsche's Account of Truth, and a Problem with it

Thus Nietzsche disposes of the hypothesis of 'things-in-themselves' on the grounds that no sense can be made of such 'things' partly because the essence of 'thingness' is its discernible affects on other things and subjects. What then are we left with? Exactly what Jacobi and von Kleist most feared, when the spectre of epistemological nihilism first raised its head in the wake of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Recall that Jacobi wrote:

> But the human being has such a choice, this single one: Nothingness or a God. Choosing Nothingness, he makes himself into a God; that is, he makes an apparition into God because if there is no God, it is impossible that man and everything which surrounds him is not merely an apparition.[23]

In Jacobi's view, without a God there is no way of guaranteeing that our perspective on the world is no more than that: just our perspective (Descartes introduces God into his *Meditations* for a similar reason). Similarly, without a realm of 'things-in-themselves' there is nothing against which to compare our human perspectives. This opens up the possibility of man, in Jacobi's terms, making 'himself into a God', in the sense of becoming that which determines what is true and what is not, what is and what is not. This possibility horrified Jacobi. Nietzsche, by contrast, embraces it with all his might. As a result of the Kantian critique of knowledge, and Nietzsche's own sharpenings of this critique, we are left with the following account of knowledge and truth:

> Not 'to know' but to schematize - to impose upon chaos as much regularity and form as our practical needs require. In the formulation of reason, logic, the categories, it was *need* that was authoritative: the need, not to 'know,' but to subsume, to schematize, for the purpose of intelligibility and calculation (WP: 515 / p.278).

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[23] Quoted in Critchley (2001), p.27.

Jacobi also wrote, 'If the highest upon which I can reflect, what I can contemplate, is my empty and pure, naked and mere ego, with its autonomy and freedom: then rational self-contemplation, then rationality is for me a curse - I deplore my existence'.[24] This is, more or less, the position that Nietzsche has arrived at - although he draws an opposed conclusion from it. For Nietzsche, as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, the highest upon which we can reflect is our ability to shape the world in a particular way, to forge our own perspective on that which possesses no qualities 'in itself'. However, it is not even the ego which does this. Rather, the ego is part of the order which we impose, is a construction of the various disparate drives which comprise it: 'The 'subject' is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is' (WP: 481 / p.267).

Before leaving Nietzsche's engagement with Kant's transcendental idealism it is worth trying to pin down quite where Nietzsche stands - something that is not very easy to do given Nietzsche's aphoristic, elusive style. More specifically: can sense be made of the notion of a 'perspective' and of truth being 'perspectival' if there is not some independently existing 'thing' for there to be perspectives of? When Nietzsche uses such terms as a 'chaos of sensations' to describe such a reality, how can he insist that this is not some form of 'thing-in-itself'? Poellner addresses this tension in Nietzsche's writings.[25] Without any such entity, we are left with what Poellner calls 'a conception of subjects as uncaused quasi-monadic entities unaffected by anything genuinely external to - ontologically independent of - them'.[26] Such a peculiar and abstract view cannot be Nietzsche's view, which means that his talk of human beings 'constructing' or 'creating' the world that we inhabit is ultimately hyperbolic, and potentially obscures the extent to which he thinks that whatever exists independently of our perspectives does make definite demands on us. As Poellner puts it, 'Reality can only 'select' well-fitted individuals for survival and condemn others to extinction if it has *determinate properties* which the respective individuals either are or

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[24] *Ibid.*, p.27.

[25] Poellner (1995), p.195-8.

[26] *Ibid.*, p.198.

are not capable of mastering'.[27] Again, if it possesses such determinate properties it may seem hard to see on what grounds Nietzsche denies so vociferously a realm of 'things-in-themselves'.

However, Nietzsche does have a defence. Claiming that reality possesses 'determinate properties' is something quite different to claiming the existence of 'things-in-themselves' in Kant's sense. While it may be hyperbolic to deny, as Nietzsche does, that there are 'things' or 'objects', and to assert that there are only really sensations, he can claim that the things which there are are not Kantian 'things-in-themselves'. Rather, they are empirical objects, part of an empirical world whose character and structure is not, in the final analysis, independent of human practices, valuations and 'sensations'.

1.5. Nietzsche's Epistemology and Modern European Nihilism

I am calling this aspect of modern European nihilism 'epistemological nihilism', the claim that there is no objective order for our knowledge to correspond to. What are the implications of such a position, and why might they seem nihilistic? It is worth remembering that one of the central motivations behind Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was to make room for faith in God by preserving a realm beyond knowledge. Nietzsche uses an essentially Kantian point to argue in the opposite direction, against God. We cannot know 'things-in-themselves'. Why, therefore, should we assume that there is a God? So, the 'death of God', announced so powerfully and movingly in *The Gay Science* 125, is, as it were, intellectually rooted, for Nietzsche, in Kant's critical philosophy. In this mournful passage (the tone is sombre rather than celebratory) Nietzsche's primary concern is the loss of measure or orientation for human life which this staggering event must bring about. As he puts it in the following marvellous metaphors: 'How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? ... Away from all suns?' (GS: 125 / p.181). For the accumulated reasons I have explained—the moral demand to tell the truth,

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[27] *Ibid.*, p.196.

expressed in modern science, reduction in the intensity of suffering that the majority of people experience, and the philosophy of Kant - the ascetic nihilism of Christianity has begun to topple, an interpretation that has provided meaning and strength to the sensitive creatures that we are for two thousand years. We have 'drunk up the sea ... wiped away the entire horizon ... unchained the earth from its sun.' We have caused fatal damage to the dam that protects us against the constitutional nihilism that would otherwise flood in.

What is so fatal about Kant's philosophy is the self-consciousness it gives us as to the projected nature of what we take to be knowledge. We are no longer able to have faith in the correspondence between our categories of reason, and the world:

> The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of 'aim,' the concept of 'unity,' or the concept of 'truth.' Existence has no end or goal; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not 'true,' is *false*. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself there is a *true* world. Briefly: the categories 'aim,' 'unity,' 'being' which we used to project some value into the world - we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*. ...
>
> Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism (WP: 12 / p.13).

It is Kant's philosophy that provides the means to pull out these categories of reason from the world - those of aim, unity and a true world - by alerting us to *the projective character of our knowledge*, a recognition that has nihilistic consequences as we are forced to adjust to the realisation that the world is not inherently purposeful, unified, and true.

We have seen how Jacobi and von Kleist reacted to the inklings which they obviously had of this recognition. Nietzsche was well aware of the power of this despairing response, no doubt through personal acquaintance

with it. He thought that the challenge that modern European nihilism poses us is to live with the epistemological insights furnished by Kant and intensified by Nietzsche without collapsing into despair. *The tension between these two alternatives - of capitulating in the face of the recognition of the absence of meanings which transcend our own construction of them, and of affirming such a recognition as a liberation into infinite possibilities of creation - constitutes the core of European nihilism.* It was a tension that Nietzsche became aware of early on in his writings, as early as *Human, all too Human* (1878), where he writes:

> But the tragic thing is that we can no longer *believe* those dogmas of religion and metaphysics, once we have the rigorous method of truth in our hearts and heads, and yet on the other hand, the development of mankind has made us so delicate, sensitive, and ailing that we need the most potent kind of cures and comforts - hence arises the danger that man might bleed to death from the truth he has recognized. Byron expressed this in his immortal lines:
>
> > Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most
> > must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,
> > the tree of knowledge is not that of life (HA: 109 / p.78).

And, in *The Gay Science*, four years later:

> Have we not exposed ourselves to the suspicion of an opposition - an opposition between the world in which we were at home up until now with our reverences that made it possible for us to *endure* life, and another world *that consists of us* - an inexorable, fundamental, and deepest suspicion about ourselves that is more and more gaining worse control of us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrifying Either/Or: 'Either abolish your reverences or - *yourselves!*'. The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be - nihilism? - This is *our* question mark (GS: 346 / p.287).

As he puts it in *The Will to Power,* man is now torn apart by the following tension: '*not* to esteem what we know, and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves' (WP: 5 / p.10). Facing up to European nihilism is, therefore, a great risk, and Nietzsche was all too keenly aware of this. European nihilism is a 'pharmakon', both poison and cure. However, there is no guarantee that it will be a cure, a liberation from ascetic nihilism, rather than a lapse into something even worse than this (a possibility which will be addressed in the next chapter). Nietzsche was well aware that man might bleed to death from the truths he has recognized, but nevertheless proceeds to ruthlessly proclaim such truths - 'plain, bitter, ugly, foul, unchristian, immoral truth' (GM: 1 2 / p.12).

As a result of the proclamation of such truths, we modern Europeans are left with the following challenge: 'It is a measure of the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do without meaning in things, to what extent one can endure to live in a meaningless world *because one organizes a small portion of it oneself.*' (WP: 585 / p.318). This is the crucial issue of Nietzsche's nihilism. Kant has drawn our attention to the role that we play in constituting reality, and Nietzsche elaborates on this idea to emphasise the constructed nature of what we take to be 'truth'. Such knowledge has the potential to crush us, insofar as, if one is not able to 'organize a small portion of [the world] oneself', one may despair of all meaning, or else fall back into the belief that our knowledge is not constructed, that 'there is a will in [things] already' (WP: 585 / p.318). Nietzsche's challenge is to face up fully to the constructed, 'all too human' nature of the meanings that we live by, thereby overcoming modern European nihilism by not succumbing to the despair that Kant's philosophy, radicalized, can lead to (and did lead to for people like von Kleist). As one Nietzsche commentator, Gregory Bruce Smith, puts it, 'Nietzsche saw his task, the task of *present* philosophy, as one of trying to develop a means by which mankind could again esteem and revere *with a good conscience*'.[28] That is to say, Nietzsche tries to articulate how man can feel his life to be meaningful and valuable without thinking that such meaning comes from reality as it is 'in-itself', thus whilst

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[28] Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger and the Transition to Postmodernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1996), p.72.

acknowledging that the meaning it possesses is 'man-made'. This is the burning question in Nietzsche's response to nihilism: having become self-conscious about the human origins of truth (and, therefore, of morality) can man still feel his life to be meaningful? Edward Craig, in *The Mind of God and the Works of Man,* suggests that, 'Nietzsche ... feels very keenly ... that the realization that a belief is held for pragmatic purposes is halfway towards its abandonment'.[29] Does it? This, to be blunt, is the central question of chapter two.

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[29] Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.281

Chapter two: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism

Introduction

I have sketched out, then, the three kinds of nihilism that Nietzsche adumbrates in his works: original, ascetic, and modern European. I have indicated how nihilism centres around the issue of rendering suffering meaningful, and, in my discussion of *The Birth of Tragedy*, sketched out a provisional contrast between nihilistic and non-nihilistic, 'Dionysian', responses to suffering. I have also traced the reasons that Nietzsche gives for the emergence of modern European nihilism, and the challenges that it poses us, challenges that originate in Kant's critical philosophy. In this chapter I shall be considering Nietzsche's account of how we might overcome this latest outbreak of nihilism, how we might overcome modern European nihilism without reverting back to a form of ascetic nihilism.

Ernest Becker, the psychologist, anthropologist and philosopher quoted earlier, writes, in *The Birth and Death of Meaning*:

> The most astonishing thing of all, about man's fictions, is not that they have from prehistoric times hung like a flimsy canopy over his social world, but that he should have come to discover them at all. It is one of the most remarkable achievements of thought, of self-scrutiny, that the most anxiety-prone animal of all could come to *see through himself* and discover the fictional nature of his action world. Future historians will probably record it as one of the great, liberating breakthroughs of all time, and it happened in ours.[30]

This quotation summarises very well much of what Nietzsche has to say about overcoming nihilism, about using our newly won self-consciousness concerning the nature of value and truth to freely choose new values and new 'truths'. Nietzsche responds to nihilism by painting a picture of a man who embodies the overcoming of nihilism. This is the central feature of the overman, or 'higher man' (I am not going to insist on a significant difference

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[30] Ernest Becker (1962), p.141-2.

between these terms, and shall generally use the former term). He is the person who can accept the human origins of meaning, truth and morality, without this insight plunging him into despair, or a crippling kind of relativism. In Becker's terms, he is able to acknowledge 'the fictional nature of his action world', and to use this insight to create new values for himself. It is Nietzsche's theory of the will to power which, in its author's eyes, provides the means to do this. So, *the overman is somebody who is simultaneously able to affirm the human origins of truth, the perspectival nature of knowledge, and yet live in accord with the will to power rather than the life-denying fictions of the various forms of ascetic nihilism.*

2.1. Nietzsche on Truth and the Opportunities that Nihilism Affords Us

Firstly, let us recap on Nietzsche's understanding of truth:

Will to truth is a making firm, a making true and durable, an abolition of the false character of things, a reinterpretation of it into beings. 'Truth' is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered - but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end - introducing truth as a *process in infinitum*, an active determining ¬ … not a becoming conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined. It is a word for the 'will to power' (WP: 552 / p.298).

This recognition, in Nietzsche's view, splits people into those who see in this a reason for despair over the meaninglessness of life, von Kleist fashion, and those who see in it an unprecedented opportunity to create new forms of truth, new values. This is the point of his 'open sea' metaphor in *The Gay Science*, about which Nietzsche rhapsodises thus:

At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an 'open sea' (GS: 343 / p.280).

This beautiful passage registers the sense of liberation which Nietzsche felt his perspectival account of truth leads to. However, he was well aware that not everyone would see it this way, that not everyone would greet the open sea with such a welcoming embrace. This is the chief feature which separates the man who is able to overcome nihilism from the man who is not, the extent to which, 'we can admit to ourselves, without perishing, the merely *apparent* character, the necessity of lies' (WP: 15 / p.15). Nietzsche predicted that the 'death of God' and the 'twilight of the idols' would initially not be greeted as a great liberation, but with profound despair:

> *Our* pessimism: the world does not have the value we thought it had. ... Initial result: it seems worth less; that is how it is experienced initially. It is only in this sense that we are pessimists; i.e., in our determination to admit this revaluation to ourselves without any reservation, and to stop telling ourselves tales - lies - the old way.
>
> That is precisely how we find the pathos that impels us to seek *new values*. In sum: the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe; we must see through the naiveté of our ideals, and while we thought that we accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not even have given our human existence a moderately fair value (WP: 32 / p.22).

Nietzsche's turns of phrase in the second paragraph are misleading, because they imply that the world has a constitution 'in-itself' which may be more valuable than we previously thought, which is exactly what, as we have seen, he is denying, and the recognition of which constitutes the heart of modern nihilism. His central point is that, released from ascetic nihilism and its concomitant claims to non-perspectival knowledge, we are now in a position to value the world more highly than it was valued by ascetic nihilism - which is why he writes that, as such, nihilism might be *'a divine way of thinking'* (WP: 15 / p.15). However, this freedom can only come about once we register and overcome the initial shock of European nihilism and the devaluation of our highest values, go through a 'dark night of the soul' and

'stop telling ourselves tales ... the old way.' And there is no guarantee that we will do this, that we will undergo this dark night of the soul, out of which a new kind of humanity would emerge. As I mentioned earlier, nihilism is a 'pharmakon', both poison and cure. Before considering the ways in which it is a cure for the life-denying fictions of ascetic nihilism, I want to discuss the dangers that it leaves us open to if we fail to embrace its challenge, its poisonous aspect. The central danger that Nietzsche feared is a kind of vacuous relativism in which little more is at stake than one's personal comfort. As such, Nietzsche's portrait of 'the last man' (I have chosen to use this term rather than Kaufmann's translation 'the ultimate man', because the latter sounds too positive!) is a damning indictment of the philosophy underlying much of mainstream, capitalist culture (see TZ: Prologue 5 / p.45-7).

2.2. The Danger of European Nihilism: the Rise of the Last Man

As mentioned above, Edward Craig suggests that, 'Nietzsche ... feels very keenly ... that the realization that a belief is held for pragmatic purposes is halfway towards its abandonment'. Craig is rightly indicating how acutely aware Nietzsche was of the potentially crippling effects a perspectival view of knowledge may have. He writes, in *The Will to Power*:

> Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind. Thus the belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in aim- and meaninglessness, is the psychologically necessary affect once the belief in God and an essentially moral order becomes untenable. Nihilism appears at that point, not that the displeasure at existence has become greater than before but because one has come to mistrust any 'meaning' in suffering, indeed in existence. One interpretation has collapsed, but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain. ...
>
> The mistrust of our previous valuations grows until it becomes the question: 'Are not all 'values' lures that draw out the comedy without bringing it closer to a solution?' (WP: 55 / p.35).

The most pervasive way in which Nietzsche thought this attitude might manifest itself is depicted in the character of the 'last man' (a phrase that has since become famous due to Fukayama's illuminating use of this notion with reference to Hegel's view of 'the end of history'). Anderson, in *The Truth about Truth*, suggests that, '... the inner voice of the postmodern ironist is becoming a part of everybody's psychological makeup'.[31] This is what Nietzsche prophesied, and it can fairly seem to have come to pass. Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, gives a portrait of students which characterises them in similar terms to Nietzsche's last men. He begins his book by saying, 'There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth us relative'.[32] He suggests that this 'new language of *value* relativism ... constitutes a change in our view of things moral and political as great as the one that took place when Christianity replaced Greek and Roman paganism.'[33] However, this seismic shift, registered so fully in Nietzsche's philosophy, presents grave dangers, dangers which Bloom saw in many of the students that he taught over his long career:

> Our openness [value relativism] means we do not need others. Thus what is advertised as a great opening is a great closing. No longer is there a hope that there are great wise men in other places and times who can reveal the truth about life ... Gone is the real historical sense of a Machiavelli who wrested a few hours from each busy day in which 'to don regal and courtly garments, enter the courts of the ancients and speak with them'.[34]

And consequently:

> ... a young person today, to exaggerate only a little, actually begins *de novo*, without the givens or imperatives that he would have had only

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[31] Walter Truett Anderson (ed.), *The Truth about Truth* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1995), p.116.

[32] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (London: Penguin, 1987), p.25.

[33] *Ibid.*, p.141.

[34] *Ibid.*, p.34-5.

yesterday. His country demands little of him and provides well for him, his religion is a matter of absolutely free choice and - this is what is really fresh - so are his sexual involvements. *He can now choose, but he finds he no longer has a sufficient motive for choice that is more than whim, that is binding* (italics mine).[35]

We have here almost a grotesque parody of the overman seizing the freedom to create his own values. Bloom's fear is the same as Nietzsche's: namely, that the recognition that knowledge is perspectival can lead to a crippling relativism, in which any life is regarded as as good as any other life because it is all a question of the individual's own 'values'. (It is the same fear that MacIntyre evokes and addresses in *After Virtue*, under the term 'emotivism'). James Edwards, in *The Plain Sense of Things*, sees in the shopping centre the perfect symbol of this insidious relativism. Having described the stark juxtaposition of various shops selling different things and purveying different values and 'lifestyles', he laments,

> Laid out before one are whole lives one can, if one has the necessary credit line, choose to inhabit ... the way in which the tools, garments and attitudes specific to particular times and places become commodities to be marketed to anonymous and rootless consumers: these are the natural (if also banal) expressions of our normal nihilism. ... In the culture of the mall, our highest values ... have become the playthings of an impersonal and endless economic ordering.[36]

We can recognise Nietzsche's 'last man' wandering the shopping malls. The 'last man' is the antithesis of the overman. Zarathustra paints a memorable portrait of the last men. Having come down from the hillside after ten years of solitude, and finding his audience unreceptive to his teaching on the overman and self-overcoming, he tries to inspire their contempt (unsuccessfully) by painting a portrait of the 'last man' (this quotation, from

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[35] *Ibid.*, p.109.

[36] James Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p.50-1.

Kaufmann's translation, translates the relevant phrase as 'ultimate man' rather than 'last man'):

> Alas! The time is coming when man will no more shoot the arrow of his longing out over mankind, and the string of his bow will have forgotten how to twang! ...
>
> Alas! The time is coming when man will give birth to no more stars. Alas! The time of the most contemptible man is coming, the man who can no longer despise himself.
>
> ... 'What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?' thus asks the Ultimate Man and blinks.
>
> The earth has become small, and upon it hops the Ultimate Man, who makes everything small. ... 'We have discovered happiness,' say the Ultimate Men and blink.
>
> They have left the places where living was hard: for one needs warmth. ...
>
> No herdsman and one herd. Everyone wants the same thing: whoever thinks otherwise goes voluntarily into the madhouse. ...
>
> They have their little pleasure for the day and their little pleasure for the night (TZ: Prologue 5 / p.46-7).

This dazzling passage contains some ideas that lie right at the heart of Nietzsche's philosophical project. Firstly, the contention that what is of the utmost importance is human excellence, and not the peaceful coexistence of individuals pursuing 'life, liberty and happiness'. Indeed, as we shall see, for Nietzsche these two aims are radically opposed. Secondly, the contention that greatness comes through conflict, strife, 'chaos', which gives birth to 'dancing stars.' Nietzsche's deepest fear was that, in the wake of the death of God, man would lose his longing for excellence, and settle down into a mediocre and petty existence, pampered by material comforts, but a life in which nothing essential is at stake.

He expresses this fear most emphatically in *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

For this is how things are: the diminution and levelling of European man constitutes our greatest danger, for the sight of him makes us weary. - We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian - there is no doubt that man is getting 'better' all the time.

Here precisely is what has become a fatality for Europe - together with the fear of man we have also lost our love for him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him. The sight of man now makes us weary - what is nihilism today if it is not that? - We are weary of man (GM: 1 12 / p.27).

So, Nietzsche's conception of the overman needs to be understood in opposition to this 'last man', as 'a man who justifies man ... for the sake of which one may still believe in man.' (*ibid.*). The last man is the man who succumbs to a dehabilitating relativism in the wake of the collapse of ascetic nihilism, who wanders the shopping malls aimlessly looking for the next purchase, and who, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde's definition of a cynic, 'knows the price of everything, the value of nothing.'

2.3. The Overman: Owning up to our Creativity and Creating New Values

The overman embodies the opposite attitude to the last man to perspectivism. He sees in it an opportunity for creativity and imposition of his own will, rather than a reason for lapsing into a stultifying relativism. It is in *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche begins his celebration of the 'all too human' nature of our knowledge as a means to the overcoming of nihilism. There he focuses on the liberation which recognition of the human nature of our knowledge potentially leads to, because it brings man into an unprecedented self-consciousness concerning his creative capacities, and therewith the potential to take charge of his own destiny, to will the kind of creature that he wants to become, and the kind of world he wants to live in. He writes:

Only we have created the world *that concerns man!* - But precisely this knowledge we lack, and when we occasionally catch it for a fleeting moment we always forget it again immediately; we fail to recognize our best power and underestimate ourselves ... We are *neither as proud nor as happy as we might be*' (GS: 301 / p.242).

The advent of nihilism provides us with an opportunity to recognise that we have created the world that concerns man, a recognition that could make us much prouder and happier that we have been for so long. Earlier in the book Nietzsche tells a little parable: 'There is a lake that one day ceased to permit itself to flow off; it formed a dam where it had hitherto flown off; and ever since this lake is rising higher and higher. ... perhaps man will rise ever higher as soon as he ceases to *flow out* into a god.' (GS: 285 / p.230). Man is now able to enter into his true estate, to recognise the power of his own creativity rather than believing it to be the work of a world 'in itself'. As Martha Nussbaum eloquently puts it:

> Nietzsche's human being, noticing [that his positing of an order of things is negated by his experience of life] is filled with Dionysian joy and pride in his own artistry. For if there is no intrinsic order in things, how much more wonderful - that one should have managed to invent so many beautiful stories, to forge so many daring conceptual schemes, to dance so many daring and improbable dances. The absence of a designing god leads to a heightened joy in the artistic possibilities of humanity.[37]

The way beyond nihilism, then, involves us becoming God-like in the way in which Jacobi had in mind, becoming aware of ourselves as world-makers rather than world-takers, as creators, as, in the broadest possible sense, artists. In both *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche celebrates the creative potential that his 'all too human' insights bestow upon man, a celebration that reaches its fruition in the figure of the overman in *Zarathustra*.

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[37] Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Dionysus' in Christopher Janaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.364-5.

Early indications of what later becomes the overman can be found in *The Gay Science*. Thus Nietzsche writes, '*What do you believe in?* - In this: that the weight of all things must be determined anew' (GS: 269 / p.219), and, 'Let us therefore *limit* ourselves to the ... *creation of our own new table of values*. ... We ... *want to be* ... those who give themselves their own law, those who create themselves!' (GS: 335 / p.266). The self-consciousness brought about by the advent of nihilism puts man in the position of being responsible for his values, an incredible burden the weight of which Nietzsche thought man could only bear by overcoming himself, by becoming a new, higher kind of being: an overman.

In *Zarathustra* Nietzsche gives supremely poetic expression to some of the ideas concerning nihilism expressed in *The Gay Science*. Thus in Zarathustra's crucial first discourse, 'Of the three metamorphoses', he speaks of the transition from camel to lion to child. The camel, the 'weight-bearing spirit', represents man before the advent of modern European nihilism, man straining under the weight of Platonic-Christian values, which have given his existence, characterised as a desert, ballast, meaning, 'gravitas'. Importantly, this meaning is assumed to inhere in Kant's 'things-in-themselves', or some Platonic / Christian equivalent: reality as it anyway is, independent of the human contribution: '*foreign* heavy words and values' (TZ: 3 11 / p.211). The lion represents the onset of nihilism, who 'wants to capture freedom and be lord in its own desert'. Zarathustra tells us that the might of the lion creates 'freedom for new creation', seizes 'the right to new values - that is the most terrible proceeding for a weight-bearing and reverential spirit' (TZ: 1 1 / p.55). The lion represents the destructive aspect of Nietzsche's work, his corrosive genealogies, designed to uncover the 'all too human' nature of previously presumed 'ideals'. From the perspective of the camel, the activity of the lion is terrible. But the deconstructive activity of the lion is not enough in itself. Nihilism must be overcome, man must negotiate the abysmal open sea on his frail, human bark, and this is symbolised by the third metamorphosis of the spirit, the child, who is 'innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning ... a sacred Yes.' This is what

is needed for 'the sport of creation', in which 'the spirit wills *its own* will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins *its own* world' (*ibid.*).

In another crucial discourse, later on in the book, 'Of the spirit of Gravity', Nietzsche develops these images further. In this section the spirit of gravity is analogous to the camel, and overcoming this spirit is analogous to the child. Zarathustra speaks of baptizing the earth as the weightless, and of teaching men to fly by removing boundary stones. He accuses the spirit of gravity of being the cause of man being 'difficult to discover'. He explains that what he means by this is that the spirit of gravity has prevented man from recognising that he has created all of the things that he has reverenced: '... he has discovered himself who says: This is *my* good and evil: he has silenced thereby the mole and the dwarf who says: 'Good for all, evil for all' (TZ: 3 11 / p.212).

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche had begun to baptize the earth as weightless by removing all boundary stones, and by exposing man as the creator of his reverences, the creator of value. In *Zarathustra* this theme is developed more and more. Thus Zarathustra says, 'Man first implanted values into things to maintain himself - he created the meaning of things, a human meaning! Therefore he calls himself: 'Man', that is: the evaluator' (TZ: 1 15 / p.85). Elsewhere he says: 'But may the will to truth mean this to you: that everything should be transformed into the humanly-conceivable, the humanly-evident, the humanly-palpable. ... the world should be formed in your image by your reason, your will, your love!' (TZ: 2 2 / p.110). Zarathustra warns of the 'terror' inherent in this recognition, comparing it, in an echo of metaphors found in *The Gay Science* (e.g. 125), to being, 'a star thrown into empty space and into the icy breath of solitude' (TZ: 3 10 / p.207). The overman is able to acknowledge this terror, to look into the abyss without it rendering him incapable of creating meaning in his life.

2.4. The Will to Power: Nietzsche's Guide to the Creation of New Values

In order to counteract the 'icy breath' of 'empty space' that surrounds the thinker who is no longer able to believe in absolute truths, the vertigo

and potentially crippling relativism that such an insight can induce, Nietzsche formulates his theory of the will to power, which is, as it were, a guide to the creation of new values for those who have travelled with him so far. The question to which the will to power provides an answer was one which had been central to Nietzsche since the beginning of his philosophizing: namely, how to furnish a new, naturalistic account of values in the face of the collapse of traditional, metaphysical, ascetic nihilist forms of grounding - such as Platonic forms, God, 'thing-in-themselves.' Thus, in the first of his *Untimely Meditations*, 'David Strauss, the confessor and writer', we find him criticising Strauss for failing to see the implications of Darwin's erosion of any essential difference between man and animal in his *On the Origin of the Species*:

> With a certain tough satisfaction he clothes himself in the hairy garments of our ape genealogists and praises Darwin as one of the great benefactors of mankind - but abashed we see that his ethics is quite untouched ... Strauss has not even learned that ... preaching morals is as easy as giving reasons for morals is difficult; it should rather have been his task seriously to explain and to derive the phenomena of human goodness, mercy, love and self-abnegation, which after all exist as a matter of fact, from his Darwinistic presuppositions (UM: 2 / p.7).

This, in fact, becomes the task Nietzsche takes on for himself: to explain human goodness from naturalistic presuppositions, and is what, ultimately, his theory of the will to power is an attempt to do.

The most important feature of Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power is that it directly opposes the ascetic nihilism of Plato and Christianity by painting a picture of man and the world the living out of which will restore man to the healthiness of his instincts (which are 'the creative-affirmative force in all productive people', as we saw Nietzsche claim earlier), 'transform him back into nature' (BG: 230 / p.162), reground him in this world, which Nietzsche thinks is best characterised as a world of will to power, that is to say, a world of 'appropriation, injury, overpowering

of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation' (BG: 259 / p.194). It is Nietzsche's attempt to reintroduce the Dionysian spirit of the early Greek tragedies, as the best way of responding to suffering, rather than the ascetic nihilism engendered by Socrates and propagated by Plato and Christianity.

What kind of doctrine is the will to power? Attempting to answer this question swiftly takes us into a hornet's nest. In *Daybreak* Nietzsche mocks the pretensions of previous philosophers to 'solve everything at a stroke, with a single word ... to compress the problem of the world into the simplest riddle-form' and become its 'unriddler' (D: 547 / p.219-20). In *Human, All Too Human* he writes, 'It is the sign of a higher culture to esteem more highly the little, humble truths, those discovered by strict method, rather than the gladdening and dazzling errors that originate in metaphysical and artistic ages and men' (HA: 3 / p.15). In that book Nietzsche styles himself as a modest pursuer of such humble truths. And yet, with his doctrine of the will to power, he does indeed seem to be attempting to 'solve everything at a stroke, with a single word'. Well, that is the question: is he? Commentators are - of course - divided on this question. Following a distinction Brian Leiter makes, we can divide them roughly into two kinds[38]. The more 'postmodern' commentators, inspired by Foucault's reading of Nietzsche, argue that the will to power is not such an attempt; they spend much of their time focusing on Nietzsche's perspectivism rather than the will to power. On the other hand, there is the more 'essentialist' school of commentators, who read Nietzsche as a more traditional philosopher, and, like Freud, take him to be making non-perspectival claims about the essence of things in his theory of the will to power. An example of such an approach is that taken by Richardson, who, in his provocatively titled book, *Nietzsche's System*, writes: 'Like Plato, [Nietzsche] claims a systematic truth about essence, an essence or being that is ... differentially realized, generating values that ground an ethics, in which the metaphysical project is rated as our highest

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[38] Brian Leiter, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.1-2.

activity.'[39] Nietzsche's writings being as fecund as they are, either interpretation can be convincingly argued for.

What is clear is that what later becomes, in *Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, the doctrine of the will to power starts life as a psychological doctrine. Thus we find Nietzsche, in the books of his so-called 'middle period' (*Human, All Too Human, Daybreak* and *The Gay Science*), giving compelling accounts of various diverse human phenomena in terms of a drive for power. (This is chronicled excellently, as ever, in Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, chapter six.) *Daybreak* contains a very good account of Nietzsche's psychological analyses of power:

> *The striving for distinction.* ... The striving for distinction keeps a constant eye on the next man and wants to know what his feelings are ... We want ... to perceive or divine how the next man outwardly or inwardly *suffers* from us, how he loses control over himself and surrenders to the impression our hand or even merely the sight of us makes upon him; and even when he who strives after distinction makes and wants to make a joyful, elevating or cheering impression, he nonetheless enjoys this success not inasmuch as he has given joy to the next man or elevated or cheered him, but inasmuch as he has *impressed* himself on the soul of the other, changed its shape and ruled over it as his own sweet will. The striving for distinction is the striving for domination over the next man, though it be a very indirect domination and only felt or even dreamed. There is a long scale of degrees of this secretly desired domination, and a complete catalogue of them would be almost the same thing as a history of culture, from the earliest, still grotesque barbarism up to the grotesqueries of over-refinement and morbid idealism. The striving for distinction brings with it *for the next man* - to name only a few steps on the ladder: torment, then blows, then terror, then fearful astonishment, then elevation, then joy, then cheerfulness, then laughter, then derision, then mockery, then ridicule, then giving blows, then imposing

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[39] John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 1996), p.76

torment: - here at the end of the ladder stands the *ascetic* and martyr (D: 113 / p.68).

This passage indicates well the extent to which what Nietzsche has in mind by our striving for distinction is deeply akin to Hegel's notion of recognition, so powerfully used by Fukayama in *The End of History and the Last Man*, where he links it to the Platonic notion of 'thymos', the 'appetitive' part of our souls. Whilst Nietzsche does not use the word 'power' here, he does in several other passages that make similar points, in his middle period writings. What is so significant about the striving for distinction, or power, is its all encompassing nature, as Nietzsche sees it. In his view the 'striving for distinction hypothesis' has great explanatory range, it can be applied to actions which, on the surface, look like the opposite of striving for distinction, such as acts of generosity or patience. Thus it is a key which can be used to write 'a history of culture', because it explains human interactions as diverse as beating another human being, making him laugh, or weep with gratitude. Because of its diversity, Nietzsche is now, it seems, on the way to 'solving everything at a stroke'.

Another way of putting this is to say that Nietzsche's psychological analyses provide him with a monistic theory with which to combat the dualisms of ascetic nihilism, especially the dualisms of matter and spirit, of this world and another, 'truer' world. So, what does he actually mean by the phrase 'will to power'? He means *a striving that all forms of life possess to move beyond what they now do or possess*. Kaufmann, being a Hegelian scholar, compares it to Hegel's *Geist* insofar as it is of the essence of the will to power to manifest itself in one way, and then to sublimate this manifestation, thereby making Nietzsche a 'dialectical monist'.[40] He also compares it to the Platonic 'eros', and writes, '... his [Nietzsche's] account of man's ontological interest has no equal in the history of Western thought since Plato offered his soul-stirring picture of man's ontological predicament in his *Symposium*.'[41] Whilst this point is exaggerated, Kaufmann

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[40] Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1974), p.235.

[41] *Ibid.*, p.255.

is quite right to point out that, 'Nietzsche's conception of morality has a cosmic setting',[42] provided by his theory of the will to power. It is quite clear from the passage in which Nietzsche first advances this theory that it is no longer just human life that is motivated by a thirst for power, but all life:

> Where I found a living creature, there I found will to power ...
>
> And life itself told me this secret: 'Behold,' it said, 'I am that *which must overcome itself again and again.*
>
> The living creature values many things higher than life itself; yet out of this evaluation itself speaks - the will to power!' (TZ: 2 12 / p.138).

The parallel here with Schopenhauer is striking. Nietzsche has, for a number of years, been burrowing into the roots of human behaviour and discovering there a desire for power. He now takes a giant leap from the human to all of life in order to proclaim his theory of the will to power, just as his early 'educator' leaps from the claim that the inner knowledge we have of our bodies is will to the claim that the inner nature of all things is will.[43]

However, Nietzsche is primarily concerned with the implications of this theory for us. We are pre-eminent amongst manifestations of the will to power because of our capacity to *consciously* break out of habitual patterns of behaviour and adopt new forms. This is what Nietzsche means by 'self-overcoming', a notion of great importance to him. The overman is somebody who recognizes that the essence of life is will to power, and lives his life in accordance with this recognition, in accordance with the will to power, constantly striving to overcome his particular patterns of thought and action: 'Whatever I create and however much I love it - soon I have to oppose it and my love: thus will my will have it.' (TZ: 2 12 / p.138). Here we can see the plausibility behind Richardson's view that, '[Nietzsche] claims a systematic truth about essence, an essence or being that is ... differentially realized, generating values that ground an ethics'.[44]

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[42] *Ibid.*, p.242.

[43] Schopenhauer (1969), *vol.I*, p.104-5.

[44] Richardson (1996), p.76.

However, interpretations of Nietzsche's along Richardson's lines, which treat him as making traditional metaphysical claims consonant with those made by previous figures in the philosophical tradition, face a big obstacle. How do Nietzsche's claims about the will to power constituting the *essence* of all life sit with his perspectivism, his view that truth is something you create depending on your perspective? According to Nietzsche, each and every perspective is a manifestation of particular wills to power. We could call this the descriptive sense of the will to power. On the other hand, some perspectives are more powerful than others, more in accord with the urge towards self-transcendence in life. This is the normative sense of the will to power. It is with this normative dimension that the tension between the will to power and perspectivism becomes most pronounced. Does this mean that the will to power in its normative sense is a non-perspectival, objective truth? This is Richardson's position. He argues that the will to power is ontologically prior to perspectivism insofar as all perspectives presuppose the will to power, and manifest particular degrees of power. Thus, whilst there is 'only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing', such seeing and knowing are better of worse, more or less valuable, according to the extent to which they accord with the non-perspectival truth that the essence of life is will to power. But how is anybody - such as Nietzsche - able to sufficiently abstract themselves from their particular perspectives in order to make such a judgement? Moreover, what are we to make of the bountiful passages in which Nietzsche emphasises the provisionality of his views, such as the following (they both occur at the end of his books, almost as a warning against us taking on the ideas expressed earlier in the books in a dogmatic fashion):

> [The hermit] will doubt whether a philosopher *could* have 'final and real' opinions at all, whether behind each of his caves there does not lie another, deeper cave - a stranger, more comprehensive world beyond the surface, an abyss behind every ground, beneath every 'foundation'. Every philosophy is a foreground philosophy - that is a hermit's judgement: 'there is something arbitrary in the fact that *he* stopped, looked back, looked around here, that he stopped digging and

laid his spade aside *here* - there is something suspicious about it.' Every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy (BG: 289 / p.216).

We aeronauts of the spirit! - All those brave birds which fly out into the distance, into the farthest distance - it is certain! somewhere or other they will be unable to go on and will perch on a mast or a bare cliff-face - and they will even be thankful for this miserable accommodation. But who would venture to infer from that, that there was *not* an immense open space before them, that they had flown as far as one *could* fly! ... *Other birds will fly further!*' (D: 575 / p.228).

As we saw in the previous chapter, Nietzsche treats philosophies as 'unconscious memoirs' on the parts of their authors, and insists that philosophers' remotest metaphysical assertions originate in the particular set of values, the particular drives that motivate him or her. Obviously, the same applies to Nietzsche. His interpretation of the world is a product of his particular set of drives. This does not preclude Nietzsche's views from proving very illuminating to other people - those with quite dissimilar drives, in search of the 'worthy opponent' Nietzsche himself always sought, as much as those with similar ones. What it does seem to mean, however, is that Nietzsche is not claiming, with his philosophy of the will to power, to have pronounced the final word in philosophy, to have finally unravelled the enigma of the world. (Here he contrasts strongly with Schopenhauer, who claimed to have done precisely this: 'Subject to the limitation of human knowledge, my philosophy is the real solution of the enigma of the world', he wrote.[45]). As he himself writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 'Granted that this too [the theory of the will to power] is only interpretation - and you will be eager enough to raise this objection? - well, so much the better.-' (BG: 22 / p.53). Perhaps, then, a better way of interpreting the will to power is to see it as a kind of performance, as a demonstration of somebody enduring the inherent meaninglessness of the world by 'organizing a small portion of it oneself'(WP: 585 / p.318).

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[45] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin, 1970), p.31.

However, this interpretation robs Nietzsche's philosophy of much of its force, for without being able to claim that the will to power is in some sense a better interpretation of the world than ascetic nihilist interpretations, his whole philosophical project collapses. Moreover, he *does* consider the will to power to be a much better interpretation of the world than, say, a Christian one. Again, this raises the question of how coherent it is to insist so strongly on the extent to which the world is a product of our agency, to the point where the idea of the world making very definite demands on us is radically diminished. In my view, Nietzsche overemphasises our role in constituting reality, for rhetorical effect, and for various historical reasons it is these aspects of his philosophy that have come to greater prominence of late.

2.4.1. The Will to Power and the Question of Suffering

In Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power we have, then, an answer to the question of what criteria to employ in creating new values, in responding to nihilism: values which accord with the will to power, which affirm the body and this world, on their own terms, without consolation. For Nietzsche, the highest expression of the will to power is the ability to affirm this world, in its most dubious, harshest aspects, without consolation - 'a pessimism of strength' - without the lies which rob man of his power by causing him to deny some aspect of himself or the world. Thus he writes, in *The Will to Power*:

> *My new path to a 'Yes'*. - Philosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary quest for even the most detested and notorious sides of existence. ... 'How much truth can a spirit *dare*?' - this became for me the real standard of value. ... [Such a philosophy] wants ... to cross over to the other side of [ascetic nihilism] - to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection ... The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence - my formula for this is *amor fati* (WP 1041 / p.536).

Here we find Nietzsche returning to ideas which he had first sketched out eighteen years previously (this note dates from 1888), in *The Birth of Tragedy'*, returning to the non-nihilistic response to suffering that he discerned in Greek tragedy prior to the arrival of Socrates on the scene and the advent of the ascendancy of rationality and subsequently ascetic nihilism. He contrasts this way of responding to suffering with the nihilistic method of the ascetic ideal thus:

> Dionysus versus the 'Crucified': there you have the antithesis. ... One will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as *holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering: he is sufficiently strong, rich and capable of deifying to do so. The Christian denies even the happiest lot on earth: he is sufficiently
> weak, poor, disinherited to suffer from life in whatever form he meets it (WP: 1052 / p.542-3).

Here we have expressed very directly the difference between the ascetic nihilistic response to suffering, and Nietzsche's own, Dionysian, affirmative response. The crucial phrase is, 'being is counted as *holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering'. The task of overcoming nihilism is essentially the task of coming to revere this world without reference to another, 'better' or 'truer', world, coming to count becoming as holy. As Smith puts it in a quotation already cited, 'Nietzsche saw his task, the task of *present* philosophy, as one of trying to develop a means by which mankind could again esteem and revere *with a good conscience.*'[46] Nietzsche's 'vision' of the will to power is his attempt to make such reverence possible.

Thus we return, at the end of our consideration of Nietzsche's account of nihilism, to the issue of suffering, with which we began. Nietzsche contrasts his own, Dionysian and tragic response to suffering with the ascetic nihilistic response of Christianity. The latter, on Nietzsche's

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[46] Smith (1996), p.72.

account, as we have seen, responds to suffering by shifting the centre of gravity of human life into a fictitious 'beyond' which, in some way, compensates us for our suffering here in this, to some extent 'unreal', world. The most obvious version of this response is the Christian idea that one goes to heaven when one dies, and is rewarded eternally for having led a good life on earth. Nietzsche objects to this response because it falsifies the reality of suffering by offering a fictitious means of escape from it, and thereby inclines us to undervalue the only life we have in the only world there is - this one! Thus, his response to suffering is to *recognise its necessity within the overall economy of life*. Such a recognition constitutes the heart of the twin ideas of 'amor fati' ('love of fate') and the eternal recurrence. Before turning to these ideas, however, it is important to realise that Nietzsche did not consider suffering as something to be merely tolerated patiently whilst waiting for the good times to come, but rather as *the* essential ingredient in any meaningful, creative life:

> You [hedonists, pessimists, utilitarians, eudaemonists - we might also add Buddhists!] want if possible - and there is no madder 'if possible' - *to abolish suffering;* and we? - it really does seem that *we* would rather increase it and make it worse than it has ever been! ... The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering - do you not know that it is *this* discipline alone which has created every elevation of mankind hitherto? That tension of the soul in misfortune which cultivates its strength, its terror at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and bravery in undergoing, enduring, interpreting ... - has it not been bestowed through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering? (BG: 225 / p.155).

Nietzsche is writing here from bitter experience, as a man who suffered severely, both physically - from headaches, near blindness, and a very weak stomach - and mentally - from loneliness and tremendous social isolation. It is always well to bear this in mind when reading Nietzsche - they are the works of a suffering man. He recounts in his 'autobiography', *Ecce Homo*, just how central his own suffering has been to his own creative development

(see, e.g., p.10, 16, 26, 62). This led him to desire the following kind of disciples:

> *Type of my disciples.* - To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities - I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished: ... I wish them the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or not - that one endures (WP: 910 / p.481).

Such are the consolations of Nietzsche's philosophy! However, the attitude that Nietzsche takes to suffering fails to distinguish adequately between different kinds of suffering. Yes, some forms of suffering can be spurs to greater levels of creativity, creativity that would not have been possible without the suffering. No doubt Nietzsche's own creativity is an example of this, of an immensely creative response to intense physical and mental suffering. But surely there are all kinds of suffering which simply cannot realistically or appropriately be viewed in this way, as opportunities for greater creativity; and which, moreover, should not be viewed in this way, because the causes of such suffering are not irremovable. Nietzsche's views on suffering might be helpful when faced with an illness for which there is no cure, or the loss of a loved one, say, in a tragic accident; but surely a different attitude is required in response to the manifold forms of suffering caused by one's fellows human beings, through violence, hatred, greed, exploitation. The problem is that, at the heart of Nietzsche's philosophy, in his doctrine of the will to power, is a view of life that aims at 'translating man back into nature', returning us to the 'innocence of becoming' (T: VI 8, p.65), a nature and innocence that can potentially be used to justify all sorts of exploitation and inequality on the grounds that life itself sanctions such actions. Nietzsche's 'innocence of becoming' is not quite as innocent as he would have us believe, not for those on the lower echelons of hierarchies of power, anyway, as we shall see shortly.

2.5. Eternal Recurrence

Nietzsche's attitude to suffering is reflected in one of his central teachings, the teaching of the eternal recurrence, a doctrine he was to attach a perhaps surprising amount of importance to, referring to his beloved Zarathustra as 'the teacher of the eternal recurrence'. This teaching is an intensification of the imperative which Nietzsche recommends to love one's fate: 'My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it ... but to *love* it ...' (EH: 4 10 / p.37-8). Both the doctrines of 'amor fati' and the eternal recurrence are injunctions to affirming the role that suffering plays in constituting meaning in life. Thus, when teaching his disciples about the eternal recurrence Zarathustra says: 'Did you ever say Yes to one joy? O my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe as well. All things are chained and entwined together, all things are in love' (TZ 4 10 / p.331-2).

The eternal recurrence is a symbol for the ability to affirm suffering due to its irreplaceable efficacy in challenging human beings to lead creative, non-nihilistic, lives. As such, it is also a kind of practical test of one's ability to overcome nihilism (a test Nietzsche himself fails, as he admits in *Ecce Homo* (EH: 2 3 p.11)). Nietzsche writes, in the 'Discipline and Breeding' section of *The Will to Power*, 'A doctrine is needed powerful enough to work as a breeding agent: strengthening the strong, paralyzing and destructive for the world-weary' (WP: 862 / p.458), and: 'My philosophy brings the triumphant idea of which all modes of thought will ultimately perish. It is the great cultivating idea: the races that cannot bear it stand condemned; those who find it the greatest benefit are chosen to rule' (WP: 1053 / p.544). The 'triumphant idea' of the eternal recurrence would, so to speak, sort out the wheat from the chaff: the weak would be consumed by its weight, leaving only those higher men - 'those human beings who are of any concern to' Nietzsche! - who are able to endure and affirm this world without recourse to mendacious consolations. A little later in *The Will to Power* we have the following key passage:

3. Means of *enduring it* [the eternal recurrence]: the revaluation of all values. No longer joy in certainty but in uncertainty; no longer 'cause and effect' but the continually creative; no longer will to preservation but will to power; no longer the humble expression, 'everything is *merely* subjective,' but 'it is also *our* work! - Let us be proud of it!' (WP 1059 / p.545).

The man who is able to affirm the eternal recurrence of his life and of the whole cosmos does not see suffering as an objection to life, as something that, in an 'ideal world', would not be there. Rather, he sees not only its necessity, but also the creativity that suffering alone affords ('anybody who has ever built a 'new heaven', only mustered the power he needed through his *own hell*', (GM: 3 10 / p.89)). The eternal recurrence is a symbol of what Nietzsche elsewhere terms the 'innocence of becoming', an attitude to life which revels in and celebrates the sheer contingency of things rather than objecting to them as absurd, capricious and inhuman.

However, there is a problem concerning the coherence of Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes, 'Is living not valuating, preferring, being unjust, being limited?' (BG: 9 / p.39); and, in *Zarathustra,* 'I honour the obstinate, fastidious tongues and stomach that have learnt to say 'I' and 'Yes' and 'No.' But to chew everything and digest everything - that is to have a really swinish nature! Always to say Yea - only the ass and those like him have learned that' (TZ: 3 11 / p.212). How does such fastidiousness and discrimination sit with the eternal recurrence and 'amor fati', in which one is to be equally well-disposed to all moments, all events? Is such a possibility liveable, let alone desirable, or might it be a case of Nietzsche's rhetoric getting the better of him, and allowing him to conjure up in words an ideal that fails to apply in a realistic or constructive way to life as it is actually lived, and as Nietzsche himself experienced it. Michael Tanner makes a similar point thus:

...at a microscopic level [Nietzsche] remains more acute than anyone else - so acute that he has to move to the other extreme - to those

'heights' he is so keen on. He is prepared to be extraordinarily careful and thorough in explaining how dreadful things - including especially people - are. And as long as he remains at the level of things and people the paralysing horror continues to grow. So when he affirms, it cannot be by selecting approved items, for they are all 'ensnared' in what he detests. He has to take all the phenomena which he loathes, achieve a 'pathos of distance' from them, look down on them; and then he is at last able, thanks to the blurred vision, to say yes to everything. In doing that, he betrays all that he actually values, by pretending that he does not value one thing more than another. Sublimity of this kind is indistinguishable from insensibility.[47]

We find in the eternal recurrence and 'amor fati' a hankering after the kind of metaphysics Nietzsche himself so sharply attacks, a kind of 'view from above or nowhere' which redeems the brute contingency of things. Can we not detect in these ideas a desire to escape the harshness of the very reality Nietzsche is so insistent that we affirm, this world of becoming, a world in which we are vulnerable to all sorts of contingencies that it is impossible and absurd to welcome with equal relish? Does not this craving to affirm life in its totality sit awkwardly with Nietzsche's very definite views on what does and does not possess value, on the deep-seated dualism in his thought between more and less power, the strong and the weak, life-affirmation and life-negation, masters and slaves, and, indeed, between anti-nihilism and nihilism?

2.6. The Political and Ethical Dimension to Overcoming Nihilism

Nietzsche's thinking on the overcoming of nihilism needs to be understood with reference to Darwin, and the massive impact that his theory of evolution has had on Western culture. Nietzsche argues in both *Human, all too Human* (40 and 247) and *The Gay Science* (115) that the false belief that man was somehow different from the animals (e.g. made in God's image) has given us our 'humanity, humaneness, and 'human dignity' ' (GS:

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[47] Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.103-4.

115 / p.174). Now that this belief, thanks to Darwin's discoveries, is no longer credible, there is no guarantee that we as a species - over a massive period of time, albeit - will not devolve back into apes (H: 247). This is why a revaluation of all values is required, and the conscious breeding of a new kind of being: 'The problem I raise here is ... what type of human being one ought to *breed*, ought to *will*, as more valuable, more worthy of life, more certain of the future.' (A: 4 / p.128). The issue of how to breed a new kind of being - the overman - is at the heart of overcoming nihilism. What I have written so far about such breeding - creating one's own values, self-overcoming to achieve greater states of power, facing up to the harshest aspects of existence, affirming the eternal recurrence - may seem reasonable enough, and consonant in some respects with our current, liberal democratic sensibilities, our current understanding of what it means to be human, to not cause too much cause for concern. Such a picture does Nietzsche a disservice. I have yet to consider the social implications of these ideas, more specifically the kind of social arrangements that he thought would best facilitate the overcoming of nihilism, and the breeding of a non-nihilistic human being.

Nietzsche's concern with breeding a higher type of being goes right to the heart of his views on culture. For him, the significance of culture lies not in the happiness of the many but in the greatness of the few. This was a theme of his earlier writings as much as his later ones. Thus, in 'Schopenhauer as Educator' he writes, '... the fundamental idea of *culture*, insofar as it sets for each one of us but one task [is]: *to promote the production of the philosopher, the artist and the saint within us and without us and thereby to work at the perfecting of nature*' (UM 3 5 / p.160). Twelve years later, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he expresses a similar idea as follows: 'A people is a detour of nature to get to six or seven great men' (126 / p.99). As Kaufmann comments on Nietzsche's remark, 'The *goal of humanity* cannot lie in the end but only *in its highest specimens*' (UM 3 5 / p.160), 'Perhaps there is no more basic statement of Nietzsche's philosophy in all his writings than this sentence.'[48]

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[48] Kaufmann (1974), p.149.

Having pointed this out, Kaufmann then ducks the issue of what kind of political arrangements this view led Nietzsche to advocate. Ivan Karamazov argues in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that the cries of a single baby cannot be justified by the existence of the world. Nietzsche's view contrasts nicely with Karamazov's. He argues that tremendous amounts of suffering are justified for the sake of the production of 'six or seven great men'. It is worth remembering that Nietzsche began his philosophical life concerned with the issue of education (one of his first works is called *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*). He was concerned with how *practically* to bring about certain results, certain forms of culture. The same holds true for his later philosophy. The task of new philosophers, he writes, is:

> To teach man the future of man as his *will*, as dependent on a human will, and to prepare for great enterprises and collective experiments in discipline and breeding so as to make an end of that gruesome dominion of chance and nonsense that has hitherto been called 'history' (BG: 203 / p.126).

The philosopher is 'the man of the most comprehensive responsibility who has the conscience for the collective evolution of mankind' (BG: 61 / p.86). Thus Nietzsche is reviving Plato's notion of 'philosopher kings'. He is preparing in his philosophy for 'great enterprises and collective experiments' for the breeding of an elite caste of new beings, 'a new ruling caste for Europe' (BG: 251 / p.183). The nature of these enterprises and experiments is made most explicit in section nine of *Beyond Good and Evil*, 'What is Noble?'. Here are two passages from it:

> Every elevation of the type 'man' has hitherto been the work of an aristocratic society - and so it will always be: a society which believes in a long scale of orders of rank and differences of worth between man and man and needs slavery in some sense or other. Without the *pathos of distance* such as develops from the incarnate differences of classes, from the ruling caste's constant looking out and looking down on subjects and instruments and from its equally constant exercise of

obedience and command, its holding down and holding at a distance, that other, more mysterious pathos could not have developed either, that longing for an ever-increasing widening of distance within the soul itself, the formation of ever higher, rarer, more remote, tenser, more comprehensive states, in short precisely the elevation of the type 'man', the continual 'self-overcoming of man', to take a moral formula in a supramoral sense (BG: 257 / p.192).

And:

[a good and healthy aristocracy] therefore accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of innumerable men who *for its sake* have to be suppressed and reduced to imperfect men, to slaves and instruments. Its fundamental faith must be that society should *not* exist for the sake of society but only as foundation and scaffolding upon which a select species of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and in general to a higher *existence* (BG: 258 / p.193).

In another passage he asserts that in such a society 'one has duties only towards one's equals; that towards beings of a lower rank, towards everything alien, one may act as one wishes or 'as the heart dictates' and in any case 'beyond good and evil' - : it is here that pity and the like can have a place' (BG: 260 / p.196). Here we see, in naked, unadorned fashion, what a society would be like, in Nietzsche's eyes, which was attempting to overcome nihilism. It would be utterly unegalitarian, ruthless in its suppression of the majority for the sake of a minority engaged in acts of self-overcoming and self-creation. Indeed, in the first passage quoted, Nietzsche insists that without differences in rank between human beings self-overcoming is not possible: that such distinctions need to be maintained in order to facilitate more subtle distinctions within the souls of those few engaged in self-overcoming. Moreover, he sees society not as an end in itself, but as a means for the production of human greatness, seemingly no matter what the human cost.

It is in passages like this that one becomes aware of the dark social side to Nietzsche's philosophy of aristocratic flourishing, and of the radical consequences of his extramoral view that life is essentially will to power, 'appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation' (BG: 259 / p.194). This feature of his philosophy - an absolutely central feature - has consistently been down played by commentators in an attempt to sanitize Nietzsche. As Jonathan Glover remarks at the start of his book, *Humanity: a moral history of the twentieth century*, '[Nietzsche's] many modern defenders rightly point out the distortions [in Nazi interpretations of his work] but perhaps they explain away too much. A sense that Nietzsche is harmless may be created. I want to remove that impression.'[49]. So do I. And, as Simon May points out in his stimulating *Nietzsche's Ethics and his War on Morality*:

> ... with Nietzsche there is not even an attempt to produce a systematic safety net against cruelty, especially if one judges oneself to be a 'higher' type of person with life-enhancing pursuits - and, to this extent, his philosophy licences the atrocities of a Hitler even though, by his personal table of values, he excoriates anti-Semitism and virulent nationalism. ... the supreme value he places on individual life-enhancement and self-legislation leaves room for, and in some cases explicitly justifies, unfettered brutality.[50]

Moreover, his attack on all established canons of meaning and insistence on individuals' seizing the freedom to create their own values has an even darker side than the possibility of the emergence of the last man, a darker side which was realized in Nietzsche's own country forty years after his death, and in his name. These dangers were something Dostoyevsky - 'the only psychologist, by the way, from whom I had anything to learn' (T: X 45 / p.110), according to Nietzsche - was only too well aware of, and expressed through the character of the 'Grand Inquisitor' in *The Brothers Karamazov*,

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[49] Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: a moral history of the twentieth century* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p.11.

[50] Simon May, *Nietzsche's Ethics and his War on Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.132.

thus: man has 'no more pressing need than to find somebody to whom he can surrender, as quickly as possible, that gift of freedom which he, unfortunate creature, was born with.'[51] Nietzsche's philosophy emphasises this gift of freedom, a gift which plenty of men and gods are willing to take away, as the century which came after Nietzsche can attest to. Rollo May suggests:

> Totalitarianism is a cultural neurotic symptom of the need for community - a symptom in the respect that it is grasped as a means of allaying anxiety resulting from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness of the isolated, alienated individuals produced in a society in which complete individualism has become the dominant goal.[52]

Nietzsche's philosophy can potentially help to create such isolated and alienated individuals, who might turn to a more drastic solution than the television set and 'retail therapy' to assuage these feelings.

We can discern in Nietzsche's fierce opposition to Christian morality the radical implications for politics and morality of the doctrines of the will to power and the breeding of the overman. He is so opposed to Christianity because its solution to our constitutional nihilism is anti-life, which means, in Nietzsche's view, anti-will to power, anti-appropriation, overpowering, exploitation, imposition. *The Antichrist*, which was to form the first section of Nietzsche's projected book on nihilism, *The Will to Power*, contains the strongest declamations in this vein:

> One should not embellish or dress up Christianity: it has waged a *war to the death* against this *higher* type of man, it has excommunicated all the fundamental instincts of this type, it has distilled evil, the *Evil One*, out of these instincts: the strong human being as the type of reprehensibility, as the 'outcast'. Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted, it has made an ideal out of

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[51] Quoted in David Loy, *A Buddhist History of the West* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p.22.

[52] Quoted in Loy (2002), p.22.

> *opposition* to the preservative instincts of strong life; ... values of decline, *nihilistic* values hold sway under the holiest of names (A: 6 / p.129-30).

And, from *Ecce Homo*:

> The morality of unselfing is the morality of decline *par excellence*, the fact 'I am perishing' translated into the imperative 'you all *shall* perish' - and *not only* into the imperative! ... The sole morality which has hitherto been taught, the morality of unselfing, betrays a will to the end, it *denies* the very foundations of life (EH: 16 7 / p.102).

Chief amongst the nihilistic values of the morality of 'unselfing' is pity, which Nietzsche calls '*practical* nihilism' (A: 7 / p.130). This is because pity increases the hold that suffering has over life by multiplying it unnecessarily amongst a larger number of people than just the sufferer, and because, more importantly, 'It preserves what is ripe for destruction; it defends life's disinherited and condemned' (*ibid.*). So we can be certain that Nietzsche's ideal of a non-nihilistic culture would either completely lack or severely minimise the role of certain values which we hold to be most essentially human, those of fellow-feeling and altruism - a point, of course, that Nietzsche was only too well aware of, and made much of (see, for example, T: IX 5 / p.80-1). Nietzsche reviles such values as hostile to the essence of life as will to power. Thus, his solutions to nihilism must give us pause for thought. He devalues most of the ordinary aspects of human life, and one could argue that this devaluation is itself nihilistic. As Ophelia Shutte puts it, in *Beyond Nihilism*, 'There is an important split between [Zarathustra's] desire to affirm life and his inability to affirm human life. Human life still appears to be too small, too insignificant and wretched to Nietzsche. Thus he constantly seeks grandeur.'[53] Is it accurate to characterise as life-affirming and non-nihilistic a style of thinking that condemns the lives of most people as essentially meaningless (remember that what Zarathustra most abhors about the eternal recurrence is the possibility of the eternal recurrence of countless petty, worthless lives)? Nietzsche's six of

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[53] Schutte (1984), p.189.

seven great individuals for whose sake it is possible to affirm life are beginning to occupy a position vis-à-vis life as tyrannical as Plato's theory of the Forms or any other principle or 'true world' in whose name this life is besplattered. The greatness of the higher men is in danger of becoming another ascetic ideal and, by being deferred to some unspecified point in the future, is coming to seem as chimerical as the various 'true worlds' the postulation of which Nietzsche so virulently castigates.

In defence of Nietzsche, one might argue that his hostility to pity, his aristocratism and elitism are not *entailed* by his critique of Judeo-Christian morality and his doctrines of self-overcoming. I think that the extent to which one finds this argument convincing depends upon the respective weight which one gives to the 'perspectivist' and 'will to power' aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy. As I mentioned earlier, a helpful distinction can be made between those commentators who emphasize the former and those who emphasize the latter. I have chosen to emphasize the latter, and have insisted on a strong link between Nietzsche's doctrine of the 'will to power' and his aristocratic elitism, which permits the expenditure of the many for the sake of the few. However, if one emphasizes the former, and insists that there is a formalism to Nietzsche's advice about how to overcome nihilism which does not imply a specific content, one is still left with the problem of how one is able to criticize, for instance, the kind of claims that Nietzsche makes in part nine of *Beyond Good and Evil*, if all values are self-created. This is a point Simon May makes, as we have already seen, and is one which we shall be returning to later on, with reference to Heidegger and Levinas (see 5.6.3).

2.7. Summary

We have seen that, for Nietzsche, the issue of nihilism revolves around different ways of responding to suffering and thereby rendering life meaningful. He praises the Dionysian response to suffering, the 'pessimism of strength' that he discerns in Greek tragedy, and this response deeply informs his doctrine of the will to power. On the other hand, he condemns various forms of ascetic nihilism for retreating from the harsh realities of earthly life, its sheer contingency, in the name of something or somewhere

more reliable and 'better' (the 'true worlds' of Plato and Christianity). With the undoing of ascetic nihilism, largely due to a radicalised version of Kant's epistemology, we are left with the need to find a new way of responding to the flux. This undoing creates an opening out of which it is possible that a new, non-nihilistic, 'Dionysian' form of life-affirmation may result, though much more likely, in Nietzsche's view, is the onset of a corrosive and vacuous mediocrity, a kind of 'brave new world' of petty people. Nietzsche devotes himself, at times maniacally, to the averting of this latter possibility.

Zarathustra tells his disciples that a teacher is a bad teacher if their pupils always remain pupils, and, in one of his last letters, written on the brink of insanity, he wrote: 'After you had discovered me, it was no trick to find me: the difficulty now is to lose me.'[54] Losing Nietzsche might not be as difficult as he would like us to think. There are grave deficiencies in his account of nihilism and its overcoming, several of which I have already flagged up. Firstly, there is the question of how coherent Nietzsche's epistemology is, given that he abandons talk of a 'thing-in-itself' (saying it is worth a 'Homeric laugh') and insists on the primacy of our role as 'creators' of truth and values. Moreover, how does this claim sit with other claims to the effect that there is a definite character to whatever exists independently of us, which it is our job to respond to as affirmatively as we can?

Secondly, how radically new is Nietzsche's attempt to revalue all values? He seems at times to have an obsession with originality for originality's sake, to betray an anxiety of influence, a fear that one's autonomy is threatened unless one is able to make a complete and radical break with the past, to banish all of 'God's shadows' and become *those who we are* - human beings who are new, unique, incomparable' (GS: 335 / p.266). Is such a goal realistic, or even desirable? Morrison, at the end of his book *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, suggests, '... if Nietzsche had lived in an age where Buddhism was better understood, he might even have considered

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[54] Quoted in WCT: 53.

the Buddha to be an *Ubermensch.*[55] Similarly, Hollingdale, in his introduction to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, draws several suggestive parallels between the advice for overcoming nihilism that we find in that book, and various Christian doctrines (TZ: p.28-9). The fact of the matter is that many of Nietzsche's descriptions of the overman and the kind of values he would embody are so formal ('live dangerously', 'become who you are') that they could be applied to, for instance, traditional religious figures like the Buddha and Jesus, or it could be insisted, as Nietzsche does time and again, that they embody in many ways the antithesis of such figures. It is certainly worth questioning the extent to which Nietzsche's ideal of the overman does represent something as radically new and different from other ideals as he would have us believe.

Thirdly, there is the question of to what extent such a view of truth is liveable, and to what extent self-posited values can be valuable. Iris Murdoch wrote, on behalf of Plato, 'The spirit must have something absolute, otherwise it goes crazy.'[56] Nietzsche has not shown us that this is not the case, for the overman, the man who is able to affirm this conception of truth and use it creatively, remains a future possibility. Nietzsche is suggesting that we create our own values. But this raises the question of how it is possible for something to be a value if we have chosen it? Is something valuable simply because I have posited it as valuable? More generally, is the epistemological position Nietzsche argues for and which the overman views as an opportunity for creation a liveable position? This is a question David Cooper considers in chapter seven of *The Measure of Things*. He argues that it is not, and cites three testimonies to this effect: from Heidegger and his account of anxiety in *Being and Time*, from Eastern philosophy, and from a variety of artists, as varied as T.S.Eliot and Sartre. Nietzsche provides us with no evidence to the contrary: the overman has not yet existed.

Fourthly, might it not be the case that it is just such a conception of truth that might lead in the direction that Nietzsche so greatly feared, that of

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[55] Morrison, Robert, *Nietzsche and Buddhism: a study in nihilism and ironic affinities* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 1997), p.225.

[56] Quoted in Cooper (2002), p.222.

the 'last man', who has discovered happiness, and blinks - to a corrosive relativism exacerbated by the rise of modern technology? These last two points are both dealt with by Martin Heidegger, as we shall see.

Fifthly, in a post-Hitler, post-Stalin world, what are we to make of the troubling ethical and political side of Nietzsche's revaluation of all values, so often ignored by commentators? This will lead me into a discussion of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, in whom we find an account of ethics potentially not susceptible to Nietzsche's critique.

Chapter Three: Heidegger on Nietzsche and Nihilism

Introduction

Why Heidegger? How might he help us respond to Nietzsche and to nihilism? Aside from the obvious fact of his enormous influence on philosophy in the twentieth century, there is also the equally obvious fact that he spent a long time (four years, in fact) explicitly addressing Nietzsche's philosophy, and was concerned, especially in his later work (post *Being and Time*), with the issue of nihilism, and what we might think of as considerations of a more cultural nature. More specifically, what Heidegger offers us is an alternative account of nihilism in which Nietzsche's very solutions to nihilism are exposed as its ultimate form, and a strikingly new and thought-provoking account of the history of Western philosophy. In *Being and Time,* we have a sustained attack on the Cartesian world view which Heidegger argues underlies Nietzsche's thinking on nihilism. In his reflections on 'technology' we have a sketch of how Nietzschean nihilism manifests itself in various of our cultural forms. In his reflections on authenticity, art, language, the 'fourfold' and the nature of thinking, we have intimations of how to respond to nihilism. So, the outlook is promising for making some headway on the question of nihilism in the company of Martin Heidegger.

I shall examine Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche and his own account of nihilism in the present chapter, the notion of the 'history of being' and the relationship between nihilism and technology. In chapter four I attempt to show how *Being and Time*, with its attack on several key presuppositions of Cartesianism, can be read as an attack on Nietzsche's couching of the issue of nihilism in terms of 'values'. In chapter five I consider what else Heidegger has to say about responding to nihilism, with particular reference to authenticity, art, language, thinking and the 'fourfold'.

3.1. Being, being, and the Forgetfulness of b/Being

Heidegger is hardly the easiest person to write upon. As Scruton remarked of his work, not entirely flatteringly, 'No one has claimed to understand [Heidegger's philosophy] completely. ... How much of it is really philosophy, and how much an embroidered description of a private spiritual journey?'[57]. This remains to be seen. Before I consider Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, I need to establish some working definitions. Heidegger's central concern is the 'question of Being'. A recent book on Heidegger, by Hermann Phillipse, draws attention to the lack of consensus amongst the secondary literature on what this question actually is. He writes, 'The very fact that there are many different and incompatible interpretations of the question of Being points to the problematic nature of this question, and, indeed, to the problematic nature of any attempt to interpret it.'[58] What provisional definition of the question of being am I going to work with? When I say to you, 'This chapter of the thesis is on Heidegger' and you understand me, we have both drawn upon an implicit understanding of a whole manner of things, in order for such communication to take place: of what a thesis is, who Heidegger is, what a philosopher is, what a student is, what a commentary is, and so on. In turn, to understand what a dissertation is, what a student is, and so on, we must have an understanding of the wider human practices and purposes in the context of which students, dissertations take their place. For Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, 'being' indicates *the broadest, most fundamental conditions our implicit understanding of which enables any particular entity to figure for us as the entity it is.*

What Heidegger means by an understanding of being can be made clearer with the help of a comparison with Kant. Just as, for Kant, all experience presupposes certain forms of intuition and certain categories that, as it were, make experience possible, enable us to have it - space, time,

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[57] Roger Scruton, *Philosophy from Descartes to Wittgenstein: a short history of modern philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1981), p.259, 263-4.

[58] Hermann Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: a critical assessment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.3.

substance, etc. - so, Heidegger claims, our experience (not a word he likes to use, incidentally, because he thinks it is riddled with subjectivism) is made possible by our understanding of 'being', our inchoate, implicit grasp of what it means for things to be: people, dissertations, U.F.O.s, mediocrity, soul-searching, etc.. As he puts it:

> ... we are always already involved in an understanding of being. ... What is asked about in the question to be elaborated is being, that which determines beings as beings, that in terms of which beings have already been understood no matter how they are discussed. ... This guiding look at being grows out of the average understanding of being in which we are always already involved *and which ultimately belongs to the essential constitution of Dasein itself* (BT: 25-8).

So, being is something we already 'know' something about, something with which we are very familiar - perhaps too familiar - in the very essence of our being. This is one of the central reasons why Heidegger's philosophy is difficult: it tries to elaborate on phenomena that are so close to us that we do not usually see them, just as we do not normally notice that we are breathing. Far from being concerned with abstruse metaphysical matters, Heidegger is the philosopher of the everyday *par excellence*.

So, the question of being, Heidegger's central question, involves, we could say, uncovering the conditions that make possible the understanding of being of which we are constituted, conditions which, in his *magnum opus Being and Time*, Heidegger refers to as 'existentiales'. When I refer to '*being*', then, I shall be using it in the sense just adumbrated. However, there is another aspect to Heidegger's question of Being that needs flagging up before we proceed, and this is a sense that I shall refer to by writing '*Being*'. Unfortunately, perhaps, Heidegger himself never makes this distinction, though this may be because the two senses of being / Being I am distinguishing ultimately blend into one. This second sense is harder to specify than the first. I shall gloss it for the time being by saying that any particular understanding of being necessarily involves not understanding being in a manifold of other ways, of, as it were, covering over other ways

of disclosing the world, other ways of understanding what it means for things to be. Being in this second sense captures this concealment, evokes the 'depth' of reality, the fact that there is not just one way of disclosing the world, of understanding being. Being in this sense, as we shall see, becomes increasingly important for the later Heidegger. He comes to think of it as the source of being in the other sense, and it carries theological / spiritual overtones in the way that *being* does not.[59]

To reiterate: Heidegger himself does not distinguish the two, thus lending his writings a richness and ambiguity that can be frustrating. For instance, in the famous phrase, 'Language is the house of Being', we can see both aspects of b/Being I have outlined above at work: language is the medium of any particular understanding of *being*, and *Being* is the source of language. In my discussions of Heidegger, I will write *being* to denote the first kind of being mentioned, and *Being* to denote the second kind, and the first and second kind at the same time. I should emphasise, however, that this distinction is ultimately artificial one, and that I am employing it for strategic reasons, to try to make it clearer what I think Heidegger is getting at.

Lastly, it is worth sketching out what Heidegger might mean by the phrase 'forgetfulness of Being', which he uses time and again, and which is his repeated charge against most of his philosophical predecessors. The resonances of this rich phrase will become apparent as we proceed, but for now, I shall define it as a way of thinking and acting which pays no heed to Being, which is oblivious to the possibility of other ways of disclosing the world than its own, and oblivious to Being as the source of its particular understanding of being. As he puts it, in his grandiose way:

> We today, and many generations before us, have long forgotten the realm of the unconcealment of beings, although we habitually take it for granted. We actually think that a being becomes accessible when

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[59] It should be pointed out that this Being/being distinction is not the one used by Heidegger's various translators, such as Macquarrie and Robinson, J.Glenn Gray, John Sallis and Joan Stambaugh. Indeed, this is the problem: that these various translators do not use 'Being' and 'being' in identical senses. The distinction that I am making between the two is taken from Julian Young's very good book *Heidegger's Later philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2002), p.10-25.

an 'I' as subject represents an object. As if the open region within whose openness something is made accessible *as* object *for* a subject, and accessibility itself, which can be penetrated and experienced, did not already have to reign here as well! (N4: 93).

In a similar vein, he writes, at the start of *Being and Time*:

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being'? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*. But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression 'Being'? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question (BT: 1).

Our inability to even understand that there is a question of Being is evidence, in Heidegger's view, of an aberration in philosophy, a losing sight of what is fundamental.[60]

Before leaving this initial attempt to orientate ourselves with Heidegger, however, it is worth pointing out that, definitions aside, the essential impulse behind Heideggerian thinking is what we might call a poetic impulse - even in *Being and Time*, which is less obviously poetical than some of the later works. As Richard Rorty writes, 'The question 'What is Being?' is no more to be *answered correctly* than the question 'What is a cherry blossom?' But the latter question is, nevertheless, one you might use to set the theme for a poetry competition.'[61] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in a passage quoted by Steiner at the end of his introduction to Heidegger, conveys better than any definition the kind of sensibility out of which Heidegger addresses himself and his readers to the question of being:

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[60] Milan Kundera, in *The Art of the Novel*, makes the very interesting suggestion that whilst modern philosophy might indeed have forgotten Being, a remembering and recollecting of Being has been going on in the modern era in the form of the novel - a possibility Heidegger neglects to consider. Kundera writes, 'Indeed, all the great existential themes Heidegger analyzes in *Being and Time* - considering them to have been neglected by all earlier European philosophy - had been unveiled, displayed, illuminated by four centuries of the novel' (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.5.

[61] Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.36.

> Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of EXISTENCE,
> in and by itself, as the mere fact of existing? Hast thou ever said to
> thyself, thoughtfully, IT IS! heedless in that moment, whether it were
> a man before thee, or a flower, or a grain of sand? ... If thou hast
> indeed attained to this, thou wilt have felt the presence of a mystery,
> which must have fixed thy spirit in awe and wonder.[62]

So, more than anything, the term 'forgetfulness of Being' registers a sensibility that is no longer capable of astonishment before the sheer fact that things are rather than that they are not, no longer capable of suspending an appropriative attitude towards the world in favour of a more appreciative one. The artist Paul Klee wrote, 'Imagine you are dead. After many years of exile, you are permitted to cast a single glance earthward. You see a lamppost and an old dog lifting his leg against it. You are so moved that you cannot help sobbing.'[63] Our concern with being in the world, whilst always there, attuning us to Being, generally only becomes apparent to us in certain revelatory moments, often moments of deprivation, pain or loss. In such moments we may becomes aware of the depth of our connection with the world, our astonishment at the sheer fact that there is something rather than nothing. This is the kind of sensibility out of which Heidegger is speaking, which causes one eminent commentator on Heidegger to write, 'the first time one truly understands Heidegger's questions one knows it by a cold shiver running down one's spine.'[64]

With these definitions and hints in place, we are now in a position to consider Heidegger's views on nihilism and Nietzsche.

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[62] Quoted in George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana, 1978), p.157-8.

[63] Quoted in Ezra Bayda, *At Home in the Muddy Water* (Boston: Shambala, 2003), p.137.

[64] Magda King, *Heidegger's Philosophy: a guide to his basic thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p.4.

3.2. Heidegger's Interpretation of Nietzsche

Having oriented ourselves around Heidegger's central concern, the question of Being, we can now turn to his account of Nietzsche. In discussing Nietzsche, we have questioned both the coherence and the feasibility of Nietzsche's account of truth. We also saw that Nietzsche considered this account to have potentially dangerous consequences, for it could lead to a deadening kind of relativism in which more and more people acquiesce, and in which all meaningful distinctions are erased. Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche centres around these twin concerns. He portrays Nietzsche's account of truth, and his posing of the problem of nihilism in terms of values, as symptoms of a 'forgetfulness of Being'. As such, Nietzsche's philosophy marks the end of the line, a line that begun with Plato, and thus Nietzsche is, in Heidegger's eyes, the last metaphysician of the West, and far from having overcome nihilism actually represents its culmination. Nihilism consists, for Heidegger, in this forgetfulness of Being coterminous with the history of Western philosophy since Plato, and culminating in Nietzsche's alleged antidote to nihilism - disposing with an old set of values and adopting new ones. He argues that nihilism, forgetfulness of Being, manifests itself in a 'technological' understanding of being, which obscures Being, and leads to the kind of relativism Nietzsche so feared. As we shall also see, such relativism is not, in Heidegger's view, a product of weakness of will, of the inability to posit one's own values, so much as a product of too much will, of an overly wilful and anthropocentric comportment towards Being which has been entrenching itself for two thousand five hundred years. Thus, an appropriate response to nihilism lies not so much in strength of will as in a relinquishing of will and openness to being claimed or called by something which in some sense transcends us - a claim ruled out by Nietzsche's account of truth.

3.2.1. Heidegger's Interpretative Strategies

Before turning to his Nietzsche interpretation, I want to point out three of the major assumptions that underlie Heidegger's interpretations of philosophers from the Western tradition. I am indebted here to the concise

summaries of Schrift and Pattison on this topic. Firstly, he works on the assumption that, 'The doctrine of a thinker is that which is left unsaid in what he says' (WCT: 100). This means three things in the case of Nietzsche. Firstly, the 'unsaid' is that which he did not publish, all of the material contained in his notebooks, the *Nachlass*. Heidegger focuses particularly on *The Will to Power*, insisting that, 'What Nietzsche himself published during his creative years was always foreground. ... His philosophy proper was left behind as posthumous, unpublished work' [N4: 12]. Secondly, the 'unsaid' refers to Being, which, according to Heidegger, has remained unsaid in the writings of all Western metaphysicians. Lastly, and most importantly, the unsaid refers to the unspoken presuppositions which allows a particular thinker to think in the way that he does. As he puts it, 'It [interpretation] is simply a matter of listening to the tradition in return, and thereby examining the prejudices and pre-judgements in which every thinking, in its own way, must dwell' (Pa: 332). This last point is worth emphasising. Heidegger's intriguing view is that, to understand a philosopher, one needs to try to reconstruct and make explicit the implicit understanding of Being he was working with, embodied in the everyday practices of his time. The understanding of being that Heidegger thought Nietzsche was working with will be of central concern in what follows, for it forms the basis of his reflections on 'technology.'

His second working assumption is, 'Every thinker thinks only a single thought' (N3: p.4). Here the suggestion is that, whilst the thoughts of many of us engaged in philosophical thinking might display a certain lack of coherence and integration, and possess no overriding unity, the thought of a great thinker will not exhibit such qualities. In Nietzsche's case, in Heidegger's view, Nietzsche's single thought is the thought of the eternal recurrence, and thus Heidegger arranges other themes of Nietzsche's around this thought (see N4: 3). His third working assumption is that all serious thinking is metaphysics. This means that a thinker's 'single thought' will be about 'being as a whole' (WCT: 80).

Whether we conclude from these assumptions and from what follows that, as his one time student Hans Georg Gadamer put it, 'all in all,

Heidegger's attempt to think through the history of philosophy exhibits the violence of a thinker who is driven by his own questions and who seeks to recognize himself in everything',[65] remains to be seen. My concern is not so much with the faithfulness of Heidegger's interpretation to Nietzsche's body of work, as with whether or not he has discerned something fundamental about Nietzsche's thinking, which can also be detected in many other thinker's in the Western tradition: namely, a 'forgetfulness of Being'.

3.2.2. 'God is Dead'

For my purposes, the best place to begin explaining Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche is a lecture called 'The word of Nietzsche: 'God is dead'', which is a kind of summary of the many lectures that Heidegger gave on Nietzsche between 1936 and 1940. Heidegger interprets Nietzsche's phrase 'God is dead' to be a reference to the supersensory world in general, and to the inability of the supersensory world to affect men, to play a vital role in the orientation of their lives, in their understanding of Being. As he puts it: 'The pronouncement 'God is dead' means: The suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. ... [it] has suffered the loss of its obligatory and above all its vitalizing and upbuilding power' (QCT: 61). He then goes on to point out that, not only is it God that no longer has the power to give meaning to people's lives, but whatever principle or ideal is placed within the suprasensory world, such as the moral law, the authority of reason, and so on. This whole way of being in the world has become bankrupt. Thus he indicates that Nietzsche's task, in response to this nihilism, is not to populate the old suprasensory realm with some new idol, but, rather, to establish meaning in some different way, a way that can vitalize man in a way that the supersensory world no longer does. As Heidegger puts it, 'Revaluing becomes the overturning of the nature and manner of valuing' (QCT: 70). Nietzsche thereby seeks out 'what is most alive', ' 'the ideal of superabundant life' ' (ibid.). Because the new values and their standard of measure must be drawn from beings themselves, rather

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[65] Quoted in Alan Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.117.

than from a realm over and above beings, a new interpretation of beings is required which can serve as such a standard, and this interpretation is what Nietzsche calls the 'will to power', so Heidegger argues.

He then turns to a question which Nietzsche himself asks, in the 'death of God' passage: namely, how did we kill God? How is it that the suprasensory world, the lights of which have guided men for over two millennia, has lost its power? We have considered Nietzsche's answer in chapter one: the will to truth, in the form of science and Kant's critical philosophy, compels us to admit the untruthfulness of belief in God. Thereby God, as the highest value, gets dethroned. Heidegger's answer is equally emphatic, and goes right to the heart of his critique of Nietzsche: it is due to thinking of God as a value in the first place that man has killed God:

> The ultimate blow against God and against the suprasensory world consists in the fact that God, the first of beings, is degraded to the highest value. The heaviest blow against God is not that God is held to be unknowable, not that God's existence is demonstrated to be unprovable, but rather that the god held to be real is elevated to the highest value (QCT: 105).

Heidegger's story of how it is that we have come to think of God in terms of values, and in terms of value at all, is what must first occupy us, then. It is central to his discussion of Nietzsche, and central to his charge that the essence of metaphysics and of nihilism is 'forgetfulness of Being.' Before we tell this story, however, we need to establish precisely what Nietzsche means by a value.

3.2.3. What are Values, and What Does Heidegger Think is Wrong with Them?

In Heideggerian fashion, we might ask, 'What is the ontological status of a value?'. In a more 'down-to-earth' fashion, we could ask what talking in terms of values - as we habitually do - says about our understanding of being. We are so accustomed to hearing and using the word today that we

perhaps do not really 'bat an eyelid' at its use, and presume that what it means is very obvious, that thinking in terms of values is the only conceivable way to think - that the Greeks had their values, the Aborigines have theirs, Christians have theirs, and so on. Much of Heidegger's merit as a philosopher lies in making the obvious seem not so obvious, indeed decidedly strange. He is insistent that it is only we moderns who have 'values' and who speak in terms of values, and that this reveals something fundamental about the way that we understand being. He points out that Nietzsche defines values, in *The Will to Power,* thus: 'The point-of-view of 'value' is the point-of-view constituting the *preservation-enhancement conditions* with respect to complex forms of relative duration of life within becoming' (WP: 715 / p.380). Heidegger is quick to seize upon the fact that the essence of a value lies in its being a point-of-view, and that this point of view is adopted with a definite aim in mind. It is, 'a seeing that aims at something' (QCT: 71). Clearly, something possesses value as a means to a particular end, a feature that will become important as we proceed.

Heidegger's opposition to thinking in terms of values was long standing. In an early series of lectures he gave, *Towards a Definition of Philosophy*, he attacks this style of thinking in certain neo-Kantians. Such opposition reaches its height in the Nietzsche lectures and after. He claims, 'The very positing of these values in the world is already nihilism' (N4: 44), and, 'No one dies for mere values' (QCT: 142). His reasons for thinking this are expressed most clearly in the 'Letter on Humanism':

> ... it is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as 'a value' what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid - solely as the objects of its doing. ... When one proclaims 'God' the altogether 'highest value,' this is a degradation of God's essence. Here as elsewhere

> thinking in values is the greatest blasphemy imaginable against Being.
> To think against values therefore does not mean to beat the drum for
> the valuelessness and nullity of beings. It means rather to bring the
> clearing of the truth of Being before thinking, as against
> subjectivizing beings into mere objects (BW: 251).

I quote this passage at length because of its supreme importance for my
concerns. Firstly, note the theological tone, as Heidegger calls valuative
thinking a 'blasphemy' against Being. His reason for thinking this is
completely clear here: values are always relative to specific people, and
hence involve a subjectivizing (and thereby objectiving) of the world, in
which beings are treated solely in terms of their capacity to bring about the
goals of man's striving. He opposes to this a way of thinking and living
which attends to 'the clearing of the truth of Being', the source of being and
beings, which is occluded by a life concerned solely with actualizing certain
ends. He is suggesting that, in our talk of values, we come to feel, as our
ancestors did not, that our values are merely our values, that they do not
possess a reality above and beyond our positing them as such, which is why,
Heidegger suggests, 'No one dies for mere values'. Here we see the rift
between Heidegger and Nietzsche, and therewith Heidegger and the rest of
the philosophical tradition (at least in his characterisation) begin to emerge.
Whereas Nietzsche celebrates the recognition that our values are just that -
our values - as a way to facing up to man's true creative capacities to forge
his own scheme of values and posit his own meanings, Heidegger recoils
from such a stance as a 'blasphemy against Being' because it renders what is
valued valueless, uncompelling and unbinding.

Heidegger thinks that, far from Nietzsche's attempt to instigate a
revaluation of all values being a possible way of overcoming nihilism and
reorienting man, this way of thinking is exactly the kind of thinking that will
leave us mired in nihilism and disoriented. This leads him to undertake an
analysis of how it is possible for nihilism to have come about in the first
place. His answer is quite simple: the 'calculative thinking' and
'forgetfulness of Being' engendered at the dawn of Western culture by Plato,
which attempts to gain some 'purchase' on Being rather than to 'let beings

be', and which culminates in the nihilism and value-thinking of Nietzsche. This is how we have been able to 'drink up the sea, to wipe away the entire horizon, to unchain the earth from its sun'. Let us now turn, then, to the roots of Nietzschean nihilism in Plato.

3.3. How Have We Come to Think in Terms of Values? Plato and the Essence of Truth

As far as Heidegger is concerned, the 'slippery slope' that culminates in the subjectivism and value thinking of Nietzsche began with Plato. It was Plato who set Western philosophy on its ineluctable course towards subjectivism. He argues for this in his 1931/2 essay, 'Plato's doctrine of truth'. There he writes:

> The beginning of metaphysics in the thought of Plato is at the same time the beginning of 'humanism'. ... humanism means the process ... whereby human beings, in differing respects but always deliberately, move into a central place among beings ... What takes place in each instance [of humanism] is a metaphysically determined revolving around the human being (Pa: 181).

He discerns in Plato's allegory of the cave the beginnings of the move away from truth conceived of as unhiddenness, to truth conceived of as correspondence. What is so crucial about this shift, for Heidegger, is that it paves the way for *a conception of truth as dependent on man, and of the subject as the locus of truth*, as evidenced in the philosophies of Descartes and Nietzsche.

What, then, is the difference between truth as correspondence and truth as unhiddenness? According to the correspondence theory of truth, a statement is true if it corresponds to a given state of affairs. Thus, Aquinas speaks of *'adaequatio intellectus et rei'*, Descartes states, 'Truth or falsehood in the proper sense can be nowhere but in the intellect alone', and Kant writes of 'the agreement of knowledge with its object'. This all seems very obvious; indeed, to be common sense. So, 'Chloe is in the meadow' is

true if and only if Chloe is in the meadow. Straightforward enough. What can Heidegger mean when he refers to truth as unhiddenness? This question goes right to the heart of his philosophy, and therefore is not an easy one to answer quickly. Still, we can say that the term 'truth as unhiddenness' refers to our understanding of being, to the shared background 'within' which things - Chloe, the meadow - become 'lit up' in the first place - a background that is so implicit (being a background) that we generally do not notice it. But it is only on the basis of this background that we are able to refer to particular beings in the first place. This is what I defined as 'being' in section one, and is one of the central features of Division I of *Being and Time*. There Heidegger makes a point that we have also come to associate with the later Wittgenstein, to the effect that social practices give meaning to assertions:

> The pointing out which assertion does [e.g. 'Chloe is in the meadow'] is performed *on the basis of what has already been disclosed in understanding or discovered circumspectively*. Assertion is not a free-floating kind of behaviour which, in its own right, might be capable of disclosing entities in general in a primary way: on the contrary *it always maintains itself on the basis of Being-in-the-world*. (BT : 199, italics mine).

What is crucial about truth as unhiddenness, about our understanding of being, the background or horizon that allows anything to show up in the first place, is that *it is not dependent on the subject*. This is because it occurs between subjects, and allows subjects to be subjects in the first place: it is, to requote a passage we encountered earlier, '... the open region within whose openness something is made accessible *as* object *for* a subject ... accessibility itself' (N4: 93). This is a point that shall become clearer in my analysis of some of Division I of *Being and Time*, in chapter four. With Plato, Heidegger argues, the move is made towards a 'forgetting' or glossing over of this background, a glossing over of what makes truth as correspondence possible, with the concomitant result that truth gets conceived of as increasingly dependent on the human subject:

As unhiddenness, truth is still a fundamental trait of beings themselves. But as the correctness of the 'gaze,' it becomes a characteristic of human comportment toward beings. ... Taking the essence of truth as the correctness of the representation, one thinks of all beings according to 'ideas' and evaluates all reality according to 'values'. (That which alone and first of all is decisive is not which ideas and which values are posited, but rather the fact that the real is interpreted according to 'ideas' at all, that the 'world' is weighed according to 'values' at all) (Pa: 177, 182, italics mine).

3.3.1. Plato and Nietzsche as Philosophers of Power

Before we proceed, it is important to be clear on the link between Plato's theory of the Forms, and Nietzsche's valuative thinking. Heidegger detects in Plato's theory a will to mastery and control, a 'calculative' way of thinking that attempts to get a clear view of what things essentially are - the 'ideas' - in order to act in as effective a way as possible. Consequent upon this, 'the very essence of [philosophy] consists in making the human being free and strong for the clarity and constancy of insight into essence. ... all our efforts must be concentrated above all on making such seeing possible' (Pa: 176). Heidegger is accusing Plato of adopting an assumption about the way that we should think when doing philosophy that manifests a desire for control and to escape from contingency: namely, the assumption that we must have certainty in our thinking, which can be achieved by getting clear and distinct before our 'mind's eye' what the essences of things are. Plato's theory of the Forms is, as it were, a description of what the world must be like, or of how we are to think of the world, if we want to achieve such certainty and power. As Rorty eloquently puts it, Heidegger discerns in Plato a concealed will to power in his assumption,

... that truth has something to do with evidence, with being clear and convincing, with being in possession of *powerful, penetrating and deep* insights or arguments - insights or arguments which will put you in a commanding position vis-à-vis something or somebody else. The West, Heidegger thinks, has been on a power trip ever since, with the

Greeks, it invented itself. ... This is the ironic result of Plato's attempt to rise above the pragmatism of the marketplace, to find a world elsewhere.[66]

3.3.2. *The History of Being, from Plato to Nietzsche*

As I mentioned earlier, Heidegger regards what is unthought in a philosopher as what is most illuminating, and by this unthought element he means the understanding of being within which each thinker was working, and struggling to articulate. This leads him to give various sketches of what he calls a 'history of Being', which is a history of the successive ways in which people have understood themselves and the world, understood being. Heidegger thinks that truly decisive events in history are not battles, revolutions, rises and falls of empires, but rather, little noticed changes which occur, as it were, behind our backs, and which change the very way we look at the world or understand being. As he puts it, 'The history of being ... sustains and defines every 'condition et situation humaine' ... The rare and simple decisions of history spring from the way in which the original essence of truth essentially unfolds.' (Pa: 240, 146). Crucially, the history of Being is determined by Being, not by man. We, as 'shepherds of Being', are sent particular understandings of being by Being itself. Thus our role is essentially a passive one - we cannot control the history of Being. In this respect the history of Being is the complete antithesis of Nietzsche's histories and genealogies, which are narratives of power struggles between competing interpretations of the world, and thus are controlled by humans. Moreover, the history of Being is opposed to Hegelian and Marxist philosophies of history, in so far as it is not teleological: 'The epochs can never be derived from one another and forced into the course of a continuous history' (Pa: 154).

The history of Being begins with a kind of 'Golden Age', before Being was forgotten, a Golden Age that Heidegger discerns in the writings of the pre-Socratics, such as Heraclitus and Parmenides (the same age that

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[66] Rorty (1991), p.31.

Nietzsche also evokes as a kind of Golden Age, but for very different reasons, as I have mentioned). Of this period he writes:

> That which is does not come into being at all through the fact that man first looks upon it, in the sense of a representing that has the character of subjective perception. Rather, man is the one who is looked upon by that which is; he is the one who is - in company with itself - gathered towards presencing, by that which opens itself. To be beheld by what is, to be included and maintained within its openness and in that way to be borne along by it, to be driven about by its oppositions and marked by its discord - that is the essence of man in the great age of the Greeks. ... that the beingness of whatever is, is defined by Plato as *eidos* [aspect, view] is the presupposition, destined far in advance and ruling indirectly in concealment, for the world's having to become picture [and, we might add, for thinking in terms of values] (QCT: 131).

This is an important passage because it describes a non-subjective way of experiencing Being, with which Heidegger contrasts the subjectivism of Western philosophy as he sees it, from Plato to Nietzsche. The rest of the history of Being is concerned with Plato to Nietzsche, and the forgetfulness of Being.

Plato's theory of the Forms, according to this history, sets in motion a way of understanding Being captured well by Michael Zimmerman's phrase 'productionist metaphysics'[67]. Heidegger suggests that Plato's vision of the world as consisting of basic designs and their copies is based on a view that the structure of all things is akin to the structure of products or artefacts. This assumption can also be seen in Aristotle's conception of things as formed matter. Plato, by conceiving of truth as lying in a realm distinct from the physical world of change, abstracts truth from being, from our implicit understanding of what things are, the rich, holistic, unthought experience that encompasses our experience of particular things. In doing so, the presencing of things is forgotten in favour of their presence, their emergence

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[67] Michael Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: technology, politics and art*, (Bloomington: Indiana university press, 1990), p.263.

is lost sight of in favour of what emerges, being is glossed over in focusing on beings. As Heidegger puts it, 'the openedness of beings gets flattened out into the apparent nothingness of what is no longer a matter even of indifference, but rather is simply forgotten' (Pa: 147). In Plato's philosophy, a Form is what a thing really is before it is produced. His concern is with essences. Heidegger's point is that Plato, in focusing on beings and what causes them, loses sight of the more fundamental but harder to articulate event of the presencing of things, and inaugurates metaphysics as the search for the causes of beings rather than an attendance on b/Being. Thus, 'the essential origin of being as making possible and as causing rules throughout the future history of being' (N2: 420).

The next crucial event in the history of Being is the translation of the Greek world into Roman Latin. Heidegger thinks that, with this event, being comes to mean 'beingness', in the sense of what is actual, and what each being has in common, rather than the horizon within which things emerge as such or such. This is compounded by medieval Christianity, which theologizes the forgetfulness of Being by conceiving of God as the 'manufacturing cause' of the world. This dispensation in the history of Being gives way to the modern era and the rise of science in which, in the philosophy of Descartes, being comes to mean to be the object for a self-certain subject (N2: 129). The self-certifying cogito becomes the ontological basis for all beings: to be means to be present in a clear and distinct fashion to this cogito. Nothing really is unless it can be represented: things are not accepted as they present themselves, but re-presented in terms amenable to the standards and purposes of the representing subject. So, for Descartes, the real is only that which can be represented in terms which are as certain as the self-certainty of the subject's own presence to itself - thus, what is real are extended objects that can be measured mathematically. What we have here, in Heidegger's view, is the natural consequence of Plato's theory of the Forms and the 'productionist metaphysics' which he inaugurated. In Heidegger' view, it is just a step from Descartes (albeit a two hundred and fifty year long step - the reverberations of big ideas go on for a long time!) to Nietzsche's understanding of being as will to power, of the will as that which causes, effects, and makes possible all things. For Nietzsche,

according to Heidegger's interpretation, to be means to be produced by will and to be useful for enhancing that will. As Clark puts it, summarising Heidegger's history very well:

> Contemporary nihilism is only the most overt manifestation of an anthropocentric, exploitative thinking that has been entrenching itself for over two thousand years. ... [Nietzsche's doctrine of the superman] renders explicit the destructive tendency of Western thought to conceive the world merely in terms that serve to enhance the apparent power and mastery of the thinker.[68]

So long as we remain enthralled to such a way of thinking, and its tremendous practical effects, we remain, Heidegger thinks, occluded from a more reverential kind of existence, which he invokes in his later writings, as we shall see.

3.4. The Step from Descartes to Nietzsche

In what sense, then, is Nietzsche a Cartesian, the ultimate subjectivist? Does not Nietzsche explicitly attack Descartes in *The Will to Power*, and thereby distinguish his position from the Frenchman's? Indeed, does not Nietzsche - as we have seen - deny the very thing that Descartes rests the whole edifice of his thought on, a self-certain subject, arguing instead that the subject is a fiction created by lumping together various sensation and drives under the same word (see, e.g., WP: 267-72)? Heidegger was well aware of all of this, and yet he still insists that, for all these differences, there is a deeper lying unity between the two thinkers: '...it has gone unnoticed that behind Nietzsche's exceedingly sharp rejection of the Cartesian 'cogito' stands an even more rigorous commitment to the subjectivity posited by Descartes' (N4: 123). The central point of conversion between the two is that the subject decides what is to count as truth. Heidegger writes:

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[68] Timothy Clarke, *Martin Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.29

For Descartes, man is the measure of all beings in the sense of the presumption of the de-limitation of representing to self-securing certitude. For Nietzsche, not only is what is represented as such a product of man, but every shaping and minting of any kind is the product and property of man as absolute lord over every sort of perspective in which the world is fashioned and empowered as absolute will to power (N4: 137).

So, Descartes' emphasis on subjectivity as the ultimate locus of truth establishes a way of thinking in which truth is thought of as what we posit as true in order to increase our power. This decisive shift in our understanding of being began at the dawn of the modern age. Heidegger points out that, around this time, a new answer to the 'guiding question of metaphysics', 'What is being?' was sought, to replace biblical Christian revealed truth and church doctrine. He argues that a new basis for freedom is posited, which consists 'in the fact that man himself legislates, chooses what is binding' (N4: 98-9). Man achieved, at this time, liberation from the revealed certitude of Christian doctrine to 'a certitude in which man can by himself be sure of his own definition and task.' (N4: 99). This has led, Heidegger argues, man to assume an increasingly dominating relationship to being:

> The securing of supreme and absolute self-development of all the capacities of mankind for absolute dominion over the entire earth is the secret goad that prods modern man again and again to new resurgences, a goad that forces him into commitments that secure for him the surety of his actions and the certainty of his aims (N4: 99).

This is, for Heidegger, the essence of nihilism. At this point in his reflections on Nietzsche we find perhaps his most concise and helpful definition of nihilism:

> [Nihilism] must seek the true and the real in the absolute humanization of all being. Metaphysics is anthropomorphism - the formation and apprehension of the world according to man's image. ... [metaphysics as will to power] ... thrusts man as no

metaphysics before it into the role of the absolute and unique measure of things (N4: 83-4).

This is the essence of nihilism, for Heidegger: the occlusion of Being by man. This is why Nietzsche, far from discerning a way beyond nihilism, actually remains deeply mired in it, due to the very way in which he - unconsciously - tries to tackle nihilism. The very fact that Nietzsche thinks of nihilism as something that we have brought about (think of the 'death of God' passage, in which the madman screams, *We have killed him* - you and I. All of us are his murderers', (GS: 125 / p.181)) betrays his inability to perceive the essence of nihilism, as far as Heidegger is concerned, which is 'forgetfulness of Being'. From this perspective, nihilism is not something that we have brought about, but is rather an event of the history of Being itself, and is thus sent to us by Being. Recognising this is central to preparing a way beyond it, as we shall see when we consider Heidegger's reflection on technology. As he puts it, in 'Nihilism and the history of Being': 'The essence of nihilism is not at all the affair of man, but a matter of Being itself' (N4: 221).

3.5. The Step from Nietzsche to 'Technology'

Descartes prepares the way for Nietzsche, and Nietzsche prepares the way for 'technology', which is, in Heidegger's view, the latest episode in the history of Being. We can see the roots of Heidegger's reflections on 'technology' in writings prior to those in which he explicitly addresses this question. In a series of lectures given in 1929-30, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger attempted to awaken in his listeners, there and then in the lecture room, what he calls a 'fundamental attunement.' What he means by such an attunement is a mood or way of disclosing the world that is fundamental to a particular period of history, to a particular episode in the 'history of Being'. Such attunements reveal, as it were, the 'spirit of the times', the way in which being is understood during that period. Heidegger's claim in this lecture course is that boredom is one of the fundamental attunements of our age, and this claim relates very closely to his critique of Nietzsche and of 'technology', which came several years

later. His claim is very similar to (and no doubt influenced by, but unacknowledged) Kierkegaard's claim that, in the present age, we have forgotten what is means to exist, what it means to exist inwardly. As the Dane complains, 'My principal thought was that in our age, because of the great increase in knowledge, we had forgotten what it means to *exist*, and what *inwardness* signifies'.[69] In the lectures, Heidegger bases his claim partly on the prevalence of a certain kind of writing in our time, which offers interpretations of our contemporary situation. He gives Spengler, Klages, Scheler, Ziegler and Nietzsche as examples, and detects in these writings a kind of nihilism of the kind he has been adumbrating so far with reference to Nietzsche's subjectivism and value thinking, because all four writers exemplify a tendency to impart to contemporary man a world historical role, which suggests that he does not possess any significance aside from this role. He asks:

> What lies behind the fact that we give ourselves this role and indeed *must* do so? Have we become too *insignificant* to ourselves, that we require a role? why do we find no meaning for ourselves anymore, i.e., no essential possibility of being? Is it because an *indifference* yawns at us out of all things, an indifference whose grounds we do not know? Yet who can speak in such a way when world trade, technology, and the economy seize hold of man and keep him moving? And nevertheless *we* seek *a role for ourselves*. ... Why *must* we do this? Perhaps because we have become *bored* with ourselves? ... *Do things ultimately stand in such a way with us that a profound boredom draws back and forth like a silent fog in the abysses of Dasein?* (FCM: 77).

When life becomes, as it does for Heidegger's Nietzsche, life for the sake of life, enhancement of power for the sake of enhancement of power, change for the sake of change - a state captured by Heidegger's evocative phrase 'the will to will' - no particular thing possesses authority anymore, qualitative distinctions are levelled out. This can lead to a quest for the ever new - as we can see so clearly in our society today - a restlessness, and obsession with what Heidegger calls the 'gigantic': being able to send spaceships to

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[69] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr.L.M. and D.F.Swenson, (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1996), p.26.

Mars, or to make computers that fit into your pocket. Underlying this, however, Heidegger detects a deep-seated boredom, a boredom that he devoted much of the 1929-30 lecture course to trying to awaken in his students. This early diagnosis of our age as prey to a devastating boredom can be seen as a forerunner to Heidegger's later thinking on nihilism and 'technology'.

3.6. What is 'Technology', and Why is it Nihilistic?

'Technology',[70] as Heidegger uses the word, denotes the latest epoch in the history of Being, an epoch prepared for by Nietzsche's subjectivism and value thinking, and hence the epoch in which nihilism as Heidegger understands it, the 'forgetfulness of Being', manifests itself in its ultimate form, in the understanding of being within which we all live and move. The 'technological' understanding of being discloses the world as so much 'standing reserve' [*Bestand*] available for human manipulation and use (BW: 322). Heidegger calls this understanding of being whereby beings are 'levelled down' to the status of resources 'enframing' [*Gestell*] (BW: 324).

How plausible is this claim? Do we moderns really understand being in this way? Obviously, no black or white answer can be given to this question, given that our understanding of being is not something that is transparent to us, it is something that we are 'always already' in. Nevertheless, there are several salient features of modern life that fit Heidegger's claim very well. Firstly, though, let us become clearer on what he is claiming. The claim that we understand the world in a 'technological' way, as so much enframed standing reserve on tap for human use, implies that means to ends are increasingly becoming ends in themselves. Thus we have ever increasing levels of productivity, of speed of travel, of ease of communication; and yet the questions of what the productivity, the travel, the communication is for become increasingly difficult to answer, and therefore the means themselves become ends. As Hannah Arendt, one of Heidegger's students, puts it:

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[70] I have adopted the practice throughout the thesis of placing inverted commas around the word 'technology' when used in Heidegger's sense.

> The perplexity of utilitarianism is that it gets caught in the unending
> chain of means and ends without ever arriving at some principle which
> could justify the category of means and ends, that is, of utility itself.
> The 'in order to' has become the content of the 'for the sake of'; in
> other words, utility established as meaning generates
> meaninglessness.[71]

Heidegger detects in Nietzschean metaphysics this dissolution of ends into
means. Analysing the will to power, he writes: 'Power is power only when
and so long as it remains power-enhancement and commands for itself 'more
power'. ... To the essence of power belongs the overpowering of itself. ...
Thus power is indeed constantly on the way to itself (QCT: 78, italics
mine). When being gets understood as will to power, meaning comes to
consist in the incessant overpowering of a particular level of power for the
sake of more power, in constantly enhancing one's means without ever
arriving at an end. This is the essential meaning of Nietzsche's doctrine of
the eternal recurrence, in Heidegger's view (see N4: 81).

In what forms does enframing manifest itself in everyday life? One
could give manifold examples. The increased emphasis on calcalulability in
more and more aspects of life, not least in education, is a good example.
Consumerism generally and the advertising industry are also good examples
of means eclipsing ends, as yet another shopping trip fails to live up to the
expectations one had concerning it, has still not managed to slake the thirst
of the heart - but nevermind, there is always the next trip! Certainly one of
the most striking ways in which means have dissolved into ends is in our
attitude towards money. Simmel, in his book *The Philosophy of Money*, puts
it as follows:

> Never has an object that owes its value exclusively to its quality as a
> means, to its convertibility into more definite values, so thoroughly
> and unreservedly developed into a psychological value absolute, into a

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[71] Quoted in Loy (2002), p.189.

completely engrossing final purpose governing our practical consciousness.[72]

In a similar vein, Schopenhauer wrote, '*Money* is human happiness *in abstracto;* consequently he who is no longer capable of happiness *in concreto* sets his whole heart on money.'[73] His point is similar to Simmel's. In the absence of genuine meaning, genuine ends for action, means become ends in themselves, no means more so than money. So, perhaps our preoccupation with money as an end in itself is the ultimate symbol of our forgetfulness of being, and our nihilism.

3.6.1. Technology Makes us Forget Being

We are beginning to see in what way a technological understanding of being is nihilistic. Firstly, it turns means into ends, locking us into a pattern whereby we do x for the sake of y for the sake of z and so on ad infinitum, without ever reaching a terminus whereby something is done purely for its own sake, as an end in itself rather than just a means. Here is Heidegger's claim to this effect:

> What threatens man in his very nature is the view that technological production puts the world in order, while in fact this ordering is precisely what levels every *ordo*, every rank, down to the uniformity of production, and thus from the outset destroys the realm from which any rank and recognition could possibly arise (PLT: 114).

Secondly, Heidegger argues that this way of disclosing being makes us more likely than ever to forget Being, the 'source' of all disclosures of being, and to forget that there are other, more 'original' and 'primal' ways of disclosing the world:

> Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing. Above all, enframing conceals that revealing which, in the sense of *poiesis*, lets what presences come forth into appearance.

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[72] *Ibid.,* p.183.
[73] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin, 1970), p.170.

> ... The rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth (BW: 332-3).

What might be the nature of 'a more original revealing and ... a more primal truth' we shall consider in chapter five. For now the point to note is that the great danger, in Heidegger's eyes, that 'technology' poses is that enframing becomes the only mode of revealing entities, and hence prevents us from entering into a more primal relationship to Being. This would result in an obscuration of man's essence as 'the one spoken to [by Being]', the 'shepherd of Being', so that 'he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve' (BW: 332), as a 'human resource'. As he goes on to write, in a passage which makes clear the link between Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche and 'technology':

> Meanwhile, man ... exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth. In this way the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself. ... Man stands so decisively in subservience to the challenging-forth of enframing that he does not grasp enframing as a claim, that he fails to see himself as the one spoken to, and hence also fails in every way to hear in what respect he ek-sists, in terms of his essence, in a realm where he is addressed, so that he can *never* encounter only himself (BW: 332).

Clearly, the concepts of 'enframing' and 'standing reserve' have counterparts in Nietzschean metaphysics, in the will to power imposing order on the world in a particular way in order to realise a particular set of values. In both his writings on Nietzsche and 'technology' there is adumbrated a strong critique of anthropocentrism, of making human will the measure of what counts as real, as being. In both critiques, Heidegger's concern is with the forgetfulness of Being this entails, forgetfulness of other possible ways of disclosing the world, more primordial ways which are not so anthropocentric.

Thirdly, and related to the previous two points: enframing the world as so much standing reserve on tap for human use can make us lose touch with tradition, with the meaningfulness we have inherited from previous generations, with what Heidegger terms in *Being and Time* our 'heritage' (BT: 435). Mark Okrent makes this point well in *Heidegger's Pragmatism*:

> ...technicity dissolves all traditional and substantial determinations for being human - by measuring the value of all factical human determinations in light of their pragmatic efficacy and by giving humans the seeming power, through technical mastery of their natural and social environment, to recreate their own facticity and 'nature' from the ground up.[74]

Obviously Okrent has in mind, in his reference to having the ability 'to recreate their own facticity and 'nature' from the ground up', such things as genetic engineering. Heidegger attaches great importance to tradition, particularly the Black Forest peasant tradition, as is well known: 'As far as my own orientation goes, in any case, I know that, according to our human experience and history, everything essential and of great magnitude has arisen only out of the fact that man had a home and was rooted in a tradition.'[75] The dissolution of home and tradition Heidegger refers to as 'homelessness', in the 'Letter on Humanism':

> Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world. ...
> Homelessness so understood consists in the abandonment of Being by beings. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of Being. Because of it the truth of Being remains unthought. ... Nietzsche was the last to experience this homelessness. (BW: 241-3).

These are, then, the three ways in which 'technology' is nihilistic and poses a great danger to us: by turning means into ends there is a levelling of meaningful distinctions; by preventing us from remembering that technology itself is one particular understanding of being, and as such has been granted

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[74] Mark Okrent, *Heidegger's Pragmatism* (Cornell: Cornell university press, 1988), p.270.

[75] Quoted in Okrent (1988), p.271.

to us by Being; and by obliterating traditions and particular people's sense of place and 'ethos'. Whilst all three are intertwined, it is the second of these dangers that will be the focus of much of the remaining two chapters on Heidegger, as we turn to a consideration of how best to respond to nihilism in his view.

Chapter Four: _Being and Time_ and the Subject-Object Distinction

4.1. Heidegger's critique of Descartes in _Being and Time_

In his Nietzsche lectures Heidegger writes, 'the question concerning Being as such stands outside the subject-object relation' (N4: 142). It is in _Being and Time_ that we find Heidegger's most sustained critique of this framework, the framework that underlies the forgetfulness of Being, and thus nihilism generally, and Nietzsche's nihilism and value-thinking in particular. As Heidegger puts it, in a quotation cited earlier:

> We actually think that a being becomes accessible when an 'I' as subject represents an object. As if the open region within whose openness something is made accessible _as_ object _for_ a subject, and accessibility itself, which can be penetrated and experienced, did not already have to reign here as well! (N4: 93).

Being and Time represents his most systematic and sustained attempt to uncover 'the open region within whose openness something is made accessible _as_ object _for_ a subject, and accessibility itself', to uncover the very presence of things, a presence which is temporal. _Being and Time_ is often read as an attack on the Cartesian picture of an isolated epistemological subject trying desperately hard to re-establish its connection with the 'external world'. This attack can also be seen as an attack on the notion of a Nietzschean isolated moral subject pasting its own values onto 'chaos', and it is this attack which, whilst left largely implicit in _Being and Time_, I want to focus on, for it is central to Heidegger's hostility to talk of 'values'.

Donald Crosby, in his book _The Spectre of the Absurd_, writes of Descartes, 'The qualitative, evaluative, affectional, informal, non-scientific ways of relating to the world ... have no veridical significance, according to Descartes' first Archimidean point. ... Descartes' method ... rapes our senses

[and] brutally assaults our most instinctual responses and predilections.'[76] In doing this, Descartes almost literally invites the nihilism of Nietzsche, whereby our 'values' have no veridical significance, but are simply pastings onto 'chaos'. The rich, holistic, unthought experience that encompasses our experience of particular things, our understanding of being, is left out of the Cartesian picture of the world, with its stark delineation of being into *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. That which makes life meaningful is thus confined to one side of a strict dividing line, the subjective side, a division which paves the way for Nietzsche's value thinking and account of truth as the necessarily false imposition of permanence and form onto that which truly possesses neither.

In the following analysis of division one of *Being and Time* I shall bring out the way in which Heidegger, through the phenomenological method, attempts to capture just those 'qualitative, evaluative, affectional, informal, non-scientific ways of relating to the world' that Descartes leaves out, thereby impressing upon us how wrong-headed the subject-object distinction underlying Descartes' and Nietzsche's thought is. Whilst *Being and Time* is often read in a Nietzschean manner (Rorty remarks somewhere that the book dresses up Nietzsche in philosophically respectable, professorial garb), causing Heidegger himself to later worry about its subjectivism and to turn to a different style of thinking; nevertheless, if we read it in the light of Heidegger's later writings, and his overall concern with the question of Being, we can find in it a profound criticism of the subject-object distinction, which, so he argues in his later writings, is most pronounced in Descartes' thought and provides the framework for Nietzsche's account of nihilism in terms of values.

4.1.1. Descartes' Search for a New Ground

As I have mentioned, Heidegger begins his detailed treatment of the philosophy of Descartes (in *Nietzsche 4*) and his establishment of the human subject as the new 'truth of beings and essence of truth', with an account of

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[76] Donald Crosby, *The Spectre of the Absurd* (New York: State university of New York press, 1988), p.212.

the specific kind of insecurities that led Descartes to think in this radically new way. As the authority of Biblical revelation began to wane, a search began for a new way of grounding man and truth, based on foundations that were more solid than the Christian foundations were now considered to be:

> Thus the question arises as to *how* we can attain and ground a certitude sought by man himself for his earthly life, concerning his own human being and the world. While in the medieval world it was precisely the path to salvation and the mode of transmitting truth (*doctrina*) that was firmly established, now the *quest* for new paths becomes decisive (N4: 89).[77]

We all know what this quest issued in. The human subject becomes the new metaphysical foundation for beings and truth. The modern age begins.

4.1.2. The Presuppositions of Cartesianism Heidegger is Criticising

Before looking in detail at Heidegger's critique of Cartesianism, we first need to be clear of its central features, or, at least, those features which Heidegger considers central to it. I do this also with a consideration of those features of Cartesianism which Heidegger thinks are embedded in Nietzsche's value-thinking. Firstly: the hard and fast distinction that Descartes makes between subject and object, inside and outside, mind and external world; and, secondly, the quest for secure and explicit foundations for our beliefs about the world. Heidegger's central concern, in division one of *Being and Time*, is to demonstrate that there is a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world that these assumptions of Cartesianism both rely on and fail to notice, and his intention is to bring these phenomena - which are so obvious and implicit that we generally tend to not notice them - to light. He calls them our 'being-in-the-world.' Our 'Dasein', our 'being there', is not that of an isolated moral subject choosing his own table of values, but is rather that of a being who 'always already' understands being in a particular

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[77] For a good, brief discussion of the intellectual context of Descartes thought, see Charles Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* (Indiana: Hackett publishing company, 1983), p.20-2.

way. *This understanding of being has a moral dimension, and thus Being is 'always already' making claims upon us.*

4.1.3. Descartes Forgot the 'World'

The most direct way, to my mind, of showing Heidegger's opposition to the Cartesian model of knowledge is to focus on his concept of 'world', which is the explicit subject of sections fourteen to eighteen of *Being and Time*, and the implicit subject of the whole book. To do this, let us focus on a simple sentence: 'Because it was Sunday, I was unable to fix my printer in time to hand in my essay.' Simple enough, we might think - we understand what it means straight away. But how is this possible? This is one way of looking at Heidegger's essential question in *Being and Time*. As Dreyfus aptly puts it, he is trying to 'make sense of our ability to make sense of things'[78]. On the Cartesian model, what is involved in understanding this sentence is having an accurate inner model of what is being said, of knowing what the words 'Sunday', 'able', 'fix', 'printer', and so on, refer to or represent. However, when we come to look closer at this very simple sentence, it becomes clear that there are nuances essential to our understanding of it which are not registered by this model of understanding. For example, to understand the word 'unable' in this sentence, we make the assumption - without rehearsing it, of course - that it refers to the fact that I myself am unable to fix my computer, that I need to go to a computer repair shop to do so, and that such shops are closed on Sundays. Similarly, to understand the word 'Sunday', we need to understand what it is about Sundays that is pertinent to the sentence - namely, that the shops are closed, and not that, for example, it is the day of the week on which one is most likely to fall prey to emptiness and boredom. Similarly, to understand my inability to hand my essay in on time involves an understanding of time, of deadlines, and so on. As Clark, to whom I am indebted for his lucidity in this sort of analysis, points out: '...when we pause to unravel it, even the most mundane sentence or action draws on a vast and inchoate mass of

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[78] Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: a commentary on Heidegger's 'Being and Time', Division 1* (London: MIT press, 1991), p.10.

assumed understanding that gets bigger the more one tries to explicate it'[79]. The crucial point, missed by the Cartesian model, is that human understanding depends upon an *implicit and shared* mode of being (what Wittgenstein calls 'stage-setting' or 'agreement in forms of life'). This is what Heidegger means by his concept of 'world'. As Clark puts it, '[it] is that presupposed and disregarded space of familiarity and recognition within which all the beings around us ... *are* for us'[80]. It is our understanding of being.

In a lecture given as early as 1919 Heidegger elucidates very clearly what he means by 'world':

> I see the lectern at a single stroke, as it were; I don't only see it in isolation, I see the lectern adjusted too high for me. I see a book lying on it, directly disturbing to me ... I see the lectern in an orientation, in a lighting, against a background ... In this experience of the lectern-seeing, something presents itself to me from an immediate environment. This environmental something ... these are not things with a definite character of meaning, objects, moreover conceived as meaning this or that, but the significant aspect is the primary experience, which presents itself to me directly, without any mental detour via a grasping of things. Living in an environment, it means to me everywhere and always, it is all of this world, it is worlding.[81]

Heidegger's claim here that we do not see things in isolation is part of his insistence that our understanding is based on what he refers to here as an 'orientation', 'lighting', 'background', 'environmental something'. Things, like the lectern, 'world'. This verb is one of many of Heidegger's word creations, designed to describe phenomena for which no name previously existed in philosophy, in his view. It means that our understanding of things is only possible on the basis of a 'world', an implicit and shared mode of

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[79] Clark (2002), p.14.

[80] *Ibid.,* p.16.

[81] Quoted in Rudiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.94-5.

being, in this case, the academic 'world', with its lectures, students, assessments, books, and so on. Thus his view of understanding is holistic: *an overall sense of things precedes and makes possible a grasp of the specific parts*. When he denies that the 'world' can be reduced to a collection of objects with particular meanings, he is referring to the phenomenology of his teacher, Husserl, and his model of a meaning-giving transcendental ego, which is a good example of the Cartesian model of understanding that I am using Heidegger to criticise. Heidegger's point is that the 'world' is more fundamental than - indeed makes possible - subjects and objects, and that, therefore, this 'world' is not something that occurs in the minds of subjects.

We are now in a position to return to our consideration of the first of the two assumptions of Cartesianism adumbrated above: the hard and fast distinction drawn between subjects and objects. For Heidegger, the subject-object framework evoked by Descartes is only made possible by 'being-in-the-world', by the shared and implicit social practices that go to make up ourselves and our world. What is so crucial about this, for my purposes, is that it strikes at the heart of the subjectivism that Heidegger thinks characterises modern philosophy, and reaches its apotheosis in Nietzsche. As far as Heidegger is concerned, the philosophical tradition has glossed over the phenomenon of the 'world' (in his sense), and in so doing, the subjectivism of modern philosophy has come to seem 'common sense', which, Heidegger remarks, is simply, '...the shallow product of that manner of forming ideas which is the final fruit of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century' (WCT: 66). Heidegger's description of Dasein stresses its inseparability from something which is not the product of individual agency, namely, the world, the shared disclosure of things which we find ourselves 'always already' in, in our thoughts, practices, beliefs, and so on, a world that can never be rendered fully present, in a clear and distinct fashion, to the subject. So, when he claims that Dasein is 'being-in-the-world', it is world in this sense that he primarily means, and not 'world' as in 'the totality of those entities which can be present-at-hand within the world' (93: BT).

4.1.4. Where Does the World Come From, if not the Subject?

This raises the crucial question, 'Whodunit?', who or what has constituted the 'world' in the way that it is constituted? A lot turns on our answer to this question, as will become clear later on. For now, let us consider the (provisional) answer that Heidegger gives in *Being and Time* and the lecture courses given around that time. Heidegger turns to this question in part four of division one of *Being and Time*, beginning with section twenty five, 'An approach to the existential question of the 'who' of Dasein'. Dreyfus remarks that this section could well be considered to be the most important section of the book, but that Heidegger's failure to adequately distinguish between the two main points that he is making in it severely confuses matters. These two points are, on the one hand, the Wittgensteinian type point about the publicness of meaning, and, on the other, Kierkegaardian point that 'the truth is never in the crowd'. There is a deep tension between these two points that to some extent division two is an attempt to resolve. For now, the important point for us is the first one. What is so crucial about Heidegger's concept of the 'world', and this is highlighted in the section now under consideration, is that it cannot be reduced to either of the two poles of the Cartesian model, *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, external physical space, or internal psychic space. It is not the former, because it is Dasein related, but it is not the latter, either, because it occurs *between* individuals. As Dreyfus puts it: 'He rejects the Husserlian and Sartrean [we could add Cartesian here] claim that philosophy must start with a separate sphere of ownness. ... Heidegger seeks to show that while there are a plurality of 'selves', these selves presuppose the disclosure of a shared world.'[82] So intelligibility, significance, meaning, occurs between 'subjects', and cannot, contra the Cartesian model, in any sense be said to occur within the minds of individual subjects.

4.1.5. The World's Groundlessness

Heidegger, like Wittgenstein, is trying to get us away from a kind of narcissism in the philosophical tradition, according to which the subject is

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[82] Dreyfus (1991), p.142.

treated as the locus of meaning. On this account, meaning is not grounded in anything 'ultimate' or secure, like God, the Forms, or the subject. Meaning is simply how we have carried on, and continue to carry on. Thus Heidegger writes, in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*:

> Insofar as Being is as ground, it itself has no ground. This is not the case because it grounds itself, however, but because every grounding - and that includes precisely those grounds that ground themselves - remains inappropriate to Being as ground. Every grounding, and indeed every appearance that something should be grounded, must degrade Being to the level of entities. As Being, Being remains ground-less. ... Being: the abyss [Ab-grund] (IM: 185).

It is this feature of Heidegger's philosophy that is initially the most disconcerting. His point is that the 'world' that we are beings in, the background of shared practices, beliefs, language and so on, makes possible the disclosure of beings in the first place, and so cannot be grounded in a being of any kind, for to do so would 'degrade Being to the level of entities', Heidegger's tirelessly repeated charge against 'metaphysics'. It is akin to a point often made by Wittgenstein, for example, when he writes, 'you must bear in mind that the language-game ... is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there - like our life'[83]. Along similar lines, Heidegger writes, ' 'In itself' it is quite incomprehensible why entities are to be *discovered*, why *truth* and *Dasein* must be.' (BT: 228).[84]

This can be read as a criticism of the second feature of Cartesianism that I highlighted: the search for an indubitable rational grounding, which Descartes claims to find in the self-certain subject. More generally, Heidegger thinks that this search for a grounding to our understanding of being characterises the whole of the Western philosophical tradition, from Plato and the theory of Forms to Nietzsche's will to power. In *Being and Time* he tries to reopen the question of being without answering it in a

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[83] LudwigWittgenstein, *On Certainty* (tr.Dennis Paul and G.E.M.Anscombe) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), p.559.

[84] I am indebted here to Charles Guignon for his ability to clarify some of Heidegger's remarks with reference to Wittgenstein. See Guignon (1983), p.177.

metaphysical way with reference to a ground, a procedure which, he thinks, ultimately leads to nihilism, to the forgetfulness of Being, as we have seen.

4.1.6. Our Primordial Guilt

This leads on to Heidegger's characterisation of Dasein as primordially or ontologically 'guilty'. His point is that, to be the beings we are, Dasein, we are dependent on something utterly outside of our control, and something without grounds - namely, the shared 'world' into which we are thrown:

> Although [Dasein] has *not* laid [the basis of its potentiality-for-Being] *itself*, it reposes in the weight of it, which is made manifest to it as a burden by Dasein's mood.
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> ... [Dasein] is never existent *before* its basis, but only *from it* and *as this basis*. Thus 'Being-a-basis' means *never* to have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up (BT: 330).

The world that we are beings in is not something that we have chosen, nor something we can control, nor is it something with transhistorical grounds that can somehow assure us that we are 'on the right track' or 'guaranteed of salvation' in some sense.

4.2. Implications for Language

The subject-object view of ourselves and our relationship to the world fosters a view of language to which, naturally, Heidegger is as equally opposed as he is to the subject-object framework itself. According to this view, a clear distinction can be drawn between word and world, name and object, and language is grounded in some prior grasp of the *nonsemantic* significance of the contexts in which we find ourselves. This view is termed an 'instrumentalist' view of language by Guignon, and 'language-as-representation' by Edwards.[85] It seems to have been held, in one way or another, by Aristotle, Descartes, and Locke. On this view, the subject forms

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[85] See James Edwards, *The Authority of Language* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990), p.60, and Guignon (1983), p.117.

beliefs about objects, which he then puts into words. Two important corollaries of this view of language are the idea that the assertion, with its subject-predicate structure, epitomises language in its most essential mode, and the idea that truth as correspondence between these assertions and objects is the most essential mode of truth.

If we consider that Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of our being-in-the-world is designed to show, amongst other things, that we cannot draw a clear distinction between the 'inner experiences' that are in the mind, and objects in the external world, then it is not surprising that he comes to a similar view about language, *viz*: we cannot draw a clear distinction between word and world. For Heidegger, the idea of a nonsemantic encounter with the world is unintelligible, because there can be no world without language. This is the heart of his objection to the instrumentalist view of language adumbrated above. As he puts it: 'In no case is a Dasein, untouched and unseduced by this [everyday] way in which things have been interpreted, set before the open country of a 'world-in-itself', so that it just beholds what it encounters' (BT: 213). He tells us that the everyday way in which things have been interpreted, in language, is something from which there is 'never a possibility of extrication'. Elsewhere in *Being and Time* he makes a similar point:

> In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation (BT: 190-1).

Heidegger's point is that we do not encounter such 'objects' as chairs, tables and houses and then, subsequently, give them names. Rather, in order for us to encounter them in the first place, understanding, and therefore language, has been presupposed: '... Language already hides in itself a developed way of conceiving' (BT: 199).

This way of approaching language, which Heidegger first develops in *Being and Time*, finds more bountiful expression in his later works, and is one of the implications of the rich metaphor, 'Language is the house of Being' (BW: 217). In his *An Introduction to Metaphysics* he states this view very succinctly: 'Words and language are not wrappers in which things are packed for the intercourse of talking and writing. It is in words and language that things first come into being and are' (IM: 35). I shall be making more of the significance of Heidegger's account of language for responding to nihilism in the next chapter, for, as we shall see, it assumes greater prominence in his later works.

4.2.1. Summary

What have we learnt from this reading of *Being and Time* as a critique of Cartesianism? Heidegger's later writings presume familiarity with *Being and Time*. As he puts it in the preface to the seventh German edition of that work, 'Yet the road [*Being and Time*] has taken remains even today a necessary one, if our Dasein is to be stirred by the question of Being' (BT: Preface). In no other place in his writings does Heidegger spell out with so much rigour and precision the question of Being, a rigour the lack of which would turn the more poetic later writings into something far less powerful than they might have been. What I hope to have brought out in this short chapter is more of what Heidegger means by forgetfulness of Being, and therefore what he means by nihilism. I hope to have shown that the division of the world into subjects and objects is parasitic on a more primordial understanding of being within which we dwell, which cannot be demarcated neatly into subject and object, and is in no need of grounding. Understanding ourselves in this way, we are less likely to fall prey to the Nietzschean nihilist picture of us as fragmented subjects positing 'truths' and 'values' onto a chaos in order to constantly be enhancing our power over ourselves, one another, and the world. The burden of Heidegger's response to Nietzsche and nihilism revolves around developing this sense of ourselves as first and foremost given over to Being and receptive to the demands that Being makes upon us, rather than first and foremost centres of domineering will imposing ourselves on Being. To stress it once more: this shift begins in *Being and*

Time, in which the foundations are laid for the later work. As Zimmerman puts it in his article, 'A comparison of Nietzsche's overman and Heidegger's authentic self':

> ... the goal of *Being and Time* is not to construct a philosophical anthropology, or to depict what the human 'species' ought to make with itself. The goal is to disclose the meaning of Being as such, which 'is' beyond man's control, and which is in fact what determines the nature of each historical epoch.[86]

4.3. Is *Being and Time* Nihilistic or Pragmatic?

Before moving on, however, I want briefly to deflect two charges often made about *Being and Time*: those which accuse it of being nihilistic, and those which accuse it of pragmatism. The nihilistic charge might run as follows: has *Being and Time* not left us in a worse position than the one we started with, by dismantling the traditional task of philosophy, namely the critique of *doxa* from the standpoint of *episteme*? If, as *Being and Time* argues, our social practices, especially language, make possible an intelligible world in the first place, an understanding of being, against what might we measure this understanding to, so to speak, check its credentials, to insure that we are not wandering in the bleary half light of opinions, in a dark, damp cave? By emphasising truth as unconcealment over and above truth as correspondence, Heidegger seems to leave us with no criteria for assessing the disclosure of beings within which we find ourselves. Surely this is a form of nihilism.

The pragmatist reading of *Being and Time* is not so much an accusation as a recommendation. It has become very popular, not least because its chief spokesman, Richard Rorty, writes in such a charming and accessible way. Basically, as is well known, Rorty finds within division one of *Being and Time*, as well as in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical*

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[86] Michael Zimmerman, 'A comparison of Nietzsche's overman and Heidegger's authentic self' Southern Journal of Philosophy XIV (1976 spring), p.228.

Investigations, the philosophical blueprint for the kind of character presumably he himself is, and which he most admires: the ironist. As Cooper puts it, in his article 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Humility', Rorty,

> congratulate(s) [Heidegger and Wittgenstein] on having finally scotched all pretensions to transcendental, universal criteria of truth or right; on paving the way for a frank admission that justification and criticism can only be an 'ethnocentric', bootstrapping matter of appealing to the epistemic and political commitments of one's community.[87]

Rorty's hero, the ironist, is someone who,

> has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses ... realizes that argument in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts ... [and] does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.[88]

Whilst it is very clear how Rorty can discern such a person in the pages of *Being and Time*, it is clear that division two of that book, as well as much of Heidegger's later writings, point away from such an interpretation, as we shall see - a point Rorty is, of course, well aware of, and explicitly criticises (see his essay 'Heidegger, Wittgenstein and the Reification of Language'[89]).

What both of these characterisations of *Being and Time* - as nihilistic and pragmatic - have in common is that they raise the rather tricky question of what 'court of appeal' there is left, if we accept the findings of division one of *Being and Time*. To put it another way, if truth as disclosure is more primordial that truth as correspondence, how are we to access the truth of

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[87] David Cooper, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Humility' Philosophy 72 (1997), p.109-10.

[88] Quoted in Anderson (1995), p.101.

[89] In Charles Guignon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

disclosures? This seems like an impossible task, for if nothing else, *Being and Time* has abandoned any pretensions to a 'view from nowhere'.

Heidegger's argument is that grounds, explanations, justifications, 'courts of appeal' are inappropriate once one is attuned to the question of Being. Moreover, the need for such a court is a symptom of an overly narrow, constricted conception of Being, involving a division between the Good and Being which, in his view, has been entrenching itself in Western culture since the time of Plato. Once we have identified such a narrowing, we are in a position to attend to the understanding of being within which we 'always already' dwell, and to open ourselves up to claims it makes on us. He spells this out in the 'Letter on Humanism':

> Only so far as man, ek-sisting into the truth of Being, belongs to Being can there come from Being itself the assignment of those directives that must become rule and law for man. *Nomos* is not only law but more originally the assignment contained in the dispensation of Being. Only the assignment is capable of dispatching man into Being. Only such dispatching is capable of supporting and obligating. *Otherwise all law remains merely something fabricated by human reason. More essential than instituting rules is that man find the way to his abode in the truth of Being.* This abode first yields the experience of something we can hold on to. *The truth of Being offers a hold for all conduct* (BW: 262, italics mine).[90]

So, our essential task in the face of nihilistic 'forgetfulness of Being' is to 'find the way back to [man's] abode in the truth of Being.' The following chapter will be devoted to exploring what this far from transparent

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[90] Compare this with the following passage from the Taoist text which Heidegger collaborated on in an aborted translation attempt, the *Tao Te Ching:* 'When they lose their sense of awe / People turn to religion' (p.72, tr. Stephen Mitchell, (London: Kyle Cathie limited, 1996). Just as, for Heidegger, explicit discourse about a domain called 'ethics' only arises once Being has been forgotten, around the time of Plato, so for Lao-Tzu, religion, in the sense of an explicit codification of a particular way of life, only becomes necessary when people lose touch with the genuine source of religion, the 'Tao' or 'Way'. See Reinhard May, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources* (London: Routledge, 1996) for more on the link between Heidegger and Eastern philosophy.

injunction might mean, and to noting some of its dangers. In so doing we shall be tracking Heidegger's transition from a concern with *being* to a concern with *Being*, as I distinguished these terms at the start of chapter three: from a concern with the 'clearing' to a concern more with the quasi-divine 'source' of the 'clearing'.

Chapter Five: Heidegger's Response to Nihilism: Authenticity, Art, Language and Thinking

Introduction

Thus far we have seen how, for Heidegger, the essence of nihilism is 'forgetfulness of Being'. This forgetfulness began around the time of Plato, and reaches its apotheosis with Nietzsche and his characterisation of nihilism in terms of values. Heidegger detects in such an approach an overly restrictive notion of Being, which is the product of an overly wilful, anthropocentric and hubristic view of man's position in the world. These attitudes have led to a 'technological' understanding of Being, in which Being is reduced to the status of a resource or 'standing reserve', enframed for human use. I have tried to show how *Being and Time*, with its attack on the subject-object distinction and the Cartesian emphasis on grounds, constitutes a powerful thrust against such nihilism. We now need to consider how this beginning is developed in Heidegger's later thought. We have taken as our guiding thought Heidegger's insistence that man must find the way back to his abode in the truth of Being. Well: how does he do this?

5.1. Overcoming Nihilism is itself Nihilistic: Nihilism issues from Being, not Man

Right away we hit a problem here. Nihilism is upon us - what must we do? This question seems such an obvious response. However, in Heidegger's view this question is simply another symptom of the problem. All talk of 'overcoming' nihilism is simply, in his view, another version of the very wilfulness and anthropocentricity that constitutes the essence of nihilism. As he puts it:

> To *want* to overcome nihilism - which is now thought in its essence - and to *overcome* it would mean that man of himself advance against Being in its default. But who or what would be powerful enough to attack Being itself, no matter with what perspective and with what intent, and to bring it under the sway of man? An overcoming of Being

itself not only can never be accomplished - the very attempt would revert to a desire to unhinge the essence of man. The hinge of that essence consists in the fact that Being itself, in whatever way, even as staying away, lays claim to the essence of man. ... One could understand the impossibility of such a plan [to overcome Being] as if it were an absurd gesture of thought, which as such thinks *on the basis* of Being while wanting to launch an attack *against* Being (N4: 223-4).

This is from an essay called 'Nihilism and the history of Being'. He makes a similar point with reference to 'technology' in 'The Question Concerning Technology', writing, 'All attempts to reckon existing reality ... in terms of decline and loss, in terms of fate, catastrophe, and destruction, are merely technological behaviour' (QCT: 48), and, 'The instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relationship to technology" (BW: 313). *The most important point that Heidegger makes about responding to nihilism is that, in a good and the most obvious sense, there is nothing we can do about it.* It is our destiny to be under its sway: it is a 'destining' [*Geschick*] (BW: 329) which has issued from Being itself. Nihilism is not, *pace* Nietzsche, something that we have brought upon ourselves through our (Christian) commitment to telling the truth, and the science (especially Copernicus and Darwin) and philosophy (Kant and Nietzsche) this commitment has produced. It is not something that has arisen because Plato, Descartes and Nietzsche made successive mistakes about the nature of truth, locating it in correspondence (or, in Nietzsche's case, lack of correspondence) rather than in unconcealment. Rather, these scientists and philosophers have been responding to events in the history of Being, the latest of which is the epoch of nihilism and 'technology'. Heidegger is quite clear about this:

Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being. But for man it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in his essence that corresponds to such destiny; for in accord

with this destiny man as ek-sisting has to guard the truth of Being. Man is the shepherd of Being (BW: 234).

We need to find 'what is fitting in [man's] essence that corresponds to [the destiny of Being]'. We need, to put it in the kind of language that Heidegger himself often uses, to listen to the voice of Being, to realise that nihilism comes from Being, that it is a way in which Being gives itself to us, for us to shepherd and guard. Nowhere is his anti-Nietzschean stance more pronounced, because for Nietzsche whether and how God and the gods come to presence *is* decided by man, albeit generally unconsciously, and by his need to secure for himself value and power.

Part of Heidegger's point here is that the recuperation of a lost solidarity or primordial 'ethos' is not something that we can manufacture or wilfully bring about. Deep set forms of life cannot be engineered or contrived. What we can do, however, is to heed, amidst our 'technological' understanding of being, Being itself as the source of this understanding. We can, to use Hubert Dreyfus's nice phrase, 'disclose that we are disclosers'.[91] It is this aspect of Heidegger's writings on authenticity that survives into the later writings, and I shall now use this aspect to flesh out what it might mean to 'heed the voice of Being' and 'disclose that we are disclosers'.

5.2. Authenticity, Anxiety, and Being: 'disclosing that we are disclosers'

Heidegger writes, at the end of the lecture course *An Introduction to Metaphysics*:

> But where is the real nihilism at work? Where one clings to current beings and believes it is enough to take beings, as before, just as the beings that they are. But with this, one rejects the question of Being and treats Being as nothing (*nihil*), which in a certain way it even 'is,' insofar as it essentially unfolds. Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being - that is nihilism.

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[91] Hubert Dreyfus et al, *Disclosing New Worlds: entrepeneurship, democratic action and the cultivation of solidarity* (London: MIT press, 1999), p.18.

Nihilism thus understood is the *ground* for the nihilism that Nietzsche exposed in the first book of *The Will to Power*.

> *In contrast*, to go expressly up to the limit of Nothing in the *question* about Being, and to take Nothing into the question of Being - this is the first and only fruitful step toward the true overcoming of nihilism (IM: 217-8).

Here we have a very succinct statement of disease and cure, what nihilism is, and how to respond to it. Whilst Heidegger here uses language that, in the 1945 essay 'Nihilism as determined by the history of Being', he repudiates, as we have just seen, nevertheless the overcoming involved is exactly the kind of response I have just outlined above, of awakening to Being and to the nature of the particular understanding of being within which one dwells. Let us examine this quotation in more detail. 'To chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being' might be glossed as closing oneself off to other ways of disclosing the world, other ways in which Being could manifest itself, other ways of receiving Being. In my introduction to Heidegger in chapter three, I pointed out that, as time went on, Being came to mean more to him than simply 'understanding of being'. In fact, it came to mean almost the opposite of this - it came to designate the limits of our understanding of being, the fact that this or that particular understanding of being does not exhaust Being. He gestures towards this 'non-phenomenon' in various ways, for example calling it 'the mystery' in his essay 'On the Essence of Truth' (BW: 130). It becomes more and more important in his writings post-*Being and Time*, a shift which is first registered in this essay on truth, of 1930.

This nihilism of 'chasing after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being' is contrasted with going 'expressly up to the limit of Nothing in the *question* about Being'. What does this mean? One of the fundamental insights of *Being and Time* is that we are always disclosing the world in a particular way, always understanding beings in a particular way, and that this understanding is primarily practical, non-explicit. Indeed, successful everyday coping with the world necessitates that that very coping, that way of disclosing beings, becomes invisible. Life has to be lived, the show must

go on - the children need to be fed, the dog taken for a walk, and so on. But if this was all there was to our lives as human beings - successful coping, successful dealing with beings - then we would indeed be condemned to nihilism. However, this is obviously not all that there is to our lives. As Michael Inwood vividly puts it, 'The normal human condition is suspended somewhere between the angst-less insect and the angst-ridden angel. We need sometimes to ascend to angels to make sure that we do not become insects.'[92] We make sure that we do not become insects by disclosing to ourselves that we are disclosers, by becoming increasingly aware of our role as disclosers of Being. This idea lies at the heart of Heidegger's conception of authenticity, and is sketched out by Dreyfus in *Disclosing New Worlds*.[93] Becoming authentic, on this interpretation, involves becoming increasingly sensitive to the ways in which we disclose the world, the ways in which we understand being, the ways in which Being opens itself up to us. In so doing we become aware of the limits of that understanding, and thereby of the depth of Being. Here is where Heidegger first explicitly mentions what I mean to designate by *B*eing, in the essay on truth of 1930 mentioned above:

> The concealment of beings as a whole, untruth proper, is older than every openedness of this or that being. It is also older than letting-be itself, which in disclosing already holds concealed and comports itself towards concealing. ... [the] mystery (the concealing of what it concealed) as such holds sway throughout man's Da-sein (BW: 129-30).

In his Nietzsche lectures Heidegger gives a very perspicuous account of what it means to disclose that one is disclosing being in *this* way and therefore not *that* way:

> That [philosophical] categories are silently expressed as claims in our ordinary thoughts and everyday comportment toward beings, that they are really never experienced, acknowledged, or even conceived as such

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[92] Michael Inwood, 'Does the Nothing Noth?', in (A. O'Hear ed.), *German philosophy since Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.292.

[93] Dreyfus et al (1999), chapter one.

tacit claims by most men throughout their 'lives,' neither these nor other such reasons are sufficient grounds for thinking that that these categories are something indifferent, something construed by a philosophy that is supposedly 'far removed from life.' ... That there exists something like a diesel engine, for example, has its decisive and wholly sufficient ground in the fact that the categories of mechanically and technically useful 'nature' were once expressly and thoroughly thought out by philosophers (N4: 39).

Authenticity, as I am interpreting it, means becoming more aware of the 'claims' that particular ways of understanding being make on us. How does one do this? Well, by being 'held out into the nothing' in the experience of *angst* or anxiety. Heidegger memorably describes this experience (one cannot help but think that he was quite intimate with it) towards the end of division one of *Being and Time*, and then again in the 1929 lecture 'What is Metaphysics?':

> In anxiety what is environmentally ready-to-hand sinks away, and so, in general, do entities within the world. The 'world' can offer nothing more, and neither can the Dasein-with of Others. Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, as it falls, in terms of the 'world' and the way that things have been publicly interpreted (BT: 232).

In anxiety one becomes aware that one is understanding the world in a particular way, and that one could understand it in a different way. One thereby becomes alive to what Heidegger calls 'the mystery', the plenitude of Being, that is never exhausted by any particular understanding of being. He contrasts this with forgetfulness of Being thus:

> ... this bearing toward concealment [the fact that Dasein *is* disclosedness] conceals itself in the process, letting a forgetfulness of the mystery take precedence and disappearing in it. Certainly man takes his bearings constantly in his comportment towards beings; but for the most part he acquiesces in this or that being and its particular

openess. Man clings to what is readily available and controllable even where ultimate matters are concerned. ...

... to reside in what is readily available is intrinsically not to let the concealing of what is concealed hold sway (BW: 131).

And:

... we usually lose ourselves altogether among beings in a certain way. The more we turn toward beings in our preoccupations the less we let beings as a whole slip away as such and the more we turn away from the nothing. Just as surely do we hasten into the public superficies of existence (BW: 104).

Ultimately, it is the extent to which a particular understanding of being is able to include or be transparent to Being, to the 'source' which grants particular world disclosures, which provides us with some form of measure of particular understandings of being.

So, Heidegger's response to nihilism is to sensitize us to the fact that we are 'always already' moving about within a particular understanding of being, 'always already' disclosing the world in a particular way. This sensitivity is something that is made possible through an experience of anxiety, of 'the Nothing', the limits of meaning, of our primordial guilt, of the ungroundedness of any and all understandings of being. As we have seen, Heidegger wants more specifically to sensitize us to the particular understanding of being of our epoch, which he sees as a 'technological' one whereby Being is 'enframed' as so much 'standing reserve' on tap for human use. Through becoming more aware of the nature of our disclosing we are in a position to not be so enslaved by it, to be released from it to some extent, released to appreciate that there are other ways of disclosing being, and to thereby become attuned to the source of all disclosures, *Being*.

It is important to realise that *Being* represents Heidegger's ultimate response to Nietzschean nihilism. Heidegger's central charge against Nietzsche is that his account of truth and of ethics is far too humanistic,

subjectivistic, 'Promethean' - that, to put it bluntly, it completely distorts the relationships between us, truth and ethics by characterising them as instruments of the will in the service of achieving more power. Heidegger's Being denotes a source - the source - of truth and 'ethos', a mysterious source which we can never fathom, still less control, and which we are beholden to, for the sense that we make in our lives. Julian Young, in *Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, describes 'Being' as the 'essentially 'theological' ' matter of Heidegger's thinking, and says it is,

> ... an object of something close to, or identical with, religious veneration. ... If ... we think of Being as the god of an authentic ('originary') theology ... if we think of it as, not the God of Christian dogma, but as, rather, 'the god of the poet', the 'unknown God' who, in Holderlin's poetry, approaches us in the sight of 'familiar' things, then Being, to be brief and blunt, is God.[94]

Brief and blunt as this point might be about something it is dangerous to be brief and blunt about, still, it conveys well the kind of connotations which Being carries for Heidegger, connotations it is crucial we hear if we are to understand his later philosophy, and how it opposes Nietzschean nihilism (as well as American pragmatism). It is for this reason that I quoted Coleridge at the start of chapter three, to evoke a sense of this dimension. I shall now further explicate the role of Being in responding to Nietzsche, with reference to art and the concept of 'earth', language and 'dif-ference', thinking and the 'fourfold'.

5.3. Heidegger's 'Anti-Humanism': Art, World and Earth - Being Further Developed

Dreyfus, in *Disclosing New Worlds*, distinguishes between two forms of disclosure, 'customary', and 'historical'.[95] Customary disclosure is nihilistic in so far as it involves the forgetfulness of Being, and capitulation to the sway of what Heidegger terms, in *Being and Time*, 'the They' (BT:

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[94] Julian Young, *Heidegger's Later Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.22.

[95] Dreyfus et al (1999), p.16.

164). In customary disclosure one is unconscious of oneself as a discloser, unconscious of the particular way in which one is understanding being, and therefore oblivious to the depth of Being, the plenitude of other possible disclosures. Historical disclosure, on the other hand, involves awareness of oneself as a discloser, awareness of the particular way in which one is understanding being, and therefore awareness of the depth of Being. It thereby makes possible new ways of disclosing the world. One of the central ways in which new ways of disclosing the world come about, Heidegger argues in the mid-1930s, is through art.

5.3.1. Art Sets Up a World

What, then, is the nature of a work of art, in Heidegger's view? What he calls a 'great' work of art sets up a 'world' (in Heidegger's sense) that radiates authoritatively and thus gives measure to a people's lives. Thus art is a way in which we become aware of 'the world's worlding', of our understanding of being. Heidegger begins his attempt to demonstrate how this is the case with a now famous evocation of an encounter with Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes. The passage deserves quoting in full, for the force and economy with which it conveys the way in which a work of art 'works':

> From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles stretches the loneliness of the field path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding

menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman (BW: 159-60).

Heidegger's Tolstoyan reverence for peasant life is fully in evidence in this marvellous passage. Leaving aside for the time being what Heidegger means by the 'earth', this passage evokes the understanding of being of the peasant woman, 'that presupposed and disregarded space of familiarity and recognition within which all the beings around us ... *are* for us', as Clark puts it: what it means for her to be. Work in the fields, walking home at close of day, fear of crop failure, joy at producing enough food to live for another year, child rearing, the omnipresence of death: all of these elements make up the world of the peasant woman, and are evoked by Van Gogh's painting. But, importantly, '...perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes.' The woman who wears the shoes is herself unlikely to see them in this way. It is the artwork which 'lets us know what shoes are in truth. ... This being [the pair of shoes] emerges into the unconcealment of its Being' (BW: 161).

The second example that Heidegger gives of the way in which art helps us to recollect Being is very different to his first example. It is of a monumental work of art which would reside in an open public space, rather than in, say, an art gallery or in someone's home. The Greek temple makes the point even more clearly than the Van Gogh painting:

> It is the temple that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. Only from it and in this expanse does the nation first return to itself for the fulfilment of its vocation (BW: 167).

As Heidegger has argued in *Being and Time*, in our 'average everydayness', our 'world' remains very much in the background, murky and obscure. Due to 'idle talk', 'curiosity' and 'ambiguity', we 'fall' (BT: 210-24), we lose

sight of the basic meanings that our lives and our world possesses, and of our role as disclosers of Being. This falling ultimately results in nihilism, as we have seen. Great art counters nihilism by restoring us to a more explicit awareness of these meanings. Importantly, such art does not *create* the world in the first place. This is something that has 'already happened unnoticed in language' (BW: 199) (a point to which I will return later). Rather, it brings it to conspicuousness. Heidegger is trying to capture the sense in which, in encountering a great work of art, we return to ordinary life as it were refreshed, better able to go on, with a stronger sense of the meanings that constitute our life, of what constitutes 'disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline.' As Shelley puts it, in 'A Defence of Poetry': '[Poetry] purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being ... It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions of blunted by familiarity.'[96]

5.3.2. What is Earth?

This is only one aspect of what a great work of art does, though, according to Heidegger. Not only does it set up a world, it does so in such a manner that that world becomes authoritative for a people. He writes of the world 'glowing' in the work, and: 'To e-rect means: to open the right in the sense of a guiding measure, a form in which what is essential gives guidance' (BW: 169). For, in Heidegger's view, not only does the work of art set up a world, it sets it forth on what he calls the 'earth'. This is a rich

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[96] P.B.Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Poems and Prose* (ed.Timothy Webb) (London: Everyman, 1995), p.276. In fact, Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry' contains some remarkably 'Heideggerian' ideas, for instance: 'The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world, and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.' (p.272). I think it is fair to say that Heidegger seems to have experienced quite strongly the 'anxiety of influence' whereby one seeks to claim for oneself and one's ideas a more unique position than they in fact occupy, and therefore is sometimes inclined to see the recollecting of Being only in select places, such as in German poets and pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, and neglects to acknowledge or consider examples of it in Eastern thought, the Romantic tradition, or in the American tradition of 'transcendentalism', for example.

term, which obviously cannot be paraphrased or cashed out in a more literal way. In its most obvious sense, it refers to the material out of which the work of art is constructed - stone, tones, language, whatever. However, what I want to focus on is the sense in which the 'earth' can be seen as a metaphor for a notion that becomes increasingly important in Heidegger's later work: that of mystery. This is the interpretation that Young privileges in his characteristically lucid *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*.[97] In 'The Origin of the Work of Art' we find the following passage, which is key to understanding Heidegger's later philosophy, and the connotation of earth that I want to emphasise:

> There is much in being that man cannot master. There is but little that comes to be known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure. Beings are never of our making, or even merely our representations, as it might all too easily seem (BW: 178).

This passage is of great import, for it sounds the keynote of Heidegger's response to Nietzschean nihilism, and sets the tenor for much of his later work. It is what we might call his 'anti-humanistic' or 'anti-Promethean' stance. The concept of earth in 'The Origin' is an attempt to register this stance. Having defined 'world' as, 'the paths ... with which all decision complies', he writes, 'Every decision, however, bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusing; else it would never be a decision' (BW: 180). What he means here is that to understand being in one way is necessarily not to understand it in another. Just as, in Robert Frost's famous poem, 'The Road Not Taken', the poet laments, 'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, / And sorry I could not travel both / And be one traveller, long I stood'[98]; so Heidegger insists on the finitude of our understanding, on how, because being is temporal, any understanding of it is partial, inexact - such partiality and inexactness is a necessary condition of such understanding. That which is not mastered, the concealed and confusing, is one of the connotations of earth, and is what gives a world its *gravitas*, its

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[97] Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2001), p.38-50.
[98] Robert Frost, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1973), p.77.

seriousness and authority. Thus we can see that what Heidegger here means by earth is similar to what I defined at the start of chapter three as *Being*.

5.3.2.1. Earth and the Irreducibility of Works of Art

'The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world' (BW: 174). In what sense, however, can Heidegger claim that, in setting up a world, a work of art sets it forth as mysterious, and thus as authoritative, by offsetting it against the earth? Heidegger, being Heidegger, hardly spells this out, but the answer lies, in my opinion, at the core of his later thinking, and links it up with crucial ideas from *Being and Time*. It centres around what we might call the irreducibility of great works of art. They cannot be 'translated' or 'put in another way' without ceasing to be the things that they are. They cannot be cashed out into a series of propositions (Clark very illuminatingly gives the example of trying to make an index of 'Hamlet'![99]). As Schopenhauer puts it, 'We are entirely satisfied by the impression of a work of art only when it leaves behind something we cannot bring down to the distinctness of a concept'[100]. Vattimo defines Heidegger's concept of earth as like, 'a sort of nucleus that is never used up by interpretation and never exhausted by meanings'[101]. Young makes an illuminating comparison between Heidegger's 'earth' and the concept of the sublime in eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetics, as that which is so vast and unlimited that it eludes conceptual comprehension. Along similar lines, Dreyfus glosses the concept of 'earth' by stressing that great works of art cannot be rationalized as a representation of an underlying set of beliefs or values (of course, this does not hold for allegories, but, for this very reason, we might not consider them great art, as Schopenhauer did not).

How does this link up with *Being and Time*? One of the central points of *Being and Time*, as we have seen, is that all of our understanding is based on a *non-cognitive* precondition, a precondition lost sight of by the Western philosophical tradition since Plato. Our explicit understanding relies on something that cannot be made explicit, reduced to a concept, namely: our

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[99] Clark (2002), p.57-8.

[100] Schopenhauer (1969), *vol.II*, p.409.

[101] Quoted in Clark (2002), p.55.

understanding of being. Heidegger is quite explicit about this (if we can read through the 'Heideggerese'):

> ... - the 'in-order-to', the 'for-the-sake-of', and the 'with-which' of an involvement - is such that *they resist any sort of mathematical functionalization; nor are they merely something thought, first posited in an 'act of thinking.'* They are rather relationships in which concernful circumspection as such already dwells (BT: 122, italics mine).

This 'fore-having', as Heidegger calls it, means that human beings and the objects we encounter are formed by cultural practices which cannot be objectified. Art becomes so important to Heidegger as his thinking progresses because it vividly demonstrates the non-intelligibility of the grounds of our intelligibility, a point made in a more abstract way in *Being and Time*. Through thinking about the inherent mysteriousness of works of art, we may be in a position to better appreciate the mysteriousness of everyday life, the mysterious fact that 'a world is worlding around us at all, that there are beings rather than nothing, that things are and we are in their midst, that we ourselves are'.[102]

5.3.2.2. The Strife of World and Earth

A last point to be made about the art work is that the relationship between world and earth is not one of peaceful co-existence. Rather, as Heidegger puts it:

> The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there. ...
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>   ... The earth cannot dispense with the open region of the world if it itself is to appear as earth in the liberated urge of its self-

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[102] Quoted in Richard Polt, *Heidegger: an introduction* (London: UCL press, 1999), p.1.

seclusion. The world in turn cannot soar out of the earth's sight if, as the governing breadth and path of all essential destiny, it is to ground itself on something decisive (BW: 174).

What Heidegger is trying to convey here is something essential to his thought: the fragility of meaning, of any and all understandings of being. There is, he suggests in this passage, a constant tension between *being* and *Being*, between intelligibility (world) and non-intelligibility (earth). Because Being unfolds in time, meaning is always fragile, always implies the threat of meaninglessness, of 'the nothing'. The 'earth' is always striving to surmount the understandings within which we dwell, just as our understandings are always trying to surmount the earth. However, without the earth, there would be no meaning. The very insecurity of the earth is a condition for meaning in the first place. As we saw earlier, every decision depends on that which it cannot master in order to be a decision in the first place. And, without the world, the earth would not be able to show itself.

To draw together the import of what I have written so far about Heidegger's account of art, I shall now briefly turn to the question of the origin of the work of art. As we have seen, *Being and Time* emphasises the pre-theoretical conditions of theory, our implicit understanding of being which makes possible explicit understanding. This emphasis is reflected in Heidegger's later writings in his concern with articulating a more fundamental, pre-reflective non-appropriative relationship to being - a relationship which he discerns in traditional craftsmen, in peasants, and in art and poetry. What defines this relationship is a sense of responding to something greater than oneself, of letting something emerge into presence rather than wilfully bringing something about. This is how Heidegger understands the origin of the work of art. As is well known, not only to people who consider themselves to be artists (even PhD. philosophy students might get some inkling of this!), there is a sense in acts of artistic creativity of *something already there waiting or struggling to be said.* Obviously, this sense is paradoxical, insofar as how can something be said to be there already if it is waiting or struggling to be said? But this is the crucial point. *This sense - which, as I have said, is not uncommon - only seems*

*paradoxical within a certain framework of understanding the world in terms
of subjects and objects, language and thing - the very framework that
Heidegger's philosophical endeavour is designed to undermine.* What this
sense points to, crucially, is that *the power of disclosure is not our own.* As
Michel Haar puts it, the artist 'can compose only what of itself gathers
together and composes itself. Heidegger cites a letter written by Mozart in
which he says, 'I seek notes that love one another' '.[103] David Loy, in his
Nonduality: a study in comparative thinking, in chapter four on nondual
thinking (which includes a section on Heidegger), gives many examples of
artists avowing this sense of responding to something beyond them, of
gathering together something that is in some sense already there. He refers
to Mozart, Tschaikovsky, Brahms, Nietzsche, Milton, Blake, Lewis Carroll,
George Eliot and Dickens amongst others.[104]

What is also operative in the origin of the work of art is a holism.
Clark, to whose elucidations on this topic I am much indebted, quotes
Rilke's account of the genesis of his 'Duino Elergies', in which a line comes
to the poet - 'Who, if I cried out, among the hierarchy of angels would hear
me?' - around which, over time, the rest of the poems gather. Again, this
seems to plunge us into the dilemma of how the poem can be already there in
some sense, if the poet has yet to write it. Clark writes:

> In that revelation the poet responds to something that comes from the
> outside. On the other hand (and this seems at first to imply a
> contradiction), neither is the tone something merely there already in
> the world and which the poet must subsequently translate into words.
> It resonates from out of the poet's listening to the language and it
> needs the act of the poet to sound out and be apprehensible. ... Does
> the revelation come first or the words? The answer is that there is only
> a contradiction here on the surface, for linear thinking. The revelation
> of the world in the resonance of the ground tone and its coming to
> language for the poet are simultaneous or equi-primordial. It all takes

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[103] Quoted in Clark (2002), p.49-50.

[104] David Loy, *Nonduality: a study in comparative philosophy* (New York: Humanity books, 1988),
p.150-161.

place too holistically - too non-foundationally - to be disentangled in terms of any one element being the 'cause' and the other an 'effect'.[105]

This passage is extremely helpful for understanding the heart of Heidegger's work. Heidegger is trying to negotiate a middle way between the absolutism of Plato and the relativism of Nietzsche, trying to think Being without collapsing into the objective (Forms) or subjective (will to power) side of a relationship which is 'equiprimordial'. This is why 'Being-in-the-world' is written with hyphens throughout *Being and Time*, and 'stands for a *unitary* phenomenon' (BT: 78). The genuine task of a thinking which has not forgotten Being, then, is not to explain away Being with reference to beings, be they subjective or objective, but to meditate upon the equiprimordiality of our 'being-in-the-world'. 'The Origin of the Work of Art' constitutes a key moment in such reflection.

5.3.2.3. Summary

What we have, then, in 'The Origin of the work of Art', is, in very broad outline, a way of responding to nihilism ('The Origin' was given as a lecture the year before Heidegger began lecturing on Nietzsche): through a work of art that sets forth a world against the earth, which gives it authority. However, just as we cannot will the overcoming of nihilism more generally, we cannot will the arising of a great work of art. What we can do, however, is to prepare, to wait in an appropriate manner, about which I shall have more to say shortly. A part of such waiting is meditation on the form that a 'saving power' (as he was later to call it) might take, and this is what Heidegger does in 'The Origin'. As he writes, at the end of the essay:

> Such reflection cannot force art and its coming-to-be. But this reflective knowledge is the preliminary and therefore indispensable preparation for the becoming of art. Only such knowledge prepares its space for art, their way for the creators, their location for the preservers (BW: 202).

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[105] Quoted in Clark (2002), p.114.

I now turn to Heidegger reflections on language to further explore Heidegger's response to nihilism, and his insistence on the equiprimordiality of man and world, language and thing.

5.4. Language and 'Dif-ference'

We have already encountered Heidegger's views on language in the discussion of *Being and Time* as an attack on the subject-object distinction prevalent in Descartes, underlying Nietzsche's account of nihilism, and ultimately indicating a 'forgetfulness of Being'. We saw how Heidegger attacks accounts of language that draw a sharp distinction between word and world, and picture language as the expression in words of a preverbal meaning. This picture of language portrays its function as primarily referential, and Heidegger thinks that such a view of language is another symptom of the 'forgetfulness of Being'. He writes, in 'The Way to Language', of how,

> the kinship of showing with what is shows ... is transformed into the conventional relationship between a sign and its signified. ... From the Hellenistic (and Stoic) period onward, as the convention becomes sheer stipulation, the sign comes to be an instrument for designating; by means of such designation, representation is co-ordinated and directed from one object to another. Designation is no longer a showing in the sense that it lets something appear. The alteration of the sign - from that which shows to that which designates - is based on a transformation in the essence of truth (BW: 401-2).

This transformation in the essence of truth is something I have explained earlier, in my account of the history of being. A central symptom of the 'forgetfulness of Being' is to think of language in terms of designation rather than disclosure. (Roughly speaking, thinking of language primarily in terms of designation is the view that Wittgenstein attributes to Augustine at the start of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and sets up as the object of his attack).[106]

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[106] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M.Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwells, 1963), p.1-2.

As we have seen, for Heidegger language is essentially disclosive, it brings beings into being, and so in this sense is creative, meta-phorical in the original sense of that word as a 'bringing across'. Prior to a given way of speaking, the beings that are disclosed by this way of speaking did not possess being. This is how Heidegger puts it in 'On the Origin of the Work of Art':

> ... language alone brings beings as beings into the open for the first time. Where there is no language, as in the Being of stone, plant and animal, there is also no openness of beings, and consequently no openness of nonbeing and of the empty.
>
> Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to name and appearance. Only this naming nominates beings *to* their Being *from out of* their Being (BW: 198).

To be thoroughly clear: Heidegger is not endorsing a form of idealism here, of the 'to be is to be perceived or referred to in language' variety. If human beings were to wiped from the face of the planet tomorrow, many things would still *exist* - stones, plants and animals amongst them, jugs and bridges too. And yet, they would not possess 'being', because there would be no language to bring them into 'being'. Heidegger calls this feature of language, whereby beings are brought into being, 'showing'. It is part of what is meant by his resonant and now famous phrase, 'language is the house of being'. Language possesses, for Heidegger, a transcendental status - it is what makes experience possible (which is why his position is sometimes referred to as 'linguistic Kantianism'). It is this aspect of language that he wants to draw our attention to, to get us to meditate upon and ultimately experience. He is trying, in his reflections on language, to use Merleau-Ponty's lovely phrase, to oversee 'the birth of meaning'.

However, his view of language creates a philosophical conundrum analogous to the one we encountered when discussing the origin of art. If, as Heidegger is fond of quoting, 'Where word breaks off / No thing may be' (Stefan George), then how can there be things in the first place for words to disclose? To put it another way - if meaningful distinctions can only be

established by language, and language can only be based on meaningful distinctions, which comes first, which is more primordial, in Heidegger speak? Another way of stating the question is to put it in terms of Heidegger's thinking on the relationship between parts and wholes, things and worlds. As we have seen, for a thing to be, to possess meaning, it must be part of a larger whole that refers to possibilities of Dasein's being, it must possess a world. However, this world or meaningful whole is not something that exists independently of the parts that gain their meaning from their place in it - it is comprised of these parts, and thereby becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, for Heidegger, thing and world are 'equiprimordial' - neither can be given more ontological weight than the other. For later Heidegger, it is through language that things and worlds are essentially disclosed. So, the question arises of how language is able to disclose things if there is not first a world in place, or of how language is able to disclose worlds if there are not already things disclosed to comprise such worlds.

The 'answer' to this 'philosophical problem' lies right at the heart of Heidegger's meditations on language, and especially their anti-humanistic - and therefore anti-nihilistic - element. My reflections on Heidegger's work here are influenced substantially by James Edwards, chapter two of his book *The Authority of Language*. Heidegger responds to this 'philosophical problem' by using various different ways of speaking, in his central essays on language. I shall focus, following Edwards, on the essay called 'Language', which presents itself as a commentary on a poem by Trakl called 'A Winter Evening'. Here he uses the word 'dif-ference', to try to intimate the transcendental condition for language, that on which language depends, which, crucially, we can say nothing about, and which must be prior to all human doing and making. This last point is the most crucial of all, for my argument. Here is what Heidegger writes about the dif-ference:

> The dif-ference is neither distinction nor relation. The dif-ference is, at most, dimension for world and thing. ... The dif-ference is *the* dimension, insofar as it measures out, apportions, world and thing,

each to its own. Its allotment of them first opens up the separateness and towardness of world and thing (PLT: 203).

Edwards helpfully glosses what Heidegger might mean by 'dif-ference' by defining it as 'that unifying differentiation (or differentiating unification) that makes human life and thought possible'.[107] Again, we see Heidegger avoiding the two positions of locating the origin of meaning on the objective (Plato) or subjective (Nietzsche) side of the subject-object divide, and trying to think it as the fusion of the two, a fusion he terms, in this essay, 'dif-ference'. David Cooper explains his position well in 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Humility':

> Either claim [that reality depends on our view of it, or vice versa] ignores the seamless character of the fusion between language and reality, responsibility for which cannot be doled out to each element in separation. Yet there is something that the world *and* language depend upon, namely that very fusion. Only where there is language is there world, and only where there is world is there language. Since, moreover, human beings are what they are - *human* - precisely in virtue of that fusion, of being the creatures enabling things to come to be in speech, human life is also dependent upon it. What they are thus dependent upon, finally, is not a fact or state of affairs within the world, for it is what makes a world possible.[108]

What we depend upon for the possibility of anything like a human life is language. But language in turn depends upon 'dif-ference', upon the fusion between language and reality which, because it makes a world possible in the first place, cannot then be explained in terms of the world (for example, through an evolutionary explanation of the kind that Nietzsche is so fond of). Here explanation (Leibniz's 'principle of sufficient reason') 'bottoms out' - further down or back than this it is not possible to go. In 'On the Way to Language' Heidegger makes this point thus, this time using the term 'propriating' in a similar fashion to the way he uses 'dif-ference' in

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[107] Edwards (1990), p.110.

[108] David Cooper, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Humility' Philosophy 72 1997, p.116-7.

'Language': 'What the propriating yields through the saying is never the effect of a cause, nor the consequence of a reason. ... Propriating is not an outcome or a result of something else' (BW: 415). And:

> ... the world's worlding cannot be explained by anything else nor can it be fathomed through anything else. This impossibility does not lie in the inability of our human thinking to explain and fathom in this way. Rather, the inexplicable and unfathomable character of the world's worlding lies in this, that causes and grounds remain unsuitable for the world's worlding (PLT: 177).

Heidegger's point is again similar to one Wittgenstein makes when he writes, 'What is spoken can only be explained in language and so in this sense language cannot be explained. Language must speak for itself'.[109] We can see here how Heidegger's reflections on the ungroundedness of language link up with his writings on guilt, in *Being and Time*, and with the history of Being, in which we have an account of the arising and dissolving of various epochs 'without why'. We can see here quite clearly the paradoxical nature of Heidegger's endeavour, and therefore one of the reasons that he can be difficult to understand: he is trying to do transcendental philosophy, to inquire into the conditions of possibility for experience, whilst at the same time insisting that those conditions cannot be represented, in the manner of Kant or Husserl, that they cannot be objectified. He spells out why this is in the following passage:

> We human beings, in order to be who we are, remain within the essence of language to which we have been granted entry. We can therefore never step outside it in order to look over it circumspectly from some alternative position. Because of this, we catch a glimpse of the essence of language only to the extent that we ourselves are envisaged by it, remanded by it. That we cannot know the essence of language - according to the traditional conception of knowledge, defined in terms of cognition and representation - is certainly not a defect; it is rather the advantage by which we advance to an

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[109] Quoted in Clark (2002), p.88.

exceptional realm, the realm in which we dwell as *mortals,* those who
are needed for the speaking of language (BW: 423).

For my purposes, the point that most needs emphasising concerning
Heidegger's reflections on language and the 'dif-ference' is that they make it
clear that language is not primarily a human creation, a tool of our devising,
for ordering Being and putting it to use, exerting our power over it. This is
one of the connotations of Heidegger's enigmatic phrase, 'Language speaks'
(PLT: 207). In 'On the Way to Language' he is more explicit:

> However, in view of the well-joined structure of the saying, we dare
> not attribute showing either exclusively or definitely to human doing.
> ... Even when showing is accomplished by means of our saying, such
> showing or referring is preceded by a thing's letting itself be shown
> (BW: 410).

Our speaking is preceded by 'a thing's letting itself be shown.' This occurs
due to the 'dif-ference'. The 'dif-ference' so to speak 'sends' us humans
ways of unconcealing: 'Every proper language, because it is allotted to
human beings through the way-making movement of the saying, is sent,
hence fateful'(BW: 422). This is what Edwards means by his phrase 'the
authority of language'. As we have seen already, a central part of responding
to nihilism is recognising that it is not we humans who have brought it
about, that nihilism has been sent by Being or the 'dif-ference', and hence is
our fate.

What is most important, as far as Heidegger is concerned, is to
experience 'dif-ference' in language, and he thinks that this is possible
through poetry. Our task as human beings, our highest vocation, is to be
'envisaged' and 'remanded' by language, to heed its call, to become, in the
broadest sense of the word, poets, by opening ourselves to 'the unforeseen
and uncontrolled pregnancy of things'.[110] We need to, as it were, stand at the
edge of language, looking out of our house of being, onto the mystery, and to
heed 'dif-ference.' This is why Heidegger's early emphasis on authenticity is

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[110] Edwards (1990), p.108.

relevant in his later writings, for both the early authentic hero and the later 'poet' need to have sufficient distance from the 'idle talk' of 'the They', sufficient awareness of their roles as disclosers, to perform their respective tasks. I shall now consider in more detail what this might mean. Before doing so, however, I want briefly to flag up a concern about Heidegger's reflection on language, to which I shall return shortly (see 5.7.).

There is a worrying side to the later Heidegger's reflections on language, and this is the potential loss of autonomy that is simultaneously what is so important to Heidegger about them, and which enables them to be used to argue against Nietzschean nihilism. On Heidegger's picture, our lives are primarily lives of obedient response to the speaking of language, not lives of self-conscious self-direction. Heidegger sees the danger of making human will the locus of the absolute, as Nietzsche does - but might he not be going too far in the opposite direction, and thereby laying us open to some equally disturbing possibilities? This is the same question, albeit in slightly different guise, as the one I asked at the end of my discussion of *Being and Time*, concerning the dismantling in that book of the traditional, Platonic / Cartesian task of distinguishing *doxa* from *episteme*. To put it in terms of Heidegger's reflections on language, if there is no conceivable authority outside of 'dif-ference' and what it sends, how are we able to be anything more than the playthings of an inscrutable 'Being'. This seems a big price to pay for overcoming nihilism.

5.5. Meditative Thinking and the Fourfold

So, ultimately Heidegger's response to Nietzsche's nihilism takes him into a consideration of the 'dif-ference', the very fusion of language and reality that makes a world possible. Heidegger's later writings are attempts to exhibit and encourage such thinking in his readers. It is important to note, however, that this is not a purely theoretical exercise. This does not mean to say, of course, that the kind of thinking that Heidegger is advocating is of a practical or 'applied' kind, in which we come up with 'action plans' and 'strategies' to 'implement' in response to nihilism. Rather, he questions the very distinction between theory and practice, asserting that the kind of

thinking he is concerned with 'comes to pass before this distinction' (BW: 259), and suggests, 'Perhaps thinking, too, is just something like building a cabinet. At any rate, it is a craft, a 'handicraft'. ... All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking' (BW: 380-1).

What is the nature of this thinking that Heidegger advocates? The two most obvious places in which to search for an answer to this question are the *Discourse on Thinking* and *What is Called Thinking?*. In the former, an address given to the people of Heidegger's hometown, Messkirch, in 1955, Heidegger distinguishes between two types of thinking: 'calculative' and 'meditative'. 'Calculative thinking' is the kind of thought which enframes things as 'standing reserve' for human use. It is the style of thought which Heidegger thinks has been dominant since the time of Plato, reached its apotheosis with Nietzsche, and manifests itself everyday in our 'technological' society. Such thought is essentially nihilistic because it neglects to attend to Being in favour of beings, in favour of what can be manipulated, put to use. Heidegger argues in the address that such thinking is alien to man's essential nature, for man is essentially 'a *thinking*, that is, a *meditating* being' (DT: 47). What, then, is 'meditative thinking'? Heidegger gives various suggestions: it is 'thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is' (DT: 46), and is characterized by '*releasement toward things*' and '*openness to the mystery*' (DT: 54-5).

In *What is Called Thinking?*, having been told that 'The question ['What is called thinking?'] cannot be settled, now or ever', and that 'To answer the question is to always keep asking', we find the following:

> Being struck by actuality is what we like to regard as constitutive of the actuality of the actual. However, in being struck by what is actual, man may be debarred precisely from what concerns and touches him - touches him in the surely mysterious way of escaping by its withdrawal. The event of withdrawal could be what is most present throughout the present, and so infinitely exceed the actuality of everything actual (BW: 374).

Slightly later on he praises Socrates as a good example of somebody who was able to 'think' this event of withdrawal: 'All through his life and right into his death, Socrates did nothing else than place himself into this draft, this current, and maintain himself in it. This is why he is the purest thinker of the West. This is why he wrote nothing' (BW: 382). Finally, in the 'Letter on Humanism' Heidegger writes, 'Thinking ... lets itself be claimed by Being so that it can say the truth of Being' (BW: 218).

From these quotations we can begin to piece together what Heideggerian thinking might involve. It is thinking that becomes aware of the particular understanding of being within which it moves, and which makes it possible, but which is simultaneously aware of 'that which withdraws', the source of this and all other particular understandings of being. Such awareness fosters a releasement from the hold of one's particular understanding of being, and openness to its source, 'the mystery', Being.

Useful as such a definition is, what is far more useful is to consider an example of such thinking. Heidegger himself provides such an example in his thinking about the 'fourfold'. It is of the utmost import, when reading Heidegger's later writings, and especially his strange meditations on the 'fourfold', to be clear that he has abandoned traditional philosophical argumentation - having spent many years pursuing such argumentation with great depth and rigour - in favour of attempts to inculcate a certain sensibility, a sensibility which is profoundly at odds with the sensibility of our age. Having said this, Heidegger's 'song' of the fourfold is, to place it within a recognisably philosophical framework, an attempt to trace the conditions of possibility for the emergence of beings. Thus his endeavour is still akin to the endeavour of *Being and Time*, only he undertakes it, twenty four years later, in a very different, much more poetic, way. He is trying to *exhibit* the 'worlding of the world.'

So, what is the fourfold? This is undoubtedly as aspect of Heidegger's work that is most resistant to paraphrase, because of its poetic nature and intent, and therefore I shall quote at some length:

Mortals dwell in that they save the earth ... To save means to set something free into its own presencing. ...

Mortals receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their inclemency; they do not turn night into day or day into harassed unrest.

Mortals dwell in that they await the divinities as divinities. In hope they hold up to the divinities what is unhoped for. They wait for the intimations of their coming and do not mistake the signs of their absence. They do not make their gods for themselves and do not worship idols. In the very depth of misfortune they wait for the weal that has been withdrawn.

Mortals dwell in that they initiate their own nature - their being capable of death as death - into the use and practice of this capacity, so that there may be a good death (PLT: 148).

What on earth is Heidegger up to here? I take these writings to be a kind of meditation on the conditions that make one's life possible, an acknowledgement of one's indebtedness to that which transcends one's own will and capacities. In *What is Called Thinking?* Heidegger, in one of his notorious etymologies, draws our attention to the common root of the words 'think' and 'thank' in the old English 'thencan'. Regardless of the authenticity of this particular piece of philology, it leads into an important point about the nature of thinking as thanking, as gratitude for that which allows us to be human:

In giving thanks, the heart gives thought to what it has and what it is. The heart, thus giving thought and thus being memory, gives itself in thought to that to which it is held. It thinks of itself as beholden, not in the sense of mere submission, but beholden because its devotion is held in listening. Original thanking is the thanks owed for being. ... The things for which we owe thanks are not things we have from ourselves. They are given to us. We receive many gifts, of many kinds. But the highest and most lasting fit given to us is always

our essential nature, with which we are gifted in such a way that we are what we are only through it. That is why we owe thanks for this endowment, first and unceasingly (WCT: 141-2).

Heidegger's meditation on the fourfold is a thanksgiving for the conditions that make our life possible, and, ultimately, a thanksgiving for the gift of our 'essential nature', which is to understand Being. Our essential nature is not our own achievement, it is something that is given to us, and the task of thinking is to acknowledge this.

How is the fourfold an example of such thinking? Each of the four 'folds' locates an essential precondition of a distinctively human life. Some are more self-explanatory than others. Thus, human life is lived on the earth, from the earth, and the food that it produces, both with and without our help. It is lived under the sky, in the light that comes from the sky, the warmth that comes from the sun, which helps things to grow. Moreover, the sky provides us with spiritual sustenance too (one thinks of the passage in *War and Peace* in which Prince Andrew Bolkonski, having nearly died on the field of battle, looks up at the sky, and thinks, 'How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all is falsehood, except that infinite sky'[111]). The sky can also be said to symbolise our social practices and languages, which also illuminate the earth, in the light of which we live, and which are also, ultimately, as transient as suns and stars. The divinities are those forces or energies which make life worth living, which lend it meaning, and which shine with a radiance that requires no justification or explanation. They can be poems, works of philosophy, religions, political movements. It is important to realise that for a world to be a genuine world, in Heidegger's sense, it must be holy, it must have this dimension of the gods. Lastly, we are mortals, we are all living lives that are going to stop, lives that are lived out in time. Thus we are capable of dying rather than perishing, of being aware of ourselves as on the way to absence, as 'beings-towards-death' (BT: 296).

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[111] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (Ware: Wordsworth editions, 1993), p.217.

Thus, the 'good life' for Heidegger, the non-nihilistic life, is a life that is lived in acknowledgement of these four dimensions, an acknowledgement which can take all sorts of forms. He is concerned with fostering a certain sensibility or awareness, a reverence and care for the world around us. As Edwards puts it, the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' is not so much a question as something, 'embodied in a particular kind of comportment towards things (the lover's touch, the poet's breath on a word, the farmer's care of her land)'.[112]

Heidegger writes about building things that gather the fourfold, and gives as examples bridges and jugs:

> [The bridge] does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. ... The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream. ... the bridge is ready for the sky's weather and its fickle nature.
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> The bridge ... grants mortals their way, so that they may come and go from shore to shore. Bridges initiate in many different ways. ... Always and ever differently the bridge initiates the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to the other banks and in the end, as mortals, to the other side. ... The bridge *gathers*, as a passage that crosses, before the divinities - whether we explicitly think of, and visibly *give thanks for*, their presence, as in the figure of the saint on the bridge, or whether that divine presence is obstructed or even pushed wholly aside.
>
> The bridge *gathers* to itself in *its own* way earth and sky, divinities and mortals (BW: 354-5).

This is an extraordinarily poetic passage, some of the force of which is lost by abridging it. In it Heidegger is gesturing towards a transformation in the way that we see the world. This passage, about a humble bridge, is no less than an account of how meaning comes to pass. The crucial word is 'gathering'. Meaning is made possible through the construction of things which gather the four fold. We, as mortals, 'gather' meaning in this way.

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[112] Edwards (1997), p.192.

Crucially, we do not create meaning. However, neither is meaning there already, waiting for us to read it off. Thus, once again, we are sailing between the extremes of Nietzschean will to power and Platonic Forms. Both accounts of the 'birth of meaning' are right and wrong - the former overlooks reality's capacity to yield meaning to us, the latter over looks the role that we play in bringing meaning about, a role that unfolds in time. Meaning emerges through the establishment of meaningful connections, which is what the bridge does, in Heidegger's example. Thus, 'the banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream'. Of course, this does not mean that the banks did not *exist* before the bridge was built. Rather, they are rendered meaningful, intelligible *as* banks, by the construction of the bridge. Heidegger is focusing our attention on the importance of the relationships. These relationships give rise to things, which then create further relationships, and so the unfolding of meaning goes on. A helpful analogy can be drawn with words, which arise in response to relationships between things, and then create further relationships in their turn.

Our role in dwelling in the fourfold is to construct things that gather the fourfold. It would be to somewhat misunderstand Heidegger if we thought this meant that we must go and build a bridge or two. Rather, Heidegger's example of the bridge is his poetic and idiosyncratic way of pointing to what it might mean to be 'open to the mystery' and 'released towards things', to practice his path of thinking and dwelling. There is an important passage at the start of 'The Question Concerning Technology' which helps to make this point clearer. Heidegger is writing about Aristotle's four causes, and the way in which our understanding of being, and therewith of causality, has narrowed down these four causes to just one, the 'efficient cause'. He points out that the Greek word for cause is 'aition', and claims that this means 'that to which something else is indebted' or 'to occasion' (BW: 314, 316). He then clarifies the nature of the four causes through the example of a silver chalice:

> Silver is that out of which the silver chalice is made. As this matter (*hyle*), it is co-responsible for the chalice. The chalice is indebted to, i.e., owes thanks to, the silver for that which it consists. ... The sacred

vessel is at the same time indebted to the aspect (*eidos*) of chaliceness. ...

But there remains yet a third something that is above all responsible for the sacrificial vessel. It is that which in advance confines the chalice within the realm of consecration and bestowal. ... That which gives bounds, that which completes, in this sense is called in Greek *telos* ...

Finally, there is a fourth participant in the responsibility for the finished vessel's lying before us ready for use, i.e., the silversmith (BW: 315).

Here is another good example of Heidegger's ability to make our most commonplace ideas and assumptions seem problematic. His point here is to emphasize that what 'occasions' a silver chalice is not just a silversmith, but rather the silversmith's participation in and indebtedness to a process that constitutes the material out of which it is to be made, the template of a chalice, which he will be working to, and, most importantly (and therefore easiest to overlook), the place that a chalice occupies within the 'world', the social practices, of a particular people. Thus the silversmith is part of something much wider than him, which we are inclined to overlook.

In the companion piece to 'Building Dwelling Thinking', 'The Thing', Heidegger writes:

When and in what way do things appear as things? They do not appear *by means of* human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents - that is, explains - to the thinking that responds and recalls (PLT: 179).

On the one hand, of course things like jugs and bridges appear because we make them. And yet, to think only in this manner is to forget Being and fall into nihilism, to forget that meaningful connections, whilst they might be established through our vigilance, are not established through our will or creation. We respond to the appeal of Being, we are part of something much

wider than we might habitually tend to think. Our task is to become more conscious of this, to attend to it, to respond and recall rather than merely explain, and, through so doing, to build things that exemplify such thinking. As Dreyfus puts it, certain things 'can focus practices and collect people around them. Such things focus like local, temporary works of art in giving meaning to human activities ... they produce a moment of stillness and harmony'[113]. A thing, in Heidegger's sense, becomes a kind of sacrament. Encountering the gathering force of the thing allows us to take stock, to recollect who we are (in a manner analogous to the great work of art), to remember the light within which we live our lives, and to give thanks for it. As Edwards puts it:

> ... attention to the clearing restores to us something of the religious person's sense of being sheltered by the fully present and perfect realm of the 'true world'. ... Attention to the clearing ... returns one ... to a sense of one's smallness before the ultimate conditions of one's own self-appearance.[114]

Later Heidegger suggests how even the humblest things can help us pay attention to the clearing, and thereby guard us against the nihilistic tendency, proclaimed by Nietzsche and manifested in 'technology', to instantiate the will as the ultimate condition of whatever there is, and to think that we can control Being.

5.6. Heidegger's Response to Nihilism: a summary

We have considered in these three chapters the way in which Heidegger responds to Nietzsche and to nihilism. I began by explaining Heidegger's opposition to the very terms within which Nietzsche the frames the issue of nihilism: those of values. This is linked, in Heidegger's view, to the neglect of the 'question of Being', a neglect that has been becoming more and more entrenched in Western culture since the time of Plato and his theory of Forms, in which Heidegger detects an implicit instrumental

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[113] In Guignon (ed.) (1993), p.316.

[114] Edwards (1997), p.192.

conception of thinking, that becomes explicit in Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power and the age of 'technology'. Thus our technological society is a manifestation of nihilism, of the forgetfulness of Being.

Heidegger's attempts to respond (though not 'overcome') nihilism underlies much of his thinking. In chapter four I showed how *Being and Time*, with its critique of Cartesianism, the subject-object distinction and the search of grounds, forms an essential - albeit inexplicit - part of Heidegger's response to nihilism, for the features of Nietzsche's thought that he attacks can be seen to have their roots in Descartes. Central also is the realisation that nihilism is not something that we humans have brought down upon ourselves: that it has been 'sent' us by Being as our 'destiny', and thus cannot be overcome through Promethean acts of vigorous willing. His writings on authenticity, art, language, the nature of thinking and the fourfold all address the necessity of becoming aware of our responsiveness to Being, to a measure beyond all human making and doing. This entails becoming more aware of the understanding of being within which we move, becoming aware that our understanding being is just one particular understanding of being, and therewith becoming more attuned to *Being*, the source of all particular understandings of being, and the object of quasi-religious reverence which constitutes the heart of Heidegger's mature philosophy.

Of course, Heidegger's 'critique' of Nietzsche is not, as it were, a 'knock out blow'! The question, 'Well, who is right, Nietzsche or Heidegger?' belongs only in the mouth of somebody who does not understand the nature of philosophy. As Heidegger himself puts it:

Plato's thinking is no more perfect than Parmenides'. Hegel's philosophy is no more perfect than Kant's. Each epoch of philosophy has its own necessity. We simply have to acknowledge the fact that a philosophy is the way that it is. It is not for us to prefer one to the other (BW: 433).

Nevertheless, Heidegger's philosophy constitutes an illuminating response to Nietzsche and nihilism, which has been the contention of the last three chapters. Heidegger writes, at the start of 'The End of Philosophy and The Task of Thinking', 'If the answer could be given it would consist in a transformation of thinking, not in a propositional statement about a matter at stake' (BW: 431). This is what his response to Nietzsche essentially is: 'a transformation of thinking'. It is not primarily a criticism of certain arguments in Nietzsche's philosophy so much as a refusal to think in that way and an attempt to exhibit a new kind of thinking, begun in *Being and Time* and continuing through to the later essays on art, language, building, dwelling, thinking and the fourfold.

5.7. Criticisms of Heidegger

So, is that it? Can we all live happily ever after now, safe in the knowledge that Heidegger has 'saved' us from the terrifying abysses of Nietzsche's nihilism? Again, to pose the question in this way is to misunderstand the nature of philosophy. To put it in Heideggerian terms, we might say that we have begun to make a pathway towards a field the cultivation of which may move us out of the vicinity of nihilism and the 'forgetfulness of Being', *if Being itself so decrees*! And yet, there is much to cause us disquiet in Heidegger's pathways, even if we leave aside his escapade of 1933. It is to these disquieting aspects of his philosophy that I now turn, and which raise the question of the adequacy of Heidegger's response to the threat that Nietzsche's nihilism presents to ethics and politics as we know them, a threat which became frighteningly real in Heidegger's country in his own lifetime.

5.7.1. Passive Subjection to the History of Being

When discussing his views on language, I pointed out that, what is so crucial about 'dif-ference', the transcendental condition for language, is that it is not something 'all too human', something we 'create' or 'posit'. Thus the very thing that grants us the possibility of being who we are, being human, is not itself something human. Rather, it is something that we

respond to, that grants us particular ways of conceiving ourselves and the world. It is our passivity in relation to 'dif-ference' that makes it so crucial in counteracting Nietzschean nihilism and value-thinking. And yet, it is this very passivity which must give us cause for alarm. Edwards makes this point well in *The Authority of Language*, when he writes:

> Heidegger's attack on the Enlightenment picture of the self, an attack founded in the radical experience of language as the primordially speaking *Logos*, threatens the moral and political heritage of the Western democracies. If language is made luminous and sovereign in this way, there seems to be nothing to protect us from the power of those who speak with its voice. We and our institutions are delivered over to what Heidegger portentuously calls our *Destiny*. Such quasi-religious rhetoric is disturbing, since it encourages in us both passivity and a yearning for eschatological transformation, the classic conditions for the rise of totalitarian moral and political structures. The threat of philosophical nihilism has been replaced by the threat of a kind of linguistic fascism, which elevates the *Logos* to the status of a god.[115]

Later Heidegger replaces the Enlightenment ideal of self-direction and self-autonomy - an ideal central to Kant, Nietzsche and early Heidegger - with submission to the historical sendings of Being. How can we guarantee that the contents of these sendings are going to be something *it is right* to submit to? Heidegger does not tackle this question, but this is because, I presume, he would reject it, insisting that 'rightness' is itself something sent by, and hence subordinate to, Being, a point which, as we shall see, Emmanuel Levinas takes issue with him.

Here is another way of putting the same thing. By aiming to think outside the subject-object distinction, and by arguing that it is our social practices, especially language, that make it possible for there to be a world in the first place, Heidegger has taken away the possibility of justifying any particular understanding of being, for justification can only take place

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[115] Edwards (1990), p.2-3.

within a particular understanding of being. He was well aware of this when writing *Being and Time*, and the notion of authenticity is partly an attempt to offer some way of making a normative distinction between different understandings of being. However, the notion of authenticity advanced in *Being and Time* is so formal that it is very difficult to apply it illuminatingly to 'ontic' affairs, to make real life moral distinctions. In the later writings, in which explicit talk of authenticity drops away, the ungroundedness of any understanding of being is now affirmed as the essential feature of the 'play' of the history of being. Heidegger writes:

> The destiny of Being: that is a child playing, playing a board game ... The destiny of Being: a child which plays. ...
>
> The play is without 'why.' It plays for the while it plays. There remains only the play: the highest and deepest. ...
>
> Nothing *is* without *ground*. Being and ground: the same. Being as grounding has no ground, but plays as the abyss that game which as destiny plays up to us Being and ground.
>
> The question remains, whether and how, hearing the movements of this play, we play along with and join in the play (PR: 188).

It becomes man's task to attune himself to the unconcealing and concealing of Being as it plays itself out through the epochs. Not to do so is to lapse into the hubristic, wilful nihilism that Nietzsche epitomises. But doesn't this open us up to potentially disastrous consequences, if Being sends us fascism, say, or global capitalism? How are we to judge whether something is sent by Being or not? By seeking Heidegger's advice? But he is no longer around, and does not seem to have been especially good at making such judgements anyway (1933). He gives us no criteria by which to discern - by which he claims to have discerned - what constitutes the fundamental attunement and understanding of being of an epoch. Iris Murdoch writes of Heidegger's history of Being that it represents a new form of 'determinism', which satisfies 'a deep human wish: to *give up*, to get rid of freedom, responsibility, remorse, all sorts of personal individual unease, and surrender to fate and the relief of 'it could not have been otherwise' '.[116] I

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[116] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.190.

am inclined to agree. There is something frightening about this surrender to Being, especially since Heideggerian Being seems to be 'beyond good and evil'.

Before leaving this point, I want simply to quote two other critics of Heidegger who have made the same point, in slightly different ways. Richard Cohen, in his introduction to one of Levinas's books, writes:

> If humanity is trapped in the history of being, then history, not universal standards of truth or morality, rules human destiny. Does not Heidegger's ontology not reduce to yet another pompous philosophy - like Hegel's, Marx's, or Spencer's - groveling at the feet of success, beholden to history's victors at the expense of the vanquished, now couched in the mysterious name of the 'truth of being'? ... Because he rejects verifiable epistemological standards as mere metaphysics, mere wilful occlusion of being, Heidegger necessarily ends up with a mystified and oracular presentation of the 'voice of being.'... Humanity's freedom is sacrificed on the altar of historical being (HO: xxii-iii).

And Ernst Cassirer, neo-Kantian and famous opponent of Heidegger at Davos in 1929, writes:

> A theory that sees in the 'geworfenheit' (thrownness) of man one of his principal characters [has] given up all hope of an active share in the construction and reconstruction of man's cultural life. Such a philosophy renounces its own fundamental theoretical and ethical ideals. It can be used, then, as a pliable instrument in the hands of political leaders (HO: xxii).

And so it was.

5.7.2. Injustice in the Primordial 'Ethos'

A second reason for disquiet concerns the endorsement in Heidegger's philosophy of a primordial 'ethos', which he finds in the ancient Greek city states, an 'ethos' which has gradually been destroyed by the forgetfulness of Being, the onset of objectifying modes of thought, culminating in the Enlightenment project and the search for rational groundings. But what about those in the lower echelons of such societies? Whilst everyone knew their place in such stratified, teleological societies, and was bound together by an unspoken 'ethos' that nobody felt the need to justify or provide with rational foundations, can such societies be held up as ideals which we should want to return to? (This is a criticism that can be levelled at MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, as well). As John Caputo puts it:

> If there is something to object to in the notion of autonomous reason, there is at least as much to object to in hierarchizing human worth in terms of gold, silver, and brass, or of occurrences along a divided line, or of freeman and slave, believer and infidel, and the rest of that intolerant, intolerable world. ...
>
> The lesson that we learn from the ancient city and its metaphysics is that deep solidarity can only be achieved on a limited scale, and that, wherever it is found, it has drawn a line around itself and become exclusionary.[117]

It might be pointed out that Heidegger does write, from time to time, about justice (see, for instance, EGT, p.40), but when doing so he removes justice from the social and political arena and treats it as a matter of letting things be what they are, of giving them their due. I do not, therefore, consider this an adequate reposte to this charge.

5.7.3. The Great Divide: Ontic and Ontological

Thirdly, there is the question of the extent to which Heidegger's upholding of an ontic-ontological schism isolates his philosophy from the

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[117] John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.255.

messy contingencies of everyday, from ethics, and from politics. This distinction is made in *Being and Time* (see, e.g., p.31), which is concerned with elucidating formal structures of possibility rather than providing criteria for making normative distinctions between the contents of such structures. Thus *Being and Time* is explicitly 'extramoral' in its intentions. Despite the attempts of people like Julian Young to find within it 'a morality of respect for all, together with active benevolence where possible and appropriate'[118], it is quite clear that Heidegger's intentions are 'ontological' rather than 'ontic'. Thus the book includes sections on guilt and authenticity, but Heidegger firmly distinguishes his ontological analyses from ontic discussions of guilt and authenticity - what one *should* feel guilty about, whether one *should* be authentic - and insists that he is concerned with the formal structures of possibility, not the messy actualities of everyday life. Leave them to the novelist (like Tolstoy, from whose *The Death of Ivan Illyich* one can learn a lot more about death than from chapter one of division two of *Being and Time*). But I think we have here, in the iron barrier that Heidegger drives between the ontic and the ontological, the roots of the lack of genuine ethical concern in Heidegger's thinking.

It is sometimes said that in Heidegger's later writings he abandons the formalism of the ontic-ontological structure. Whilst he no longer uses this particular vocabulary, a similar kind of distinction becomes, in some ways, even more pronounced. Consider the following two remarks from his later writings:

> On all sides we hear talk about the housing shortage, and with good reason. Nor is there just talk; there is action too. We try to fill the need by providing houses, by promoting the building of houses, planning the whole architectural enterprise. However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the *proper plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The proper plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older than the increase of the earth's population and

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[118] Julian Young, *Heidegger, Philosophy, Nazism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.106.

the condition of the industrial workers. The proper dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*. What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *proper* plight of dwelling as *the* plight? (BW: 363).

Compared to [a critical encounter with being], world wars remain superficial (Pa: 321).

The first passage is a powerful piece of writing, and one could, of course, excuse Heidegger's disparagement of the housing crisis that occurred after World War II (the above passage was delivered in a lecture in 1951) as trivial compared to the more important task of learning to dwell, on the grounds of it being simply a powerful and provocative piece of rhetoric designed to incite discussion, and to indicate the nature of the role that philosophy can play in such issues, i.e. not a practical one. Perhaps Heidegger is simply implying that refined common sense can solve the housing shortage - what you need philosophy for is to reflect on the nature of what it means to dwell. Similarly, his dismissal of world wars as 'superficial' compared to a critical encounter with Being can be seen as an instance of hyperbole designed to shock readers into considering the role that the (largely unnoticed) ways in which things are disclosed to us plays in determining how we act, whether we fight and who we fight, and so on. And yet, one cannot help but feel uneasy about the strength of the distinction that Heidegger draws between the housing crisis and the nature of dwelling, world wars and a critical encounter with Being, as though the two issues were completely unconnected, permitting Heidegger, the philosopher, to reflect upon the more 'primordial' of the two issues - the nature of dwelling or an encounter with Being - while the government, say, gets on with building more houses and training its troops. We see here the antithesis of Heidegger's earlier, Platonic style ambition to play the philosopher-king at the court of Hitler. There seems to be a strengthening of Heidegger's earlier 'ontic-ontological split' in this stark distinction between these issues, a distinction more and more pronounced in the later Heidegger as the philosopher of Being becomes more and more 'Being oriented', less and less

'Dasein' oriented. This comes across in the *Spiegel* interview he gave in 1966, published after his death:

> *Spiegel*: ... We politicians, semi-politicians, journalists, etc., we constantly have to make decisions of one kind or another. We must try to adapt to the system we live in, we must attempt to change it, must look for the small opportunity of reform and the still smaller one of revolution. We expect help from the philosopher, if only indirect help, help in a roundabout way. And now we hear: I cannot help you.
> H: And I cannot. ...
> Philosophy will not be able to effect an immediate transformation of the present condition of the world. This is not only true of philosophy but of all merely human thought and endeavour. Only a god can save us.[119]

Caputo, commenting on this, writes:

> Heidegger leaves the thinker mute in the face of the ethicopolitical. He cuts short the reach of the deconstruction of metaphysics; he never exploits its ethicopolitical cutting edge. He has isolated thinking from the *agora* and driven it up into the mountains. ... He does not point out that the sociological equivalent of the destruction of the history of ontology is the critique of political systems. That is what his own notion of *ethos* commits him to, but he never delivers, whereas it never entered the head of Parmenides or Eckhart that their lofty work of thought was in the slightest way incongruous with their situatedness in the *polis*.[120]

Caputo makes an excellent point here. Heidegger's later thinking lacks a social and political dimension, a lack which can be traced to the ontic-ontological distinction operating throughout his thought. Moreover, this thinking lacks an ethical dimension. Heidegger's overriding concern, early and late, with structures of possibility, allows his philosophy to soar loftily

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[119] Quoted in Caputo (1987), p.195, 248.

[120] Caputo (1987), p.250-1.

above the grubby ontic history of human beings, living, loving, fighting and dying to consider the more ideal history of Being, the background disclosures through which we live, love, fight and die. Again, this is a point Caputo makes:

> [The world of Heidegger's thinking] is a world in which a wholly *other* kind of responsiveness and responsibility have been silenced, a responsibility to those who live and die, to those who are embodied, who suffer or are in pain, who grow old and infirm, above all, to innocent victims. The thinker leaves no room at all for the victim in the history of Being's self-showing.[121]

Rorty, in a similar vein, detects in the later Heidegger a retreat from the messiness and riskiness of ordinary life so insisted upon in *Being and Time*, into his own version of metaphysics, his own escape from contingency and insecurity:

> On my reading, Heidegger is still doing the same sort of thing which Plato tried to do when he created a supersensible world from which to look down on Athens, or Augustine when he imagined a City of God from which to look down on the Dark Ages. He is opting out of the struggles of his fellow humans by making his mind its own place, his own story the only one that counts, making himself the redeemer of his time precisely through his abstention from action. ... The Heideggerian counterpart of Plato's world of appearance seen from above is the West seen beyond metaphysics. Whereas Plato looks down, Heidegger looks back. But both are hoping to distance themselves from, cleanse themselves of, what they are looking at.[122]

There is a sense here in which later Heidegger, with his own version of the decline of the West, and the 'technologization' of Being, is betraying the

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[121] Quoted in Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press, 1992), p.134.

[122] Rorty (1991), p.70.

very thing that gave his philosophy so much power in the first place: its close attention to the 'things themselves', without reference to grand theories or metanarratives that might encourage us to attend to certain phenomena inappropriately because we are armed in advance with preconceived notions about the way in which they must show up - as 'standing reserve', for instance.

How damaging are these charges of neglect of the political and ethical in relation to Nietzsche's nihilism? To what extent is Nietzsche's nihilism a political and social threat? To a large extent, as I have shown in chapter two, an extent that calls, in my view, for a more explicitly ethical response than the one provided by Heidegger. If, as R.G.Collingwood claimed, 'The chief business of twentieth-century philosophy is to reckon with twentieth-century history'[123], there are substantial grounds upon which to question the adequacy of the response to nihilism of the one time Nazi who maintained a resolute public silence after World War II. Can the 'deep history' of nihilism be severed from the two world wars of the twentieth century?

We find in Nietzsche no such severence. He was very clear about the potential reverberations of nihilism in the ethical and political spheres. In 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' he expresses the following fear:

> If ... the doctrines of sovereign becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts, types and species, of the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal - doctrines which I consider true but deadly - are thrust upon the people for another generation with the rage for instruction that has now become normal, no one should be surprised if the people perishes of petty egoism, ossification and greed, falls apart and ceases to be a people; in its place systems of individualist egoism, brotherhoods for the rapacious exploitation of non-brothers, and similar creations of utilitarian vulgarity may perhaps appear in the arena of the future (UM 2 9 / p.113).

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[123] Glover (2001), p.1.

In a similar, though far more apocalyptic, not to say manic, vein, Nietzsche wrote in his last book, *Ecce Homo*: 'For when truth steps into battle with the lie of millennia we shall have convulsions, an earthquake spasm, a transposition of valley and mountain such as has never been dreamed of. ... there will be wars such as there have never yet been on earth' (EH 15 1 / p.97). What Nietzsche has in mind in both of these quotations is that, as faith in God wanes, and faith in the old ascetic/Platonic way in which Western man has secured meaning for himself in the face of suffering, a vacuum will open up within which great conflict and change, on a moral and political level, will take place. From first to last, what concerned Nietzsche were the implications for morality of a collective loss of faith in God. He writes, in *The Gay Science*: '... how much must collapse now that [the Christian] faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of Christian morality'. He anticipates a, '... long plenitude and sequences of breakdown, destruction, ruin and cataclysm' (GS: 343 / p.279). There is throughout his writings a sense of imminent collapse and impending disaster on a moral and political level.

Reading Nietzsche at the start of the twenty first century, we can bear witness to his prophecies. The 'brotherhoods for the rapacious exploitation of non-brothers' has come to pass, in Nietzsche's and Heidegger's own country as well as elsewhere. There have been 'wars such as there have never yet been on earth'. And yet, there is nothing within Nietzsche that offers the potential for countering such events. On the contrary, elements of his philosophy can be seen to be complicit in them. By describing life as '*essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation', in his doctrine of the will to power, and by placing so much emphasis on creating one's own values in accord with this doctrine, it can be seen how easily Nietzsche's ideas lent themselves to brotherhoods intent on rapaciously exploiting non-brothers. As J.P.Stern puts it, in *A Study of Nietzsche*:

He seems unaware that he is giving us nothing to distinguish the fanaticism that goes with bad faith from his own belief in the unconditioned value of self-realization and self-becoming - that is, from his own belief in the Superman. ... We can hardly forget that the solemn avowal of this reduplicated self - the pathos of personal authenticity - was the chief tenet of fascism and national socialism. No man came closer to the full realization of self-created 'values' than A.Hitler. ... it cannot be denied that the intellectual superstructure of [Italian and French fascists and German national socialists] is as inconceivable without Nietzsche as these movements are without their superstructure.[124]

Similarly, Simon May, in a passage quoted in chapter two, points out that, 'the supreme value he places on individual life-enhancement and self-legislation leaves room for, and in some cases explicitly justifies, unfettered brutality'. Moreover, as we have seen, central to Nietzsche's philosophy is the view that, 'The *goal of humanity* cannot lie in the end but only *in its highest specimens*', a view which leads Nietzsche to advocate a form of society in which the interests of the majority can be suppressed for the sake of producing such 'highest specimens'.

In the light of all of this, I would argue that there is the need for a more urgent ethical response than the one Heidegger provides to Nietzschean nihilism. Heidegger's response to Nietzsche, for all of its insight, fails to attend directly enough to the urgently ethical nature of Nietzsche's threat. We need something more than the fourfold, and meditations on jugs and bridges, to respond to this. In the last chapter of the thesis I turn, then, to somebody whose philosophy might help provide a more urgently ethical response to Nietzschean nihilism than Heidegger's does, somebody, moreover, who experienced first hand the 'brotherhoods for the rapacious exploitation of non-brothers' that Nietzsche prophesied, having had most of his family murdered in the Holocaust. He was also a deep admirer of Heidegger's early philosophy - Emmanuel Levinas.

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[124] J.P.Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p.117, 122.

Chapter Six: Levinas and a Way of Thinking of Ethics after Nietzsche

Introduction

Let me begin by explaining what I am not doing in this last chapter. I am not, as it were, bringing Levinas 'out of the hat' as the solution to the great mess that Nietzsche and Heidegger have got us into. Firstly, I consider Heidegger's response to Nietzsche to be of considerable depth and importance in its evocation of a measure for human life - 'Being' - that is beyond mere human creation, that is not a 'value' posited to secure power, and in its portrayal of the good human life as one lived out in response to this measure. Secondly, I do not consider Heidegger's philosophy to be entirely devoid of an ethical dimension. Rather, in my view it is underdeveloped, as he presents it, in these respects. Thirdly, Levinas rarely uses the term 'nihilism' in his philosophy, and is not directly concerned with nihilism *per se*, in the way that Nietzsche and Heidegger are. Fourthly, Levinas's philosophy would not have been possible without the new opening in philosophy created by Husserl and Heidegger - something Levinas himself acknowledged.

What I intend to demonstrate is that Levinas's philosophy contains within it a phenomenological approach to ethics and a critique of Western philosophy that offers a new way of thinking about ethics in the face of the decline of the Platonic-Christian tradition, and the assertion, by Nietzsche, of a very different set of values, which leaves little room for fellow-feeling and selflessness, and advocates political arrangements in which the majority are regarded as means rather than ends. I suggest that this new way of thinking about ethics is needed more than ever given the tremendously enhanced capacities that we now possess for both evil and good, provided by technology, and the erosion of personal responsibility which occurs in an increasingly beaurocratized world. This new way of thinking which Levinas offers does not, crucially, fall foul of the critique of moralities based on 'true worlds' or God that Nietzsche so successfully attacks, for his approach to ethics is 'anarchical', without grounding principles, as we shall see.

Levinas's phenomenology of 'ethical structures' argues for the priority of the other person in thinking about language, truth and objectivity, and the priority of a passive, almost visceral subjection to the presence of others and the moral demands that their presence makes, over a more active, rational, autonomous moral subject. Levinas in his writings tries to evoke the ethical rather than explain it, and, in so doing, I argue, offers a fruitful way of thinking about ethics after Nietzsche.

Before looking in detail at Levinas's thought, just a couple of remarks to orientate us. The theologian Johann Baptist Metz says that religion speaks *ex memoria passionis*, from the memory of suffering.[125] If this is so, then Levinas's philosophical writings are profoundly religious. They speak out of the memory of suffering, the memory of the Holocaust, in which Levinas lost most of his family. Memory is important for Heidegger, as we have seen, but it is a remembering of the meaningfulness we have inherited, and a time when Being had not been forgotten. In Levinas's writings, it is suffering that is remembered, especially the suffering of the Jews in the Holocaust. He asks, 'Did not Nietzsche's saying about the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the meaning of a quasi-empirical fact?'. Thus he links, as I have done and as Glover does, the 'death of God' to the Nazi horrors. He also writes, 'The essential problem is: can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?' (PL: 176). This is the underlying question of his philosophy, which is an attempt to answer 'yes' to this question, and to hold up, in the depths of the night through which Levinas lived, an affirming flame.

Levinas's philosophy speaks out of the memory of suffering, then. Suffering in the age of technology, in which man's capacity to inflict suffering has increased a million fold. We no longer fight face to face with spears and bows and arrows, but with bombs which kill people we have never faced. Surely this is one of the most significant features of technology to consider, one of its most thought-provoking features, in a century that, as Levinas points out, '... in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the

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[125] Quoted in Caputo (1987), p.281.

Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia.' (EN: 97). The age of 'technology' has made the question of morality more and more pressing, as our capacity to inflict evil has increased so incredibly. Moreover, our age is one in which it is increasingly difficult to apportion moral responsibility to particular individuals. However, Heidegger fails to adequately consider this, and its startling implications when combined with the technology to inflict untold suffering on countless people. Thus, for example, no one thought of themselves as causing the horrors of Hiroshima - it just happened. The scientists were simply making a weapon, not necessarily using it. The pilots in the 'Enola Gay' were simply obeying orders. None of the politicians engaged in the decision-making process were willing to stand up and take responsibility, and could hide behind it being a 'committee decision'. Jonathan Glover, in *Humanity*, analyses this corrosion of responsibility leading up to and after the dropping of the bomb[126]. In the face of such events, what is needed alongside a critique of 'technology' for turning Being into so much standing order on tap for human use is a consideration of the moral responsibility that possessing such technologies as the atomic bomb places on us. We find this in Levinas's philosophy.

6.1. Levinas's Philosophical Method

Before proceeding any further, it is worth trying to do a brief sketch of Levinas's philosophical method. To put it in Husserlian terms, Levinas is trying to make us more conscious of the ethical 'horizons' of our lives. However, this raises an immediate problem, a problem that, as we shall come to see, is central to the nature of Levinas's thought. He argues that the 'phenomena' that he is concerned to articulate are not 'phenomena' in the sense that they do not appear! They do not manifest in the Heideggerian 'lit clearing of being', in the light, so to speak. As he writes, in the introduction to *Totality and Infinity*:

> The welcoming of the face and the work of justice - which condition the birth of truth itself - are not interpretable in terms of disclosure. Phenomenology is a method for philosophy, but phenomenology - the

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[126] Glover (2001), p.89-113.

comprehension effected through a bringing to light - does not constitute the ultimate event of being itself (TI: 28).

Consequently, the way of attending to phenomena *qua* what appear must be markedly different to the way that we must attend to the 'phenomena' Levinas is concerned with. Indeed, the 'phenomena' which he articulates are precisely what disturb and break through the phenomena of more traditional phenomenologists, like Husserl and Heidegger. In a late essay, he uses the term 'enigma' to contrast the 'phenomena' he is concerned with, which appear in the manner of not appearing, with the phenomena of more traditional phenomenology. The nature and significance of this contrast will become apparent as we proceed. What I want to emphasize for now is the problem that this raises in assessing Levinas's philosophy: how are we to assess the validity of claims about something that does not show itself, that is not a 'phenomenon' in the conventional sense? This leads one Levinas commentator to astutely remark, 'To succeed as a philosophy of the Other, it must fail adequately to thematize its subject'.[127] This paradox potentially makes Levinas into one of those 'irrefutable' philosophers who one either gets completed carried away with and infected by, or else dismisses from the outset as a crank.

Levinas argues that what he calls 'the astonishing alterity of the other' gets 'banalized or dimmed down to a simple exchange of courtesies that has become established as an 'impersonal commerce' of customs.' (PL: 101). He claims to be uncovering the essentially ethical structure of human relations, a structure which can be discerned in common customs and courtesies, but only in dimmed down, palimpsest, form. Thus he says, in an interview, '[The face] is the presupposed in all human relationships. If it were not that, we would not even say, before an open door, 'After you, sir!' It is an original 'After you, sir!' that I have tried to describe' (EI: 89). Through close attention to human relations, one can discern the essentially ethical dimension underlying it, a dimension Levinas refers to as 'the face', but which, crucially, is not a phenomenon, is not something one can indubitably point to or seize upon as 'evidence', by its very nature.

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[127] Colin David, *Levinas: an introduction*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.62.

6.2. Levinas's Grand Narrative: the Philosophy of the Same

Just as Nietzsche and Heidegger both present grand narratives concerning the history of Western philosophy, so does Levinas. As we have seen, for Nietzsche the essence of the philosophical tradition is its asceticism, its hostility to life in favour of 'Reason' and 'true worlds'; and for Heidegger its essence is the 'forgetfulness of Being', forgetfulness of the process by which beings emerge as beings, and forgetfulness of the 'source' that grants them. For Levinas, the Western philosophical tradition has been characterised by a 'forgetfulness of the Other', by totalising forms of discourse rather than discourse which is open to what he calls 'infinity'. What does this mean? Answering this question is a necessary first step in accessing Levinas's thought, for this grand narrative underlies much of it. His most succinct elucidation of it occurs in his essay 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite'.

He begins this essay by making a distinction between different approaches to truth, a distinction that is fundamental to his thought. He distinguishes a heteronomous from an autonomous approach to truth. This dichotomy is so central to Levinas's thought that it can be seen running through the titles of his books and essays: *Totality and Infinity*, 'Meaning and Sense', 'Enigma and Phenomenon', 'Truth of disclosure and Truth of testimony', 'Transcendence and Intelligibility'. In a heteronomous approach to truth,

> a thinker maintains a relationship with a reality distinct from him, other than him ... Truth would thus designate the outcome of a movement that leaves a world that is intimate and familiar ... and goes toward another region, towards a *beyond*, as Plato puts it.[128]

An autonomous approach to truth, on the other hand, involves not the exposure of the truth seeker to unexpected realities, but rather the reduction

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[128] Quoted in Adriaan Perperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), p.88-9. Perperzak includes the whole article (in the original French and in English translation) as part of his book.

of reality to that which the truth seeker can understand. It involves, '... the preserving of his [the truth seeker's] nature, his identity, the feat of remaining the same despite the unknown lands into which thought seems to lead'.[129] Levinas argues that, of these two approaches, the autonomous approach has dominated Western philosophy.

He thinks that this domination has occurred for a good reason. He argues that an autonomous ('autonomous' meaning, literally, 'the being ruled by the law of oneself') approach to truth allowed Western man to take a leap out of the tyranny of custom, to become individuals rather than simply members of a particular tribe. He writes, 'Against the turbid and disturbing participation opinion presupposes, philosophy willed souls that are separate and in a sense impenetrable. The idea of the Same, the idea of freedom seemed to offer the most firm guarantee of such a separation.'[130] He regards this as an immense, epoch defining achievement which assures the 'philosophy of the Same' of 'immortal merit'. We can see what he means here by considering Socrates and the questions that he put to his fellow Athenians concerning the nature of piety, friendship, justice *as such*, not as defined by a particular group of people. As MacIntyre points out in *After Virtue*, prior to this questions of moral worth were identical with questions of social fact: '... morality and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society. ... Morality as something distinct does not yet exist. Evaluative questions *are* questions of social fact.'[131] The philosophy of the Same's defining achievement was to separate morality and social structure, a revolutionary achievement, but one which created its own bias, which Levinas sees himself as trying to counteract.

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas mentions various moments in the Western philosophical tradition that particularly exemplify the tendency he defines as 'the philosophy of the Same'. He detects it in Plato, and in the Platonic doctrine of recollection, whereby obtaining knowledge involves recollecting Forms *which already resided in one*, but which one had

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[129] Perperzak (1993), p.91.

[130] Perperzak (1993), p.93.

[131] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p.123.

forgotten. Hegel's philosophy is another instance of the 'philosophy of the Same', for Levinas, insofar as it reduces history to the gradual unfolding of 'Spirit', and the subject's overcoming of all forms of alienation. There are two features which Levinas singles out as symptomatic of the 'philosophy of the Same'. Firstly, it is 'atheistic', by which he means it is opposed to truth as revelation, truth coming from to us from without:

> The essence of truth will then not be in the heteronomous relationship to an unknown God, but in the already-known which has to be uncovered or freely invented in oneself, and in which everything unknown is comprised. It is fundamentally opposed to a God that reveals. Philosophy is atheism, or rather, unreligion, the negation of a God that reveals himself and puts truths into us.[132]

The second feature characteristic of the 'philosophy of the Same' lies in its mode of access to beings, which is not direct, but is mediated by abstractions, such as 'Forms'.

What Levinas proceeds to do in this essay is to outline a relationship that cannot be characterised in these terms, a relationship that is a 'revelation', that involves truth being put into me, and which is direct, not mediated by abstractions. This is my relationship with the face of another person. His whole philosophy turns on the claim that *this relationship is prior to the relationship which the 'philosophy of the Same' adopts towards the world, prior in the sense of a transcendental condition for it*. To put it in slogan form: goodness is prior to truth.

However, there is a lot more to Levinas's thesis in this essay than the abstract philosophical concerns I have mentioned so far. Like Heidegger, Levinas has the ability to combine abstract philosophical argumentation with cultural critique, and this essay is a good example of this. The cultural point underlying his philosophical point about the emphasis that the 'philosophy of the Same' has placed on autonomy is that, as a culture, we have prioritised freedom at the expense of justice. David Loy points out to how

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[132] Perperzak (1993), p.96.

great an extent the idea of freedom has animated Western culture since the Greeks, in the first chapter of his fascinating book *A Buddhist History of the West*. Philosophy began, so the story goes, with the liberation of reason from myth. The Reformation brought us greater religious freedom, the American and French revolutions brought greater political freedom. The lists of freedoms we have become party to over the last few centuries could go on and on: economic freedom, colonial freedom, racial freedom, psychological freedom, sexual freedom. Loy's chapter makes some insightful criticisms of this drive towards freedom, from a Buddhist perspective. Levinas, in 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', also criticizes it, from the perspective of a concern with justice.

These introductory remarks are necessarily vague and sketchy. What they might mean more concretely we shall consider when looking in more detail at Levinas's philosophy. For now, let us consider how Nietzsche might fit into this narrative.

6.2.1. Is Nietzsche a 'Philosopher of the Same'?

Levinas writes very little directly about Nietzsche, which is surprising given that they were both deeply concerned with the nature of ethics, and that Nietzsche's philosophy was associated with the political party that murdered most of Levinas's family. Nietzsche's philosophy exemplifies the characteristics of the 'philosophy of the Same' very well. As we have seen, central to the 'philosophy of the Same' is its emphasis on freedom over and above justice. Nietzsche's philosophy very much exhibits this emphasis. The superman is defined by his autonomy, his self-direction, his freedom from the constraining influence of the 'flies of the market place', the slavish 'herd', and the follies of pity. He writes of the superman, 'We ... want to become those who we really are - human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.' (GS: 335 / p.266). Where necessary, as we have seen, the welfare of other people can be legitimately sacrificed, in Nietzsche's view, for the sake of the life-enhancement and creativity of members of this elite, for, recall, 'A

people is a detour of nature to get to six or seven great men' (BG: 126 / p.99).

Moreover, Nietzsche's whole epistemology is based around the idea that what we call 'truth' is simply a successful way of schematizing chaos in order to exert power over it, the subsuming of the river of becoming under concepts, the reduction of otherness to sameness, all the better to exercise one's will. For Nietzsche, thought has its source in our limbs and stomach, it is essentially predatory. A third - and perhaps the most telling - instance of the characteristics of the 'philosophy of the Same' operating in Nietzsche's thought occurs in his analyses of all human behaviour, especially the ethical, in terms of power and subjectivity. Here are two examples:

> Our love of our neighbour - is it not lust for new *possessions*? ... Gradually we become tired of what we safely possess, and we stretch out our hands again. ... When we see somebody suffer, we like to exploit this opportunity to take possession of him; those who become his benefactors and pity him, for example, do this and call the lust for new possessions that he awakens in them 'love'; and the pleasure they feel is comparable to that aroused by the prospect of a new conquest (GS: 14 / p.88).

> *Morality as the self-division of man.* ... A girl in love wishes the faithfulness and devotion of her love could be tested by the faithlessness of the man she loves. ... A mother gives to her child that of which she deprives herself, sleep, the best food, if need be her health, her strength. - But are these all unegoistic states? ... Is it not clear that in all these instances man loves *something of himself*, an idea, a desire, an offspring, more than *something else of himself*, that he thus *divides* his nature and sacrifices one part of it to the other? (HA 57 / p.53-4).

What we have here is the theory of 'psychological egoism', the view that all human behaviour can ultimately be accurately accounted for in terms of egoism, in terms of, in Nietzsche's case, the desire of the agent to increase

his power. Such a theory attempts to construct what Levinas calls a 'totality', to subsume our encounters with genuine otherness under a totalising theory which banishes the otherness of such experiences, their direct and revelatory quality.

So much for the applicability of Levinas's grand narrative to Nietzsche. I shall return to the relationship between these two philosophers later, when comparing their views on the origins of consciousness, and when I consider the extent to which Levinas's account of ethics does not fall prey to Nietzsche's critique. Now, however, we must consider Levinas's critique of Heidegger as also a 'philosopher of the Same', and how potent it is.

6.3. Levinas's Critique of Heidegger

In 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite' Levinas argues that Heidegger, far from destroying, as he would have us believe, 'a whole current of Western philosophy', actually sums it up, affirms 'a tradition in which the Same dominates the Other, in which freedom ... precedes justice'.[133] Thus Levinas's critique of Heidegger is not just a critique of Heidegger, but of Heidegger as the latest representative of the 'philosophy of the Same'. However, there is a far more personal element to Levinas's critique of Heidegger, and it is necessary to draw attention to this first, in order the better to understand his critique.

Levinas began his philosophical life as an ardent admirer and astute interpreter of Husserlian phenomenology, helping to introduce, along with Raymond Aron, this movement to France and to Jean-Paul Sartre, via his book on Husserl. However, he soon came to feel that Heidegger's approach to phenomenology was more fruitful than Husserl's, prompting him to attend several series of lectures given by Heidegger at Freiburg university in the late 1920s. Asked in an interview in the 1980s which works of philosophy he considered to be the most important, *Being and Time* was in the list of five books he mentioned (EI: 37-8). In another interview he said, 'For me, Heidegger is the greatest philosopher of the century, perhaps one of the very

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[133] Perperzak (1993), p.101, 105.

great philosophers of the millennium' (EN: 116). Thus his debt to, and admiration of, Heidegger was immense. It is hard to imagine, therefore, what the twenty eight year old Levinas felt when his philosophical master joined the Nazi party, in 1933. In a sense, however, this event gave birth to Levinas as a philosopher in his own right. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say, as Simon Critchley does, that Levinas's 'philosophical life was animated by the question of how a philosopher as undeniably brilliant as Heidegger could become a Nazi, for however a short time.'[134] This apparent contradiction impelled him to undertake a critique of Heidegger in order to address the question of *what it is about Heidegger's philosophy that could lead its author to make such a terrible moral and political mistake.* This question leads him to undertake a critique of the whole tradition of Western philosophy and politics, which he comes to regard Heidegger as summing up.

Levinas is quite clear about the nature of his relationship to Heidegger: he both acknowledges the deep influence of Heideggerian phenomenology on his thought, and his own desire to think in a decisively different manner to Heidegger. As he puts it in his first book, *Existence and Existents,* written during his imprisonment in World War II, 'If, at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy'(EE: 4). What Levinas means by the 'climate' of Heidegger's philosophy will concern me shortly. For now, it is important to note that Levinas's 'critique' of Heidegger is not so much a refutation as a refusal of certain fundamental Heideggerian assumptions. Richard Rorty argues that a 'talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change',[135] and it is a 'talent for speaking differently' which Levinas's engagement with Heidegger exhibits (which isn't to imply that the argumentation is shoddy!).

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[134] Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.8.

[135] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1989), p.7.

6.3.1. Levinas and Heidegger on Death

Before considering the heart of Levinas's critique of Heidegger, I want first to focus on a particular issue that Levinas criticizes Heidegger on: his treatment of death. This will allow us to see in what kind of ways Levinas attacks Heidegger, and allow me to point out the unsatisfactoriness of this particular part of his critique. Heidegger offers a famous analysis of death in *Being and Time*. Levinas takes issue with this analysis. Specifically, he takes issue with Heidegger's insistence on the 'mineness' of one's own death. 'The Being of any such entity [as ourselves] is *in each case mine*', begins the main body of *Being and Time* (BT: 67). This is something that we are generally unaware of, according to Heidegger, lost as we are in the sway of 'the They'. However, in moments of lucidity with regard to one's mortality, one is no longer able to absorb oneself in 'the They', no longer able to dim down an awareness of one's mortality through the comforting feeling that one is just doing what one does, and that death is something that happens to other people. The recognition that one is living a life which will stop brings with it, according to Heidegger, a heightened sense of the uniqueness of one's life, of the particular course it has taken, and one's responsibility for it. These are the thoughts behind the claim he makes, 'no one can take the Other's dying away from him' (BT: 284). By 'dying' here Heidegger is not referring to the act of literally passing away, but rather the sense of living in anticipation of death, as a 'being-unto-death'. Nobody can take away from me my power to estimate the worth of my life, a power that we become increasingly aware of as we become increasingly aware of our mortality.

What is it that Levinas objects to in Heidegger's 'phenomenology of death', which is, after all, a pretty good formal, structural description of what goes on in many great works of literature, such as *The Death of Ivan Illyich*, by Tolstoy (which Heidegger in fact refers to in the footnotes to his chapter on death (BT: 495))? Heidegger is arguing that the anticipation of one's death gives one a freedom and mastery over oneself that makes authentic existence possible. Levinas demurs:

Death becomes the limit of the subject's virility ... What is important about the approach of death is that at a certain moment we are no longer *able to be able*. It is exactly thus that the subject loses its very mastery as a subject.

This end of mastery indicates that we have assumed existing in such a way that an *event* can happen to us that we no longer assume. ... The approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity. My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it (TO: 74).

What Levinas detects in Heidegger's analysis of death is a distorted description of the phenomena, due to Heidegger's insistence on the freedom and self-sufficiency of the individual, thereby betraying his adherence to what he later terms the 'philosophy of the Same' (Levinas's critique of Heidegger on death was written before he had coined this term). For Levinas, death is the kind of phenomenon that can only be distorted by such an analysis, because it attests to what exceeds the powers of the subject to incorporate something into itself as part of its history, to 'totalise' it. Death is an event that 'we no longer assume'. It attests to our radical vulnerability and passivity, a passivity prior to choice, prior to our freedom. Heidegger, in Levinas's eyes, wants to incorporate even something as alien and other to us as death into the subject, into an ontological framework, into our understanding of being.

What is particularly important about their respective analyses of death is that they indicate where the essential discrepancy between the two thinkers lies. Certain features of our experience are not assimilable within a philosophical framework which makes ontology fundamental, in Levinas's view, and he is concerned with tracing such experiences, and drawing out their true implications, undistorted by the 'philosophy of the Same'.

He also disagrees with the emphasis Heidegger places on the solitariness of death. Commenting on an expression from the Bible which

describes how 'Jonathan and Saul were not divided in death', Levinas suggests that this expression, far from designating an after-life in which the two meet, and far from being a merely 'metaphorical' expression, gestures towards,

> ... a surpassing in the human of the animal effort of life, purely life - a surpassing of the *conatus essendi* of life - an opening of the *human* through the living being: of the human, the newness of which could not be reduced to a more intense effort in its 'preserving in being'; ... the human, in which worry over the death of the other comes before care for self. ...
>
> Does not the relationship to the other in sacrifice, in which the death of the other preoccupies the human *being-there* before his own death, indicate precisely a beyond ontology - or a before ontology. ...Beyond the humanity that still defines itself as life and as *conatus essendi* and concern for being - a dis-interested humanity (EN: 215-7).

Levinas detects in Heidegger's insistence that 'being is in each case mine', an insistence most strongly felt in his analysis of death, an attachment to self constitutive of the 'philosophy of the Same'. He opposes to Heidegger's analysis of death an account whereby we are willing to die for another person, a willingness that indicates 'a rationality of the Good higher than all essence' (EN: 228), which constitutes our humanity. This is our ability to act for a present that will never be ours. Contrasting his own analysis of death with Heidegger's, he writes, in 'Diachrony and Representation':

> In the finitude of time the 'being-toward-death' of *Being and Time* sketches out ... the meaningful remains enclosed within the immanence of the *Jemeinigkeit* of the *Dasein* that *has to be* that thus - in spite of the denunciation of being as presence - still belongs to a philosophy of presence. Does not responsibility for the Other's death - the fear for the Other that no longer enters into the Heideggerian phenomenology of emotion, *Befindlichkeit* - consist in understanding, in the finite being of the mortal ego starting from the Other's face, the meaning of a *future* beyond what happens to me, beyond what, for an ego, is to

come? One would thus not have gone to the end of thought and meaningfulness in dying. The meaningful continues beyond my death (EN: 114).

It is our ability to perform such acts of disinterest, to be concerned for a future which we will never see, that constitutes the rupture in being, in the rule of *connatus essendi*, which Levinas is concerned to articulate.

Levinas makes some powerful points here, but he is misguided to direct them against Heidegger's analysis of death. It is not clear that Heidegger's insistence on the 'mineness' of 'Dasein', his analysis of the way in which 'looking death in the face' thrusts one back upon oneself, implies the egotism, the *conatus essendi*, which Levinas asserts it does. On the contrary, implicit in Heidegger's analysis of death is the idea that awareness of one's mortality forces one to consider more deeply than usual the nature of one's relations with others, and perhaps to change them. At the same time, there is nothing in *Being and Time* that suggests that Heidegger thought we should, on the basis of such consideration, become more concerned with the welfare of others, and less concerned with our own welfare.

Also, it is not clear how Heidegger's analysis of death does not allow for a meaningfulness continuing beyond my death. Surely having a sense of one's heritage, the role that one is playing in the unfolding history of a people, implies exactly this. Equally, it is not clear that Heidegger *distorts* death by turning it into something by means of which we can become masters of ourselves and face up to our freedom, for it is often through confrontation with mortality that the deadening weight of habit loosens slightly its stranglehold on our lives and we become able to make comparatively freer and more creative choices than we usually do. Thus Levinas's critique of Heidegger here is somewhat off the mark. However, we can see in this aspect of his critique elements that feature in other, more telling, aspects: a claim that Heidegger's insistence on the fundamental nature of ontology blinds him to the nature and centrality of the ethical.

6.3.2. Is Ontology Fundamental?

Levinas's first direct clash with Heidegger occurs in the 1951 essay, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' This clash continues in *Totality and Infinity*, especially in the section called 'Metaphysics Precedes Ontology', in which he writes:

> *Being and Time* has argued perhaps but one sole thesis: Being is
> inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as
> time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity. ...
> To affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already
> decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with
> someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with
> the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension,
> the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates
> justice to freedom. ... In subordinating every relation with existents to
> the relation with Being the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy
> of freedom over ethics. ... Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy
> of power. It issues in the State (TI: 45-6).

There are two problems with this passage. Firstly, Heidegger does not affirm the priority of Being over existents. Whilst Being is not to be equated with the totality of beings, and to neglect their difference is to fall into nihilism, Being cannot manifest without beings. Without beings, there would be no Being, so Heidegger is not affirming the priority of a relation with an abstraction over our relationship with concrete beings. On the contrary, *Being and Time* is a text which is concerned with grounding abstractions in concrete, lived experience. Given this, it is hard to see how Heidegger can be accused of subordinating ethics to freedom (in the way that Nietzsche can), why it is necessarily a philosophy of power, and issues in the state.

Secondly - as Levinas no doubt knew - Heidegger does not argue that we encounter other people in the same way that we encounter any other kind of being. Rather, he maintains that we encounter them as co-disclosers of the world, through a *sui generis* mode of access he calls 'solicitude'.

Admittedly, he does not have a great deal to say about our 'being-with-others' in *Being and Time*: there is a short section on the difference between 'leaping in' and 'leaping ahead' (BT: 158-9), and a more worked out section on how we must, in order to be authentic Dasein, resolutely choose our heroes in the face of our 'being-towards-death', and wrest ourselves away from the sway of 'the They', the pernicious effect that other people's influence can have on us. But he does not argue that we encounter them in subordination to Being. Rather, our 'being-with-others' is an 'existentiale', and, as such, is not subordinate to our relationship with Being, but is part of the enabling conditions of such a relationship.

And yet, this is, perhaps, the very issue at stake. Heidegger is concerned to raise anew the question of Being, and sees such a question as the fundamental starting point of philosophy. *It is this very assumption that Levinas is criticizing, and, as such, his critique of Heidegger goes right to the core of that project.* The question, 'Is ontology fundamental?' is the question that Levinas poses to Heidegger. Levinas's answer to this question is 'no': because Heidegger prioritises consideration of our understanding of Being, he necessarily fails to do justice to the *nature* and *centrality* of our relationship with other people, with genuine otherness - and thus remains a 'philosopher of the Same', prioritising freedom over justice.

In what way does Heidegger fail to do justice to the nature and centrality of our relationship with other people? Levinas criticizes Heidegger's decision to consider our relationship with other people as part of a more general ontological project; and he criticizes Heidegger's characterization of our relationship with other people in terms of a relationship with co-participants in shared projects, a 'side by side' relationship rather than a 'face to face' one. Levinas makes these points during an interview:

> In Heidegger, the ethical relationship, the *Miteinandersein*, the being-with-another-person, is only one moment of our presence in the world. It does not have the central place. *Mit* is always being next to ... it is

not in the first instance the Face, it is *zusammensein* [being-together], perhaps *marschieren* [marching-together] (EN: 116).

Pace Heidegger, Levinas argues that our relationship with other people is primarily a face to face relationship, not a side by side one, and forms a transcendental condition of the ontological project. As he puts it, in *Totality and Infinity*:

> ... the comprehension of Being in general cannot dominate the relationship with the Other. *The latter relationship commands the first*. I cannot disentangle myself from society with the Other, even when I consider the Being of the existent he is. ... This 'saying to the Other' - this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an existent - precedes all ontology; *it is the ultimate relation in Being* (TI: 47-8, italics mine).

And here is why he thinks that, from 'Is Ontology Fundamental?':

> A human being is the sole being which I am unable to encounter without expressing this very encounter to him. It is precisely in this that the encounter distinguishes itself from knowledge. In every attitude in regard to the human there is a greeting - if only in the refusal of greeting. Here perception is not projected toward a horizon - the field of my freedom, power and property - in order to grasp the individual upon a familiar foundation. It refers to the pure individual, to a being as such (BPW: 7).

Levinas is here suggesting that we do not encounter one another fundamentally as possessing meaning by belonging within a particular nexus of relationships, but as absolute, unique, irreplaceable. Moreover, we encounter people *expressively*, we acknowledge them before we 'know' them. Thus this encounter has the character of what Levinas terms 'revelation', in the sense that it transcends our comprehension of being. We understand beings by reference to the 'world' within which they have their place. However, this is not how we encounter other people. Our relationship

to them is not, first and foremost, in any sense cognitive; and it is to a particular being, to *you*, possessing meaning without reference to a 'world'. Levinas is stressing the importance of the second person, as opposed to the first and third person, which have traditionally dominated in philosophy.

Levinas describes, in this essay, our relationship with other people in terms of invocation rather than comprehension. Before we comprehend another person, we invoke them. When we encounter another person, we are in society with them, and *this sociality cannot be formulated in terms of ontology*. Thus, 'It is a matter of finding a place where the human no longer concerns us from the perspective of the horizon of being, that is to say, no longer offers itself to our powers' (BPW: 8). The search for such a place, the attempt to articulate it, forms the heart of Levinas's philosophy. For Levinas it is what he calls the 'face' of another person which can breach the totalising horizons of being which engird Heidegger's philosophy of the home. More than this, it is the face of another person which makes disclosure of being - truth - possible in the first place. These bold claims will be spelt out in more detail shortly.

So, Levinas's critique of Heidegger is not simply an attack on a particular aspect of his philosophy - his omission of a sustained concern with the phenomenology of other people, say - but, rather, an attack on the very assumptions underlying it, that ontology is fundamental, and that our relationship with other people can be adequately considered within a more general consideration of our relationship to being. He argues, as we shall see, that the reverse is in fact the case, that our understanding of being is inherently ethical, that 'ethics precedes ontology'. This argument is merely adumbrated in 'Is Ontology Fundamental?'. It is not until 1961, in Levinas's main work *Totality and Infinity*, that they are more fully worked out.

6.4. *Justice precedes Truth: the Other makes Objectivity and Selfhood Possible*

Levinas's disagreement with Heidegger, as the latest representative of the 'philosophy of the Same' (as well as a one time member of a political

party who murdered most of Levinas's family) hinges on the question of whether the human being is primarily present to himself, and only secondarily directed towards the other, or whether he is face to face with the other from the outset, and only secondarily a self-consciousness? To put it another way: is dialogue the transcendental framework for the intentional relationship to the world, or vice versa? As far as Levinas is concerned, Heidegger, because he insists that 'being is in each case mine', prioritises self-consciousness and intentionality: dialogue and face to face encounters are secondary. Levinas reverses this priority: for him, the face to face relationship with another person is the transcendental framework for our intentional relationship to the world.

Why does he think this? He argues that we would have no objectivity if another person was not watching us. The revelation of the arbitrariness and injustice of my spontaneous activity is the origin of critical consciousness. Without the other person, who commits us to truth, we would succumb to confusion and ambiguity: 'The presence of the Other is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world. ... Objectivity coincides with the abolition of inalienable property - which presupposes the epiphany of the other' (TI: 76). And:

> The presence of the Other dispels the anarchic sorcery of the facts: the world becomes an object. To be an object, to be a theme, is to be what I can speak of with someone who has broken through the screen of phenomena and has associated me with himself. ... truth is founded on my relationship with the other, or justice (TI: 99).

He is claiming that the presence of another person wrenches us out of our own personal way of seeing the world, what he calls 'my joyous possession of the world': that is to say an orientation that takes into account, which considers real, only that which enables me to satisfy my desires. Truth is based on my relationship with another person, and his calling me to be just, to not just see the world from my own point of view. Implicit in this argument are the following two corollaries: that the other person enables me

to be genuinely self-conscious, and enables the possibility of their being an objective world between us.

6.4.1. The Other Calls on me to Respond - Thus Language Arises

This arises with, so to speak, the birth of language, which, for Levinas, is essentially an ethical event:

> A meaningful world is a world in which there is the Other through whom the world of my enjoyment becomes a theme having a signification. Things acquire a rational signification, and not only one associated with my usage, because an other is associated with my relations with them. In designating a thing I designate it to the Other. ... Utilizing a sign ... permits me to render the things offerable, detach them from my own usage, alienate them, render them exterior. ... Objectivity results from language, which permits the putting into question of possession. ... To thematize is to offer the world to the other in speech. 'Distance' with regard to the object thus exceeds its spatial signification. ... This distance is more radical than every distance in the world. The subject must find itself 'at a distance' from its own being ... Consciousness of the object - thematization - rests on distance with regard to oneself, which can only be time; or, if one prefers, it rests on self-consciousness (TI: 209-10).

Levinas argues, in this crucial passage, that rationality - 'things acquir[ing] a rational signification' - is made possible by my relation to another person, and by his calling me to offer up my world to him in a way that we can both understand. Thus rationality is inherently ethical, is born out of my ethical proximity to another person. The essence of language, in Levinas's view, is donation, generosity, insofar as, in language, one is facilitating the emergence of a 'common place' between oneself and others. Crucially, *it is the other person who makes this possible, who allows one to attain self-consciousness*. The other person calling me to be just thereby invests me with genuine self-consciousness and freedom. This is the crucial moment in Levinas's phenomenology of the emergence of ethics. It can now be seen

why Levinas thinks that the 'philosophy of the Same' rests on assumptions which it cannot avow within its own conceptual framework, a justice which is prior to selfhood and objectivity, and comes not from the self but from another person, and is thus a heteronomous relationship. Heteronomy precedes autonomy, justice precedes freedom, as Levinas claims in 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite'.

There are two moments in the other person's calling me to be just, and thereby to speak and be self-conscious. Firstly, the other person calls upon me to share my world, as discussed above. Secondly, there arises the question of justice when a third person comes along. I now have to make decisions based on thematization, generalisation: I can no longer relate to the other people as unique and irreplaceable. Levinas writes:

> Consciousness is born as the presence of the third party in the proximity of the one for the other and, consequently, it is to the extent that it proceeds from this that it can become dis-inter-estedness. The foundation of consciousness is justice and not the reverse. To the extravagant generosity of the for-the-other is superimposed a reasonable order, ancillary or angelic, of justice through knowledge, and philosophy here is a *measure* brought to the infinity of the being-for-the-other of peace and proximity, and is like the wisdom of love (BPW: 169).

Consciousness, thematization, knowing, are born from out of ethics, from out of 'the extravagant generosity of the for-the-other', and thus to try to derive ethics from knowledge is to put the proverbial cart before the horse!

It is worth contrasting Levinas's views on language with Heidegger's, here. 'Language is the house of Being' for Heidegger, it is that wherein Being manifests itself. There is the constant danger that language might fall into 'idle talk' and lose its revelatory quality, its essentially poetic nature. This happens when words are used by people without their having had the kind of 'originary experiences' which gave rise to the words in the first place. Thus it is important that language be so to speak 'refreshed' by

genuine encounters with Being, which is the task of the 'poet' (not to be understood literally, simply as somebody who writes poems). Levinas wants to focus our attention on a different aspect of language, and to claim that this aspect is more fundamental than the one Heidegger privileges. Levinas emphasises the way in which language allows us to touch and connect with on another, to acknowledge one another, to share the world - what we might call language's 'in-this-togetherness'. Underlying the disclosure of Being is the fact that we disclose Being *to somebody else.* 'Before any participation in a common content by comprehension, [expression] consists in the intuition of sociality by a relation that is consequently irreducible to comprehension'(BPW: 7). This sharing of one's world constitutes the birth of ethics, for Levinas, and he locates it in language. The commonplaces that language creates are not first and foremost fallings away from the primordial experience of perhaps solitary poets, whereby genuine encounters with Being are degraded into hackneyed clichés. Rather, such commonplaces involve the generosity of a speaker in society with another person donating his world to the other person, who is calling him to be just.

6.4.2. Affinities with Husserl and Nietzsche

There is an obvious similarity here with Husserl and his fifth 'Cartesian Meditation' (which Levinas refers to), where he writes:

> ... *the only transcendence which is really worthy its name,* and anything else that is called transcendent, such as the objective world, *depends* upon the transcendence of foreign subjectivity.
> All Objectivity, in this sense, is related back constitutionally to what does not belong to Ego proper, to the other-than-my-Ego's-own in the form, 'someone else' - that is to say: the non-Ego in the form, 'another Ego'.[136]

Husserl's point, like Levinas's, is that *only insofar as I experience that others experience the same objects as myself, do I really experience these*

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[136] Quoted in Evan Thompson (ed.), *Between Ourselves: second person issues in the study of consciousness* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2001), p.159.

objects as objective and real. My perceptual experience is experience of intersubjectively accessible being - being which does not exist for me alone.

There is also a useful comparison to be made with Nietzsche. In *The Gay Science*, he advances a similar thesis concerning consciousness. He argues that consciousness and language emerged together, due to a need to communicate (in order to escape from predators, find food, etc..):

> ... *consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication*; ... As the most distressed animal, [man] ... had to learn to express his distress and make himself understood; and for all of this he needed 'consciousness' first of all, he needed to 'know' himself what distressed him, he needed to 'know' how he felt, he needed to 'know' what he thought (GS: 354: p.298).

Nietzsche uses this argument as a way of downplaying the role that consciousness plays, or should play, in our lives, and to point out that we can never become conscious of what makes us truly individual. Levinas argues in the opposite direction, pointing out the ethical significance of creating a world of common places between two people, the ethical significance of offering the privacy of one's world up to the other person.

6.4.3. Conversation as the Locus of Ethics

Offering one's own world up to another person constitutes an essential part of conversation, which is why Levinas focuses on conversation as a prime locus of ethics:

> The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an 'I,' as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself. ... the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognising in the Other a *right* over [my] egoism, and hence in justifying oneself. Apology ... belongs to the essence of conversation (TI: 39-40).

Levinas is, as it were, arguing for how conversation is possible. Granted we have conversations, what must be in place in order for them to happen? In conversation, I offer my world up in word, and this is an act of generosity, not an act based on reciprocity. All conversation presupposes this prior act of generosity, this exposing of my world to the potential criticism of another, this apology or accounting for oneself. This is what Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being*, refers to as 'Saying':

> Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure. ... It is the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability (OB: 48).

6.4.4. *The Asymmetry of My Relationship with Another Person*

Underlying these claims about self-consciousness, rationality, language, and conversation, and separating them from Nietzsche's and Husserl's similar claims, is the distinctively ethical twist that Levinas gives to them. Fundamental to this ethical dimension is an assumption about the nature of our relationship with other people: namely, that it is a is a vertical relationship, one of height, it is 'asymmetrical', it is, as he puts it, a relationship with 'the Master' (TI: 101). In order to offer up my world in words to the other person, I must encounter the other person as, in some sense, above me: 'The Other - the absolutely other - paralyzes possession, which he contests by the epiphany of the face. *He can contest my possession only because he approaches me not from the outside but from above'* (TI: 171, italics mine). This seems like a peculiar claim, and has caused a number of Levinas commentators to demur. For example, Sonia Sikka, in 'Questioning the Sacred: Heidegger and Levinas on the Locus of Divinity', asks:

> In what manner are these claims [about the asymmetry of the relationship with another person] asserted? If they are phenomenological claims, do they mean to locate structures of

experience which everyone, upon reflection, could recognize as their own? But this simply is not so. ... Many are likely to respond that these [Levinas's characterisation of our relationship to other people as asymmetric] are religious relics, that there is no guilt prior to the conception of freedom, that the ethical relation is a symmetrical one in which I may demand as well as give.[137]

The asymmetry of the ethical relationship is a phenomenological claim - Levinas insists that he is being descriptive rather than prescriptive, locating structures that we can all, on reflection, recognize as our own. What kind of reflections might induce us to accept that the ethical relationship is asymmetrical? Firstly, Levinas is emphasising that we experience other people first and foremost 'head on' - we are directly in relationship to them. We do not, so to speak, experience people from sideways on primarily - to do so is to abstract from our concrete relationship with particular people. Performing such an abstraction is completely necessary in order to create just social arrangements, but it comes after and is made possible by this prior, face to face, relationship.

However, this only establishes that the symmetrical relationship between people is an abstraction from our direct relationships with other people. It does not establish that the latter relationship is one of 'height', is one in which we are below the other person. Levinas describes as 'a concrete moral experience' that,

> ... what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other. This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry: the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the others, and consequently the impossibility of totalization - and, on the plane of social experience, the impossibility of *forgetting* the intersubjective experience that leads to the social experience and endows it with meaning (TI: 53).

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[137] Sonia Sikka, 'Questioning the Sacred: Heidegger and Levinas on the Locus of Divinity', Modern Theology 14 (3) (1998), p.314.

He is suggesting that we do experience people in this way, that the essence of human relations is not reciprocity, a 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' kind of contractualism of the kind that underlies the political philosophies of Hobbes and Locke (and therewith modern capitalist society), but a pure giving, without expectation of recompence. He suggests that such experiences are commonplace. In 'Diachrony and Representation', for example, he claims that, in simple greetings, in 'Hello' and 'Goodbye', there 'already lies dormant ... the gratuitousness of the *for-the-other*' (TO: 106). This is why he is fond of quoting Dostoyevsky's remark, 'All of us are guilty of everything and responsible for everyone in the face of everything *and I more than the others.*' (e.g. EI: 105, italics mine). My moral responsibility is not something that I can, as it were, distance myself from and relate to in the same way that I might relate to the moral responsibility of others. My moral responsibility cannot be thus 'totalized', and to that extent cannot be spoken of as primarily symmetrical. There is a substantial affinity here between Levinas and Kierkegaard, and the latter's insistence that the individual - like Abraham - might be called upon to perform an act of 'purely personal virtue', that cannnot be universalized, or subsumed under a 'System'.[138]

An examination of the key Levinasian notion of 'the face' may help us to become clearer about why Levinas views our relationship to others as an asymmetrical one whereby we are called to put the other before or above ourselves.

6.5. The Nakedness of the Face

When discussing 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite' I pointed out that Levinas distinguishes between two kinds of approaches to truth: an autonomous and heteronomous one. This is the crucial distinction in his thought. Another way of describing it is as a distinction between different types of givenness: givenness as disclosure, within a horizon or 'world' - the givenness that Heidegger and the 'philosophy of the Same' focuses upon, and givenness as what Levinas terms 'revelation', or absolute givenness (the parallel with Buber's 'I-thou' and 'I-it' distinction is obvious here). As I

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[138] See Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear And Trembling* tr.Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin, 1985), e.g. p.88, where Kierkegaard writes, 'Abraham is great through an act of purely personal virtue.'

have mentioned above, his claim is that other people are not given to us within a horizon, they are given absolutely, without reference to anything else, 'revealed'. He makes this contrast in the following passage:

> To disclose a thing is to clarify it by forms: to find for it a place in the whole by apperceiving its function or its beauty.
>
> The work of language is entirely different: it consists in entering into relationship with a nudity disengaged from every form, but having meaning by itself, signifying before we have projected light upon it. ... Such a nudity is the face. The nakedness of the face is not what is presented to me because I disclose it, what would therefore be presented to me, to my powers, to my eyes, to my perception, in light exterior to it. ... It *is* by itself and not by reference to a system (TI: 74).

The face is an 'irreducible means of access' (PL: 169), like Heidegger's 'ready-to-hand' category, for instance. It cannot be reduced to something more basic: it is a way in which the world is given to us. When we encounter another person as 'the face', we are encountering them as unique, irreplaceable, and of value in themselves. In using the term 'face', Levinas is trying to focus our attention on what it is actually like to encounter other people, to face them, to look them in the eyes and listen to their voice, to be in their presence and fall under their influence. Approaching another person is like approaching a field of energy, and Levinas is trying to convey what this is like, speaking of it as an irreducible means of access, and pointing out its essentially moral character. In 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite' he writes:

> But [the Other] can also - and here is where he presents me his face - oppose himself to me beyond all measure, with the total uncoveredness and nakedness of his defenceless eyes, the straightforwardness, the absolute frankness of his gaze. ... Not that conquest is beyond my too weak powers, but *I am no longer able to have power* ... Here is established a relationship not with a very great resistance but with the

absolute Other, with the resistance of what has no resistance, with ethical resistance.[139]

Much of the time, we do not encounter the face. Rather, we encounter masks. Levinas writes, 'To be sure, most of the time the *who* is a *what*. We ask, 'Who is Mr.X?' and we answer: 'He is the President of the State council,' or 'He is Mr.So-and-so.' The answer presents itself as a quiddity; it refers to a system of relations' (TI: 177). But sometimes, we encounter the face. This encounter can occur in erotic love, which is why Levinas writes quite extensively about it (see, e.g., TO: 84-90). It can also occur when we share with somebody our miseries, the miseries we all bear, and yet which rarely see the light of day in the public sphere - indeed, are promptly frog-marched out when they do disturb the social world, in which everybody is assuring everybody else that they are doing fine, and that they are a suitable object for other people's envy. An encounter with the face might occur when somebody shares with you a song or poem they have written. It occurs when the other is exposed to us, as just this person, in all their vulnerability, an exposure which contains a moral demand that we not remain indifferent to this person's vulnerability, and, ultimately, to their death. When we encounter the face we are, as it were, hearing the other silently whisper to us, 'Remember me'.

Crucially, this encounter cannot be represented or recalled. Levinas's thinking here is analogous to the Buddhist idea that 'Enlightenment' cannot be spoken of as an experience or state because to do so turns it into an object, which is precisely what it is not. If it were, it could be appropriated by a subject, by the ego, which is the very relationship that 'Enlightenment' denotes the absence of. Similarly, Levinas writes that the face is not something we experience, or rather, it is an experience of 'infinity'. It is an experience which cannot be spoken about in the kind of terms in which philosophy has tended to speak of the world, because to thematize such an experience, to incorporate it into a more general movement or 'totality', is to no longer to encounter 'the face', the unique, the irreplaceable. Our relationship to 'the face' is not one of comprehension or knowledge, for such

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[139] Perperzak (1993), p.109-10.

relationships totalize whatever they are in relation to. Rather, our relationship to the face is what Levinas calls in *Totality and Infinity* 'Desire'. In 'Peace and Proximity' he writes of it thus:

> The thought that is awake to the face of the other human is not a thought of ..., a representation, but straightaway a thought for ..., a nonindifference for the other, upsetting the equilibrium of the steady and impassive soul of pure knowledge, a watching over the other human in his or her unicity which is indiscernible to knowledge (BPW: 166).

Interestingly, the 'face' does not literally have to be the face! It can also be 'a bare arm sculpted by Rodin' or the nape of the neck of people queuing up to see relatives imprisoned in Lubyanka prison in Moscow. Levinas says, 'The face, then, is not the colour of the eyes, the shape of the nose, the ruddiness of the cheeks, etc..' (EN: 232). Rather, it is, 'This possibility for the human of signifying in its uniqueness, in the humility of its nakedness and mortality' (EN: 231), '... the pure denuding of exposure without defence. Exposure as such, extreme exposure to death, to mortality itself. Extreme precariousness of the unique, precariousness of the stranger' (BPW: 167). 'The face is a hand in search of a recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something. It is going to ask you for something' (PL: 169).

6.5.1. Summary

To briefly summarise this morass of thinking, which Levinas relatively chaotically splurges out in *Totality and Infinity* (it has none of the precision of structure of Heidegger's *Being and Time*), here is one of his own concise summaries of these thoughts:

> The transitivity of teaching, and not the interiority of reminiscence, manifests being; the locus of truth is society. The *moral* relation with the Master who judges me subtends the freedom of my adherence to the true. Thus language commences. He who speaks to me and across the words proposes himself to me retains the

fundamental foreignness of the Other who judges me; our relations are never reversible. This supremacy posits him in himself, outside of my knowing, and it is by relation to this absolute that the *given* takes on meaning (TI: 101).

'Teaching' is the evocative term that Levinas sometimes uses to convey the asymmetry of our relationship with others, the fact that the other comes from on high, his uniqueness cannot be reduced to my understanding and capacities. The ultimate outcome of this argumentation is the thesis that meaning is possible due to ethics, due to the face of the other person, beyond phenomena / outside of being, calling me to justice. This has the radical implication that my life - my home, work, and labour (all of which Levinas offers analyses of in *Totality and Infinity*) - gains its meaning from without, has it bestowed upon it by another person. As the Levinas commentator Perpezak puts it: 'I must feed my body and arrange my house in order to receive the foreigner knocking at my door ... The justification of my nestling in the world ... does not lie in the necessity of my satisfactions but in the dedication to others that thereby becomes possible. ... the sense of my selfhood is my being-for-the-Other.'[140] For Levinas, prior to any acts of Nietzschean self-creation or Heideggerian resolutely choosing of one's heroes or letting beings be, prior to our freedom and capacity to initiate action, our lives have already been given a potential meaning from without, from the other person, an ethical meaning or calling - a calling which, of course, we are then free to evade.

As we saw when discussing *Being and Time*, one of the crucial points of the book is that our understanding of being is not grounded in reasons, that, as Wittgenstein puts it, at a certain point explanation gives way and we simply have to say 'This is how we go on'. *Being and Time* attempts to describe our non-cognitive attunement to being, our 'forms of life'. Crucially, then, the conditions of knowing are non-cognitive. Equally crucially, this non-cognitive attunement to being is communal, it is not primarily the private affair of a lone subject. Levinas's thinking depends to a certain extent on these insights, because they open up a way of thinking

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[140] Perperzak (1993), p.25.

about ethics as *prior to cognition*. We need no longer think that what gets us into the moral universe must be rational or cognitive. Thus to ask for reasons to be ethical is to mistake the nature of ethics. Ethics is not an object of knowledge, and certainly cannot be made into a science.

From the above we can see how Levinas's philosophy, in criticizing Heidegger and the whole Western philosophical tradition as a 'philosophy of the Same', provides us with a phenomenologically inspired moral dimension largely lacking in Heidegger. Moreover, Levinas provides us with another way of responding to Nietzsche's nihilism than Heidegger's, a way that more directly addresses Nietzsche's devastating critique of morality.

6.6. Our Anarchical Allegiance to the Good: Levinas's Response to Nietzsche's 'Immoralism'

Thus far my exegesis of Levinas has focused on the earlier of his two main works, *Totality and Infinity*. What remains for me to say shall focus on his later work, including his second main work, *Otherwise than Being*. Very roughly speaking, these two books differ in approach in so far as *Totality and Infinity* focuses on our encounter with the face, whereas *Otherwise than Being* focuses on the nature of a subject who is capable of encountering the face.

Underlying Levinas's work is the thesis that conscience is prior to consciousness - as we have seen. This priority is not the priority of an unconscious lurking under a surface of conscious and really ruling the roost, the kind that Nietzsche invokes in his writings time and again. Rather, it is prior in the sense of a transcendental condition. Levinas never dealt with Nietzsche's philosophy at any great length - which, as I have mentioned, is both surprising and a shame, given that ethics is so central to the philosophies of both men, and given Nietzsche's alleged ideological association with a political party who murdered most of Levinas's family. If he had dealt with Nietzsche's critique of Judeo-Christian morality, this is what, I suggest, he would argue: that Nietzsche has overlooked the ethical origins of consciousness in conscience. He would probably have said that,

yes, if the 'philosophy of the Same' and the freedom of the subject had the priority that the Western philosophical tradition has given to them, then Nietzsche is right to insist that the essence of life is 'appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation', 'will to power'. But this is to overlook our prior exposedness to the Other, which is not an experience, and which cannot be incorporated within the history of a subject as an allegiance which he freely undertook at a particular point in time. It is the evocation of this prior exposedness that constitutes the heart of Levinas's second major work, *Otherwise than Being*, to which I now turn.

In this strange book he is, to use a phrase Wittgenstein used, 'making propaganda' for a certain type of thinking that unearths this prior exposedness, the priority of conscience to consciousness. *Otherwise than Being* is a frustrating and opaque book, that possesses an almost incantatory quality, as Levinas insists over and over again on the same essential point. His clearest exposition of this point, to my mind, occurs not in the book itself, but in an essay called 'Nonintentional Consciousness'. To be clear about the nature of 'nonintentional consciousness', it helps to have in mind which aspects of consciousness has in mind:

> Consciousness is a mode of being such that beginning is its *essential*. To begin - to ignore or suspend the undefined density of the past - is the wonder of the *present*. All contents of consciousness were received, were present and consequently are present or represented, memorable. Consciousness is the very impossibility of a past that had never been present, that is closed to memory and history (EN: 49).

It is on the basis of the freedom and autonomy of consciousness that philosophers - including Nietzsche - have reasoned, according to Levinas, which is why they have all propagated 'philosophies of the Same'. He draws an illuminating parallel between philosophy and the fate of Job:

We still reason as though the ego had been present at the creation of the world and as though the world, henceforth in its charge, had issued from an act of free will. Such are the presumptions of philosophers, the presumptions of idealists. Indeed, it is for this that Scripture reproaches Job. No doubt he could have understood his misfortunes had they been the result of his faults. ... in an orderly world one is responsible only for one's *own* actions. Ergo, Job must have been guilty of an oversight. But the meaning of the world is not inscribed in being as a theme that exhibits itself in this world. ...

Entering too late into a world created without him, he is responsible over and above what he experiences. And yet, in the same way, he is *better* for not being a mere effect of this world (BPW: 93).

Levinas will argue that consciousness in the sense defined above, and the freedom associated with it, rests on a prior 'non-intentional consciousness'. This non-intentional consciousness is something Heidegger devotes a lot of attention to, in his insistence on the 'thrownness' of 'Dasein', its 'always already' being situated in a particular relation to being. It is that feeling which Kierkegaard, prior to both Heidegger and Levinas, so well articulates when he writes, 'Why was I not asked about [coming into this world], why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks as if I had been bought from a peddling shanghaier of human beings?'.[141] What Levinas objects to about Heideggerian thrownness is its lack of ethical content, which is the dimension of it that Levinas is concerned to make so much of. He refers, in the essay mentioned above, to our thrownness as 'bad conscience', of which he writes we are,

... without intentions, without aims, without the protective mask of the character contemplating himself in the mirror of the world, self-assured and affirming himself. Without name, position, or titles. A presence that fears presence, stripped of all attributes. ...

Bad conscience or timidity: accused without culpability and responsible for its very presence. Reserve of the non-invested, the non-justified, the 'stranger in the earth,' in the words of the Psalmist

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[141] Quoted in Caputo (1987), p.25.

the stateless or homeless person, who dares not enter. The interiority of the mental is perhaps originally this. *Not in the world, but in question* (EN: 129, italics mine).

Levinas, in this passage, is trying to invoke a sense of self that is prior to our sense of 'self-possession', a sense of our 'selves' prior to having been *invested* with 'the protective mask of the character contemplating himself in the mirror of the world', prior to our name, positions and titles. As such, these passages can be compared with Heidegger's passages on *angst*, in so far as both are trying to describe a rupture in our ordinary understanding of ourselves that reveals something more fundamental or 'originary' about us. The big difference is that Levinas insists, unlike Heidegger, on the ineluctably ethical character of this rupture, this mood of dispossession and vulnerability prior to and underlying one's self-possession. For Levinas, prior to intentionality, freedom and consciousness, we are accused, and responsible for our very presence - this is the locus of ethics, and it is what his whole philosophy points towards. This bad conscience is not, as it is for Nietzsche, 'some childhood of the mind to be outgrown, or the momentary weakening of an otherwise impassive psyche':

> In the passivity of the non-intentional ... the very justice of position in being which is affirmed in intentional thought, knowledge and control of the now is questioned: being as bad conscience; being put in question, but also put to the question, having to answer - the birth of language; having to speak, having to say 'I,' being in the first person, being precisely myself; but henceforth, in the assertion of its being as myself, having to answer for its right to be ... Having to answer for one's right to be, not by appealing to the abstraction of some anonymous law, some juridical entity, but in the fear for the other person. My 'being in the world' or my 'place in the sun,' my home - are they not a usurpation of places that belong to the other man who has already been oppressed or starved by me? ... Fear for all the violence and murder of my existing, despite its intentional and conscious innocence, can bring about. ... A fear that comes to me from the face of the other person (EN:130).

Louis Macniece, in his 'Prayer Before Birth', voices a similar sentiment in the lines, 'I am not yet born; forgive me / For the sins that in me the world shall commit'.[142] What Levinas is trying to do in this passage is to emphasise our passivity in the face of other people and the necessity of justifying ourselves to them, a necessity that arises not from an autonomous but from a *heteronomous* moral subject who fears for the harm that his simply existing, being there, 'under the sun', may *unintentionally* cause other people. Levinas is arguing, *pace* Nietzsche, that there is no 'innocence of becoming'. We are hurled into a world that was here before we were, and in occupying a place in it we are occupying a place that could be occupied by somebody else if we were not here. When we come into the world we all do so as strangers, homeless and stateless, nameless, without identity, and this is something that 'always already' constitutes us, prior to our becoming conscious of, taking over, particular responsibilities and identities. As Levinas poetically puts it in 'Without Identity':

> Echo of the permanent *saying* of the Bible: the condition - or incondition - of strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt brings man closer to his fellow man. Men seek one another in their incondition of strangers. No one is at home. The memory of that servitude assembles humanity (HO: 66).

Perhaps this is why making a genuine apology to somebody can be so difficult and terrifying - because it reminds us of our primordial condition of stranger. There is an analogy here with the Buddhist notion of 'going forth'. In traditional Buddhist societies one ordained as a Buddhist monk would be spoken of as 'going forth' from civic life, and would be referred to as an 'anagarika', literally 'a cityless one'. In Levinasian terms, we could say that such a person is exposing himself to our primordial condition as strangers, to the very fact that our simply being in the world is violent, and needs to be justified.

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[142] In Francis Turner (ed.), *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.518.

Levinas's whole philosophy is an appeal to this 'bad conscience' which precedes freedom, our capacity to fear for the other and the harm that our simply 'being there', existing, may, *unintentionally*, cause him. To be human is 'to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it' (EN: 133), which is perhaps the pithiest way of expressing Levinas's objection to Nietzsche and the will to power, to the assurance of ever greater degrees of power over various forms of life.

We do not choose to be good ('No one is good voluntarily', Levinas writes (OB: 11)). Rather, prior to the conscious decision to be good or bad, prior to the decision to exercise one's will to power in one way rather than another, prior to giving oneself laws or deciding to embody particular values, we have 'always already' been delivered over to the Other, we 'always already' have responsibilities which we did not contract, which arose prior to us, but nevertheless obligate (but not compel) us:

> *Interiority is the fact that in being* the beginning is preceded but that which precedes is not presented to the free gaze that would assume it, does not make itself present or representation; something already happened 'over the head' of the present, did not pass through the cord of consciousness and does not let itself be recuperated; something that precedes the beginning and the principle, something that is, an-archically, *despite* being, reverses or precedes being (HO: 51).

And, 'Prior to consciousness and choice, before the creature collects himself in present and representation to make himself essence, man approaches man. He is stitched of responsibilities. Through them, he lacerates essence' (HO: 67). This being 'stitched of responsibilities' is not something that can be proved or demonstrated, because it precedes all such proofs and demonstrations, for reasons we have seen earlier concerning the priority of justice over truth. In this manner Levinas presents an alternative way of accounting for ethics to the one Nietzsche attacks. That account - Platonic, Christian, or Kantian - grounds morality in a 'true world' which grants to morality its value, grounds it in knowledge. Nietzsche's attack on Judeo-Christian morality is based on his attacking the idea of a 'true world' in

which it is grounded, an attack that, as we saw in chapter one, was facilitated by Kant's critical philosophy. This leads Nietzsche to argue that moralities grounded in 'true worlds' are hostile to life in this world, and as such, should be replaced with a morality that does not denigrate this world. He finds, as we have seen, the will to power to be the adequate expression for such a morality. He argues that the drive for power underlies all human actions, even the most ostensibly power-free actions, such as generosity or patience. Levinas, crucially, does not seek to ground morality in a 'true world', in knowledge. On the contrary, he regards attempts to do so as symptomatic of the 'philosophy of the Same', and its attempts to reduce goodness to truth, to situate morality within the wider, more fundamental context of knowing or understanding. Instead Levinas situates morality in a phenomenology of the face of another person. More importantly with reference to Nietzsche, he argues that language and self-consciousness are only made possible by our relationship with another person, and his calling me to be just. This leads him, in his later work, which is more concerned with the nature of moral subjectivity, to argue that, prior to consciousness, to the autonomous subject and his free decision to respond to particular obligations, there is a prior obligatedness that originates out of our fear for the other person, and the potential violence that my simply being here in the world, occupying a 'place under the sun', causes him.

What I am suggesting is that Levinas's philosophy offers a new way of thinking about ethics that can and must be used to supplement Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche's philosophy. 'Every thinker is dependent - upon the address of Being', wrote Heidegger (EGT: 55). The way in which Being addressed Levinas was very different to the way in which it addressed Heidegger and Nietzsche. He was a man haunted by the memory of the Holocaust. He experienced first hand the horrors of the Nazi regime, the practical consequences of thoughts that can be found in Nietzsche's portrayal of nihilism. He was also much more aware than Heidegger of the moral implications of our technological age. His philosophy attempts a response to both of these things, a voice in the wilderness, speaking out of the memory of suffering, and of the Old Testament prophets. Whilst it lacks the substance and detail of Nietzsche and Heidegger (Levinas only wrote

four main works, all of which are relatively short), it nevertheless, in a beleaguered time, holds out an affirming flame.

6.7. Assessing Levinas's Philosophy

As I have said earlier, Levinas's philosophy is difficult to access, because its central topic is not something that we can produce evidence for, as it were set up in front of us and discuss and reach agreement about. To quote again one of Levinas's commentators, 'To succeed as a philosophy of the Other, it must fail as a philosophical text, fail to thematize adequately its subject'. Thus, in one interview Levinas says,

> There is no evidence with regards to the face; there is, rather, an order in the sense that the face is commanded value. Consequently, you could call it generosity; in other terms, it is the moment of faith. Faith is not a question of the existence or non-existence of God. It is believing that love without reward is valuable (PL: 176-7).

The problem is that Levinas is trying to point out what cannot be pointed out by philosophy - by doing philosophy! In this respect his work is analogous to Kierkegaard's. Levinas argues that philosophy is a particular way of speaking that arose in Greece at a certain time. He says,

> The Greeks have taught us how to speak. ... Greek philosophy is a special language which can say everything to everyone because it never presupposes anything in particular. Greek philosophy is the way that people speak in the modern university the world over. ... It is a certain way of presenting things. It is a way of using language that everyone can enter (PL: 179).

'It is a way of using language that everyone can enter.' But what Levinas is trying to articulate cannot be universalized in this way. The encounter with the face is *my* encounter with the face. As soon as I try to universalize this encounter, I, as it were, begin to speak Greek, and, in so doing, repress the

very thing that I am trying to express, by thematizing it, placing it within a context, totalizing it.

Moreover, as we have seen, Levinas argues that the impulse to speak Greek, to universalize, depends on a prior encounter with the face. On the basis of this encounter, in the face of more than one person making demands upon one, there is the necessity to generalize. As he puts it in one interview:

> Now, when there are two unique beings, the genre appears. From this moment on, I think of the other in the genre. I am Greek, it is Greek thought. The thought of comparison, of judgement, the attributes of the subject, in short, the entire terminology of Greek logic and Greek politics appear. ... But, what I say, quite simply, is that [Greek thought and the desire for justice] is, ultimately, based on the relationship to the other, on the ethics without which I would not have sought justice (PL: 174).

This does all raise serious questions about to what extent Levinas can still claim to be doing philosophy, or, more specifically, phenomenology. He is insistent that what he is concerned to articulate - the 'face' - is not a phenomenon, does not show itself. In one essay he refers to it as an 'enigma' (BPW: p.70) and, as we have seen, he points out in *Totality and Infinity* that, 'The welcoming of the face and the work of justice ... are not interpretable in terms of disclosure' (TI: 28). This leads me to think that perhaps the best way of reading Levinas's often emotive and incantatory prose is as a kind of performance that attempts to break open the accretions of the ego in order to foster a greater recognition of the 'otherness' of other people, their resistance to all of our attempt to reduce them to something more general than their own uniqueness. He is not trying to 'ground' or to 'found' ethics. Rather, he is trying to show why all such attempts to do this come too late, and that ethics requires evocation rather than explanation, that being ethical is a response to a call, not the call of 'Being', but of the other person, in his vulnerability, his susceptibility to suffering, and his 'being-towards-death'.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to articulate a satisfactory response to the issue of nihilism and to the philosophy of Nietzsche, based on the writings of the phenomenologists Heidegger and Levinas. I began, in chapter one, by explaining the nature of nihilism as Nietzsche saw it. He regards modern European nihilism and the death of God as the result chiefly of Kant's arguments against us having knowledge of 'things-in-themselves'. This puts paid to the 'true world' hypotheses of Plato and Christianity whereby this world has been invested with meaning insofar as it is related to another, higher, better world. In chapter two I examined Nietzsche's proposed solutions to nihilism: chiefly, the overman and the will to power. The overman is able to create his own values in the face of the collapse of Judeo-Christian values, whilst recognising that his values are not part of a 'true world'. These values will be based on the will to power, a view of life as the constant striving for ever greater degrees of power and distinction. Thus nihilism is overcome through the emergence of great men who are able to endure the demise of 'true worlds' without lapsing into despair or mediocrity. I then pointed out what kind of social arrangements Nietzsche viewed as necessary for the production of such men, and the lack of any limits placed on who or what might be sacrificed in order for such men to thrive. I tried to show that Nietzsche's philosophy contains elements that we must find deeply disturbing, elements that may have been overlooked by commentators in attempts to redress Nazi distortions of his work, and champion him as a forerunner of existentialism and postmodernism. As Nietzsche himself insisted, he is 'dynamite' (EC: 15 1 / p.96)! Let us not domesticate him, like an outspoken guest at a dinner party who we fear might embarrass us.

In chapter three I consider Heidegger's response to Nietzsche and nihilism. Heidegger reframes the issue of nihilism, portraying Nietzsche as thoroughly bound up with nihilism rather than moving beyond it. For him, nihilism is symptomatic of a forgetfulness of Being, a forgetfulness that began around the time of Plato, and the switch from truth as unconcealment to truth as correspondence. This set Western philosophy and culture on a

course of increasing subjectivization of Being, culminating in Nietzsche's conception of nihilism in terms of values, and the age of 'technology'. Crucially, for Heidegger, nihilism is an event of Being itself. It has been sent us by Being. To think that we ourselves have brought it about, as Nietzsche does, is itself a form of nihilism, a version of the humanistic hubris that nihilism manifests as.

In chapter four I considered Heidegger's attack on Cartesianism, and the subject-object distinction, as mounted in *Being and Time*, in terms of its implications as a critique of Nietzsche and his conception of nihilism. In chapter five I considered other aspects of Heidegger's writing as responses to nihilism: those on authenticity, art, language, thinking, and the 'fourfold'. I concluded that, for Heidegger, responding to nihilism involves becoming more aware of ourselves as disclosers of Being, becoming more aware of the particular, technological, understanding of being within which we move, and becoming attuned to Being, to the 'source' of all particular disclosures of being. This source is, crucially, not dependent on us. Rather, we are dependent on it, for our language, for our lives, and, as such, it is an appropriate object of reverence and gratitude.

At the end of this chapter I considered three aspects of Heidegger's thought that might cause us unease: the sense of submission to the destiny of Being, his harkening back to a primordial 'ethos', and the ontic-ontological distinction that runs through his work. I suggested that this latter distinction diminishes Heidegger's philosophy's effectiveness as a response to Nietzsche because it subsumes the ethical dimension of Nietzsche's threat under a supposedly all-encompassing question of Being, and thus does not specifically address the most disturbing feature of Nietzsche's response to nihilism.

To redress this lack I turn to Levinas in the last chapter. Here I outline and assess Levinas's critique of Heidegger for his subsuming of ethics to ontology, and his 'anarchical' ethics of the face as a way of philosophically upholding an ethics of fellow feeling that does not fall prey to Nietzsche's corrosive critique of morality.

I thereby hope to have shown that Heidegger's and Levinas's philosophies provide us with means for responding to Nietzsche's nihilism, without adopting the unpalatable solutions that he proposes, solutions which would render democracy and fellow feeling weaknesses to be overcome rather than strengths to be cherished.

William Barrett, in the concluding pages of his excellent *The Illusion of Technique*, writes:

> As soon as we are born we breathe the air of religion: We are alive, and so we must die. Amid all the definitions proposed for man the most truthful is that he is the religious animal. He created religions long before the Greeks created reason. And now that he lives at last in the world of science and the computer, new religions sprout all over the map. It would be folly to think that this part of him was an accidental excrescence terminated by the French revolution. The fanaticism of subsequent history has shown that mankind has simply displaced its religious passions into the world; and the results have been more terrifying than any religious inquisition.[143]

We are, as Nietzsche points out, sensitive, delicate creatures, in need of balms to soothe our aching wounds. And now the traditional remedies are banned us. Nihilism is upon us. But we are fools, as Barrett suggests, if we think we have done with religion, or the need for religion. We are often told that we are now living in a secular age. To think this is naive. It is rather that our gods have taken different forms now. As Heidegger insists, we 'always already' live under the gods, even if they have abandoned us. It could be feasibly argued - as David Loy does in chapter nine of *A Buddhist History of the West* - that capitalism, far from being some value-neutral economic system, is essentially a religion. Like all religions, it offers its own forms of salvation, of transcendence - they just do not happen to be very satisfactory ones. Nietzsche's 'last man' walks the shopping malls, blinking at the dazzling array of products now on offer. In the writings of Heidegger and Levinas we find new ways of thinking about being 'religious'

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[143] William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique* (London: William Kimber, 1979), p.343.

(in the broadest sense of the term)- in 'Being' and the 'face' - without falling back into the ascetic nihilism Nietzsche castigates.

In addressing the issue of nihilism, I have been forced to consider the whole history of Western philosophy, via the writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Levinas. Two thousand five hundred years ago Plato sought to locate meaning and morality outside the cave of culture. Over a hundred years ago Nietzsche proclaimed the end of such an attempt, castigating it as nihilistic, life-denying. Meaning and morality are firmly culture-bound, and this is something we must learn to live with, he insists. Heidegger negotiates a 'middle way' between the two. Language and culture are not obstacles separating us from a 'true world', and neither are they a prison within which we are condemned to be trapped. Rather, they are the means whereby Being manifests itself to us, its shepherds. This 'middle way' offers us a way beyond nihilism.

I hope to have shown that, if nihilism really is a threat, there are other ways of framing the issue and responding to it than those provided by Nietzsche. We do not need to create new values based on the will to power. It is not an elite of higher men whose excellence is going to justify the mediocrity of the majority and make life meaningful again in the wake of the death of God. Rather, we must heed the rally call of phenomenology and attend to the 'things themselves', the threads of care by which we *are*, in the world, and to the face of the other person, calling me to be just. Moreover, we must attend to the hold that technology has on our lives. We must give thanks for the threads of meaningfulness that we have inherited from previous generations, and attend to those aspects of our lives which resist the objectifying tendencies of technology: we must learn to dwell and build. We must attend to the ways in which we are 'always already' ethical, 'always already' beholden to the other man. No big global blue-print of reform can take us out of nihilism in one fell swoop - thinking in this manner would be to forget Being, to practice totalizing thought, to remain nihilistic. We do not need philosopher kings imposing their will from above. Small steps, wandering and slow, are what is needed, for, as a humble English novelist from Nuneaton pointed out, '... the growing good of the

world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs'[144]. These faithful, hidden, unrecorded lives, lived 'far from the madding crowd', are disregarded by Nietzsche, in his constant search for grandeur and greatness. As such, he remains as metaphysical as the metaphysicians that he castigates. Heidegger and Levinas return us to the 'plain sense of things'. This is why they may help us to move beyond nihilism into something else ...

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[144] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 1965), p.896.

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