

After The Death Of God:  
From Political Nihilism To Post-Foundational Democracy

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## Abstract

*The topic of this dissertation is Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics viewed through the prism of Nietzsche's declaration that 'God is dead'. I argue that Nietzsche's transvaluation of value remains ensnared by the 'will to power' and the nihilistic destiny of the 'eternal return'. I look at Heidegger's late thought as a response to the disenchantment of nature and the technological 'framing' of Earth. I argue that the delineation of a non-instrumental way of life requires a political turn that is quite different from Heidegger's own conservative nationalism. While the post-structuralist appropriation of Heidegger's late thought makes some tentative moves towards a post-foundational democracy, I argue that the deconstruction of political community stemming from Derrida, Levinas, and Nancy fails to adequately deal with the question of democratic sovereignty. In light of this inadequacy, I take up the political theory of Benjamin, Schmitt, and Agamben in order to further delineate a 'negative political theology' without reference to any metaphysical grounding of sovereign power. Essential to such a politics is the non-linear experience of time as 'event'. I contrast Benjamin's notion of empty 'homogenous time' with Agamben's analysis of non-linear 'revolutionary time'. I suggest that the eschatological remembrance of democracy requires an interruption of history as a linear sequence of time. Against the instrumental 'framing' of democracy, I advocate for the decentralization of sovereignty to local modes of participatory self-government such as general assemblies, councils, and cooperatives.*

Dedication

To my parents,  
For their love and support

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Introduction:

*Argument*

A major claim of this dissertation is that modernity is an age of 'spiritual crisis'. I argue that the modern age ought to be understood in light of Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration that 'God is dead'. The 'death of God' is the discovery that Truth is not absolute. Indeed, Justice, Beauty, and Truth are metaphysically ungrounded. The notion of Absolute Truth is untenable in the modern era. Truth becomes nothing but subjective preference. Postmodern thinkers interpret the relativity of truth as liberation. The deconstruction of that which Derrida calls a 'transcendental signifier' opens up a plurality of diverse interpretations in place of the 'first cause'. Nevertheless, postmodernism is naïve to the extent that the very real danger of nihilism stemming from the 'death of God' is evaded, suppressed, and concealed. I argue that nihilism is not just an existential issue, but deeply political as well. The planetary framework of

rationalization, secularization, and modernization undermines social ties to communities of belonging, which in turn leads to social fragmentation, alienation, and anomie. In response to the dissolution of value and truth, the only perceived refuge becomes the 'active nihilism' of religious fundamentalism and political violence. As Nietzsche indicates, disclosing the ungrounded abyss provokes a 'metaphysical need' for moral absolutes. The challenge, therefore, is to face the void without succumbing to a nostalgia for the Absolute.

Another major claim is that authoritarianism is symptomatic of nihilism, not its converse. Postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida tend to associate nihilism with democratic pluralism and authoritarianism with foundationalism. For Derrida, nihilism is emancipation – *freedom from* moral absolutes and *freedom to* decide for oneself what is meaningful. According to this logic, post-foundationalism gives rise to the self-legislation of meaning, value, and truth. But what *is* meaningful? Indeed, what *is* good? More often, the discovery that our highest values are ontologically ungrounded provokes a sense of *angst*, anxiety, or horror before the abyss. We ignore the 'metaphysical need' for security at our own peril. To paraphrase Nietzsche, it is necessary for man to know why he exists. But what happens when all possible answers to such a question are exposed as nothing but myth? Derrida deconstructs the notion of a comprehensive meta-narrative that could give meaning to life. But the postmodern account of the dissolution of an overarching meta-narrative is itself just another meta-narrative – the myth of the absence of myth. While the myth of postmodernism has become entangled in its own web of self-contradictions, it is nevertheless impossible to return to a

dialectical belief in the innate logic of Reason, History, and the State. What, then, is the way forward? I intend to journey through the dangerous landscape of political nihilism in search of an answer. The path that leads out of political nihilism is long and winding. There are no clear answers to the problem of nihilism, and no guarantee that we will find our way. My hope is that insight into the ontological groundlessness of being may give way to post-foundational democracy rather than the law-founding violence of sovereign decision.

I argue that the 'death of God' requires that thinking occur without recourse to metaphysical foundations. I understand metaphysics to be more or less synonymous with Platonic metaphysics. Platonic metaphysics is characterized by the unconditional grounding of meaning, value, and truth in a fixed origin, foundation, or cause. I interpret Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology as an initial attempt to think without foundations. I nevertheless argue that Heidegger's ontology replicates that which it attempts to supplant – the primacy of the ungrounded 'will to power'. Heidegger unwittingly assigns the divine attributes of God to Man – the power of creation *ex nihilo*. After the 'death of God', Man, not God becomes the sovereign legislator of value. Just as Nietzsche's overcoming of nihilism is itself nihilistic, Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics remains insufficient and incomplete. I therefore argue that it is necessary to move beyond the philosophical milieu of Heidegger's confrontation with Nietzsche in order to more fully explicate a post-foundational democratic alternative to political nihilism. For this reason, I take up the post-structuralist appropriation of Heidegger's thought by Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas. I argue that the

deconstruction of political community and sovereign power ultimately renders democracy inoperative. I therefore turn to the political theology of Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt in order to more fully illuminate an alternative post-foundational democracy without recourse to any 'onto-theological' grounding of sovereign power.

Following Heidegger, I claim that the relentless destruction of nature in the modern era arises from the metaphysical dualism of ancient Greek philosophy. With the 'flight of the gods' in the wake of the universal scientific world-view, nature is reduced to nothing but a resource for technological exploitation. Heidegger's late thought attempts to cultivate a non-instrumental relation to nature through the practice of mindful 'dwelling' in the world. But the political implications of this environmental ethic remain undeveloped. I find it necessary to leave the climate of Heidegger's confrontation with Nietzsche in order to more fully explore the democratic implications of the deconstruction of metaphysics. I nevertheless use Heidegger's analysis of the technological framing of Earth to understand the worldwide 'depoliticization' and 'deterritorialization' of democracy. I argue that liberal internationalism does not signify a more enlightened politics, but rather the narrow vision of the political as the 'ground' of politics. I attempt to think the political not as a metaphysical foundation of the state, but as the ungrounded 'site' of post-foundational democracy.

A central argument of this dissertation is that there is a fundamental relationship between Heidegger's overcoming of onto-theology and the struggle to overcome the authoritarian element of Schmitt's political theology. Indeed, I argue that the



deconstruction of 'onto-theology' lends itself to a *negative political theology* of post-foundational democratic anarchism. Schmitt argues that political sovereignty is a secularization of the theological notion of creation *ex nihilo*. Just as the creative self-legislation of values is a secular reflection of the divine will to create meaning from nothing, sovereign power is a secularization of divine power to create order out of chaos. I understand Benjamin's reflections on 'divine violence' as the converse of Schmitt's notion of 'sovereign decision'. Indeed, for Benjamin, the non-linear temporality that is delineated by Klee's drawing *Angel of History* illuminates the 'true exception' to the eternal return of law-making and law-preserving violence. I argue that true democracy is anarchy. *An-arche*: without foundation, principle, or ground.

An examination of the intersection of political nihilism and post-foundational democracy after the 'death of God' calls into question the modern experience of time. While ancient philosophy understands time as the infinite repetition of a closed loop, modernity views time as a linear sequence of 'nows'. While the former is a horrific vision of arbitrary fate, the latter amounts to a catastrophic faith in history as progress. Contra the modernist understanding of history as progress, I outline a revolutionary temporality of 'the event.' Heidegger's philosophy proves indispensable here. I argue that the advent of post-foundational democracy would be equivalent to an eschatological break from the dialectical movement of history towards its culmination in the universal 'world-state'. Contrary to the historical emergence of the nation-state and the more recent transition to post-national forms of super-state governance, post-foundational democracy would amount to a reversal of this logic. Contrary to the

current post-democratic centralization of power at the level of the continental super-state (such as the EU), post-foundational democracy involves the decentralization of sovereignty directly to the people.

Another major claim is that post-foundational democracy is participatory, not representative. This involves an important distinction between liberalism on the one hand, and democracy on the other. While the former is a modern concept, the latter is quite ancient. I therefore argue that democracy is not a utopian image of the future. Instead, democracy involves a remembrance of a forgotten trace of the past. Following Heidegger, I argue that it is necessary to 'step back' to the origins of democracy in ancient Greece in order to 'leap beyond' the planetary framework of neoliberal globalization. Against the grain of history, I argue that post-foundational democracy is local, not global. For this reason, post-foundational democracy would require the dissolution of the liberal international framework of global capitalism. I therefore advocate for the participatory self-government of local regions, communities, and neighborhoods.

### *Literature*

I will conduct a chronological literature review from 1990 to the present on the academic scholarship that looks at the 'death of God' as the essential site of 'the political' in the modern era. This review is not intended to be systematic or complete. Rather, this review focuses on the intersection of nihilism and politics stemming from Heidegger's philosophical confrontation with Nietzsche. The literature on the topic

tends to range from viewing Heidegger's late thought as either giving rise to an ungrounded nihilism on one hand, or as cultivating a radical post-foundational democracy on the other. It is my aim in this dissertation to indicate the radical democratic potential of the ungrounded 'site' of the political opened by the 'death of God'. I argue that it would be a mistake to overlook the very real threat of political nihilism in the wake of Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics. Indeed, post-foundational democracy must face its own condition of ontological groundlessness in order to move beyond Nietzsche's horrific vision of cosmic nihilism. The danger of nihilism should not detract from an investigation of the transformative power of Heidegger's post-foundational thinking. I argue that 'the death of God' is the site of the political in the modern era. Indeed, I suggest that the void of God's absence need not threaten the future of democracy, but rather serves as its ungrounded site. Democracy is an-*arche* – without ground.

Reiner Schürmann's *Heidegger: From Principles To Anarchy* was published in 1990 and in many ways serves as the foundation of my interpretation of Heidegger. Schürmann suggests a novel method of reading Heidegger 'backward'. Schürmann interprets Heidegger's early writing in light of his late philosophy, which he takes to be more authoritative and insightful: "When read backward, from the last writing to the first, Heidegger appears in a different light . . . Instead of a unity concept of ground, we have the 'fourfold'; instead of praise from the firm will, detachment; instead of

straightforward identification between *Fuhrer* and right, anarchy.”<sup>1</sup> By giving priority to Heidegger’s late thought, Schürmann opens up Heidegger scholarship far beyond the typical existential interpretations that dominated the literature at the time. Following Schürmann, I recognize a break, or ‘turn’ between the style and substance of Heidegger’s early ontology and his late philosophy. Heidegger’s late thought is characterized in part by a ‘turning’ from the nihilistic ‘will to power’ towards a meditative style of ‘non-willing’. In the third chapter, I suggest that Heidegger’s turn towards ‘non-willing’ is of significant importance given Nietzsche’s own failed self-overcoming of nihilism via the ‘will to power’. I argue that the will to power is an expression of, rather than an alternative to, Nietzsche’s horrific vision of cosmic nihilism.

Schürmann’s book is oriented by the dissolution of absolute truth as an ontological foundation for thinking and acting. Schürmann attempts to “show what happens to the old problem of the unity between thinking and acting once ‘thinking’ no longer means securing some rational foundation . . . and once ‘acting’ no longer means conforming to the foundation so secured.”<sup>2</sup> This question has important implications for political *praxis*. For Heidegger ‘the political’ is not a foundation, origin, or ground, but rather a ‘site’ of interaction.<sup>3</sup> Schürmann argues that “to deconstruct the ontic origins of the political would mean to recover some of the conditions of the Greek *polis* prior to the classical age.”<sup>4</sup> But in spite of these provocative suggestions, Schürmann does not

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<sup>1</sup> Reiner Schurmann, *Heidegger: From Principles To Anarchy*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 1

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 39

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 91

seriously engage with the various political implications of Heidegger's thought. Indeed, Schürmann's notion of anarchy is more epistemological than political. In the final chapter of my dissertation, I attempt to further unpack Schürmann's notion of the deconstructed 'site' of the Greek *polis*. I suggest that post-foundational democracy shares the local and participatory aspects of the Greek *polis*. However, I do not view democratic participation through the agonistic, tragic lens of the ancient Greeks, but as a form of cooperative decision-making.

One of the most significant contributions of Schürmann's book is the discussion of Heidegger's epochal history of being. For Heidegger, each epoch of history discloses a distinct world of meaning and intelligibility. In this sense, Heidegger views history as a series of radical breaks rather than a logical chain of development. I argue that post-foundational democracy should be understood as an epochal break from the history of Western metaphysics rather than its dialectical culmination. This is a very different approach from post-modern thinkers such as Gianni Vattimo. In my judgment, Vattimo reduces post-foundational democracy to a variation of liberal democracy.<sup>5</sup> Contra Vattimo, I suggest that post-foundational democracy is an alternative to, rather than a development of, liberal-democracy. Indeed, I go on to suggest that post-foundational democracy is participatory, not representative.

Schürmann's book does not undertake a detailed analysis of Heidegger's philosophy of technology. For this reason Michael Zimmerman's book entitled *Heidegger's Confrontation With Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* was a welcome

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<sup>5</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism And Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, & Law*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004)

intervention when it was published in 1990. Zimmerman looks at Heidegger's treatment of technology and politics in a broader constellation of German thinkers including Jünger, Nietzsche, and Hölderlin. Zimmerman looks at Heidegger's critique of technology in light of the 'spiritual crisis' of modernity stemming from the 'death of God' and the ungrounded 'will to power'. For Heidegger, "both industrialism and modernity are symptoms of the contemporary disclosure of things as raw material to be used for expanding the scope of technological power for its own sake."<sup>6</sup> Zimmerman suggests that "discovering the groundlessness of the technological era makes possible the openness – and anxiety – necessary for the arrival of a new, postmodern era."<sup>7</sup> Zimmerman therefore frames Heidegger's deconstruction of ancient metaphysics as a revolutionary overturning of technological imperialism; "While recognizing that the Greek world could never be revived, Heidegger called for the *Volk* to initiate a beginning that was a radical and enduring as that carried out by the ancient Greeks."<sup>8</sup> For Heidegger, the step back to the 'Greek beginning' is not at all a naïve attempt to return to a previous epoch of history. Instead, the return to the beginning of philosophy is intended to inspire a leap beyond the history of Western metaphysics towards a new way of being and *dwelling* in the world.

Heidegger's revolutionary break with industrialism and modernity nevertheless proves disastrous in the context of the spectacular violence of World War II. Zimmerman explains that "to compensate for the loss of God, Germans began to deify

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation With Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), xiii

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 236

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 115

the *Volk* and make it the source of meaning and purpose for their lives.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Heidegger’s critique of technology replicates the same anthropocentric assumptions that it attempts to supplant. Zimmerman: “The radical break which occurred between God and humanity at Auschwitz resulted from a hubristic humanity which tried to raise itself to the level of the all-powerful God.”<sup>10</sup> The *Volk* supplants God as the generative source of value, meaning, and truth. But neither *Volk* nor *Staat* nor *Führer* can occupy the empty place of God. Indeed, I argue in the second chapter that the ‘death of God’ is also the ‘end of Man’ understood as a reflection, or image of the divine. But in spite of Heidegger’s deification of the German *Volk*, I nevertheless see value in Heidegger’s notion of a break from the technological nihilism of the ‘first beginning’ and the potential for ‘another beginning’. Heidegger is no doubt correct that neither capitalism nor socialism is capable of addressing the accelerating destruction of Earth. By presenting Heidegger in a broader constellation of post-foundational thinkers such as Levinas and Benjamin, I attempt to draw out the eschatological elements of Heidegger’s ‘step back’ from and subsequent ‘leap beyond’ the history of productionist metaphysics. I argue that there is no essential relationship between a break with Western metaphysics and the advent of the totalitarian State as seen in Nazi Germany. On the contrary, I argue that such a break is consistent with Levinas’ notion of ‘ethical command’ and Benjamin’s notion of ‘divine violence’. Levinas and Benjamin illuminate democratic alternatives to political nihilism that remains unexplored in Zimmerman’s book.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 10

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 127

Losurdo's book *Heidegger & The Ideology Of War: Community, Death, & The West*, published in 2001, builds on Zimmerman's work by undertaking a sustained analysis of Heidegger's political thought in the broader context of reactionary anti-modernist intellectual milieu of pre-war Germany. Losurdo suggests that Heidegger's philosophy is permeated by the same toxic political climate in which it arose. Losurdo therefore views Heidegger's notion of 'another beginning' through the dark prism of revolutionary fascism in pre-war Germany. Losurdo: "What explains Heidegger's encounter with Nazism is the combination of an extremely radical denunciation of scientific and political modernity and a fervent desire for an event that will restore primal greatness."<sup>11</sup> For Heidegger, political revolution is not nearly radical enough; what is needed is a transfiguration of our basic experience of being. Losurdo: "The political revolution cannot be considered complete without a radical cultural and philosophical transformation, without rethinking the 'fundamental conception of being'."<sup>12</sup> For Losurdo, Heidegger's desire for 'another beginning' caused him to mistake the Nazi seizure of the State as a 'leap beyond' the history of Western metaphysics which he so desperately sought. I nevertheless view the nationalist revolution in Germany as an expression of, rather than an alternative to the technological imperialism of the modern era.

Losurdo nevertheless stops short of arguing that Heidegger's thinking is nothing but a philosophical expression of Nazi ideology. Losurdo argues that "the denunciation

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<sup>11</sup> Domenico Losurdo, *Heidegger & The Ideology Of War: Community, Death, & The West*, (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 228

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 153



of modernity is at the same time a point in common with Nazism, and a possible critical confrontation with it.”<sup>13</sup> Losurdo understands National Socialism as a rejection of modernity that paradoxically accelerates some of its most destructive attributes, such as industrial warfare. Losurdo: “Nazism keeps alive the hope for a regeneration of society, one that will be able to halt and reverse the processes of industrialization and urbanization.”<sup>14</sup> Following Losurdo, I look at the elements of Heidegger’s thought that signify a critical confrontation with National Socialism, in addition to points of intersection between the two. According to the ideology of National Socialism, war offers up the essential sacrifice upon which a nation is founded. In other words, the nation must be forged from out of the common struggle of war in the absence of any metaphysical grounding of the community. In the fourth chapter, I ask whether it is possible to found a democratic people without recourse to foundational violence. Moreover, I ask whether political community can be founded on the suspension of violence rather than its expression? While fascism seeks an alternative to liberal anomie, liberalism seeks an alternative to nationalist violence. In this dissertation, I seek an alternative to both.

Richard Wolin’s book entitled *Heidegger’s Children*, published in 2001, attempts to establish Heidegger’s toxic philosophical legacy in light of the ‘dangerous’ political thought of his Jewish students: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse. According to Wolin, “like a Greek tragedy, the sins of the father will be visited

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 155

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 143

upon the daughters and sons.”<sup>15</sup> Wolin suggests that in spite of the attempt of Heidegger’s students to think ‘with Heidegger against Heidegger’ their political thought nevertheless remains contaminated by Heidegger’s hostility towards technology, liberalism, and democracy. Wolin’s critique is rather shallow and unconvincing. This insufficiency is likely a result of Wolin’s almost exclusive focus on the political implications of *Being And Time*. In focusing on the early themes of *Being And Time*, Wolin betrays an obvious unfamiliarity with Heidegger’s late thought. Wolin fails to engage with that which Shurmann calls the ‘turning’ that occurs between Heidegger’s early writing and his late thought. While some of Wolin’s criticisms of *Being And Time* are indeed justified, Wolin nevertheless leaves the political implications of Heidegger’s more challenging later thought unexplored. My dissertation draws heavily from Heidegger’s late essays and *Beiträge*, a series of meditative writings that include the recently translated *Contributions To Philosophy (Of The Event)*, *The Event*, *Mindfulness*, *Overcoming Metaphysics*, *The History Of Being*, and *The Beginning Of Western Philosophy*. By drawing from these late sources, I hope to conduct a more honest evaluation of Heidegger’s political legacy.

While I disagree with many elements of Wolin’s book, I nevertheless agree with his interpretation of Heidegger’s philosophy as a response to the nihilism provoked by Nietzsche’s declaration that ‘God is dead’. Wolin: “According to Nietzsche, the death of God was symptomatic of the delegitimation of the highest Western values and ideals. What remained was a devil’s choice between the abyss of nihilism and Nietzsche’s own

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, & Herbert Marcuse*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 20

alternative: the superman who was 'beyond good and evil'. Such were the 'ontic' or historical origins of Heidegger's *Existenz-philosophie*."<sup>16</sup> By attempting to address the nihilism of 'the West', Heidegger seeks "to provide the Nazi movement with the proper philosophical direction."<sup>17</sup> But for Heidegger, Nietzsche's overcoming of nihilism via the 'overman' is not an alternative to nihilism, but rather its most violent expression. Wolin appears to be ignorant of the fact that Heidegger viewed his own attempt to provide 'philosophical direction' for the Nazi regime as a spectacular failure. In my view, Wolin betrays a strong reactionary bias against any and all challenges to representative democracy and liberal capitalism. For this reason, Wolin loses sight of the transformative potential of Heidegger's thought and that of his students. Wolin demonstrates little appreciation for the originality of the thinkers that he dismisses as 'dangerous', 'toxic', and 'contaminated'. Needless to say, I strongly disagree with Wolin's assessment of 'Heidegger's children'. Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse (along with Leo Strauss) are by far the most important and insightful political theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is widely accepted that all three owe a significant debt to Heidegger's philosophy.

In spite of the many insufficiencies and oversights of Wolin's argument, I nevertheless find value in Wolin's attempt to evaluate Heidegger's philosophy in light of the political legacy of his students rather than solely based on his own political commitments, as significant as those are. For this reason, my dissertation places Heidegger in a constellation of political thinkers who have been deeply influenced by

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 173

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 181

Heidegger's philosophical legacy. Unlike Wolin, my aim is not to reject Heidegger's philosophy outright. Instead, I suggest that the deeply insightful elements of Heidegger's thought can be more clearly discerned by evaluating Heidegger in light of a broader constellation of thinkers inspired by his philosophy, including Derrida, Benjamin, and Levinas. Indeed, Heidegger's 'step back' to the philosophy of ancient Greece informs my own discussion of post-foundational democracy in light of the ancient Greek polis. Against the authoritarian destruction of history, the 'step back' requires a remembrance of our origins, a critical exercise that Wolin condemns as inherently dangerous to the liberal international order.

Julian Young's book on *Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, published in 2002, is a welcome change from Wolin's treatment of Heidegger's philosophy as nothing but an extension of Nazi ideology. Young uncovers a crucial element of Heidegger's thinking that had remained relatively unexplored in the literature up this point – 'the event'. Young: "Metaphysics blocks access to the unfathomable 'depth' of Being, to the mystery of its 'self-concealment', and it blocks access to Being's 'granting' of being to us, the phenomenon of its self-disclosure, its 'giving' of itself to us (in the *Event*)."<sup>18</sup> While the ancient Greeks perceived the radiant emergence of being to presence, we are more likely to perceive the withdrawal of being into the darkness of concealment in our own era after the 'death of God'. Young indicates an important relation between poetry, technology, and nature in Heidegger's late thought. Heidegger understands *poiesis* as 'bringing forth', *techne* as 'aided bringing forth', while *physis* is understood as 'unaided

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<sup>18</sup> Julian Young, *Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 29

bringing forth'.<sup>19</sup> Young goes on to argue that: "By occluding the sense of the world as 'brought forth', as the self-revelation of the divine, it destroys the sense of it as a sacred place, and, as such, a place to be revered and cared for."<sup>20</sup> In this sense, Heidegger's thought lends itself to a conservation ethic of 'sparing' and 'preserving', rather than the Nietzschean will to generate meaning *ex nihilo*, from out of *nothing*. Heidegger envisions humanity not as 'overmen', but as 'guardians' of nature.

While Young's book offers an insightful exploration of the environmental implications of Heidegger's late philosophy, he nevertheless evades the more disturbing political implications of Heidegger's thought as discussed by Zimmerman and Losurdo. Young does not look in any great detail at how Heidegger's environmental ethic of *dwelling* might be politically accomplished. In my view, Heidegger's environmental ethic cannot be accomplished via liberal representative democracy. Nor can an ethic of *dwelling* be accomplished via fascism, which is as much an intensification of technological nihilism as a rebellion against it. I therefore suggest that participatory democracy and local forms of extra-parliamentary political action are better suited to the cultivation of a non-instrumental relation to nature.

Graham Harman's 2007 book *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon To Thing* is, in my judgment, the best overall study of Heidegger's philosophical corpus, from the early phenomenological writings on existential themes to the late poetic meditations on technology and art. Harman suggests that Heidegger's fundamental insight is that being is not a presence, but an event. Harman: "All things that exist have the character of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 41

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 53

events.”<sup>21</sup> For Heidegger, being does not persist through time as an ontological substance. Instead, being ‘happens’, or ‘occurs’ only to ‘recede’ or ‘withdraw’ from presence; being is an *event*. The temporality of the *event* is not oriented towards the future, but to the past. Before we can represent it to ourselves, the moment is gone, only a memory. In spite of the fleeting nature of temporal impermanence, Harman claims that “the past is never entirely gone, since its possibilities remain with us in the form of a heritage.”<sup>22</sup> Harman: “Yet there is no way of touching our destiny unless we make contact with the power of the Greek beginning. Greek philosophy is the place where humans first take a stand amidst beings as a whole, interrogating and grasping them.”<sup>23</sup> According to Harman, “the Greeks understood what Husserl did not – that all light emerges only from shadow, and never entirely dispels that shadow. Things do not appear in lucid presence in consciousness, but emerge only partly from the unveiling of being.”<sup>24</sup> There are two beginnings in the history of ‘the West’: 1) the ‘first beginning’ in the classical age of ancient Greece, and 2) ‘another beginning’ that has yet to be accomplished. Following Young, Harman suggests that a ‘new beginning’ would illuminate an alternative to the technological framing of nature, and cultivate a non-instrumental way of ‘dwelling’ on our finite planet. Unfortunately, any interest in the environmental implications of Heidegger’s late thought has been supplanted by the

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<sup>21</sup> Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon To Thing*, (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2007), 22

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 76

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 98

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 154

question of Heidegger's personal involvement with National Socialism ever since the publication of Emmanuel Faye's landmark book, to which we now turn.

Emmanuel Faye's book entitled *Heidegger: The Introduction Of Nazism Into Philosophy* made a significant impact when it was published in 2009. For better or worst, Faye's book has shaped Heidegger scholarship ever since. Like Wolin, Faye argues that Heidegger's philosophy is nothing more than a vile expression of Nazi ideology. According to Faye, "we witness, in courses and lectures that are ostensibly presented as 'philosophical', a progress dissolving of the human being, whose individual worth is expressly denied, into a community of people rooted in the land and united by blood."<sup>25</sup> Faye: "That quest for soil, for essential enrootedness, and for a freeing of the life forces, is what energized Heidegger in his struggle for a vision of the historical world."<sup>26</sup> Faye's critique goes further than that of Wolin, arguing that Heidegger's philosophy is infected with biological racism and anti-Semitism grounded in little more than crude provincialism. Faye's book is a force to be reckoned with. After reading Faye's book, it is no longer possible to evade or deny Heidegger's Nazi sympathy's during the war years. But Faye's argument too often reads as a shrill polemic. Moreover, Faye makes numerous unjustifiable leaps in logic. Heidegger's philosophy is not necessarily an extension of party doctrine. Faye fails to convince that Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism contaminates his entire philosophical corpus with Nazi propaganda.

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<sup>25</sup> Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction Of Nazism Into Philosophy*, (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 2009), 2

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 15

Faye seems completely oblivious to the deeply insightful aspects of Heidegger's philosophy taken up by scholars such as Harman and Young. Instead, Faye reads Heidegger's *Being And Time* as a political manifesto, arguing that the displacement of the Cartesian ego in *Being And Time* paves the way for the destruction of the individual by the Nazi State. Faye: "The real project of *Being And Time* is the project to destroy the idea of the *I* in order to make room for the 'most radical individuation', which is emphatically realized not in the individual but in the organic indivisibility of the *Gemeinschaft* of the people."<sup>27</sup> This is a complete misreading in my judgment. Contra Faye, I am in agreement with Herbert Dreyfus's masterful exposition in *Being In The World: A Commentary On Heidegger's Being And Time, Division I*. In that book, Dreyfus argues that Heidegger's displacement of the Cartesian ego via an investigation of 'being-in-the-world' is primarily an ontological rather than political project. Contra Faye's polemic, Heidegger intends to 'bracket' consciousness of the object in order to 'step back' to the phenomenological horizon in which the object appears, or occurs. It becomes clear in light of Dreyfus' lucid analysis of Heidegger's fundamental ontology that Faye's interpretation of *Being And Time* is both limited and ideologically motivated. Heidegger's fundamental ontology is far from perfect, but it is hardly the Nazi propaganda that Faye claims it to be.

Contrary to Faye's indulgence in *ad hominem* attack, David Ohana offers a more honest and insightful evaluation of Heidegger's confrontation with Nietzsche's legacy in *The Dawn Of Political Nihilism*, published in 2012. Ohana looks at Nietzsche in a broader

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 17



constellation of European nihilism, including Italian Futurism, National Socialism, and Soviet Communism. Ohana places European nihilism in the intellectual context of thinking that responds to the 'death of God'. Ohana: "The cultural and political crisis that overcame the European cultural elite took the form of a rejection of the validity of the accepted ideas of the Western heritage on the one hand, and of a proposal of a radical alternative to that crisis on the other."<sup>28</sup> Ohana's most significant insight is that nihilism and totalitarianism are not two opposed world-views, but rather two sides of the same coin. Ohana: "Until now, nihilism and totalitarianism were considered opposites: one an orderless state of affairs, the other a strict regimented order. On closer scrutiny, however, a surprising affinity can be found between these two concepts."<sup>29</sup> Totalitarianism is not an alternative to, but rather an expression of nihilism – the will to establish order in the midst of chaos. Totalitarianism is creation *ex nihilo* – out of *nothing*.

According to Ohana, "the Nietzschean therapy for this radical diagnosis (the death of God) was the existence of the will to power as the counterweight to nihilism."<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche's nihilist revolution involves supplanting ethics with aesthetics. In the absence of any metaphysical grounding of morality, Nietzsche advocates for the aesthetic creation of meaning via the generative will. Ohana: "The nihilistic revolution is necessarily connected with the aesthetic one. Nietzschean nihilism – having gone beyond the traditional criterion for good and evil, truth and falsity – led to the new

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>29</sup> David Ohana, *The Dawn Of Political Nihilism*, (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 1

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 47

creative principle of the will to power. Traditional ethics was replaced by new aesthetics.”<sup>31</sup> Ohana explains that “Nietzsche viewed the world from an aesthetic standpoint: the paradoxical result of the death of God was the birth of the self-created man, and thus nihilism paved the way for a concept of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon.”<sup>32</sup> In the modern age, there are no moral absolutes that could provide a secure foundation for thinking and acting. It is therefore necessary to generate meaning as an aesthetic act of creation. I nevertheless argue against the ‘will to power’ as an antidote to nihilism in the first and second chapters. The self-overcoming of nihilism is not an adequate response to the loss of objective morality. Ohana states the problem well; “Man created an illusion of wholeness, order, and unity in order to organize the chaos by giving it a meaningful structure, but the reflective consciousness exposes the illusion.”<sup>33</sup> Man cannot bear to be the origin of his own meaning. I suggest that after the ‘death of God’, it is still possible to find meaning outside of ourselves located in the ethical command of the other.

Tracy Strong’s *Politics Without Vision*, published in 2013, looks at a constellation of 20<sup>th</sup> Century political thinkers including Nietzsche, Weber, Schmitt, Heidegger, and Arendt. Strong’s major claim is that politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century lacks vision. This lack of vision, according to Strong, is a direct result of the dissolution of any transcendental ideal in the modern age. Strong: “Humans no longer can rely on any transcendental

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 42

grounding to finalize their thinking – be that God, or nature, or history.”<sup>34</sup> Strong looks at the neoliberal ‘depoliticization’ of the State as symptomatic of this lack of transcendent vision. In response to the relentless globalization of modernity, Strong looks at an alternative constellation of political thinkers in order to explore paths not taken. One of Strong’s most interesting suggestions is that contemporary politics ought to be reoriented around the *polis* rather than the State as the primary ‘site’ of the political. Strong: “The *polis* is not *state* or even *city-state* . . . it is rather ‘the site of the abode of human history that belongs to humans in the midst of beings’ . . . the *polis* is the *polos* - both a pole and a vortex ‘around which everything turns’.”<sup>35</sup> For Strong, “the *polis* must be understood as an origin, as a work of art.”<sup>36</sup> But as we have seen, the aesthetic approach to politics is problematic. I tend to agree with Benjamin, who claims that the ultimate expression of the ‘*aestheticization*’ of politics is the fascist mass rally. Instead of aesthetics, what is needed is an ‘ethical turn’ after the dissolution of absolute value and the Nietzschean ‘will to nothing’. Strong nevertheless makes four important claims that map the territory I aim to explore:

- 1) The modern age is the age of *world* politics
- 2) The modern age has seen a shift from localized and limited goals of national interest to the limitless pursuit of power without purpose

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<sup>34</sup> Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision*, (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2012), 1

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 312

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 314

- 3) Part of this shift entails the growth of the invisible government over against the visible government
- 4) This, in turn, leads to the erosion, perhaps even the disintegration of the nation-state, that is, the space in which human beings belong and live as citizens.<sup>37</sup>

The modern age is indeed the age of world politics. It would seem that we are living through a transition from the nation-state to a new post-national world order. However, the implications of the end of the nation-state remain uncertain given that an alternative post-Westphalian model has yet to emerge in full. Apart from that which Strong calls 'invisible government' of the deep state, there are no actually existing alternatives to liberal democracy. A new vision of post-foundational democracy therefore requires a reconsideration of the 'site' of the political. In this dissertation I trace a line from Heidegger's overcoming of 'onto-theology', through its post-structural appropriation, and finally towards Benjamin's confrontation with political theology. In my judgment, the *polis* should not be conceived of as the nation-state – nor as the continental super-state or the planetary world-state – but as the *demos* in which we live and dwell and encounter one another. For democracy to have a future, it must be local, not global.

### *Context*

I will attempt to contextualize this dissertation within a broader intellectual horizon than a narrow literature can provide. I will therefore look at the intersection of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 346

political nihilism and post-foundational democracy within the broader horizon of contemporary political theory. I will juxtapose the post-Heideggerian deconstruction of metaphysics that I will explore throughout this dissertation with neo-Marxist theory. While Heidegger and Nietzsche are both 'right-wing' thinkers, this dissertation engages primarily with the political 'left'. I define 'the left' as those for whom Marx is a significant political thinker. In what follows, I review some significant trends in current Marxist theory in relation to my own engagement with the political nihilism stemming from the 'death of God' and the potential emergence of a post-foundational democracy.

I will now look at: 1) the Frankfurt School of Horkheimer and Adorno, 2) the postmodern Marxism of Derrida and Deleuze, and 3) The Marxist political theology of Žižek and Badiou.

First, I will look at the Frankfurt School of critical theory. The Frankfurt School was a loose academic community of post-Marxist scholars including Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse.<sup>38</sup> The purpose of the Frankfurt School was in part to explain the absence of proletarian revolution in the capitalist 'West'. The problem is that history proved Marx's theory of dialectical materialism wrong. Marx argues that the dialectic of 'World-History' is driven by the innate *telos* of the economic 'mode of production'. The dialectical logic of history means that capitalism transitions to communism just as day gives way to night. But when communism failed to give way to capitalism in Europe, it proved necessary to develop a theory 'class consciousness' to explain the 'false consciousness' of the masses. As the cultural theorist Žižek explains,

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<sup>38</sup> I am primarily concerned here with the 'first generation' of critical theory, as opposed to the second and third generations of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth.

“the great defining problem of Western Marxism was the lack of a revolutionary subject: why is it that the working class does not complete the passage from in-itself to for-itself and constitute itself as a revolutionary agent?”<sup>39</sup> Contra Marx, the Frankfurt School argues that the proletariat must first recognize their historical role as the subject of history, and only then will revolution follow. The task of critical theory is to bring about this new ‘class consciousness’, or that which Marcuse calls a ‘new sensibility’. This required a shift from Marx’s focus on political economy towards questions of culture, philosophy, and aesthetics.

Hannah Arendt was the first to perceive that National Socialism and Soviet Communism share the same totalitarian form with different ideological content. The brutality of ‘actually existing’ communism in the Soviet Union left critical theory in ‘the West’ without a compelling alternative model to the planetary hegemony of liberal capitalism. Instead, a democratic alternative would have to be fashioned from out of the ‘determinate negation’ of existing social conditions. The political theorist Susan Buck-Morss explains that “the Hegelian dialectic of progress, the optimistic scenario of world history as inevitable transcendence through negation, was long ago stripped of legitimacy. In its wake, there has been an almost exclusive focus on the left on critical epistemology, the moment of negation, as if critique were all that is required of philosophy.”<sup>40</sup> In my judgment, the well-worn criticism of critical theory is more or less accurate – that social criticism lacks a sufficient normative grounding. The basis of

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<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek: ed. Costas Douzinas & Slavoj Žižek. *The Idea Of Communism*, (London, UK: Verso, 2010), 72

<sup>40</sup> Susan Buck-Morss: ed. Costas Douzinas & Slavoj Žižek. *The Idea Of Communism*, (London, UK: Verso, 2010), 72

critique is opposition to the status quo rather than an alternative vision. The Post-Hegelian method of 'negation' utilized by the Frankfurt School lacks affirmation. Moreover, critical theory lacks a compelling model of political *praxis* beyond mere protest. In the absence of an alternative political vision, social criticism too often succumbs to petty resentment. In fact, contemporary critical theory has largely degenerated into 'checking privilege' on social media and enforcing 'safe spaces' on university campuses. In my opinion, we need to begin looking at alternative models of local self-governance, not just blind refusal, protest, and dissent.

Having looked at the Frankfurt School of critical theory, I will now look at the postmodern variation of Marxism. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the collapse of the Soviet Union along with the fall of the Berlin Wall were taken to signify the final victory of liberal capitalism over the communist model. Francis Fukuyama famously declared that the collapse of the Soviet Union amounts to 'the end of history'. Fukuyama suggests that with the collapse of communism, liberal democracy is destined to become the most advanced stage of political organization ever to be realized. For Fukuyama, the global adoption of liberal democracy signifies the dialectical fulfillment of Hegel's 'universal history'. Fukuyama argues that the planetary hegemony of liberal capitalism marks the dialectical fulfillment of 'World-Spirit'. More recently, the 'end of history' thesis has been used to justify the imposition of liberal democracy via military force in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, with more 'rogue states' sure to follow. But of course, history did not 'end' in 1989. History has returned with a vengeance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Today, liberalism faces a crisis of legitimacy in the face new and emerging

threats. As the post-war liberal consensus falters, it can no longer be taken for granted that we have seen the last of revolutionary nationalism. What is needed is a democratic alternative to both provincial nationalism and the rootless cosmopolitanism it rightly rejects.

In *Specters Of Marx*, Derrida responds to the utopian triumphalism of Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis. In that text, Derrida looks at Marxism through the prism of a 'hauntology'. For Derrida, the 'specters of Marx' do not refer to a communist threat that 'haunts' Europe. Instead, Derrida suggests that Marx himself is haunted by the hermeneutic openness of communism to alternative interpretations. Unfortunately, these 'specters' were thoroughly exorcised with the implementation of actually existing communism in the Soviet Union. Derrida therefore distinguishes between the 'spirit' of Marx's critique of capitalism on the one hand, and the dogmatic certainty of existing communism on the other. Derrida attempts to keep communism open to the 'specter' of its own haunted past. The democratic 'spirit' of communism involves an important temporal element. Derrida's theory of democracy is deeply informed by Heidegger's philosophy of time. For instance, Derrida's notion of a 'democracy to come' is indebted to Heidegger's description of 'ecstatic' temporality in *Being And Time*. In that book, Heidegger describes how the present moment arises through the projection of consciousness into the future and the recollection of the past. For Heidegger, the most important mode of temporality is the projection of consciousness into the future – 'being-towards-death'. Heidegger's notion of 'being-towards-death' is not some kind of Nazi warrior-ethic. On the contrary, 'being-towards-death' is the opening of



consciousness to the arrival of a future that cannot possibly be anticipated. Although the moment of one's death cannot be known, its arrival is certain. The same can be said for revolution.

Marx's theory of revolution is a secularization of messianic time. Derrida points out that Marx's dialectical materialism operates according to a messianic temporal structure. Derrida distinguishes between 'determinate messianism' on the one hand, and 'indeterminate messianism' on the other. Determinate messianism refers to a religious community of belief, while indeterminate messianism refers to the future-oriented temporality of expectation. Derrida suggests that Marxists anticipate the communist revolution just as Christians hope for the 'second coming' of Christ. Derrida's notion of the 'democracy to come' also expresses this 'messianic time' of expectation. Democracy is never complete, it is always still to come. For this reason, Derrida understands democracy as a radical openness to the future. Democracy is an unfinished project. It is nevertheless important to emphasize that democracy is not just the promise of the future. Indeed, democracy is also the inheritance of the past. For Derrida too, the 'inheritance of democracy' involves the remembrance of the past as well as the openness to the future. In my view, Derrida's notion of democracy as inheritance is indebted to Heidegger's philosophy of time. The temporality of Heidegger's late thought is quite different from the existential attunement of 'being-towards-death' investigated in *Being And Time*. While Heidegger's early philosophy emphasizes the projection of consciousness into the future, his late thought is more concerned with the recollection of history, tradition, and the nihilistic destiny of 'the West'. Heidegger's late thought

attempts to 'step back' to the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece. Likewise, the inheritance of democracy requires that we remember its beginnings in the ancient Athenian *polis*. Only then can we shelter the democratic tradition for future generations.

For this reason, my own engagement with post-foundational democracy tends to emphasize the revolutionary nature of non-linear time. In my judgment, Derrida's messianic structure of time bears too many structural similarities to the same Marxist-Hegelian dialectic of history that he claims to oppose. While Derrida's messianic time lacks the teleological direction of Hegel's universal history, both messianic time and dialectical history are nevertheless oriented towards the future. The problem, however, is that the orientation of consciousness towards a utopian future tends to remain blind to the atrocities of the past. This forgetfulness makes it more likely that these atrocities will be repeated in a perpetual cycle of 'eternal return'. For this reason, I find it necessary to emphasize the eschatological remembrance of democracy in order to counter Hegel's ideology of history as progress.

The philosophy of Deleuze is less entangled with dialectical materialism than that of Derrida. Deleuze's thinking is an expression of the philosophy of immanence and the politics of affect stemming from a neo-Spinozist ontological pluralism. The turn from Marx to Spinoza in contemporary political theory is a result of the ideological absurdity of dialectical materialism. With the 'death of God', Hegel's deification of history as 'World-Spirit' is no longer convincing; nor is Marx's faith in the innate *telos* of the technical 'mode of production'. Spinoza's philosophy depicts the vital dynamism of

material becoming without the direction of a Hegelian *telos*. Consequently, the multitude replaces the proletariat as the subject of history. Gilles Deleuze is the most important figure of this neo-Spinozist intellectual genealogy. Like Heidegger, Deleuze is concerned with overturning the Platonic legacy of metaphysical dualism. Plato envisions two worlds: 1) the immanent world of illusion, and 2) a transcendent world beyond, behind, or beneath this world. Contra Plato, Deleuze affirms this world – the immanent plane of material becoming. In my opinion, the problem is that the plane of immanence lacks the vertical dimension of transcendence. There is *no outside* of immanence, just as there is *no way out* of the neo-liberal planetary frame.

The philosophical problem of the immanent frame is also evident in the politics of affect stemming from Deleuze. The ontology of radical immanence can be understood as nothing but the ideology of global capitalism. Because Deleuzian political ontology lacks a notion of transcendence (within immanence), the politics of affect lacks any concept of transformative political *praxis* aside from resistance. In my judgment, the limitation of political *praxis* to resistance is defeatist. All resistance can imagine is a perpetual agonistic struggle against the persistent neo-liberal global order. That we no longer speak of revolution indicates an utter lack of alternative political vision. Brian Massumi comes close to admitting as much in a moment of self-criticism: “It seems to me that there’s been a certain type of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance.”<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, Deleuzian ontology is an expression of, rather than an alternative to the novel transmutations of global

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<sup>41</sup> Brian Massumi, *The Politics Of Affect*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015), 21

capitalism. The political ontology of assemblages, networks, and flows is nothing but an ideological expression of late-capitalism. Contra Deleuze's neo-Spinozist ontology, I argue that Rousseau's delineation of participatory democracy is more relevant to the political challenges of the present, and more in line with the deconstructive genealogy that I wish to consider. I will suggest that breaking through the plain of immanence is precisely what Benjamin imagines with his notion of 'divine violence'.

Having looked at critical theory and postmodernism, I will now look at the political theology of Žižek and Badiou. The contemporary revival of Orthodox Communism directs our attention away from postmodern themes of gender, identity, and race back to classical political questions of agency, sovereignty, and the state. Žižek argues that the liberal cosmopolitanism espoused by Derrida neutralizes the class-conflict of capitalism. Žižek: "The class problematic of workers exploitation is transformed into the multiculturalist problematic of the 'intolerance of Otherness' . . ."<sup>42</sup> This liberal ethic of tolerance is problematic for Žižek because it deflects political consideration away from the problem of class struggle and revolution towards questions of identity politics. Žižek asks, "Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, rather than emancipation, political struggle, or even armed struggle? The source of this culturation is defeat, the failure of directly political solutions . . ."<sup>43</sup> For Žižek, the problem with postmodernism is that it has bought into Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis. Postmodernism takes for granted that liberal capitalism is the most preferable form of government. Indeed, postmodernism legitimates liberal capitalism by perpetuating a

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<sup>42</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, (London, UK: Verso, 2000), 10

<sup>43</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living In The End Times*, (London, UK: Verso, 2010), 5

discourse of inclusivity, diversity, and tolerance. For Žižek, it is therefore necessary to redirect politics away from questions of identity towards concrete questions of political action. The problem, however, is that this new 'communist horizon' fails to learn the tragic lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Soviet Communism didn't fail just because it was improperly implemented. Marxism is intrinsically flawed; it replicates the metaphysical concepts of the universality of reason, the centrality of the state, and history as progress.

There is no great distance between the Leninist Party-State and that which Marx calls the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. In my view, the communism of both Žižek and Badiou contains an authoritarian impulse. Žižek has on occasion argued for an authoritarian Stalinist State, while Badiou regularly calls for a Maoist Cultural Revolution and armed political violence. This violent impulse is even more shocking given that both Žižek and Badiou view the communist militant as a secularization of the Christian 'knight of faith'. Both the communist militant and the Christian 'knight of faith' uphold that which Badiou calls 'fidelity' to the *Event*. Just as Christianity arises from out of the *Event* of crucifixion, communism comes into being from out of an *Event* that discloses a new world of possibilities. Badiou: "An event is something that brings to light a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable . . . it opens up a possibility."<sup>44</sup> Badiou cites three such events in the history of Communism to which the militant must remain faithful: 1) The Paris Commune, 2) the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, and 3) The Maoist Cultural

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<sup>44</sup> Alain Badiou, *Philosophy & The Event*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), 9

Revolution. These events are ‘world-disclosing’; they illuminate a horizon of possibilities for political action.

Following Badiou, Žižek understands communism as a secularization of Christian political theology. Žižek: “There is a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism . . . There is no Christ outside St Paul; in exactly the same way, there is no ‘authentic Marx’ that can be approached directly, bypassing Lenin.”<sup>45</sup> Just as the Christian religion was not founded by Jesus, but rather by St. Paul, Lenin, not Marx, established the first Communist state. For Žižek, Lenin’s transformation of Marx’s teachings into Communism follows the same pattern as Paul’s transformation of Christ’s teaching into Christianity. The Party becomes identical with the State, just as the Church becomes identical with Christ in the Christian tradition. The foundation of political order shelters the truth, but also conceals it. For Badiou, the truth is that “Communism can only be a movement, it cannot be a State.”<sup>46</sup> Badiou: “the idea of Lenin was to dispel forever the specter of the failure of the Paris Commune . . . One had, therefore, the ‘Party-State’ as communism’s center of gravity.”<sup>47</sup> Lenin’s founding of the Soviet Union is not motivated by the desire to remain faithful to Marx’s teachings, but by a ‘fidelity’ to the *Event* of the Paris Commune and to the foundation of the Soviet State. The problem, however, is that with the identity of Party and State communism becomes dictatorship.

Contrary to the false dialectical unity of the Leninist State, I emphasize the distinction between democracy and the state. I suggest that that the dialectical notion

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<sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, (London, UK: Verso, 2000), 2

<sup>46</sup> Alain Badiou, *Philosophy & The Event*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), 20

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 18

of Reason, History, and the State as incarnations of 'World-Spirit' are untenable after the 'death of God'. More specifically, the Marxist doctrine that the progress of history is by an innate logic towards its dialectical culmination in the universal state cannot be justified without recourse to 'onto-theological' notions of divine providence. In my view, Zizek and Badiou are too accepting of the political violence that the foundation of a Communist State would require. Moreover, the political theology of Zizek and Badiou lacks an eschatological element. Contra Zizek and Badiou, I rely on the principle of political non-violence, or that which Benjamin calls 'divine violence'. I attempt to counter the Marxist-Hegelian notion of history as progress with Benjamin's notion of history as catastrophe. For Benjamin, political revolution is not the *telos*, or fulfillment of history, but its *eschaton*, or end.

### *Method*

It is necessary that any research methodology be well suited to the topic investigated. The use of systematic methodology would be inappropriate given that this dissertation looks at the shattered foundations of metaphysical systems. Indeed, it is necessary for textual interpretation to acknowledge its own lack of objective foundations. But this lack of metaphysical foundations should not be taken as a justification for arbitrary subjectivism. On the contrary, an alternative method is needed.

Throughout this dissertation, I attempt to utilize Benjamin's constellational method of interpretation. Benjamin claims that "for knowledge, method is a way of

acquiring its object . . . for truth, method is self-representation, and it is therefore imminent in its form.”<sup>48</sup> The implication is that an investigation into the dissolution of linear narratives cannot itself maintain a linear form. For this reason, I arrange the chapters of this dissertation as a series of constellations rather than a traditional linear narrative. Benjamin claims that “ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.”<sup>49</sup> In the modern era, the search for truth is akin to the salvaging of fragmentary truths from the ruins of metaphysical foundations. As a result, every idea is a fragment of a shattered whole. These fragments must be arranged in various constellations in order to perceive their deeper significance. Roger Foster looks at Benjamin’s constellational method together with its use by Adorno. Foster explains that “the god-forsaken world that formed the Baroque perspective on the ruins of history is here secularized in the contemplation of the ruins of philosophical systems. Philosophy now has the task of constructing meaning through the interpretation and arraignment of these fragments.”<sup>50</sup> In this sense, the constellational method is a secularization of the ‘flight of the gods’ from the disenchanting world.

The constellational method recognizes the ‘non-identity’ of the map and the territory. The intention of Benjamin’s method is to arrange the fragments of truth into an intelligible constellation by viewing the object of inquiry from a plurality of different perspectives. The meaning of a constellation is derived from the relation between ideas, rather than abstracting the idea from its relations and context. Benjamin: “Tirelessly, the

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<sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin Of German Tragic Drama*, (London, UK: Verso, 2009), 30

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 34

<sup>50</sup> Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery Of Experience*, (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2007), 79



process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation. For by pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object it receives both the incentive to begin again and the justification for its irregular rhythm.”<sup>51</sup> For example, I repeatedly return to ‘death of God’ in order to view the problem of nihilism from a variety of different angles. In the first chapter, I look at the ‘death of God’ as the dissolution of any metaphysical foundation, origin or ground. I argue that the moral relativism of Nietzsche’s revaluation of value gives way to the tragic view of history as ‘eternal return’. I then look Heidegger’s deconstruction of Man as the mirror image of God in the second chapter. I look at some of the anti-humanist implications of the phenomenal clearing opened up by the absence of any transcendental signifier. The third chapter looks at the ‘death of God’ as the ‘oblivion’ of being to the technological ‘framing’ of Earth. I then turn to the dissolution of any metaphysical grounding of political community in the third chapter. Finally, I look at the ‘judicial void’ opened by the death of the God-King through an engagement with political theology in the last chapter. Rather than giving way to catastrophic nihilism, the loss of any absolute *arche* opens a ‘site’ of democratic *an-arche*. I present Benjamin’s eschatological remembrance of democracy as a remedy to Nietzsche’s tragic vision of history. Each perspective is intended to add a layer of meaning and intelligibility. Taken together, these layers of meaning do not make up a complete whole, but rather a shifting mosaic that remains forever open to interpretation.

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<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin Of German Tragic Drama*, (London, UK: Verso, 2009), 28

The constellational method of interpretation embodies the search for redemption in its form. Interpretation has no alternative but to confront the futility of language through linguistic expression. The map is an inadequate representation of the territory, but it can nevertheless show the way. The very attempt to express the inexpressible maintains a sense of hope without succumbing to the horror of nihilism. Foster explains that “the constellation is a form of writing that brings to self-awareness the block on experience that curtails what concepts are able to say.”<sup>52</sup> Foster: “But because interpretation retains the striving of thought to say the unsayable, even though it is impossible within current experience, it maintains the possibility of redemption in the form of hope. It is therefore the constant exertion of thought to say what it cannot say that preserves the transcendent within thinking.”<sup>53</sup> This sense of hope proves indispensable to my own inquiry into political nihilism and democratic alternatives. Throughout the dissertation, I occasionally draw from that which Derrida calls the ‘margins of philosophy’, including negative theology, eschatology, and romanticism. The point is not to outline these heterodox traditions in a systemic fashion, but to draw from these traditions to further the exposition of my major arguments.

### *Summary*

The first chapter of this dissertation argues that Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality culminates in the ‘death of God’, uncovering the Promethean destiny of ‘the West’. It was for good reason the Greeks worshiped Beauty rather than Truth.

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<sup>52</sup> Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery Of Experience*, (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2007), 83

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 84

Relativism and the radical contingency of value give way to the metaphysical need to believe in the divinity of truth. I nevertheless argue that Nietzsche's aesthetic response to the horror of ontological groundlessness proves insufficient. I argue that to the extent that it is rooted in the ungrounded 'will-to-power', Nietzsche's overcoming of nihilism is also nihilistic.

The second chapter argues that Heidegger's fundamental ontology is an attempt to overcome the onto-theological legacy of Platonic philosophy. Metaphysics conceals the difference between *what* there is in the world and the basic fact *that* there is a world at all. The aim of overcoming onto-theology is to turn our attention to the pre-Socratic wonder of 'being-in-the-world'. I argue that the appropriation of Heidegger's ontology by Jean-Paul Sartre replicates the same Cartesian anthropocentrism that Heidegger's description of 'being-there' is intended to supplant. I suggest that Jean-Luc Nancy's deconstruction of monotheism is a more faithful appropriation of Heidegger's 'de-structuring' of metaphysics as well as a necessary corrective to Sartre's existential humanism.

The third, and largest chapter traces the instrumental mode of 'being-in-the-world' to the beginning of Western metaphysics in ancient Greece. The root of the problem is the technological understanding of things as objects and truth as objectivity. Heidegger indicates a more primordial understanding of truth as 'event'. For Heidegger, the emergence of an alternative non-instrumental way of life depends upon whether the temporal 'event' comes to 'resonate' in poetic language. I argue that, while deeply insightful, Heidegger's attempt to elucidate 'the event' in poetry is ultimately

insufficient. I suggest that Levinas' post-foundational ethics comes closer to delineating a non-instrumental relation to being.

The fourth chapter looks at the non-cognitive material basis of Levinas' ethics. I use the confrontation between Antigone and Creon in Sophocles' play *Antigone* to elucidate the tragic strife between the ethical command and sovereign violence. I argue that Nancy, Derrida, and Levinas come dangerously close to condemning the *demos* as inherently violent. I suggest that the anarchy of the 'ethical relationship' nevertheless lends itself to local forms of democracy such as the ancient Greek *polis*.

In the fifth and final chapter, I argue that the deconstruction of metaphysics lends itself to a *negative political theology*. History and time are important themes of this chapter. I contrast Benjamin's notion of 'empty homogenous time' with Agamben's analysis of non-linear 'revolutionary time'. I suggest that the eschatological remembrance of our inheritance of democracy requires an interruption of the future oriented time-consciousness of modernity.

## I. The Promethean Fate Of The West

### *The Genealogy Of Morality*

This chapter looks at Nietzsche's confrontation with the innate nihilism of Western metaphysics. I suggest that nihilism is not just an existential issue, but deeply political as well. In spite of his rigorous critique of Platonism, I suggest that Nietzsche shares with Plato an authoritarian vision that is rooted in the cyclical experience of time. The temporality of the eternal return unveils a vista of cosmic nihilism that cannot possibly be endured. In the absence of metaphysical foundations, the vital will to power is assigned an impossible task – to create meaning from nothing. I suggest that when confronted with the horror of the ungrounded void, the self-overcoming of nihilism reverts to self-annihilation. The declaration that 'God is dead' becomes the belief that 'death is God'. I trace Nietzsche's cosmic nihilism back to Plato's myths and the poetic vision of Sophocles and Aeschylus. I argue that Nietzsche's overcoming of nihilism is

itself nihilistic. However, this does not mean that Nietzsche's project is as a complete failure. On the contrary, I suggest that Nietzsche's deepest insight is that the good life is not the pursuit of truth, but the alleviation of suffering. The challenge, therefore, is to face the ungrounded void without succumbing to nostalgia for the Absolute.

According to Martin Heidegger's influential interpretation, Nietzsche's 'will to power' occupies the threshold between the culmination of nihilism and its supersession towards a genuine affirmation of life. In my view, Nietzsche ultimately fails to overcome the tragic destiny of 'the West'. Contrary to his original intent, Nietzsche's attempt to overcome nihilism is itself nihilistic. Heidegger: "Thought in terms of the essence of nihilism, Nietzsche's overcoming is merely the fulfillment of nihilism."<sup>54</sup> By delineating the nihilistic destiny of Western metaphysics, Nietzsche brings us face to face with disenchantment of all value, meaning, and truth in the modern era. In other words, Nietzsche brings us to the precipice of 'the abyss' while nevertheless failing to accomplish leap beyond. Nietzsche's genealogical method deconstructs the divine origin of tradition, custom, and law. The problem, however, is that value loses its affective power once morality is perceived as nothing more than a social construct subject to continual reevaluation. In the absence of divine origins, morality amounts to nothing more than subjective preference. The radical de-centering of meaning, value, and truth is the inevitable result.

Nietzsche's declaration that 'God is dead' means that our highest values devalue themselves. For this reason, the 'death of God' requires that thinking occur without

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche vls. III-IV*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York, NY: Harper One, 1987), 219

recourse to metaphysical foundations. I argue that Nietzsche's aesthetic response to the horror of ontological groundlessness proves insufficient. In response to the radical contingency of value, meaning, and truth, Nietzsche attempts to legislate a new table of values 'beyond good and evil'. I will nevertheless argue that the 'revaluation of value' does not signify the overcoming of nihilism, but rather its full expression. The vital 'will to power' is assigned an impossible task – to create meaning *ex nihilo*. I will suggest that when confronted with the cosmic nihilism of the 'eternal return', the self-overcoming of nihilism reverts to self-annihilation.

I tend to interpret Nietzsche's legacy in light of Heidegger's appropriation of the problem of nihilism. For Heidegger and Nietzsche both, European history is nihilistic to the extent that it is characterized by the innate violence of Platonic metaphysics. Heidegger: "European history reveals its fundamental feature as nihilism."<sup>55</sup> Platonic metaphysics is characterized by the unconditional grounding of meaning, value, and truth in a fixed origin, foundation, or cause. Heidegger: "Metaphysics is an inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp."<sup>56</sup> In other words, metaphysics seeks to comprehend the ground of being in order to grasp the totality of being. Metaphysics is an expression of nihilism for the following reason: The ill-fated attempt to grasp the ultimate foundation, origin, or ground of being leads to the startling discovery that being is in fact ungrounded. This discovery can be unsettling to say the least. In Heidegger's words, "an attempt to delimit beings in

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 188

<sup>56</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. Glenn Gray (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2004), 106

what they are, in their Being, leads us to the brink of nothingness, and to the abyss.”<sup>57</sup>

Heidegger: “We must not shrink back here and must rather consider this: If we want to grasp beings (the Greeks say delimit, place within limits), then we must, indeed necessarily, proceed to the limit of beings, and that is nothingness.”<sup>58</sup> Thinking is the endurance of this abyss, chasm, or void at the heart of being. It would seem that for Heidegger, thinking is a dangerous exercise.

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant exemplifies the kind of metaphysical grounding of morality that Nietzsche’s genealogy renders untenable. Unlike Nietzsche, Kant evades the nihilistic implications of attempting to ground morality upon mere reason. According to Nietzsche’s analysis, Kant “wanted to supply a *rational foundation* for morality . . . Morality itself, however, was accepted as given.”<sup>59</sup> In attempting to ground morality, Kant simply takes it for granted that such an exercise is both possible and desirable. Nietzsche exposes the insufficiencies of Kant’s philosophy by posing a radically different kind of question, one that is genealogical rather than metaphysical. While Kant poses “the question of where our good and evil really originated”, and therefore seeks a metaphysical grounding of morality in the transcendental categories of subjective reason, Nietzsche instead asks: “Under what conditions did man make

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<sup>57</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Beginning Of Western Philosophy: Interpretation of Anaximander & Parmenides*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 13

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1966), 97



these value judgments good and evil?"<sup>60</sup> More simply, while Kant passes moral judgment upon existence, Nietzsche inverts this relationship, judging morality from the perspective of life itself. Nietzsche's genealogy of morality therefore indicates a radical inversion of Platonic orthodoxy. Nietzsche: "What, seen in the perspective of *life*, is the significance of morality?"<sup>61</sup> Oblivious to this line of questioning, Kant's transcendental idealism attempts to ground universal moral law upon the *a priori* categories of practical reason.

For Kant, the moral law is characterized by its universality. Moreover, the unconditional moral law can be distinguished with certainty from the relativity of social maxims, customs, and norms on the basis of practical reason. Nevertheless, the attempt to metaphysically ground morality in the sovereignty of reason is both unfounded and untenable. While Kant suggests that practical reason is the ultimate foundation of moral law, Nietzsche argues that reason is not at all transcendental. Instead, reason remains historically mediated by the same social conditions from which it claims independence. Consequently, there is no rational basis by which to distinguish between the absolute moral law and the relativity of value. Additionally, Kant's universal moral law bears within itself a self-contradiction. On the one hand, 'the moral law within' is unconditional, absolute, and therefore every bit as objective as the laws of physics governing the movement of 'the starry skies above'. On the other hand, the moral law is not so much discovered as it is legislated by the autonomous will. Only one of these

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<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967), 16

<sup>61</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967), 22

claims can be true. Either the law is absolute and determines the will, or the will is primary and constitutes the law. In my opinion, the notion of the autonomous will marks the true originality of Kant's thinking. For Kant, the autonomous will only submits to law that it has legislated. The Kantian legacy of secular modernity is that all value is perceived as historically contingent. Put simply, there is no moral law at work in the cosmos apart from the law that is willed into existence *ex nihilo*, out of nothingness.

The Kantian legacy of secular modernity becomes readily apparent in light of John Stuart Mill's appropriation and development of Kant's thought. Mill's notion of individual freedom is widely considered to be the foundation of political liberalism, a tradition to which Nietzsche is vehemently opposed. In my view, Kant's notion of moral autonomy is the basis of Mill's idea of political freedom. Like Kant's notion of moral autonomy, Mill's idea of political freedom is both formal and abstract. The problem is that liberal freedom does not provide a compelling vision of 'the good life'. Mill argues that we are free to determine the good in our own way, so long as our own freedom does not inhibit the freedom of others. Nevertheless, Mill fails to pose the fundamental question, mainly – What is the good life? The implication of the liberal notion of freedom developed by Kant and Mill is that 'X' is not willed because it is good. Instead, 'X' is good because it is willed. The relativity of value resulting from moral self-legislation eradicates any notion of intrinsic meaning in the world. The will is completely ungrounded. Or, to phrase the matter differently, the will is grounded in nothing other than the will itself – 'the will to will'. This leads to a significant problem: that while everything is permitted, nothing is compelling. Nietzsche: "One would rather will

nothing than not will.”<sup>62</sup> In the words of the poet Yeats: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”<sup>63</sup> In this sense, nihilism is not opposed to, but rather symptomatic of political liberalism.

Nietzsche’s most provocative claim is that the ‘highest values’ of the modern age originate from a ‘slave revolt’ in morality. Nietzsche distinguishes between two different kinds of morality: 1) noble, or master morality, and 2) slave morality. According to Nietzsche, the virtues of the ancient Greeks exemplify ‘noble morality’, while the values of the ancient Hebrews is akin to a ‘slave revolt’ in morality. While ‘noble morality’ affirms the ancient virtues of courage, strength, and honour, the ‘slave revolt’ inverts this ‘table of values’. With the ‘slave revolt’, the ancient virtues of strength, courage, and honour are replaced with the Christian values of humility, love, and compassion. Nietzsche’s evaluation of these two different kinds of morality is extremely nuanced. On the one hand, Nietzsche respects the vitality of noble morality. But on the other hand, Nietzsche admires the strength of will required to undermine and supplant these noble values. In fact, the ‘slave revolt’ in morality accomplishes that which Nietzsche himself initiates but never accomplishes – a ‘revaluation of value’.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s tentative admiration for this ‘slave revolt’ is tempered by his dislike of the ‘spirit of resentment’ from which it originates. Nietzsche claims that the ‘slave revolt’ in morality originates from a seething sense of psychological resentment towards the ruling nobility. The ‘revaluation of value’ is not motivated by a desire for justice. Instead, the ‘slave revolt’ is rooted in a twisted and cruel desire for

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<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 16

<sup>63</sup> Yeats <<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/second-coming>> 2017

vengeance and retribution. In this sense, the intention of the 'slave revolt' is not the abolition of hierarchical structures of power, but instead, to seize the position of power for oneself, and to rule as one was once ruled. For this reason, Nietzsche judges 'slave morality' to be reactionary rather than life affirming and genuinely creative. The 'slave revolt' is nothing more than a reactionary rejection of the noble sense of what is good. According to Nietzsche, the slave first conceives of "the evil enemy and the Evil One, and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought, a good one – himself!"<sup>64</sup> In this sense, "slave morality . . . is fundamentally reaction."<sup>65</sup> All that 'noble morality' calls good 'slave morality' calls bad. While noble morality is a spontaneous affirmation of the good, "the slave revolt in morality begins when resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values."<sup>66</sup> 'Slave morality' is driven by a hatred of evil, which the slave identifies as everything the noble considers good. If 'slave morality' is founded upon hatred and resentment, 'noble morality' is inspired by love of the good. Nietzsche argues that the noble "conceives the basic concept 'good' in advance and spontaneously out of himself and only then creates for himself an idea of 'bad'! This 'bad' of noble origin and that 'evil' out of the cauldron of unsatisfied hatred."<sup>67</sup> In other words, while slave morality distinguishes between good and evil, 'noble morality' distinguishes between good and bad. Nietzsche admires the 'slave revolt' in morality for accomplishing a 'revaluation of value'. Nevertheless, Nietzsche ultimately remains faithful to the spontaneity and vitality of noble morality.

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<sup>64</sup> Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 41

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 36

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 41

For Nietzsche, 'slave morality' violates the laws of nature itself; it violates the basic law that the strong should devour the weak. Nietzsche expresses this controversial argument by means of analogy. The struggle between master and slave is equivalent to the relationship between the bird of prey and the lamb. The bird of prey hunts the lamb because it is strong, just as the lamb is prey to the bird because it is weak. While noble morality celebrates this strength, slave morality condemns it. Instead, slave morality makes a virtue of weakness and a sin of strength. In this sense, 'slave morality' amounts to a mutilation of the will; the will is repressed and turned against itself through the psychological internalization of conscience and guilt perpetuated by organized religion. Nietzsche levels some of his sharpest criticism at the moral indoctrination of 'ascetic priests'. The 'ascetic priests' are evocative of the Catholic clergy as well as the Hindu Brahmin caste. Nietzsche: "The ascetic priest alters the direction of resentment. By instilling such notions as sin and guilt, the will is folded back upon itself for the purpose of self-discipline and self-overcoming."<sup>68</sup> In other words, religious asceticism trains the will to repress the affirmative life-instincts for the sake of disciplinary self-mastery. Such discipline of the will is presumably achieved through the religious practice of poverty, humility, and chastity as well as spiritual training in fasting, yoga, and meditation. According to Nietzsche, 'ascetic priests' exemplify the bitter resentment of 'slave morality'. Nietzsche: "Here rules a resentment without equal, that of an insatiable instinct and power-will that want to become master not over

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 41

something in life but over life itself . . .”<sup>69</sup> Mastery over life is characterized by belief in the ‘ascetic ideal’. The ‘ascetic ideal’ is the ancient metaphysical faith in the goodness of truth; “the faith in a metaphysical value, the absolute value of truth . . .”<sup>70</sup> Nietzsche: “It is the profound, suspicious fear of an incurable pessimism that forces whole millennia to cling to a religious interpretation of existence . . . Piety, the ‘life in God’, seen in this way, would appear as fear of truth.”<sup>71</sup> It is interesting that in spite of his criticism of the ‘ascetic ideal’, Nietzsche readily admits that he too relies upon faith in the value of truth.

It is perhaps unexpected that Nietzsche himself confesses a ‘metaphysical need’ for the ascetic faith in the absolute value of truth. Nietzsche’s own ‘revaluation of value’ can only be undertaken on the basis of an unconditional belief in the ‘ascetic ideal’. This is unfortunate, seeing as the ‘revaluation of value’ disenchant the very faith upon which it depends. The ‘will to truth’ deconstructs its own foundation – the ascetic faith that “god is truth, that truth is divine.”<sup>72</sup> Consequently, Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality is caught in a performative contradiction. On the one hand, the ‘revaluation of value’ presupposes an absolute truth beyond any revaluation and upon which the task of revaluation is nevertheless grounded. But on the other hand, the ‘revaluation of value’ is precisely the deconstruction of all such absolutes. The task of ‘revaluation’ therefore undermines and destroys its own conditions of existence. Nietzsche: “*That* the ascetic ideal has meant so many things to man, however, is an expression of the basic

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 117

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 151

<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 71

<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*. 152

fact of the human will, its *horror of a vacuum: it needs a goal* – and it would rather will nothingness than not will.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, faith in the ‘ascetic ideal’ is symptomatic of the basic fact that “man has to believe, to know, from time to time why he exists.”<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche: “Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human animal, has no meaning . . .”<sup>75</sup>

In Nietzsche’s final analysis, “this ascetic priest, this apparent enemy of life, this denier – precisely he is amongst the greatest conserving and greatest yes-creating forces of life.”<sup>76</sup> Nietzsche explains that “from the moment faith in the god of the ascetic ideal is denied, a new problem arises – that of the value of truth . . . The value of truth must for once be experimentally called into question.”<sup>77</sup> Nietzsche therefore poses a deeply unsettling question: “What if this belief is becoming more and more unbelievable, if nothing turns out to be divine any longer unless it be an error, blindness, lies – if god himself turns out to be our longest lie?”<sup>78</sup> It would seem as if “some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt . . . and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined . . .”<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche recoils but does not retreat from the horror of such a ‘collapse’. Indeed, the will to truth “forbids itself the lie involved in the faith in god.”<sup>80</sup> Not only does Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality expose the groundlessness of our highest values, but in an even more radical gesture, questions

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 97

<sup>74</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1974), 75

<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 162

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 121

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 153

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 152

<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 279

<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 160

the value of truth as such! Nietzsche therefore poses a remarkably new kind of question: “Might not morality be ‘a will to negate life’, a secret instinct of annihilation?”<sup>81</sup> What is the value of value? What is the value of morality for life? Does morality benefit or inhibit the flourishing of life? Prior to Nietzsche’s provocation, Western philosophy was established upon Socrates’ assurance that ‘the virtuous life is the happy life’. However, Nietzsche suggests that the benefit of morality to life has heretofore been merely presumed as fact. The social utility of morality has never been subjected to serious doubt, which is precisely Nietzsche’s intent.

### *The Death Of God*

The prophetic declaration that ‘God is dead’ does not necessarily announce the emancipation from religious dogma, as Nietzsche’s post-modern enthusiasts presume. Nor does it announce a catastrophic loss of faith, as is the interpretation of Nietzsche’s neo-reactionary readers. The matter at hand is neither simple nor clear. The meaning of the death of God has yet to be decided for the reason that we are still living out the implications of what it means to exist in a godless age. Nietzsche’s famous declaration that ‘God is dead’ is uttered in aphoristic form in the parable of the madman. As Eugene Thacker indicates in ‘12 Fragments On Nihilism’, “we do him a disservice if we credit Nietzsche for the death of God. He just happened to be at the scene of the crime”.<sup>82</sup> That a madman should witness this event is appropriate, given that insight into the

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<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 23

<sup>82</sup> Eugene Thacker <<http://www.fourbythreemagazine.com/issue/nihilism/12-fragments-on-nihilism>> 2017



ungrounded horror of being is akin to a madness that can scarcely be endured. Upon stumbling upon this dangerous discovery, the madman descends from the monastic solitude of the mountain into the bustle of the market. Predictably, the public does not readily receive the madman's message. Ironically, it is the madman, bearing the message of God's absence, who is the authentic seeker of God. It is the unbelieving villagers, weak of faith, who ultimately reject the 'death of God'. Moreover, the madman not only discovers that God is dead, but that we have killed him: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him".<sup>83</sup> At first, it seems that "there has never been a greater deed"; that humanity has reached spiritual maturity and is no longer in need of such dogmatic certainties as belief in God.<sup>84</sup> It turns out that this initial estimation is far too optimistic. The madman ultimately concludes that he has arrived too early; that "this tremendous event is still on its way."<sup>85</sup> Although God is dead, this truth remains too horrific to bear. The madman says that "*We have killed him – you and I*".<sup>86</sup> What does it mean to bear responsibly for the death of God? Both the solitary individual and the unreflective 'herd' share responsibility for this crime. It is clear that 'the herd' bears responsibility for unreflectively receiving established dogma as truth. But in what sense is the madman responsible for the death of God? The only crime of the madman is to seek truth unconditionally, no matter how unsettling that truth may be. For Nietzsche, it is precisely such fidelity to truth that kills God, so to speak. The 'will to truth' disenchants the necessary fiction that God is truth and truth is divine. Put

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<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 181

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 182

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 181

simply, truth, for Nietzsche, is akin to madness. For this reason, truth is 'the greatest danger'. As such, truth ought to remain hidden, a privilege of the noble few.

Nietzsche's announcement that 'God is dead' is an allegory for at least three related phenomena: 1) the discovery that the divine realm of ideas is a myth, 2) the ensuing disenchantment of the temporal world of appearance, and 3) the culmination of metaphysics in the nihilistic destiny of 'the West'. According to Heidegger's interpretation, Nietzsche's use of the term 'God' refers to super-sensory realm of ideas. Since Plato, Western metaphysics has been characterized by the position that the ideal realm of forms is "the true and genuinely real world".<sup>87</sup> The 'ascetic ideal' is not limited to religion; it is prevalent in philosophy as well. For Nietzsche, the beginning of Western metaphysics in ancient Greece is the origin of asceticism. For this reason, Nietzsche suggests that Plato is the first 'ascetic priest'. Nietzsche: "The idea at issue here is the valuation the ascetic priest places on our life: he juxtaposes it [becoming] with a quite different mode of existence [being] . . ." <sup>88</sup> The problem with Plato's metaphysical dualism between being and becoming is that this world is viewed as illusory and empty of true substance. The phenomenal world of becoming is devalued by the metaphysical valuation of an ideal world of true being. In contrast to the true super-sensory world, the phenomenal world of appearance is false. Nietzsche: "Philosophical men have a presentiment that the world in which we live and have our being is mere appearance,

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<sup>87</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology & Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1977), 61

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy Of Morals*, 117

and that another, quite different reality lies beneath it.”<sup>89</sup> In light of this metaphysical dualism, the imperative of reason amounts to “the annihilation of the veil of *maya* . . .”<sup>90</sup> In this sense, Platonic metaphysics devalues life as mere appearance, illusion, or ‘*maya*’. The aim of philosophical reason is to ‘annihilate’ this false world of appearance in order to intuit the divine world of forms.

The ‘divided line’ between the sensible and super-sensible realms is symbolized by Plato’s famous allegory of the cave in *The Republic*. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates invites his interlocutors to imagine the human condition as one of bondage in an underground cave-like dwelling. Upon the walls of this underground dwelling are images of shadows cast by fire. Since the prisoners lack any knowledge of existence outside of the cave, the shadows of artificial things are mistaken for the things themselves. There is nevertheless a world beyond the bondage of the cave – a world of radiant sunlight in which the things themselves shine forth. The Sun represents the form of ‘the Good’, the source of true knowledge, of which the perception of shadows is a mere semblance. Socrates then asks us to imagine that the prisoner was compelled to emerge from this false world of darkness. For Plato, the world of ‘shadows cast by fire’ represents the illusory world of appearance, while the world of ‘overwhelming beauty’ represents the true realm of forms. The prisoners’ forced ascent from the cave would amount to the destruction of the illusions to which one clings as certain and true. One would be compelled towards the unknown. Upon emerging from the underground prison, one is compelled by some unknown force to turn and gaze upon the Sun itself. The Sun

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<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 34

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 40

represents the Supreme Source, the form of 'the Good' that moves all without itself being moved. Upon first perceiving the radiant illumination of the Sun, one would be blinded, and therefore subjected to a state of ignorance even more extensive than one's condition of bondage in the cave. However, once one's eyes adapt to the sunlight, one would perceive a world of overwhelming beauty in which the forms are intuited as they truly are. For Socrates, such true vision amounts to wisdom. Socrates then asks us to imagine that following his ascent into the radiance of being, the prisoner were compelled to again descend into the darkness of the cave. While the prisoner was once bound in a state of ignorance, now the prisoner is bound in a state of knowledge. Plato's allegory indicates that knowledge does not bring freedom. The prisoner remains bound in spite of the wisdom gained. Nevertheless, inspired by such visions of overwhelming beauty, the prisoner feels compelled to bear witness to the truth for the benefit of others. The prisoner therefore attempts to teach what he has learned: that we are ignorant of our own bondage. This world is a mere semblance of truth. Furthermore, there is another world beyond our own, a world of overwhelming beauty and truth. Tragically, the prisoner is not believed. Moreover, he is hated and despised by those he wishes to teach. Lacking knowledge of 'the Good', those bound within the depths of the cave prefer ignorance to truth. Such is the human condition according to the Platonic legacy of Western metaphysics.

In my opinion, the meaning of Plato's allegory is identical to that of Nietzsche's allegory of the madman. For Plato, this illusory world of appearance is symbolized by a world of 'shadows cast by fire', while the true world of the forms is represented by a

world of 'overwhelming beauty' illuminated by the Sun. In light of Plato's allegory, the 'death of God' therefore indicates that "the suprasensory world is without effective power."<sup>91</sup> Heidegger: "That the highest values hitherto are devalued means that these ideals lose their capacity to shape history."<sup>92</sup> In other words, the implication of what Nietzsche calls 'the death of God', or what Heidegger names 'the end of metaphysics', is that the unconditional grounding of reality has itself become unreal. However, the discovery that the real world of forms is a myth does not simply render the false world of appearance true. Heidegger: "If God, as the suprasensory ground and goal of all reality is dead, if the suprasensory world of the Ideas has suffered the loss of its obligatory and above all its vitalizing and upbuilding power, then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself."<sup>93</sup> The 'death of God' provokes a condition of existential disorientation in light of the radical contingency of all meaning, value, and truth. In Nietzsche's words, the 'death of God' is akin to "plunging continually . . . through an infinite nothing".<sup>94</sup> The temptation, in light of this state of existential groundlessness and psychological disorientation, is to attempt to reorient oneself by clinging to the illusion of a transcendent power. Heidegger: "The cause of nihilism is morality, in the sense of positing the supernatural ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty that are valid in themselves."<sup>95</sup> The nihilist believes: 1) that this world, the world that is, should not be, and 2) that the other world, the world that should be, is

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<sup>91</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 99

<sup>92</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 203

<sup>93</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 61

<sup>94</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181

<sup>95</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 206

not.<sup>96</sup> This is precisely the meaning of Plato's allegory of the cave, in which illusion is preferred to truth.

The belief of the nihilist is identical to that of the metaphysician. For instance, Plato argues that this world only retains value in light of a true world beyond our own. The divine world of forms grounds the material world of appearance in true being. Consequently, "whatever has value in our world now does not have value in itself".<sup>97</sup> In order to affirm value, meaning and truth in this world, one "must affirm another world than the world of life, nature, and history."<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, Nietzsche asks: "Insofar as they affirm this 'other world' . . . must they not by the same token negate its counterpart, this world, our world?"<sup>99</sup> Heidegger cites Socrates, who perceives "the world down here as a veil of tears in contrast to the mountain of everlasting bliss in the beyond."<sup>100</sup> The truth of this world is a mere reflection of a higher world. But the existence of another world would at the same time negate the intrinsic value of this world. Consequently, while metaphysics is already inherently nihilistic, so too is the destruction of metaphysics via the 'revaluation of value'. Again, although metaphysical dualism is thoroughly nihilistic, the collapse of metaphysical dualism risks bringing nihilism to its full expression. While formerly this world lacked meaning in itself, now the world lacks any meaning whatsoever; nature has become "indifferent beyond

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<sup>96</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967), 318

<sup>97</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 242

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 282

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 282

<sup>100</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 61

measure”.<sup>101</sup> As a result of the disenchantment of the supersensory realm, our own “deified world has become stupid, blind, mad, and questionable.”<sup>102</sup> Just as the true world has become a myth, the apparent world too has become ungrounded. In Nietzsche’s words, an “ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt . . . and how much must now collapse, now that this faith has been undermined.”<sup>103</sup> It would seem that both the traditional faith in unconditional value and the modern critical revaluation of value inevitably leads to nihilism. Platonic metaphysics is nihilistic because meaning lies beyond the world. The end of metaphysics is nihilistic because there is no longer a beyond, and therefore no meaning either.

Nihilism is “the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability.”<sup>104</sup> As the metaphysical grounding of value is subjected to revaluation, “the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”<sup>105</sup> In this sense, the ‘revaluation of value’ leads directly and unavoidably to a ‘devaluation of value’. However, it is Nietzsche’s hope that the ‘devaluation of value’ is only a transitional stage in the history of ‘the West’. The transition from ‘passive nihilism’ to ‘active nihilism’ would signify a new epoch of ‘world-history’. In the fragmentary *Will To Power*, Nietzsche distinguishes between 1) the catastrophe of ‘passive nihilism’ on the one hand, and 2) the possible redemption of ‘active nihilism’ on the other. For Nietzsche, it remains to be decided whether the ‘death of God’ signifies catastrophe or redemption. The implication of

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<sup>101</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 15

<sup>102</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 309

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 279

<sup>104</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 7

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 9

passive nihilism is that “every kind of dogmatism that is left standing dispirited and discouraged”.<sup>106</sup> Active nihilism, however, is “a violent force of destruction”.<sup>107</sup> Active nihilism is the conviction that “what is falling, we should still push”<sup>108</sup> in order that “the weights of all things can be determined anew.”<sup>109</sup> In this sense, active nihilism is “not only the belief that everything deserves to perish; but one actually puts one’s shoulder to the plough; one destroys”.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that redemption can neither be achieved through the old faith in the ‘ascetic ideal’, nor through the new principle of valuation – the ‘will to power’. For Heidegger and Nietzsche both, “nihilism does not strive for mere nullity. Its proper essence lies in the affirmative nature of a liberation.”<sup>111</sup> Heidegger: “Nihilism then proclaims the following: *Nothing* of the prior valuations shall have validity any longer; all beings must be differently posited as a whole . . .”<sup>112</sup> Consequently, “the will to power becomes the principle of a new valuation . . .”<sup>113</sup> Contrary to Kant’s moral law, “the will is now pure self-legislation of itself; a command to achieve its essence, which is commanding as such, the pure powering of power.”<sup>114</sup> The ungrounded ‘will to power’ has no purpose apart from the preservation and enhancement of power; it is the ‘will to nothing’.

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<sup>106</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 1

<sup>107</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 18

<sup>108</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 219

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 219

<sup>110</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 18

<sup>111</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 204

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 205

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 202

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 224



It is at this point where the thinking of Heidegger and Nietzsche diverge. Heidegger suggests that Nietzsche's error is to presume that "the basic characteristic of beings is 'will to power', and all interpretations of the world, to the extent that they are kinds of valuations, derive from the will to power."<sup>115</sup> In my view, Nietzsche's 'will to power' more closely resembles the vitalism of Spinoza's *Conatus* than the individualism of Descartes' *Cogito*. For Nietzsche, the 'will to power' operates unconsciously at the instinctual level; it is a transpersonal force that runs deeper than the individual ego. For Heidegger, the 'will to power' does not indicate the overcoming of nihilism, but rather its logical extension. While Nietzsche distinguishes between passive and active forms of nihilism, Heidegger makes a similar distinction between 'incomplete' and 'complete nihilism'. While Nietzsche's thinking exemplifies 'incomplete nihilism', Heidegger's thinking presumably characterizes 'complete nihilism'. Heidegger suggests that "incomplete nihilism does indeed replace the former values with others, but it still posits the latter always in the old position of authority that is gratuitously maintained as the ideal realm of the suprasensory."<sup>116</sup> While God has disappeared from his "authoritative position in the suprasensory world, his authoritative place is still always preserved . . . as that which has become empty."<sup>117</sup> Heidegger suggests that "the empty place demands to be occupied anew and to have the God now vanished from it replaced by something else."<sup>118</sup> According to this demand, new ideals are set up as 'highest

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 188

<sup>116</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 69

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 69

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 69

values' in the realm formerly occupied by being itself. As a result, being is transformed into value, and, as such, into an arbitrary determination of the ungrounded will.

The transformation of being into value effectively devalues being into a product of the will. To the extent that being is "accorded worth as a value, it is already degraded to a condition posited by the will to power itself."<sup>119</sup> For Nietzsche, value has no metaphysical grounding apart from the ungrounded 'will to power'; the world is 'will to power' and nothing else.<sup>120</sup> For this reason, Heidegger judges Nietzsche's genealogy of morality to be nihilistic. Heidegger: "Nietzsche's metaphysics is nihilistic insofar as it is value thinking, and insofar as the latter is grounded in will to power as the principle of all valuation. Nietzsche's metaphysics consequently becomes the fulfillment of nihilism proper, because it is the metaphysics of the will to power."<sup>121</sup> The implication is that there is nothing of value apart from that which is attributed value by the generative will. Contrary to Nietzsche's 'incomplete nihilism', Heidegger suggests that "completed nihilism must, in addition, do away with even the place of value itself, with the suprasensory as a realm, and accordingly must posit and revalue values differently."<sup>122</sup> The challenge of completed nihilism is to leave the open place formerly occupied by God empty, open, and unoccupied by any transcendental signifier. Heidegger suggests that "instead of [the place of God], another [place] can loom on the horizon – a place that is

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 103

<sup>120</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 48

<sup>121</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 204

<sup>122</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 69

identical neither with the essential realm belonging to god nor with that of man, but with which man comes once more into a distinctive relationship [with being].”<sup>123</sup>

For Nietzsche, humanity in its present form is not up to the task of assuming self-mastery and dominion over the Earth. A new type of man must therefore be created – the ‘overman’.<sup>124</sup> The strength of will required for undertaking a ‘revaluation of value’ is rare, as is anything noble. Nietzsche: “Independence is for the very few, it is a privilege of the strong.”<sup>125</sup> Contrary to Heidegger, Nietzsche’s insight into the groundlessness of being does not inspire ‘awe and wonder’, but horror in the face of ‘the abyss’. Nietzsche warns that the vast majority of people lack the courage to exercise the generative ‘will to power’ in the face of a meaningless and indifferent universe. Only an elite aristocratic caste has the courage to face the groundlessness of being and summon the strength of will necessary to create meaning from *nothingness*, from nothing prior to the will itself. Nietzsche advocates for the creation of “a new aristocracy, based on the severest self-legislation.”<sup>126</sup> Only the caste of the ‘overman’ is capable of becoming who they are – “self-legislators, self-creators, creators of new values and tables of what is good.”<sup>127</sup> Put simply, the highest need is “to teach man the future of man as his *will* . . .”<sup>128</sup> Such strength of will is fashioned through a strict adherence to ascetic regimes of self-discipline “with the intention of training a ruling caste – the future masters of the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 100

<sup>124</sup> See Stanley Rosen, *The Mask Of Enlightenment*, (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2004)

<sup>125</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 41

<sup>126</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 504

<sup>127</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 266

<sup>128</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 117

Earth.”<sup>129</sup> Heidegger: “Justice looks beyond to that sort of mankind which is to be forged and bred into a type, a type that possesses essential aptitude for establishing absolute dominion over the Earth.”<sup>130</sup> It would be a mistake to interpret the ‘overman’ as equivalent to the modern Enlightenment project of moral self-legislation, whereby each is subject only to the law that they themselves will. On the contrary, ‘the highest man’ is “he who determines values and directs the will of millennia by giving directions to the highest natures.”<sup>131</sup> It is therefore no less true for Nietzsche than for Aristotle that “the wise man must not be ordered but must order, and he must not obey another, but the less wise must obey him.”<sup>132</sup>

Nietzsche distinguishes between the ruling caste of the ‘overman’ from under-caste of the ‘last man’. The ‘last man’ lacks sufficient courage to endure the spiritual transfiguration undergone by the ‘overman’. Instead, the ‘last man’ succumbs to the need for a metaphysical grounding of truth. The ‘metaphysical need’ refers to the psychological inability to cope with the radical contingency of truth. In response to the anxiety, uncertainty, and disorientation of metaphysical groundlessness, the ‘last man’ clings to the myth of divine origins. Just as the allegory of the cave teaches that there is an ideal realm that grounds this world, the myth of the metals teaches of the divine origins of justice. According to Nietzsche, the purpose of Plato’s myth is to instill the false belief “that the order of castes, the highest, the dominating law, is merely the

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<sup>129</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 502

<sup>130</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vl. III-IV*, 245

<sup>131</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 519

<sup>132</sup> Aristotle, *The Basic Works Of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, NY: Random House Inc, 1941), 691

ratification of the order of nature, of a natural law of the first rank.”<sup>133</sup> The teaching of the myth of the metals is that the ruling ‘philosopher-kings’ belong to a superior caste, just as the lower castes are inherently inferior. It therefore follows that the ‘last man’ is incapable of self-mastery and so must be ruled by the ‘overman’. The function of the ‘noble lie’ is to maintain order by justifying hierarchical social relations as an expression of the ‘great chain of being’. This hierarchy is justified by the belief that the social order is a reflection of the natural order, and that the rule of the few is at the same time the rule of the best.

We have seen that Nietzsche is opposed to the perceived dualism and foundationalism of Platonic metaphysics. However, Nietzsche shares with Plato an authoritarian political vision that is rooted in the cyclical experience of time. For Nietzsche and Plato both, the temporality of the ‘eternal return’ unveils a vista of cosmic nihilism that cannot possibly be endured. Ohana states the problem well; “Man created an illusion of wholeness, order, and unity in order to organize the chaos by giving it a meaningful structure, but the reflective consciousness exposes the illusion.”<sup>134</sup> Man cannot bear to be the origin of his own meaning. The insight into the Promethean destiny of cyclical time reverts to a psychological need for political order grounded in foundational myth (the myth of foundations). By delineating the nihilistic destiny of Western metaphysics, Nietzsche brings us face to face with the disenchantment of all

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<sup>133</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans, H.L. Mencken (Tuscan, AZ: See Sharp Press, 1999), 82

<sup>134</sup> Ohana, *The Dawn Of Political Nihilism*, 42

value, meaning, and truth. Tragically, Nietzsche brings us to the precipice of 'the abyss', while nevertheless failing to accomplish a leap beyond.

### *The Destiny Of Nihilism*

Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* poses the following question: "What is the significance of the *tragic* myth amongst the Greeks?"<sup>135</sup> For Nietzsche, tragic myth offers a glimpse into the nihilistic fate of 'the West'. Nietzsche's visionary insight is that attic tragedy is an aesthetic response to the horror of confronting the ungrounded emptiness of being. The innate nihilism of Western metaphysics is evident in the startling conclusion of Plato's *Republic*, the myth of Er. The myth of Er offers a shocking vision of cosmic nihilism. The myth tells of the warrior Er, who upon dying in battle, returns to life bearing an unsettling account of the afterlife. Er describes the transmigration of his soul through divine realms. Upon departing from his body at the moment of death, Er's soul first arrives at a landscape of heavenly and demonic realms. At this boundary between worlds, the soul encounters a judge who measures out punishment and reward. The judge directs the soul towards higher or lower realms based upon the goodness of one's life. The wicked are imprisoned in the depths of Tartarus, each sin punished ten times over, while the virtuous ascend to heavenly realms of bliss. After receiving their just measure, all souls, wicked and virtuous alike, journey towards a panoramic vista. Upon entrance into this visionary realm, the soul glimpses the horrific 'Spindle of Necessity', a cosmic vortex turned by the arbitrary decree of the hideous Moirai (Fates), daughters of

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<sup>135</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 18

Ananke (Necessity). At this point of the journey, the soul must decide on its next reincarnation based upon the lessons learned from previous lives. The soul's decision as to what constitutes a good life will determine the fate of its reincarnation. If the soul decides wisely, it will ascend to a higher form of life. It is for this reason that philosophical wisdom is of cosmic significance for Socrates.

It is nevertheless strange that the myth of Er ultimately undermines Socrates' assurance that the good life is also the happy life. Instead, the myth indicates that ultimately, wisdom is futile. Life is blind suffering, regardless of virtue or vice. The nullity of wisdom becomes increasingly evident in light of the startling culmination of the soul's transmigration. After deciding on the form of its next life, the soul must journey to Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Upon reaching the banks of Lethe, the soul is compelled to drink from the river, and subsequently forgets its previous incarnations along with the lessons learned. The soul is then carried away by the solar winds of a cosmic storm, randomly descending as a shooting star into its next incarnation. Plato's cosmological vision is horrifically bleak. In the end, the soul's reincarnation is not determined by just measure, but instead by blind Fate. If I may draw from Hindu terminology, the wheel of samsara is not turned by Justice. There is no karma in Plato's horrific vision, only arbitrary Fate. The myth of Er contradicts Socrates' fundamental teachings that "virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy".<sup>136</sup> In order to establish that the good life is in fact the best form of life, Socrates must presuppose a cosmological notion of justice operative within the universe.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 91

However, the arbitrary turning of the 'Spindle of Necessity' indicates that there is in fact no such measure. Instead, "all that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both."<sup>137</sup> Plato refutes the optimism of the Hindu sages; reincarnation is not governed by karma. Instead the transmigration of the soul is determined by the turning of blind Fate.

The nihilistic destiny of Western metaphysics is readily apparent in Sophocles' *Theban Trilogy*, especially *Oedipus The King*. Sophocles tragic drama presents striking answers to Nietzsche's question of whether or not truth is beneficial to life. The answer is a resounding no! On the contrary, Sophocles' attic tragedy offers a shockingly bleak vision of the world in which the search for truth is fated to culminate in utter devastation. Even Oedipus, the heroic king of Thebes, lacks the strength to endure the truth of cosmic nihilism. For Oedipus, truth is ultimately a revelation of 'horror'. According to a prophecy of the Delphic oracle, Oedipus is destined to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Horrified by the oracle's prophecy, Oedipus exiles himself in a desperate attempt to avoid his fated ruin. But Oedipus's determination to evade his future only hastens the prophecy to fruition. Oedipus is ignorant of the fact that the King and Queen of Corinth, who raised Oedipus, and whom Oedipus takes to be his biological parents, are in reality Oedipus' adopted parents. It is because of this ignorance that in self-imposed exile from Corinth, Oedipus fails to recognize his true father when they meet in a chance encounter upon the road. Ignorant of his true identity, Oedipus engages in a heated dispute with the elderly stranger. In a state of

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 72



rage, Oedipus unintentionally kills the stranger, Oedipus' true father, Laius, King of Thebes.

Upon reaching the city of Thebes, Oedipus discovers its citizens at the mercy of the monstrous Sphinx. The only hope for salvation is to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. The Sphinx's riddle represents the secrets of nature of which only Oedipus is wise enough to perceive. Oedipus heroically solves the riddle and defeats the Sphinx. In a demonstration of gratitude, the Thebans crown Oedipus their king. As a result, Oedipus unknowingly marries his own mother Jocasta, the Queen of Thebes. To all appearance, Oedipus rules over a period of prosperity. However, the truth is that Oedipus' heinous crimes are festering deep within the body-politic. The gods strike Thebes with a horrible plague as punishment for the unspeakable crimes of their king. Oedipus, desperate to relieve the suffering of his people, pleads to "learn what act or covenant of mine could still redeem the state?"<sup>138</sup> At that moment, Creon, brother of Jocasta, returns from the oracle bearing news that "our wounds will issue into blessings."<sup>139</sup> The gods bring reassurance, promising that "seek and you shall find. Only that escapes which never was pursued."<sup>140</sup> Encouraged by the oracle's prophecy, Oedipus is determined to discover the identity of Laius' killer, and thereby "drag that shadowed past to light."<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, Oedipus' resolve to discover the truth at any cost leads to the devastating recognition of the ungrounded emptiness of being.

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<sup>138</sup> Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays Of Sophocles*, trans. Paul Roche, (New York, NY: Meridian, 1966), 7

<sup>139</sup> Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays*, 8

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 9

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 11

According to Aristotle's authoritative interpretation of the play, Oedipus' torment at the hands of gods is just. This is because Oedipus is afflicted with that which Aristotle calls the 'tragic flaw' of pride. According to Nietzsche, however, Sophocles' play bears witness to far darker truth – that ignorance is preferable to knowledge. Nietzsche: "Sophocles understood the most sorrowful figure of the Greek stage, the unfortunate Oedipus, as the noble human being who, in spite of his wisdom, is destined to error and misery . . ." <sup>142</sup> Far from displaying a 'tragic flaw', Oedipus' only crime is his devotion to truth. In the pursuit of truth, Oedipus summons the prophet Tiresias, who warns Oedipus that truth is too difficult for the soul to bear. Oedipus nevertheless persists, and Tiresias declares that "the murderer of the man whose murder you pursue is you . . . I say that you and your dearly beloved are wrapped together in hideous sin, blind to the horror of it." <sup>143</sup> Oedipus is reduced to a state of shock and despair. Desperate to avoid such a horrific prophecy, Jocasta offers false comfort, dismissing the command of the Delphic oracle to 'know thyself'. Jocasta: "There is no art of prophecy known to man . . . If the god insists of tracking down the truth, why then, let the god himself get on track." <sup>144</sup> Ever faithful to the gods, Oedipus is beyond such false consolation and resolves to face the truth at any cost. Jocasta nevertheless continues to plead with Oedipus to "forget it all. It's not worth knowing . . . God help you, Oedipus! Hide it from you who you are." <sup>145</sup> Oedipus is nevertheless compelled to continue seeking the truth

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<sup>142</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 67

<sup>143</sup> Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays*, 21

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 40

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 58

until the mystery is revealed: "Forget it all? I can't stop now."<sup>146</sup> According to Nietzsche, Oedipus should have followed the council of Tiresias and Jocasta; the truth is indeed too painful to endure. Upon discovery of the truth, Oedipus cries out: "Lost! Ah lost! At last it's blazing clear. Light of my days, go dark. I want to gaze no more."<sup>147</sup> According to the chorus, Oedipus' fate reveals "man's pattern of unblessedness."<sup>148</sup> What, then, is the truth of Oedipus' fate? What discovery could be so horrific that Oedipus is compelled to gauge out his own eyes in the shock of recognition?

The horrific truth of Sophocles' attic drama is as follows: "The edge of wisdom turns against the wise: wisdom is a crime against nature."<sup>149</sup> For Sophocles, we are 'abandoned' by the gods, destined to suffer a 'world of pain', whose only respite is death. Nietzsche suggests that, "conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence . . ."<sup>150</sup> In recognition of his fate, Oedipus' act of self-blinding suggests that it is better to live a life condemned to eternal darkness than to glimpse the 'horror' of being. According to Nietzsche's interpretation, "it was to be able to live that the Greeks had to create these gods from a most profound need."<sup>151</sup> Nietzsche: "The Greek knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians."<sup>152</sup> This veil was torn for Oedipus, thereby

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 60

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 68

<sup>149</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 69

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 60

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 42

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 42

revealing a glimpse of ‘the horror’. In spite of his nobility, strength, and courage, Oedipus’ fate is too terrible to bear. Creon nevertheless attributes blame to Oedipus, advising him to “stop this striving to be master of all. The mastery you had in life has been your fall.”<sup>153</sup> Nevertheless, it is not pride, but rather devotion to truth that drives Oedipus. The teaching of the play is completely nihilistic, and can be summarized as follows: “So being mortal, look on that last day and count no man blessed in this life until he’s crossed life’s bounds unstuck by ruin.”<sup>154</sup> Oedipus’ tragic fate indicates that it is better *not to be* than *to be*. Oedipus: “Oh wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not *to be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon.”<sup>155</sup>

The tragic world-view of *Oedipus King* is reinforced in an important passage of Plato’s *Apology*. At the moment of his death, Socrates says that he owes Asclepius a rooster. Asclepius is the god of healing, to whom Socrates owes a sacrifice. Presumably this debt is owed because Socrates thinks that death heals the wound of life. For Socrates, life is a disease whose only cure is death. Like Oedipus, Socrates “suffers life like a sickness,” and only death can heal the illness of living.<sup>156</sup> It is therefore better to not have been. Ultimately, both Socrates and Oedipus attain peace by resolutely enduring the cruelty of their fate. For this reason, Oedipus is considered a hero within the ancient Greek world. According to the conventions of attic tragedy, a hero is

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<sup>153</sup> Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays*, 80

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 81

<sup>155</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 42

<sup>156</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 74

characterized by the quest for truth, such as Odysseus' epic journey in Homer's *Odyssey*. For the ancient Greeks, the quest for truth inevitably involves the transgression of social norms, roles, and customs. Since the social order is divinely sanctioned, the transgression of social norms therefore invites divine retribution. A hero clears a new way of being beyond established forms of life. The search for truth therefore requires great courage. By committing incest and patricide, Oedipus transgresses the sacred cultural taboos of Thebes. These taboos repress the instincts in the name of preserving the established social order. The will of the hero is liberated from any such restrictions. Nietzsche calls the Greek hero a 'free spirit'. For Nietzsche, the will is free to the extent that "the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty . . ." <sup>157</sup> However, even the 'free spirit' must submit to the 'tyrannical' rule of the gods.

Take, for instance, Aeschylus' remarkable *Prometheus Bound*, in which the gods themselves are cast as tyrants. In the only surviving fragment of the Prometheus trilogy, the primordial Titanic gods are at war with the new Olympic gods. The ancient Titans are defeated and imprisoned within the abysmal depths of Tartarus. Only Prometheus, who sides with the new gods, against his own kind, is spared punishment. Upon observing the wretched state of humanity, Prometheus raises mankind above bare animal life by bestowing the transformative gift of fire. In so doing, Prometheus transgresses the divine command of Zeus. The 'tyrant' Zeus is enraged by Prometheus' 'man-loving disposition', imprisoning the Titan for all of eternity upon a mountainside of 'untrodden desolation' in a 'savage' act of divine retribution. As if that were not punishment

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<sup>157</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 290

enough, Prometheus must endure the consumption of his liver by a bird of prey, only to have it continually regenerate in order to be consumed again and again until the end of time. As Prometheus bears the gift of foresight, the question arises as to why the Titan could not foresee his own tragic fate? It is a cruel trick of Fate that Prometheus is gifted with foresight but not with the gift of remembrance. Though gifted with foresight, Prometheus is nevertheless destined to forget. As a result, Prometheus must suffer the 'eternal return' of the infinite cycles of time. Time is an infinite circle; everything that will happen has already happened. Conversely, everything that has happened will happen again and again. Even the ancient Titanic gods must submit to the arbitrary law of the 'grey-grim' Fates. To the extent that we moderns also look to the future while forgetting our past, Prometheus's Fate is also our own.

Aeschylus' bleak cosmic vision can be discerned in Prometheus' final lamentation: "So must I bear, as lightly as I can, the destiny that fate has given me; for I know well against necessity, against its strength, no one can fight and win."<sup>158</sup> Perhaps, like Oedipus, Prometheus would have gouged out his own eyes upon learning of his tragic fate, were his arms not already bound by indestructible adamantine chain. The remarkably nihilistic vision of Aeschylus' attic tragedy is "that it is better to die than suffer torment".<sup>159</sup> The contention that non-being is preferable to being can readily be discerned when Prometheus reveals the nature of his gift to humanity. Prometheus: "I

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<sup>158</sup> *Greek Tragedies vl I*, ed. David Grene & Richmond Lattimore, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 69

<sup>159</sup> *Greek Tragedies*, 93

stopped mortals from foreseeing doom . . . I sowed in them blind hopes.”<sup>160</sup> The response of the chorus to this revelation is not sorrow, but approval; “That was a great help that you gave to men.”<sup>161</sup> It would seem that knowledge does not bring freedom, but rather visions of catastrophic ruin and utter despair. With knowledge, one can only lament “the dreamlike feebleness by which the race of man is held in bondage, a blind prisoner.”<sup>162</sup> For Prometheus, ignorance of our condition is preferable to knowledge. ‘It is better not to know’ that mortals as well as the immortal Gods and Titans are bound by the blind rule of Fate. In spite of Prometheus’ bitter lamentations, Hermes dares to accuse him of pride: “Bring your proud heart to know a true discretion – oh foolish spirit – in the face of ruin.”<sup>163</sup> Hermes: “When you are trapped by ruin don’t blame fortune.”<sup>164</sup> But Prometheus remains steadfast, resolutely bearing the injustice of the gods, conceding no wrongdoing. Prometheus: “Oh Holy mother, oh Sky that circling brings light to all, you see me, how I suffer, how unjustly.”<sup>165</sup> Prometheus must resolutely endure his fate, bearing witness to the nihilistic horror of being until the end of time.

For Nietzsche, Prometheus’ fate is also that of ‘the West’. Like Prometheus, we are destined to endure the ‘eternal return’ of time that destroys and renews all that we take to be eternal and true. Nietzsche’s shocking discovery is that “something might be

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 74

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 74

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 85

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 102

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 105

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 106

true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree.”<sup>166</sup> Truth is not beneficial but harmful to life. For Nietzsche, the challenge is therefore “to recognize untruth as a condition of life . . .”<sup>167</sup> It would seem that self-consciousness is an aberration that ought to be annihilated. The challenge, in light of Aeschylus’ ‘tragic vision’ of cosmic nihilism, is to ascend to a higher perspective from which the horror of blind Fate appears sublime. From the vistas of such heights, “all things, whether good or evil, are deified.”<sup>168</sup> For Nietzsche, affirming the beauty of suffering is all that can be hoped for; “for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence is eternally justified.”<sup>169</sup> For Nietzsche, only the aesthetic re-enchantment of experience provides relief from this primal death wish. The only consolation is to learn to see beauty in necessity.

Nietzsche’s genealogical project remains unfinished, cut short by the tragic onset of madness. We are left with an *aporia* – an unsurpassable limit that must nevertheless be surpassed. It would seem that the search for truth dissolves its own conditions of existence: the ascetic belief that truth is divine and that knowledge is akin to blessedness. We cannot simply evade Nietzsche’s shocking discovery that it is not truth, but fiction that proves beneficial to life. Although I have argued that Nietzsche’s attempt to replace ethics with aesthetics is ultimately inadequate, Nietzsche’s confrontation with cosmic nihilism should by no means be judged a complete failure. In my view, Nietzsche’s deepest insight is that the good life is not the pursuit of truth, but the alleviation of suffering.

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<sup>166</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 49

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 12

<sup>168</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 41

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 52



We have already traveled a fair distance from Heidegger's initial confrontation with Nietzsche. Nietzsche's declaration that 'God is dead' means that in the modern age, our highest values devalue themselves. We have seen that in response to the radical contingency of value, meaning, and truth, Nietzsche attempts to legislate a new table of values 'beyond good and evil'. However, I argued that the revaluation of value does not signify the overcoming of nihilism, but rather its full expression. The vital will to power is assigned an impossible task – to create meaning *ex nihilo*. When confronted with the cosmic nihilism of the 'eternal return', the will to power amounts to a will to nothing. In light of Nietzsche's failure to overcome nihilism via the vitality of the will, we turn next to Heidegger's phenomenological account of 'being-in-the-world'. We will see that the subject does not exist over and above a world of objects that are available for instrumental use. Instead, we will explore Heidegger's account of being embedded in horizon of meaning. We will see that meaning is not created, but given.

## II. Overcoming Onto-Theology

### *The Deconstruction Of Metaphysics*

The topic of this chapter is Heidegger's overcoming of the 'onto-theological' legacy of Western metaphysics. Heidegger attributes the inception of Western metaphysics to the classical period of ancient Greece. Although ancient Greece is neither the beginning of civilization nor of metaphysics, Greek philosophy has nevertheless exerted an unparalleled influence on the philosophical heritage and cultural traditions of 'the West'. According to Emmanuel Levinas, Heidegger's remembrance of the Greeks is intended to "recall the missed possibilities, or of what went unsaid or un-thought, in this epoch."<sup>170</sup> Like Nietzsche, Heidegger understands Western metaphysics as Platonism, just as Christianity is understood as 'Platonism for the people'. Heidegger's 'de-structuring' of Western metaphysics is intended to disclose

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<sup>170</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, And Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 121

the unrealized potential and alternative possibilities of the 'onto-theological' legacy of Platonism. Heidegger famously attributes the beginning of Western philosophy to a sense of 'awe and wonder' before the radiant clearing of the encompassing world. Although 'awe and wonder' inspired the beginning of Western metaphysics, the history of the philosophical tradition – inaugurated by Plato and culminating with Nietzsche – is nevertheless a history of the concealment and oblivion of this primordial wonder. Throughout the history of philosophy the sense of wonder is forgotten, along with the 'grounding question' of what it means to be in the world.

Heidegger's 'de-structuring', or deconstruction of metaphysics prefigures the contemporary intellectual milieu of French 'post-structuralism', especially the thought of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Nancy. Indeed, I view Heidegger as the 'father' of post-structuralism. For instance, Derrida's deconstruction of any fixed origin is an appropriation of Heidegger's 'de-structuring' of any unconditional grounding of being history, and truth. According to Heidegger, a fundamental element of Western metaphysics is the search for a fixed origin, ground, or foundation of meaning, value, and truth. Emmanuel Levinas, a brilliant interpreter (and fierce critic) of Heidegger, expresses the prejudice of Western philosophy well: "All rationality comes down to discovery of the origin, the principle. Reason is an archeology . . ."<sup>171</sup> This position can be readily attributed to Aristotle, for whom the most fundamental philosophical discipline is metaphysics – an inquiry into the universal ground of all things. Heidegger argues that since the beginning of philosophy, "the Being of beings

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<sup>171</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism Of The Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 49

has shown itself as the ground (*arche, aition*).<sup>172</sup> Put simply, the philosophical tradition thinks being as foundation. Levinas levels the same criticism, arguing that “Western thought consists in understanding being only as the *foundation of beings*”.<sup>173</sup>

For Levinas and Heidegger both, metaphysics is more than a set of foundational dogmas and beliefs. Instead, metaphysics forms an unconscious epochal horizon that frames our entire way of being, thinking, and acting. Levinas suggests that the epoch of metaphysics encompasses the entire history of Western philosophy. Levinas: “The onto-theological character of metaphysics goes together with the characterization of a certain epoch . . . The epoch in question here (that of onto-theo-logy) embraces all of philosophy.”<sup>174</sup> Put simply, “in the epoch of metaphysics we think being as foundation, that is, we think metaphysically.”<sup>175</sup> It then follows that post-metaphysical thinking must also be post-foundational. For this reason, Levinas argues that the post-metaphysical epoch “signifies a rupture with the rationality of the foundation.”<sup>176</sup> Heidegger’s primary aim is to ‘step back’ from foundational concepts in order to retrieve a primordial sense of wonder before the ungrounded void.

Plato’s division of being into form and appearance inaugurates the ‘onto-theological’ legacy Western metaphysics. The intention of this ‘onto-theological’ dualism is to comprehend the unconditional ground of all being. Heidegger’s ‘de-structuring’ of metaphysics is intended to draw attention to the ‘ontological difference’

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<sup>172</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 56

<sup>173</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, And Time*, 122

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*, 123

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 123

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, 156

between the thing on the one hand, and its substance, essence, or ground on the other. The 'ontological difference' refers to the distinction between *what* there is and *that* there is. Heidegger intends to direct our attention to the basic fact that *there is*. According to Heidegger, "the beginning of metaphysics is revealed as . . . the division into whatness and thatness."<sup>177</sup> In other words, the 'ontological difference' refers to the distinction between the appearance of a specific thing in the field of vision on the one hand, and the vision of a field in which any specific thing can appear on the other. Heidegger argues that philosophy is no longer inspired by the 'awe and wonder' *that* there is, but is instead focused on categorization of *what* there is. It is only in light of the 'ontological difference' that being itself, distinct from any specific thing, comes to attention and becomes questionable. According to Heidegger, "we think of being itself rigorously only when we think of the difference between being and beings."<sup>178</sup> It follows that 'rigorous' thinking must forego any reliance upon the illusion of a secure metaphysical foundation.

Heidegger levels a sustained criticism of Western metaphysics as 'onto-theology'. 'Onto-theology' refers to the style of thinking that seeks to grasp the deepest ground and highest cause of all there is. 'Onto-theology' seeks to comprehend the totality of being; it seeks absolute knowledge. Although inaugurated by Plato, the 'onto-theological' nature of philosophy can perhaps be most clearly discerned in the treatises of Aristotle, especially the treatise on *Metaphysics*. Aristotle is the first philosopher to

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<sup>177</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), 2

<sup>178</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 62

define metaphysics as the science of being itself. While natural science is the study of the attributes of being (for instance, as molecular for physics, as elemental for chemistry, or as cellular for biology) metaphysics is the science of the properties of being as such.<sup>179</sup> According to Aristotle, the properties of being are twofold; metaphysics inquires into being as either: 1) the deepest ground, or as 2) the highest cause. Heidegger further clarifies the twofold aspect of being as follows: “[being] is the unifying One in the sense of what is everywhere primal and thus most universal; and at the same time [being] is the unifying One in the sense of the All Highest”.<sup>180</sup> According to Heidegger, to the extent that being is investigated as “the first and most universal ground common to all beings,” metaphysics is ontology.<sup>181</sup> Similarly, insofar as being is investigated as “the highest ground above all beings, ultimately as the ground of itself” metaphysics is theology.<sup>182</sup> Together, ontology and theology comprise that which Heidegger calls ‘the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics’ since Plato.

Levinas again proves an insightful interpreter of the onto-theological’ legacy of Western philosophy. For Levinas, “the problem posed by Aristotle is indeed that of being *as* being, but being is immediately approached in the form of a foundation of beings, and, finally, it comes to be named God. From that moment on, philosophy becomes theology.”<sup>183</sup> The ‘onto-theological’ constitution of metaphysics therefore signifies the introduction of the deity into philosophy as a principle of causation, or as

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<sup>179</sup> Aristotle, *The Basic Works Of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, NY: Random House, 1941), 731

<sup>180</sup> Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, 69

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>183</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, And Time*, 123

that which Aristotle calls the 'unmoved mover'. Heidegger argues that the conception of being as a unifying ground or cause is akin to "the metaphysical concept of God."<sup>184</sup> With the introduction of the deity into philosophy, metaphysical inquiry becomes the contemplation of God as either the highest cause or the deepest ground of the world that opens before us. According to Levinas, "onto-theology consists in thinking of God as a being, and in thinking being on the basis of this superior or supreme being."<sup>185</sup> However, the 'onto-theological' contemplation of God as highest cause and deepest ground abstracts from the basic experience of wonder before the ungrounded void. Again, Levinas expresses the matter best: "For Heidegger, the comprehension of being in its truth was immediately covered over by its function as the universal foundation of beings, by a supreme being, a founder, by God. The thinking of being, being in its truth, becomes knowledge or comprehension of God: theo-logy. The European philosophy of being becomes theology."<sup>186</sup>

'Onto-theology' is the contemplation of the unconditioned foundation upon which everything conditioned is grounded. By determining being as the ground of entities, 'onto-theology' perceives being as that which is most general or universal to all things. Heidegger therefore claims that the purpose of metaphysics is the intellection of the 'first principle'. Metaphysical inquiry can therefore be understood as "the question about beings as such and as a whole," or that which "unifies as the generative

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<sup>184</sup> Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, 60

<sup>185</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, And Time*, 160

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, 123

ground.”<sup>187</sup> For Aristotle, the ‘unmoved mover’ is the principle of causation that unifies the totality of being into a comprehensive system. ‘Onto-theology’ understands God as perfect self-identity – ‘thought thinking thought’. Aristotle therefore understands the first cause as “a substance which is eternal and immovable and separate from sensible things.”<sup>188</sup> Aristotle’s treatise on *Metaphysics* begins with the claim that “all men by nature desire to know.”<sup>189</sup> True knowledge, for Aristotle, is knowledge of that which is self-identical; “In pursuing the truth one must begin with the things that are always in the same state and suffer no change”.<sup>190</sup> The ‘onto-theological’ tradition therefore understands wisdom as “knowledge about certain principles and causes”.<sup>191</sup>

Heidegger argues that ‘onto-theology’ is founded upon the principle of identity – the unity of thought and being. The principle of identity states that for something to exist, it must remain 1) self-identical, or identical to itself, as well as 2) self-sufficient, or independent of any relationship. According to Heidegger, onto-theology therefore “represents identity as a fundamental characteristic of being.”<sup>192</sup> While ‘onto-theology’ interprets being as a stable identity, Heidegger attempts to delineate the basic experience of being as an ongoing process of self-differentiated becoming that escapes any attempt at stable identification. Heidegger suggests that being is not in fact self-identical. Instead, being is a continuous flow of self-differentiation. The ‘onto-theological’ principle of identity conceals the basic fact that all things lack intrinsic

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<sup>187</sup> Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, 54

<sup>188</sup> Aristotle, *Basic Works*, 881

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, 689

<sup>190</sup> Aristotle, *Basic Works*, 859

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, 691

<sup>192</sup> Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, 39



identity. No stable identity or thing can endure the transformative passage of time. On the contrary, attention to experience reveals the impermanence and interdependence of all there is. Phenomenal manifestation emerges to presence and fades into absence. Simply put, being is a process of self-differentiation, not stable self-identity.

### *The New Science*

In *Being And Time*, Heidegger makes the sweeping claim that, aside from the inception of metaphysics in ancient Greece, the entire history of Western philosophy has failed to pose the question of being – what does it mean to be? According to Heidegger, being does not appear worthy of questioning because the answer is thought to be already self-evident. But being only appears self-evident as long as it remains unquestioned. In a sense, Heidegger aims to reclaim a Socratic knowledge of our own ignorance – the recognition that we do not in fact know what it means to be. By posing the question of being, Heidegger intends to reawaken the fundamental ‘awe and wonder’ that inspired the ancient ‘science of being’. Throughout the history of philosophy, metaphysics has been oriented by that which Heidegger calls the ‘guiding question’ – the scientific interrogation of beings, entities, or objects in the world. Heidegger nevertheless intends to pose that which he names the ‘grounding question’. The ‘grounding question’ is the basis of Heidegger’s ontological investigation of the universal human experience of ‘being-in-the-world’. The grounding question is not, however, intended to replicate the ‘onto-theological’ quest for a first cause or foundational principle. While metaphysics seeks to derive absolute certainty from a

fixed origin, the question of being is 'grounded' by nothing apart from the method of inquiry itself. In this sense, Heidegger's 'fundamental ontology' is intended to be even more scientific than science. While the scientific investigation of beings, entities, or objects is 'ontic', only a questioning of being itself is 'ontological' in the fundamental sense.

In preparation for a 'fundamental ontology' of being itself, Heidegger undertakes an 'existential analysis' of *Dasein* – the being for whom being is a question. Heidegger calls the human being *Dasein*, which means 'being-there'. The experience of 'being-there' is supposedly characterized by certain fundamental ontological structures such as 'being-in-the-world', 'being-with', and 'being-towards-death'. In addition to such basic structures of existence, *Dasein* is characterized by certain existential attunements such as care, anxiety, and guilt.

In many respects, *Being And Time* can be interpreted as a response to Kant's idealist notion of the 'transcendental categories' of perception in *The Critique Of Pure Reason*. For Immanuel Kant, as for Heidegger, the entire tradition of Western philosophy amounts to the history of an error. Kant and Heidegger disagree, however, on the content of this error. For Heidegger, the metaphysical inquiry into entities fails to pose the question of being itself. For Kant, however, the metaphysical wonder of existence fails to inquire into the necessary *a priori* conditions of experience. Kant explains that the Western philosophical tradition presupposes that subjective reason conforms to the object of perception. For instance, Aristotle claims that "a thought is

moved by the object of thought”.<sup>193</sup> Kant nevertheless suggests that it is in fact the other way around – that the thought constitutes the object through the activity of the transcendental ‘categories of perception’. The ‘categories of perception’ are ‘transcendental’ because they remain beyond experience. In other words, the ‘categories of perception’ are the necessary conditions of experience and yet remain completely unconditioned by experience. Heidegger’s ‘existential analytic’ of *Dasein* basically interprets the ‘categories of perception’ through an anthropological lens. Contra Kant, for whom the ‘transcendental categories’ are abstracted from any cultural milieu, Heidegger’s argues that *Dasein*’s experience of ‘being-in-the-world’ is always historically mediated.

Kant’s discovery of the transcendental ‘categories of perception’ amounts to that which Kant himself names a ‘Copernican revolution’ in philosophy. In other words, transcendental idealism amounts to a revolution in philosophy on the scale of Copernicus’ discovery that the Sun, not the Earth, is in fact the center of our solar system. The equivalent revolution in philosophy is that the transcendental faculties of the mind constitute the phenomenal world of appearance. We do not see the world as it really is, only as it appears. In my judgment, *Being And Time* should be interpreted as a counter-revolutionary response against Kant’s revolution in philosophy. Heidegger characterizes Kant’s inversion of metaphysics not as a revolution, but rather as an ‘insurrection’ of the subject against the object. In light of this ‘insurrection’, Heidegger aims to cultivate a receptive, rather than constitutive relation to the world. According to

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<sup>193</sup> Aristotle, *Basic Works*, 879

Heidegger, Kant's division between subject and object, as well as the subsequent elevation of the subject over against the object, is a misinterpretation of the fundamental experience of 'being-in-the-world'. *Dasein* is not separate from the world, but instead exists within the world. The prevailing assumption that the subject occupies a privileged position, elevated over and against the object, is therefore deeply misguided.

Heidegger refutes the primacy of the subject over the object through a description of *Dasein's* embeddedness in the encompassing world. This description of 'being-in-the-world' challenges yet another fundamental assumption of modern philosophy – the autonomous self-determination of the rational subject. This modern notion of freedom predates Kant's 'transcendental idealism' and is most often attributed to the early modern philosopher Rene Descartes. For Descartes, it is of little importance that the subject exists within a world. Instead, Descartes suggests that the subject is best understood as independent and separate from anything *other*. As independent, the subject "needs no place and depends on no material thing".<sup>194</sup> Such independence nevertheless abstracts the subject from 'being-there' in the encompassing world. Descartes therefore understands freedom as independence from the finite limits of 'being-in-the-world'. Contra Descartes, Heidegger argues that the philosophical notion of freedom as autonomous self-determination overlooks the 'finitude' of human existence. Heidegger further delineates the 'finitude' of existence through a detailed analysis of the 'facticity' of *Dasein* as a 'thrown-projection'. For

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<sup>194</sup> Mark Wrathall, *How To Read Heidegger* (London, UK: Granta Books, 2005), 15.

Heidegger, the facticity of 'being-in-the-world' is both a condition and limit of freedom. On the one hand, the world limits freedom in the sense that one is 'thrown' into a situation in which certain choices are possible while others are not. *Dasein* is 'thrown' into existence without having chosen to come into existence. The encompassing world is not of one's own making and therefore resists the sovereignty of the will. On the other hand, the world is a condition for freedom to the extent that one makes a 'project' for oneself of the finite possibilities of one's 'thrown' situation. Although *Dasein* is 'thrown' into an established horizon of meaning, one can nevertheless resolve to 'project' one's own meaning into the world as a free act of creation.

The 'facticity' of *Dasein* as a 'thrown-projection' determines one's way of 'being-in-the-world' as either authentic or inauthentic. Inauthenticity is the evasion of the wide-ranging implications of the indeterminacy, contingency, and finitude of being. Although the possibilities one may choose are limited by the horizons of an intelligible world, one is nevertheless responsible to choose for oneself a way of life that is worthy of commitment. Inauthenticity is the evasion of the responsibility to create a life-project for oneself. Inauthentic *Dasein* flees from the responsibility of self-determination, preferring the comfort and security of pre-determined norms, values, and customs that are judged to be 'correct and proper' by the unreflective majority. While Heidegger argues that inauthenticity is the prevailing way of 'being-in-the-world', another, more authentic way of being is nevertheless possible. Authenticity is resolution before the nullity of one's own existence. 'Nullity' refers to the absence of an eternal substance, essence, or form at the core of one's own being. Heidegger's notion of the 'nullity' of

the ego the Buddhist notion of *An-Atman*, which means non-identity, no-self, or selflessness. According to Heidegger, there is no true self or stable identity at the core of one's being, only a chasm, or abyss.

Existential angst, or anxiety is the typical psychological response to one's recognition of the abysmal 'nullity' of the self. However, anxiety is not necessarily a negative state. Heidegger contrasts anxiety with fear, which is the dread of something specific in the world. Anxiety, on the other hand, is the dread of the groundlessness of existence as such. For Heidegger, anxiety is not just a feeling, emotion, or mood. Anxiety is a way of perceiving the world. It is a way of 'being-in-the-world' that reveals certain features of reality while concealing others. The angst that prevails in modernity indicates a sense of 'homelessness' in the modern world. In this sense, anxiety is not altogether different from the wonder of the ancient Greeks. Both anxiety and wonder cause things in the world to recede from attention, thereby un-concealing the world as such. Heidegger argues that anxiety can provoke authentic thought, just like the wonder of the ancient Greeks. The fundamental 'attunement' of anxiety directs our attention to the 'uncanny' fact that there is something rather than nothing at all. Moreover, anxiety interrupts our habitual sense of immersion in the everyday world. The existential 'homelessness' of modernity delimits the 'being-historical' horizons of the world as such. This phenomenological bracketing of the historical 'life-world' places being itself in question.

Although it is Heidegger's aim to 'de-structure' the tradition of Western metaphysics – inaugurated by Plato, inverted by Kant, and completed by Nietzsche – the

existential themes of *Being And Time* often replicate the same ‘onto-theological’ concepts that ‘fundamental ontology’ is intended to overcome. For instance, the notion of ‘authentic resolution’ can nevertheless be interpreted in a way that perpetuates the same subject-object relation that the existential analysis of ‘being-there’ and ‘being-in-the-world’ is intended to ‘de-structure’, question, and displace. Contrary to his own intentions, Heidegger’s notion of resolution is therefore consistent with morality since Kant – authentic resolution is akin to the autonomous self-legislation. Heidegger himself implies as much, given that he later judges the terminology of authenticity and resolution to be insufficiently post-foundational. In spite of these shortcomings, Heidegger’s existential analysis of *Dasein* nevertheless proves deeply influential.

Jean-Paul Sartre was of course deeply influenced by Heidegger’s existential analysis of *Dasein*. In fact, *Being And Nothingness* is in many ways a creative appropriation of the existential themes introduced in *Being And Time*. In my judgment, Sartre’s existential humanism is useful only to the extent that it heightens and intensifies the insufficiencies that are also present in Heidegger’s early existential analytic. Following the dualistic subject-object distinction of both Descartes and Kant, Sartre presupposes the primacy of the isolated individual abstracted from the encompassing world. According to Heidegger, “the thought that [all things] are products of the creating human expresses a destiny of the history of the essence of the West.”<sup>195</sup> Sartre’s notion of existential freedom is no exception, and therefore requires that

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<sup>195</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction To Philosophy: Thinking & Poetizing*, trans. Phillip Jacques Braunstein, (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 23

“subjectivity must be the point of departure”.<sup>196</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy is correct when he suggests that Sartre’s existentialism replicates “the ontology in which being – as subject – is foundation.”<sup>197</sup> By asserting the primacy of the subject, Sartre’s appropriation of Heidegger’s philosophy merely replicates the same ‘onto-theological’ legacy that Heidegger intends to displace. Sartre’s analysis therefore diverges from Heidegger’s phenomenological investigation of ‘being-in-the-world’ prior to the conceptual duality of subject and object. Unlike Heidegger, Sartre abstracts the individual subject from the more primordial experience of *being-there* in the world. Regardless of Sartre’s Cartesian presuppositions, his analysis of existential freedom delineates additional aspects of Heidegger’s ‘fundamental ontology’ that are insufficiently post-foundational. In other words, the project of overcoming ‘onto-theology’ too readily presupposes the same metaphysical foundation that it aims to ‘de-structure’. These metaphysical presuppositions can be readily discerned in Sartre’s existential humanism.

In his widely read essay *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, Sartre appropriates and develops Heidegger’s notion of authenticity. Sartre grounds his argument upon that which he calls “the first principle of existentialism” – that “God does not exist”.<sup>198</sup> We moderns are fated to endure the ‘flight of the gods’ from the disenchanted world of inert matter. Sartre suggests that the absence of God is not cause for hopelessness and despair. Instead, Sartre views the ‘death of God’ as the foundation of human freedom.

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<sup>196</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 20

<sup>197</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience Of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 6

<sup>198</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, 22



The 'non-existence of God' indicates that there is no God that could have created a human nature. If God does not exist then neither does a fixed human essence. There is no human nature because there is no God who could conceive of such a nature. For Sartre, if God does not exist, then 'existence precedes essence'. The 'death of God' means that we are 'condemned to be free'. Consequently, freedom should be understood in the radical sense; that is, as the existential determination of one's own being. If we are condemned to endure the absence of a Supreme Being, and consequently the absence of fixed human nature, then man at his core is "nothing other than what he makes of himself".<sup>199</sup> For this reason, Sartre claims that man ought to be defined "in relation to his commitments".<sup>200</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy offers a much-needed corrective to Sartre's radical account of existential freedom. Nancy argues that the sovereign decision of the will is arbitrary and ungrounded. Instead, Nancy suggests that "freedom cannot be presented as the autonomy of a subjectivity in charge of itself and its decisions, evolving freely and in perfect independence from every obstacle."<sup>201</sup> Contrary to Sartre, Nancy claims that overcoming 'onto-theology' should be understood as "the task of delivering ourselves from the thought of freedom as a property of the subjective constitution of being, and as the property of an individual subject."<sup>202</sup> Echoing Nietzsche, it is Sartre's position that man is the 'undetermined animal'. The subject is an existential project without any metaphysical basis, foundation, or ground. However, the power of creation *ex nihilo* is a

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 22

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 46

<sup>201</sup> Nancy, *The Experience Of Freedom*, 66

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 7

capacity formerly attributed exclusively to God alone. Sartre attributes the divine power of creation to the autonomous will. As Nancy points out, the sovereignty of the will does not signify the self-overcoming and self-realization of the 'over-man', but instead delineates "the last species of the odious god: the man-God, himself, abandoned by God, the totally secular divinity of humanity . . ." <sup>203</sup>

Sartre's attempt to assign the divine attributes of God to Man is ultimately a futile exercise. The insight that God is a lie does not thereby attribute value to Man. On the contrary, the absence of God means that both the human and the divine realms are devalued. In other words, the insight that God *is not*, does not simply mean that Man *is*. Sartre's secular humanism understands Man as the self-generating creator of meaning, value, and truth. In this sense, Man is a mirror image of God. But if God is absent, then so too is Man. The reflection vanishes along with that which is reflected. Secular atheism undermines itself; the 'death of God' reverts to the 'end of Man'. For this reason, Heidegger argues that secular humanism is not a description of subjective freedom, but of alienation – of the isolated individual alienated from the encompassing world. Although ontologically incorrect, Sartre's description of the isolated individual is ultimately true to modern experience. Heidegger: "The character of human essence in the shape of the working creative essence belongs as a distinction to the age of modernity, and only to this age." <sup>204</sup> Although the primordial human condition is one of 'being-in-the-world', modern experience is that of 'world-alienation'. The 'onto-

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<sup>203</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 139

<sup>204</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction To Philosophy*, 22

theological' determination of Man as the 'rational animal' disenchant the world, first by projecting truth into a beyond, and then by objectifying nature through instrumental rationality. In this sense, Heidegger's 'remembrance' of ancient metaphysics delineates one of the most damaging symptoms of modern life – that of 'reification'. Heidegger: "By setting its essence upon itself, the human rises into the willing of its own self . . . all things simultaneously become an object for the first time. The human in this uprising and the world as object belong together . . . Reification is now the fundamental comportment towards the world."<sup>205</sup>

### *The Holy*

Jacques Derrida takes up the problem of the abolition of Man and God in his essay *The Ends Of Man*. Derrida's major insight is that Sartre's "atheism changes nothing of the fundamental structure" of metaphysics.<sup>206</sup> Sartre's account of existential freedom attributes the generative will to mortal man rather than the immortal deity. According to Derrida, Sartre's project is therefore "nothing other than the metaphysical union of man and god, the relation of man to god, *the project of becoming god* as the project of constituting human reality."<sup>207</sup> The implication is that Sartre's existential humanism is not an expression of atheism at all, but instead unintentionally preserves the 'onto-theological' determination of the human being as "the universal and the highest".<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 20

<sup>206</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins Of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1982), 116

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 116

<sup>208</sup> Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, 61

Sartre substitutes the empty place of 'God' with the signifier 'Man'. As a result, "creativity, previously the unique property of the biblical God, becomes the distinctive mark of human activity."<sup>209</sup> The divine power of creation *ex nihilo*, or out of nothingness, becomes an attribute of the sovereign will. The challenge of overcoming 'onto-theology' is not to supplement the signifier of Man in the place of God, but rather to leave the abandoned place of God empty, clear, and open.

Sartre's account of existential freedom overlooks the most significant innovation of *Being And Time* – the description of human existence as 'being there', or 'being-in-the-world'. Sartre fails to account for the 'essential occurrence' of *Dasein*. Heidegger: "Man occurs essentially in such a way that he is *there*, that is, the clearing of being."<sup>210</sup> Although Heidegger utilizes the term 'essence' in this context, the term does not refer to the traditional metaphysical meaning. According to Western metaphysics, the essence of a thing indicates a predetermined and unchanging nature; "For metaphysics, the essence is always the whatness; therefore metaphysics seeks the representation of the outward look of beings as things that are present as objects."<sup>211</sup> For Heidegger, however, essence does not indicate an objective state, but rather a temporal occurrence. In other words, essence does not refer to *what* a thing is, but rather *that* a thing is; "essence here no longer means the endowment of a whatness; instead, it

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<sup>209</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology And Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1977), 64

<sup>210</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1977), 229

<sup>211</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Event*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013, 135

means an essential occurrence . . .”<sup>212</sup> Although *Dasein* is not constituted by an eternal essence, it essentially occurs in the clearing of ‘the open’.

The German term *Lichtung*, or ‘clearing’ has a rich and varied meaning. Typically, *Lichtung* means lighting, or illumination. But in its traditional usage, *Lichtung* refers to the open clearing at the end of a forest trail. The term evokes an image of a solitary figure walking through the dense shadows of a narrow forest path. At the end of the trail, the figure emerges into the open clearing of a forest meadow. Upon emerging from the darkness of the forest, the light of the clearing would no doubt radiate a sacred aura. It is this element of the sacred that, among other things, distinguishes Heidegger’s ontology from Sartre’s existential humanism. In my judgment, Heidegger’s ‘de-structuring’ of metaphysics bears a close affinity to Jean-Luc Nancy’s deconstruction of religious monotheism. This affinity is perhaps unexpected, given that Heidegger equates ‘onto-theology’ with both Platonism and Christianity. I do not wish to overstate the similarities between Heidegger’s ‘de-structuring’ of metaphysics and Nancy’s deconstruction of monotheism. There are significant differences between the two thinkers. For instance, Nancy contends that ‘the West’ begins with the advent of Christianity in Europe, rather than with the inception of metaphysics in ancient Greece, as is Heidegger’s contention. Moreover, Nancy argues that the ‘triple-headed’ monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are auto-deconstructive, and therefore do not function as a limit to be transgressed, as does Heidegger’s conception of ‘onto-

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 136

theology'. Nevertheless, Heidegger's overcoming of 'onto-theology' and Nancy's deconstruction of monotheism remain deeply complementary in many respects.

Nancy's project can be interpreted as a confrontation with Nietzsche's provocative declaration that 'God is dead'. The implications of this phenomenon are neither simple nor clear; the 'death of God' could signify either the emancipation from the bondage of religious dogma, or the catastrophic advent of nihilism along with the disenchantment of all meaning, value, and truth. For Nancy, there is a real danger that the 'death of God' does not, in fact, signify the newfound freedom of self-determination that emerges along with the passage from the Medieval era to Modernity, but rather, that "there is nothing to seek, nor to believe – no god."<sup>213</sup> According to Nancy, the 'death of God' signifies "the supreme alienation of the divine Idea: 'God is dead, God himself is dead' . . . everything which is eternal, true, is not, there is negation even in God . . ."<sup>214</sup> Nevertheless, Nancy's opposition to the 'onto-theological' notion of the Supreme Being should not be understood as a statement of atheism, nor as a rejection of the sacred as such. On the contrary, I take it that Heidegger's statement is true for Nancy as well: "The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy (god as first cause) is perhaps closer to the divine God . . ."<sup>215</sup> Heidegger's statement is evocative of Nietzsche's insight that "nihilism, as the denial of the truthful world of being, might be a divine way of thinking."<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 141

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*, 125

<sup>215</sup> Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, 72

<sup>216</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967), 15

In my view, Nancy's deconstruction of monotheism is a continuation and extension of Heidegger's deconstruction of the 'onto-theological' legacy of Western metaphysics. Nancy argues that atheism is an insufficient response to the 'death of God'. Nancy: "Atheism is not enough! Atheism is the positing of the principle that must be emptied. It is not enough to say that God takes leave, withdraws, or is incommensurable. It is even less a question to placing another principle on his throne – Mankind, Reason, Society. It is instead a question of coming to grips with this: *the world rests on nothing . . .*"<sup>217</sup> In other words, the challenge is to leave the place of the deity empty, clear, and open, and to thereby go beyond the 'onto-theological' determination of both Man and God. Nancy: "The empty place must not be occupied."<sup>218</sup> The phenomenological discovery of 'the clearing' delineates an alternative to the metaphysical determination of Man as the genesis of meaning and the legislator of value. Heidegger: "If man is no longer the image of the Judeo-Christian creator-God . . . the only conclusion to be drawn for being-historical thinking is this: man is not at all an image of an Other, but [exists] by virtue of his relation to being. [Man] is not the self-seeking of a willful positing of essence, but rather belongingness unto being, that is, unto what is most unique . . ."<sup>219</sup> In other words, *Daesin* is grounded in nothing other than the ungrounded 'clearing' of the phenomenal world. Nancy: "The death of God called for and brought forth a mode of thought that ventures out where God no longer

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<sup>217</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction Of Christianity II*, trans. John Mckeane (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 32

<sup>218</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 33

<sup>219</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary (London, UK: Continuum International Publishing, 2006), 291

guarantees either being or the subject or the world.”<sup>220</sup> Post-metaphysical thinking must be ventured without any recourse to an ‘onto-theological’ grounding of being, value, and truth.

Nancy’s deconstruction of monotheism elucidates that which Heidegger enigmatically names ‘the holy’. According to Heidegger and Nancy, ‘the holy’ transcends both the ‘onto-theological’ God of philosophy and the anthropomorphic God of religion. Heidegger: “The holy, which alone is the essential sphere of divinity, which in turn alone affords a dimension for the gods and for the God, comes to radiate only when being itself . . . has been illuminated and is experienced in its truth.”<sup>221</sup> It would seem that ‘the holy’ can only be thought from out of the ‘truth of being’. Again, “only from the truth of being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word ‘God’ is to signify.”<sup>222</sup> What is that which Heidegger names ‘the holy’? Of course, this is the wrong question to ask, since for Heidegger, ‘the holy’ is not *what* there is; God is not an entity, being, or object, but rather the non-dual ‘clearing’ of the world itself.

Heidegger’s notion of ‘the holy’ echoes the teaching of at least two distinct religious traditions: Advaita Vedanta and Kabbalah. Advaita Vedanta means ‘*non-dual* teaching’, while Kabbalah means ‘reception of tradition’. The affinity between Vedanta and Kabbalah is by no means unexpected, given that no-dualism and monotheism are

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<sup>220</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 122

<sup>221</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 242

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*, 253



simply two ways of expressing the same enigmatic experience of the sacred. Vendata teaches that Atman (the indwelling spirit) is Brahman (the transcendent godhead). Kabbalah teaches that Ein Sof (the infinite) is beyond the Sefirot (the anthropocentric image of god). Likewise, Heidegger's notion of 'the holy' attempts to delineate an experience of the sacred that 'de-structures' the metaphysical understanding of God as a principle of logic. For Heidegger, 'the holy' can neither be understood ontologically as the deepest ground, nor theologically as the highest cause. Indeed, 'the holy' cannot be understood at all. The stillness of 'the clearing' is more elemental than any 'onto-theological' concept. 'The holy' is the radiant opening of the world in which all things shine.

According to Nancy, the deconstruction of monotheism leaves the place of God "wide open, vacant, and abandoned, the divine infinitely undone and scattered."<sup>223</sup> Nancy: "This is no longer the 'divine', but is the dis-location and dis-position of the world . . ."<sup>224</sup> For Nancy, "the opening is neither the foundation nor the origin."<sup>225</sup> Nancy suggests that the sacred should *not* be understood 'onto-theologically' as the Supreme Source of nature and the cosmos. Instead, the origin "in itself it is nothing, nothing but a gap, an opening."<sup>226</sup> Nancy: "There is no other world, no world beyond, nor any 'backworld'. This means that there is no ultimate reference for the networks of the

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<sup>223</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 137

<sup>224</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Robert Richardson & Ann O'Byrn, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 17

<sup>225</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation Of The World: Or Globalization*, trans. Francois Raffoul & David Pettigrew, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 70

<sup>226</sup> Nancy, *Adoration*, 15

worlds references and that therefore there is no (ultimate) Sense . . .”<sup>227</sup> In the absence of that any fixed transcendental signifier, “truth, the truth of philosophy and of history, can do nothing else, henceforth, than open onto the abyss of its own beginning, or its own absence of beginning, end, and ground.”<sup>228</sup> It follows that “if the world does not have an origin outside of itself, if the world is its own origin or the origin of itself, then the origin of the world happens at each moment.”<sup>229</sup> If there is no prior origin of the world, then “the world springs forth everywhere and in each instant, simultaneously.”<sup>230</sup> For Nancy, the sacred is nothing other than this radiant opening of the world to presence.

Nancy’s turn to religion deconstructs the simplistic dualism between dogmatic theism and militant atheism. Nancy refutes both the anthropomorphic image of God and the theomorphic image of Man. Anthropomorphism is the projection of human qualities onto the primordial clearing of ‘the open’. The more traditional term is simply idolatry. The ancient Hebrew’s honored the clearing of ‘the holy’ by prohibiting the creation of any ‘graven image’ of God. The place of God was to remain empty of any conceptual representation. The most striking instance is the prohibition of any representation of the sacred name of God, the *Tetragrammaton*. For Christians too, the empty place of God is symbolized by the withdrawal of the divine at the event of

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>228</sup> Nancy, *The Creation Of The World*, 82

<sup>229</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 83

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 83

resurrection; “the divine is the empty tomb.”<sup>231</sup> For this reason, Nancy argues that the deconstructed God “is neither represented nor representable . . . but living; ‘the invisible image of an invisible God’.”<sup>232</sup> According to Nancy, “what ‘resurrection’ refers to – inadequately – is the radiance of manifestation.”<sup>233</sup> Nancy: “Resurrection is the manifestation of god inasmuch as he comes in his own withdrawal, leaves his mark in his own obliteration, is revealed in his own invisibility.”<sup>234</sup> The place of God is to remain open, empty, and clear; in other words – ‘holy’. While traditional religion is concerned with worshiping an anthropomorphic image of God, Nancy merely indicates the simple wonder of *being-there* in ‘the open’, or that which the poet Rilke calls “that pure space into which flowers endlessly open”.<sup>235</sup>

Nancy’s account of the radical imminence of ‘the holy’ is akin to a secular account of *kenosis*. Nancy: “The unique God . . . cannot precede its creation any more than it can subsist above it or apart from it in some way. It merges with it: merging with it withdraws in it, withdrawing there it empties itself there, emptying itself it is nothing other than the opening of this void. Only the opening is divine, but the divine is nothing more than the opening.”<sup>236</sup> *Kenosis* understands the divine act of creation as the self-emptying of God into the world. In this sense, *kenosis* deifies this world as the self-

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<sup>231</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction Of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, & Michael B. Smith, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 79

<sup>232</sup> Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 156

<sup>233</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 125

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid*, 125

<sup>235</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies And Sonnets To Orpheus*, trans. Stephen Mitchell, (New York, NY: Vintage, 2009) 49

<sup>236</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Truth Of Democracy*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), 70

unfolding, self-development, and self-emptying of 'Spirit'. To some extent, *kenosis* also resembles Heidegger's account of the 'abysmal ground' of being. By utilizing the term 'ground', Heidegger is not referring to the traditional meaning of the term as an ontological foundation. Instead, the 'abysmal', 'groundless', or 'ungrounded ground' refers to the absence of any secure foundation, principle, or origin. Heidegger: "The abysmal ground is the hesitant self-withholding of the ground."<sup>237</sup> Although self-withholding, it would be a mistake to interpret the abysmal grounding of being as something negative or nihilistic. For Heidegger and Nancy both, the withholding of the ground is a necessary condition for 'the clearing' of being; "for wherever there is ground there is cessation of clearing."<sup>238</sup> The withdrawal of a metaphysical foundation is at the same time the emergence of being to presence. 'The holy' is not separate from this world, but rather the very clearing of 'the open' in which we live, and move, and have our being.

We have now seen that Heidegger's phenomenological description of *Dasein*, or *being-there*, attempts to overcome the Cartesian dualism of body and mind. I suggested that Heidegger's confrontation with nihilism proves insufficient. The existential themes of *Being And Time* replicate the same humanist concept of Man as a secular image of God that Heidegger intends to supplant. In the end, what is 'holy' for Heidegger is not Man, or God, but the open field of vision in which all things shine. In light of the insufficiencies of Heidegger's phenomenological investigation, we move from

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<sup>237</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions To Philosophy (Of The Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Valega-Neu (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 300

<sup>238</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*, 196

Heidegger's early fundamental ontology to Heidegger's late reflections on technology, language, and art. We will see that the 'clearing' of the horizon in which beings emerge to presence is only a partial account of our experience of 'being-in-the-world'. There is not just an emergence of beings to presence, but also a withdrawal of being into concealment. We will see that this self-concealment of being is itself concealed by the technological 'framing' of being as constant presence available for instrumental use.

### III. The Technological Framing Of Earth

#### *The Turn*

The topic of this chapter is the non-instrumental environmental ethic of 'dwelling' that arises from Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics. I argue that Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics lends itself to an environmental ethic of non-violent 'dwelling'. I trace the instrumental mode of 'being-in-the-world' to the beginning of Western metaphysics in ancient Greece. The root of the problem is the technological understanding of things as objects and truth as objectivity. Heidegger indicates a more primordial understanding of truth as 'event'. For Heidegger, the emergence of a non-instrumental way of life depends upon the extent to which the technological 'framing' of nature is clearly perceived. I suggest that while Heidegger's post-foundational ethic does indeed envision a non-instrumental relation to nature, it remains unclear how such an alternative way of life may be politically achieved.

To the extent that Heidegger wishes to indicate a path beyond metaphysics, his late philosophy offers insight into the possibility of moving beyond the perception of Earth as a mere natural resource available for exploitation. This is especially evident in Heidegger's *Beiträge*, a series of meditative writings that include the recently translated *Contributions To Philosophy (Of The Event)*, *The Event*, *Mindfulness*, *Overcoming Metaphysics*, *The History Of Being*, and *The Beginning Of Western Philosophy*. Heidegger's most famous work, *Being And Time*, is intended to culminate with an investigation of being itself. This investigation, however, is ultimately left incomplete. In a remarkable demonstration of intellectual humility, Heidegger judges the entire project of overcoming metaphysics and the method of 'fundamental ontology' to be insufficient. Heidegger judges his initial attempt to overcome metaphysics from within the metaphysical tradition to be insufficient for a variety of reasons. The most basic problem with the attempt to overcome metaphysics is that the imminent critique of metaphysics unintentionally presupposes many of the basic onto-theological 'concepts and categories' that Heidegger intends to overcome. Heidegger: "The previous attempts, in *Being And Time* and the ensuing writings . . . had to remain insufficient. For they were always carried out as a rejection and so always took their orientation from that which they rejected."<sup>239</sup> In other words, the language of metaphysics proves

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<sup>239</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions To Philosophy (Of The Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Valega-Neu (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 278

inadequate to the criticism of metaphysics. Heidegger's task is therefore "to cease all overcoming, and leave metaphysics to itself."<sup>240</sup>

This problem is evident even in the use of the word 'being'. Heidegger's aim is to establish the insufficiencies of the 'ontological difference' between 'beings' and 'being'. To the extent that metaphysics is concerned with 'being' at all, it is understood as the 'Being of beings'; that is, as either: 1) the most general and universal being, or 2) the supreme and highest being. Furthermore, metaphysics conceals the difference between: 1) the ontic study of a specific being, or object, and 2) the fundamental ontological inquiry into being itself. In my judgment, the metaphysical terminology of fundamental ontology, including 'beings', 'being', and the 'Being of beings' sacrifices conceptual precision, in addition to being unnecessarily tedious. By Heidegger's own admission, " 'Being' and 'to be' are almost no more than empty sounds."<sup>241</sup> A difficulty inherent to Heidegger's project of overcoming the metaphysical understanding of being is that the term 'being' indicates a noun, a thing, or an object. The term 'being' therefore perpetuates the same subject-object relation that Heidegger intends to supplant through the analysis of *Dasein*, or 'being-there' in the world. By using the same metaphysical language of 'being' and 'beings' that he seeks to supplant, Heidegger both sacrifices terminological clarity and perpetuates the very concepts that he judges to be inadequate. For this reason, Heidegger's later thought largely abandons the terminology of *Being And Time* and is instead characterized by the experimental use of non-

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<sup>240</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 24

<sup>241</sup> Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 217



metaphysical language. In this sense, the poetic language of Heidegger's late philosophy signifies a departure from the tradition of Western philosophy. In place of 'beings', 'being', and the 'Being of beings', Heidegger speaks of 'the event', 'dwelling', and 'saying'.

The 'grounding question' of fundamental ontology delineates a similar methodological inadequacy of Heidegger's failed immanent critique. Heidegger distinguishes between the 'guiding question' of metaphysics, which is concerned exclusively with objectivity of 'beings', and the 'grounding question' of fundamental ontology, which is concerned with the meaning of 'being'. Unlike traditional metaphysical inquiry, 'fundamental ontology' is not concerned with the objectivity of beings (what a being is), but rather with the meaning of being (what it means to be). The question that *Being And Time* wishes to pose anew is therefore: What does it mean to be? The 'grounding question' of fundamental ontology nevertheless approaches being in light of a pre-conceived epistemological framework, which proves insufficient to the intended task. The methodology of 'fundamental ontology' resembles the scientific method, which presupposes a certain amount of 'fore-knowledge' about, or familiarity with the object of inquiry. This 'fore-knowledge' is evident in the formulation of a question and the positing of a hypothesis. However, although the aim is to focus attention to concrete experience, 'fundamental ontology' inadvertently replicates the methodology of abstract scientific analysis. This resemblance to the natural sciences is problematic for Heidegger, for whom the scientific method of experimentation and observation frames being narrowly as "a calculable coherence of forces" and "sets

nature up to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance.”<sup>242</sup> Again, science “orders its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature presents itself when set up in this way.”<sup>243</sup> Heidegger’s fundamental question of being is therefore only capable of disclosing the aspects of being that correspond to the pre-established method of inquiry. According to this established epistemological framework, beings are approached as objects distinct from the inquiring subject. In other words, the question of being presupposes established ways representing beings as objects and truth as objectivity. Heidegger: “Science is research into beings, such that these are already determined in advance as objects.”<sup>244</sup> The aspects of beings that are not readily perceptible to the scientific interrogation therefore remains concealed, and subsequently overlooked entirely by the history of philosophy. In light of this problem, what is needed is a more receptive way of thinking and dwelling.

In his late thought, Heidegger attempts to cultivate a more meditative way of thinking that responds to being as occurrence, happening, or ‘event’. This receptive style of thinking is perhaps closer to the sensibility of visionary mystics and poets than to the sober rationality of philosophers and scientists. Heidegger aims to overcome metaphysical thinking by abandoning the scientific method of rational inquiry that orients the ontological investigation of *Being And Time*. In order to accomplish this task, Heidegger’s style of thinking undergoes a ‘turn’ away from the rigorous phenomenological methodology of *Being And Time*, towards a more meditative and

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<sup>242</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology & Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1977), 21

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid*, 21

<sup>244</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*, 216

poetic style of thinking. More specifically, 'the turn' in Heidegger's thought indicates an abandonment of the traditional metaphysical language of Western philosophy since Plato. As a result, Heidegger engages far less with the metaphysical language and existential themes of his early philosophy. Instead, the problematic to which Heidegger's late thought responds can be expressed as follows: "In the history of Western thought, from its inception, the being of beings has indeed been thought, but the truth of being as being remains unthought; not only is such truth denied as a possible experience for thinking, but Western thought, as metaphysics, expressly though unwittingly conceals the occurrence of this refusal."<sup>245</sup> While Heidegger's early 'fundamental ontology' attempts to 'de-structure' metaphysics from within the tradition of Western philosophy, Heidegger's late thought attempts to go *beyond* metaphysics altogether. The 'turn' in Heidegger's late thought should therefore be understood as an attempt to go beyond the conventional use of language, beyond the frame of immanence, and beyond the world-historical destiny of 'the West'. The 'turn' in Heidegger's thought does not simply attempt to a 'step back' to the inception of ancient metaphysics in ancient Greece, but to 'leap beyond' the entire philosophical tradition of Western civilization as a whole. The end of Western philosophy does not, however, signify the end of thinking. On the contrary, Heidegger suggests that "with the end of philosophy, thinking is not also at its end, but in a transition to another beginning."<sup>246</sup>

It would be a mistake to interpret Heidegger's late thought as a naïve attempt to return to a bygone historical era of 'first beginning' of metaphysics. Instead, Heidegger

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<sup>245</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vls III-IV*, 190

<sup>246</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 96

envisions the inception of 'another beginning' altogether. Implicit in the intention to 'leap beyond' the history of Western metaphysics is a radical critique of Western civilization as a whole. The radical nature of Heidegger's criticism of metaphysics becomes more clearly delineated when juxtaposed with Marx's criticism of capitalism and the prospects of a 'proletarian revolution'. Heidegger judges Marx's critique of capitalism and the subsequent notion of revolution to be insufficiently radical. In this context, the term 'radical' should be understood according to its original meaning as 'a penetration to the roots'. Heidegger argues that revolution is merely "the overturning of what is already familiar but never the transformation into the entirely Other".<sup>247</sup> What is needed, according to Heidegger's late thought, is not only a 'de-structuring' of Western metaphysics, but moreover, an epochal transfiguration of the 'history of being'. Revolution amounts to a mere reversal, inversion, or reconfiguration of 'the same', whereas Heidegger seeks a radical dislocation of 2500 years of Western philosophy and civilization. The need for a more extensive break from metaphysics than a political revolution could achieve illuminates another significant disagreement between Heidegger and Marx. While Heidegger is deeply concerned with the alienation, or 'homelessness' of the modern condition, Heidegger fundamentally disagrees with Marx's diagnosis of the capitalist 'mode of production' as the origin of such alienation. For Heidegger, unlike Marx, alienation does not originate from the capitalist 'mode of production'. Socialist industrialization is no more receptive to being than capitalist production. Socialism does not offer a genuine alternative to capitalism. Instead, both

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<sup>247</sup> <http://lareviewofbooks.org/review/king-dead-heideggers-black-notebooks> 2016

socialism and capitalism are encompassed within the metaphysical frame of Western civilization. What is needed, for Heidegger, is an alternative to the entire metaphysical framework of 'the West'. Even a break with modernity would be insufficiently radical to accomplish such a feat.

Heidegger distinguishes between two beginnings of philosophy: the 'first beginning' of metaphysics in ancient Greece, and a more enigmatic 'other beginning' which has yet to be accomplished. The first beginning amounts to a 'step back' to the ancient Greek origins of Western metaphysics. Heidegger: "The step back from the thinking that merely represents to the thinking that responds."<sup>248</sup> According to Heidegger, the ancient Greek philosophers were the first to attain insight into the 'ontological difference' – the difference between *what* there is, and *that* there is. In other words, the 'ontological difference' distinguishes between the conceptual representation of *what* there is, and the awe and wonder *that* there is. Heidegger argues that "the division into whatness and thatness does not just contain a doctrine of metaphysical thinking. It points to an event in the history of being."<sup>249</sup> For Heidegger, the distinction between 'beings' and 'being' attains its logical fulfillment in the 'abandonment' of beings to the violence of technological exploitation and the subsequent 'oblivion' of being. It is Heidegger's contention that nihilism has been innate to Western metaphysics ever since the inception of the 'ontological difference' in ancient Greece. Throughout the history of 'the West', the simple wonder that *there is*

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<sup>248</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. (New York, NY: Perennial 1971), 179

<sup>249</sup> Heidegger. *The End Of Philosophy*, 4

becomes obscured by philosophical ‘concepts and categories’. The ‘step back’ is not, therefore, merely concerned with a retrieval of the principles and dogmas that characterize ancient metaphysics. Instead, the intention of the ‘step back’ is to once again perceive the wonder *that* there is being rather than nothing. While metaphysics is concerned with the conceptual representation of objects, Heidegger’s ‘step back’ aims to cultivate a pre-conceptual receptivity to direct experience. Heidegger: “The step back lets thinking enter into a questioning that experiences.”<sup>250</sup> In this sense, the ‘step back’ does not aim to retrieve or revive ancient philosophy. Instead, in Heidegger’s words, “only when we turn thoughtfully toward what has already been thought, will we be turned to what must still be thought.”<sup>251</sup> The ‘step back’ is therefore a preparation for the still more radical ‘leap beyond’ the entire Western philosophical tradition since Plato.

While it is frequently noted that many of Heidegger’s early existential themes – such as anxiety, being-towards-death, guilt, and conscience – are indebted to the modern theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, it is less often noted that this is also the case with Heidegger’s notion of ‘the leap’ in his later thought. The somewhat obscure notion of ‘the leap’ can be more readily understood within this context. For Kierkegaard, as for Heidegger, ‘the leap’ is not altogether different from the idea of religious conversion. In this sense, Heidegger presupposes that “there is a thinking more

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<sup>250</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: CA: Harper Collins, 1977), 246

<sup>251</sup> Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, 41

rigorous than the conceptual.”<sup>252</sup> The ‘leap beyond’ metaphysics therefore amounts to a transition from the intellectual representation of being as an object, to a ‘mindfulness’ of the essential occurrence of being as ‘event’. The notion of the ‘leap beyond’ should also be understood in opposition to the steady progression of deductive and inductive logic. ‘The leap’ breaks free of “the restriction of thinking to the concept of thinking established by logic.”<sup>253</sup> ‘The leap’ is sudden, abrupt, and completely unexpected. Heidegger: “In contrast to a steady progress . . . the leap takes us abruptly to where everything is different, so different that it strikes us as strange. Abrupt means sheer descent or rise that mark the chasms edge.”<sup>254</sup> In this sense, the ‘leap beyond’ is akin to direct pre-conceptual insight into non-dual experience. It would therefore be mistaken to interpret ‘the leap’ as a movement beyond existence into some kind of otherworldly realm, such as the divine realm of Plato’s forms. Instead, ‘the leap’ involves a ‘bracketing’ of abstract rationality and a renewed attention to direct experience. For Heidegger, thinking “is not about a mere modification of the concept, nor about a more original insight into the essence. Instead, it is about the leap into the essential occurrence of truth.”<sup>255</sup> Such an insight into the ‘essential occurrence’ of truth would amount to nothing less than the inception of ‘another beginning’ in the history of ‘the West’. In other words, Heidegger’s late thought amounts to: 1) a ‘step back’ to the unthought difference between being and beings, and, more significantly, 2) a ‘leap beyond’ the world-historical epoch of Western metaphysics.

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<sup>252</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 258

<sup>253</sup> Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 209

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid*, 12

<sup>255</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions To Philosophy*, 267

*The Frame*

Contrary to the history of philosophy since Plato, for whom truth is eternal and unchanging, Heidegger argues that the 'truth of being' is both temporal and historical. History grounds the 'truth of being'. More specifically, the 'history of being' is the ungrounded site of truth. Heidegger: "In its own being, truth is historical"<sup>256</sup> For Heidegger, "truth is inherently historical, not because human being elapses in the course of time, but because mankind is sent into metaphysics, and because metaphysics alone is able to ground an epoch insofar as it establishes and maintains humankind in a truth concerning beings as such and as a whole."<sup>257</sup> Heidegger's argument is actually quite simple. Metaphysics does not refer to system of dogmas, beliefs, and principles, but instead refers to an historical horizon of experience. Heidegger: "Metaphysics determines the history of the Western era."<sup>258</sup> Again, "Metaphysics grounds an age, in that through a specific comprehension of truth it gives to that age a basis upon which it is formed."<sup>259</sup> An 'age', 'era', or 'epoch' of history refers to the unconscious horizon of intelligibility and meaning that frames our basic experience of being. In this sense, the unfolding and culmination of Platonic metaphysics is akin to the density of 'the West'.

Heidegger claims that the 'truth of being' expresses itself differently throughout different historical epochs of being. Heidegger: "History arises out of the appropriating event and as such decides the essence of truth in each case and, with this decision, sustains a 'time' and grounds 'epochs' that essentially occur . . . as ages of world-

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<sup>256</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche: vsl III & IV*, 187

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, 187

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid*, 205

<sup>259</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 115



history.”<sup>260</sup> According to Heidegger, the history of the ‘first beginning’ of metaphysics constitutes the world-historical epoch in which the truth of being discloses itself as *alethia*, or ‘un-concealment’. Only in light of this original ‘clearing’ of being can any specific entity or thing emerge to presence. For Heidegger, the inception of ‘another beginning’ would constitute a rupture, or break from the epoch of the ‘first beginning’. In this sense, the ‘first beginning’ constitutes the epochal frame of Western metaphysics beginning with Plato and culminating with Nietzsche. For Heidegger, “history is not merely in transition to another age within the previous time-space of metaphysics; on the contrary, time-space itself is becoming other.”<sup>261</sup> Each unique ‘world-historical’ epoch signifies a distinct metaphysical framework that structures our basic experience of being. For this reason, ‘another beginning’ would constitute a fundamentally different way of ‘being-in-the-world’. Heidegger’s understanding of metaphysics as a ‘world-historical’ epoch of being indicates that history is not a linear development through time, but rather a series of unforeseeable breaks. A rupture of the epochal frame of Western metaphysics therefore indicates the inception of a way of ‘being-in-the-world’ that is absolutely incommensurable with the history of the ‘first beginning’.

It is worth noting that Heidegger’s account of a ‘world-historical’ epoch of being is quite different from the notion of universal history of ‘world-spirit’ that dominates modern philosophy from Kant through Hegel and culminating in Marx. A juxtaposition of Heidegger’s notion of ‘historicity’ with the dialectical notion of ‘universal history’ may clarify the former. Hegel’s phenomenology of ‘World-Spirit’ is a secularized Christian

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<sup>260</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*, 11

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, 64

cosmology. The dialectical movement of 'Being – Essence – Notion' delineates the Trinitarian account of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of God. The Father is incarnated as the Son who is crucified and resurrected as the Holy Spirit of Christian fellowship. Hegel: "Spirit is the movement of Self that empties itself of itself . . ." <sup>262</sup> Hegel argues that history is the immanent unfolding of 'universal spirit' in the world. The dialectical movement of history is the process of the self-emptying of 'Spirit'; "history is a conscious self-mediating process – Spirit emptied out into Time . . ." <sup>263</sup> For Hegel, the subject of history is history itself. Hegel therefore defines the 'universal spirit' of 'world-history' as "that Spirit whose nature is always one and the same, but which unfolds its one nature in the phenomenon of the World's existence." <sup>264</sup> The subject, or 'spirit of history' unfolds itself as a process of self-differentiation, and returns to itself in a process of self-recognition. History is therefore the process through which 'world-spirit' attains the self-consciousness of its own movement and development towards 'absolute knowledge'. For this reason, Hegel claims that the movement of 'universal history' is the progressive development of 'world-spirit' to ever more advanced forms of self-consciousness. Hegel: "The life of the ever present Spirit is a circle of progressive embodiments." <sup>265</sup> For Hegel, 'universal history' is therefore the history of progress, of the real becoming rational and the rational real; "Reason is the Sovereign of the World;

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<sup>262</sup> Hegel quoted in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness Of The Negative*, trans. Jason Smith & Steven Miller, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 94

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, 105

<sup>264</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy Of History*, trans. J. Sibree, (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1956) 10

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 79

the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process.”<sup>266</sup> In other words, the sovereignty of reason governs the ascending trajectory of ‘world-history’. The unfolding of ‘world-spirit’ is driven by an innate *telos* that determines the logic of historical development. As obscure as Hegel’s notion of ‘universal history’ may at first seem, it is actually the dominant ideology of modernity. The epochal frame of modern time-consciousness perceives history as a linear sequence of events. Furthermore, history is the linear progression from the dark past towards a brighter future. Although dominant, this ideology most often remains primarily latent, and therefore unconscious. For instance, nearly all of us implicitly believe that the modern age is more advanced than previous historical eras, and that civilization will continue to advance into an ideal future. In this sense, to the extent that we are modern, we are also implicitly Hegelian.

Heidegger’s criticism of ‘universal history’ is remarkably similar to Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel. Hegel claims that each historical epoch is overcome, transcended, or sublated by a more advanced stage of history. In this context, sublation should be understood as an overcoming that both transcends and preserves the horizons of the current historical epoch. For both Heidegger and Kierkegaard, however, history is constituted by discontinuity and rupture rather than the progressive continuity of time that stretches from the past to the present and into the future. There is no innate logic to history. History is not the history of progress. Instead, each world-historical epoch is ‘incommensurable’ with every other epoch of being. An epoch of ‘world-history’ does not progress to a higher stage through the logical development of a divine purpose, or

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid, 9

*telos*, as it does for Hegel. Hegel's teleological notion of history is more clearly delineated when juxtaposed with Kierkegaard's notion of the 'teleological suspension' of 'universal history'. A 'teleological suspension' of history presupposes something that is higher than the universal. For Kierkegaard, that which is 'higher' is the singular individual before God. A 'teleological suspension' of history is similar to Heidegger's notion of an epochal transfiguration of being. The transfiguration of a 'world-historical' epoch of being should therefore be understood as the suspension, rupture, or break from the history of the 'first beginning' of metaphysics. It therefore follows that history is not a progressive development through time, but rather a series of unforeseeable breaks. Each historical era represents the advent of a unique way of 'being-in-the-world'. The discontinuity of history means that the advent of another 'world-historical' epoch is completely unforeseeable from within epochal horizons of the Western metaphysics. A chasm therefore extends between the 'first beginning' of metaphysics and that which Heidegger calls 'another beginning'. For this reason, the fundamental characteristics of the 'other beginning' are completely unforeseeable from within the metaphysical framework of the 'first beginning'. It is not Heidegger's intention to accomplish an epochal transfiguration of being, but merely to establish its necessity. At most, Heidegger hopes to prepare for inception of 'another beginning' by cultivating experimental modes of thought.

An essential element of Heidegger's late thought is the contention that the 'first beginning' of metaphysics frames being as 'constant presence'. Heidegger: "Being

means: presencing, letting-be-present: presence.”<sup>267</sup> Again, “presence means: the constant abiding that approaches man, reaches him, is extended to him.”<sup>268</sup> Heidegger argues that “since the beginning of Western metaphysics, being has been understood in the sense of permanence of presencing, whereby permanence has ambiguously meant both fixity and persistence.”<sup>269</sup> In Heidegger’s words, metaphysics is the “final consequence of this determination of the sway of being as ‘the permanent’, ‘the constant’ . . .”<sup>270</sup> As early as *Being And Time*, Heidegger describes two fundamental ‘attunements’ towards being as presence: ‘present-at-hand’ and ‘ready-to-hand’. ‘Present-at-hand’ refers to the objective presence of objects to reason, while ‘ready-to-hand’ refers to the practical use of tools in daily life. While things appear ‘present-at-hand’ to the detached observation of the scientist or philosopher, things are not necessarily experienced as ‘present-at-hand’ in the context of daily life. Rather, things merely appear as objectively present when related to exclusively as objects of scientific observation and experimentation. In fact, ‘present-at-hand’ is derivative of the more primordial way of relating to things as ‘ready-to-hand’. For Heidegger, things appear as ‘ready-to-hand’ in light of the ordinary, pre-theoretical way of ‘being-in-the-world’. While metaphysics ‘frames’ beings as objectively present, attention to experience reveals things within an interdependent network of relations and a matrix of meaning arising from everyday practical use. In other words, the ‘present-at-hand’ mode of

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<sup>267</sup> Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, 10

<sup>268</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>269</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vls III-IV*, 212

<sup>270</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary (London, UK: Continuum International Publishing, 2006), 107

relating to things as objects is an abstraction of the way things actually appear to direct experience. The concept assumes primacy over that which is conceptualized. The metaphysical relation to beings as objects that are 'present-at-hand' abstracts from the practical 'ready-to-hand' way of 'being-in-the-world'. The 'present-at-hand' way of relating to things as objects obscures the following fact: that the pre-theoretical relation to things as tools is more primordial than the scientific relation to things as objects.

Heidegger's controversial insight is that technology did not emerge from out of the modern scientific revolution. Heidegger argues that technology precedes the development of science, just as the 'ready-to-hand' way of being in the world precedes the 'present-at-hand' relation to being. According to Heidegger, it would be a mistake to interpret technology as a primarily modern phenomenon. On the contrary, the technological relation to being is as ancient as metaphysics itself. Heidegger: "Technology is in its essence a destiny within the history of being and of the truth of being, a truth that lies in oblivion."<sup>271</sup> Heidegger traces the origins of this destiny back to the inception of Western metaphysics in ancient Greece. Heidegger distinguishes between technology on the one hand, and essence of technology on the other. In light of this distinction, Heidegger suggests that "technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology."<sup>272</sup> Furthermore, "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological."<sup>273</sup> If technology can be understood as "the manufacture and utilization of equipment, tools, and machines, the manufactured and used things themselves, and

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<sup>271</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 244

<sup>272</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 4

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, 4

the needs and ends they serve,” what then, is the essence of technology?<sup>274</sup> It is clear that for Heidegger the essence of technology is more than a means to an end; technology is more than a mere neutral instrument directed towards specific ends of our own choosing. Instead, Heidegger argues that “everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral.”<sup>275</sup> Contrary to the standard interpretation of technology as a neutral tool, or the means to and a specific end, Heidegger argues that the essence of technology does not merely mediate our access to things in the world. Technology discloses the world as such; technology is ‘world-disclosing’. According to Heidegger, the essence of technology “coincides with the term completed metaphysics.”<sup>276</sup> Western metaphysics culminates with the ‘abandonment’ of beings to the fate of technological ‘machination’. The completion of metaphysics is therefore akin to the nihilistic destiny of ‘the West’.

According to Heidegger, the historical unfolding of Platonic metaphysics ‘frames’ being as ‘constant presence’. In the modern era, the metaphysical determination of being as ‘presence’ discloses beings as ‘standing reserve’ for technological exploitation. Heidegger argues that “this [metaphysical] view excludes . . . that which becomes, that which comes into being and ceases to be, the un-constant.”<sup>277</sup> The technological ‘framing’ of living beings as a ‘resource’ culminates with “the unconditional

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>276</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 93

<sup>277</sup> Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, 107

objectification of everything present”<sup>278</sup> and “the absolute objectification of being as such.”<sup>279</sup> The total objectification of being is a logical outcome of the ‘ontological difference’ – “the sole precedence of beings (of what is objectively real) over being.”<sup>280</sup> With the distinction of the ‘truth of being’ from beings, beings become objects and truth becomes objectivity. As a result, “being everywhere abandons beings, leaving them to the claws and talons of objectification.”<sup>281</sup> The pre-conceptual, pre-objective, or pre-theoretical way of ‘being-in-the-world’ was more readily accessible to the ancient Greeks than to us moderns. The insight of the Pre-Socratics has, nevertheless, been concealed and forgotten throughout the history of Platonic metaphysics. For Heidegger, the unfolding of metaphysics is coextensive with ‘the history of being’. Heidegger: “In the beginning of its history, Being opens itself up as an emerging (physis) and unconcealment (alethia). From there it reaches the formulation of presence and permanence in the sense of enduring (ousia).”<sup>282</sup> At the inception of metaphysics in ancient Greece, being discloses itself as the radiant emergence of beings to presence. Throughout the history of philosophy, however, metaphysics becomes the systematic representation of that which can be conceptually grasped as objectively present. For Heidegger, the primordial ‘clearing’ of an epochal horizon of being is prior to the technological ‘framing’ of being as a ‘resource’. Heidegger therefore intends to ‘step back’ to the ancient experience of the emergence of beings into ‘the open’.

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<sup>278</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 85

<sup>279</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vls III-IV*, 242

<sup>280</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 91

<sup>281</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The History Of Beyng*, trans. Jeffery Powell & William McNeil, (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 130

<sup>282</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 4



At the inception of Western metaphysics, 'beings' are distinguished from 'being'. The question of 'being' subsequently recedes behind the disclosure of individual entities. As a result, the fundamental question of being is concealed and obscured. We are no longer 'mindful' that *there is*. Henceforth, being is thought exclusively as a 'standing reserve' constantly available for extraction, production, and exploitation. It is Heidegger's contention that "the unconditional establishment of machination and the aligning of mankind to this establishment constitute the installation of the abandonment of beings by being . . ." <sup>283</sup> The technological 'framing' of beings and the 'abandonment' of being culminates in the complete nihilism of 'machination'. The technological 'framing' of nature renders it virtually impossible to encounter this world as sacred. For instance, it is Heidegger's contention that it is now impossible to perceive a river as anything more than a natural resource. For this reason, Holderlin's hymn to the Ister is a work of art that bears witness to fundamentally different world, one that is no longer accessible to us. Similarly, the Black Forest no longer inspires mystery and fables. Instead, it is just another stock of 'standing reserve' to be exploited. Obscured by city lights, the night sky no longer inspires 'awe and wonder' before the vastness of the cosmos. We have truly become 'homeless' in this world. The technological 'framing' of nature is total. Rivers, mountains, forests, and fields become a 'natural resource' just humans are reduced to 'human capital'. Heidegger: "The irresistibility of the metaphysical essence of technology now incorporates the human being, calculated as

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<sup>283</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*, 87

the most important raw material.”<sup>284</sup> In other words, what is at stake is the total technological ‘framing’ of Earth as standing reserve for instrumental ‘machination’ – “the planetary imperialism of technologically organized man.”<sup>285</sup>

Heidegger’s criticism of the ‘framing’ and ‘machination’ of nature can be further clarified by looking briefly at the notion of ‘instrumental reason’ emerging from out of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, especially the work of Herbert Marcuse. As a student of Heidegger, Marcuse’s criticism of technological rationality is deeply influenced by Heidegger’s late thought. Following Heidegger, Marcuse attempts to disclose the “basic experiential framework” of the modern epoch of being.<sup>286</sup> According to Marcuse, technology functions as an *a priori* – it reveals being as nothing but a resource constantly available for exploitation.<sup>287</sup> As *a priori*, the technological frame “predefines the form in which objects appear.”<sup>288</sup> In other words, technology functions as an *a priori* category of perception in the sense that “it predetermines the experience of nature as extractable resource.”<sup>289</sup> For Heidegger and the Frankfurt School alike, the essence of technology discloses “a specific world, [but technology] does not and cannot transcend this world.”<sup>290</sup> Within the metaphysical framework of technology, “being is

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid, 77

<sup>285</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. 152

<sup>286</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, trans. Douglas Kellner, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964), 164

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, 152

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, 219

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, 152

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, 164

apprehended under the aspect of manufacture and administration.”<sup>291</sup> The metaphysical determination of being as ‘presence’ lends itself to the perception of nature as a ‘resource’ available for total administration. For both Heidegger and Marcuse, ‘machination’ encompasses the totality of being, thereby ‘framing’ all of Earth as a resource for exploitation. Heidegger’s account of the ‘abandonment’ of beings to ‘machination’ should be understood in light of the total administration of ‘instrumental reason’. For the Frankfurt School, the domination of nature goes hand in hand with domination of man. The same is true for Heidegger as well – the technological ‘framing’ of being delimits the epochal horizon of Western metaphysics. This is similar to Marcuse’s contention that “the instrumentalization of things becomes . . . the instrumentalization of man.”<sup>292</sup> This is also the position of Horkheimer and Adorno, for whom “man becomes material, just as nature as a whole is material for society.”<sup>293</sup> Nevertheless, perhaps the differences between Heidegger and the Frankfurt School are more significant than their similarities. While the Frankfurt school diagnoses the ‘instrumentalization’ of man, the reification of consciousness, and the mutilation of sensation to the alienation of global capitalism, Heidegger is more fatalistic in his outlook. For Heidegger, the technological ‘framing’ and ‘machination’ of nature constitutes the nihilistic destiny of ‘the West’.

The innate nihilism of metaphysics need not lead to the defeatism of radical pessimism. A faint glimmer of hope remains. Heidegger directs us to Holderlin’s poetic

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<sup>291</sup> Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 84

<sup>292</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 159

<sup>293</sup> Horkheimer & Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 87

saying: 'Where there is danger, there grows the saving power'. For Heidegger, the 'saving power' is as follows: that the essence of technology is also the essence of truth. Technology discloses beings as objects, thereby revealing the truth of being as objectivity. It follows that truth is therefore the adequate representation of an object to consciousness. The instrumental exploitation of nature as a 'standing reserve' is the culmination of the metaphysical determination of being as 'constant presence'. What is needed is a 'leap beyond' the metaphysical determination of being as presence. 'The leap' signifies the inception of a non-instrumental relation to nature. The implications of Heidegger's criticism of Western metaphysics are extensive. It would seem that nothing short of an 'epochal transfiguration' can address the problem of the instrumental relation to being. What is needed, therefore, is "a new basic experience of being [that] would change human existence in its entirety."<sup>294</sup> The intention of Heidegger and Marcuse is identical in this respect. For both thinkers, only "a qualitatively new mode of 'seeing' and qualitatively new relations between men and nature" would signify a transfiguration of the epochal horizons of being.<sup>295</sup> Such a transfiguration of the technological way of 'being-in-the-world' would consist of "a fundamentally different experience of being, a fundamentally different relation between man and nature, and fundamentally different existential relations."<sup>296</sup> For Heidegger and Marcuse alike,

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<sup>294</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros And Civilization*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1974), 52

<sup>295</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 165

<sup>296</sup> Marcuse, *Eros And Civilization*, 5

salvation would require nothing less than the emergence of “a different fundamental relation to being.”<sup>297</sup>

The prospect of such an ‘epochal transfiguration’ depends, first of all, on the extent to which the necessity of such a break from the ‘history of being’ is felt as an existential need. For Heidegger, the fundamental need is “to disrupt history through the leap into the overcoming of metaphysics, and thereby to raise beings as a whole out of the hinges of machination.”<sup>298</sup> If there is indeed reason to place hope in a ‘saving power’, then the ‘plight’ of the ‘abandonment’ of being to technological ‘machination’ must give rise to a deeply felt need for the inception of a non-instrumental way of life. Marcuse nevertheless echoes Adorno’s concern – that “the need which might resist control has already been suppressed.”<sup>299</sup> For Heidegger too, there is a danger that “we fail to hear the claim of being which speaks in the essence of technology.”<sup>300</sup> Heidegger: “The spiritual decline of the Earth has progressed so far that people are in danger of losing their last spiritual strength, the strength that makes it possible to even see this decline . . . and to appraise it as such.”<sup>301</sup> As a result, Heidegger suggests that “the lack of need is the highest and most hidden need.”<sup>302</sup> Heidegger: “The abandonment of beings by being leaves human beings without a sense of plight [in light of] the endless self-expanding emptiness of devastation.”<sup>303</sup> For both Heidegger and Marcuse, the technological

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<sup>297</sup> Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 89

<sup>298</sup> Heidegger, *The History Of Being*, 22

<sup>299</sup> Horkheimer & Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 121

<sup>300</sup> Heidegger, *Identity And Difference*, 34

<sup>301</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction To Metaphysics*, 40

<sup>302</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 102

<sup>303</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*, 141

‘framing’ of being must give rise to the genuine need for ‘another beginning’ – the need for an entirely *other* way of life.

### *The Event*

If, as Heidegger claims, “thinking remains bound to the tradition of the epochs of the destiny of Being,” then it therefore follows that an ‘epochal transfiguration’ of being must include a cultivation of pre-objective, non-instrumental, and post-metaphysical modes of thought.<sup>304</sup> This meditative style of thinking is the expression of a more ‘mindful’ and ‘thankful’ way of ‘dwelling’ upon Earth. The transition to a non-violent mode of ‘dwelling’ must nevertheless be ventured from out of the epoch of technological ‘framing’ and ‘machination’. According to Heidegger, the technological ‘framing’ of being is something resembling that which the ancient Greeks called destiny; “metaphysics is an epoch of the history of being itself.”<sup>305</sup> Within the ‘being-historical’ epoch of Western metaphysics, we are destined to experience the world metaphysically; that is, dualistically. A basic feature of the metaphysical frame is dualism – the duality of ‘being’ and ‘beings’. Moreover, metaphysical dualism is not merely one characteristic of metaphysics among many. Instead, Heidegger claims that the entire “style of all Western-European philosophy . . . is determined by this duality.”<sup>306</sup> Through an analysis of the metaphysical language of Western philosophy, Heidegger demonstrates that the most basic characteristic of metaphysics is “the duality of

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<sup>304</sup> Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, 9

<sup>305</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 110

<sup>306</sup> Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 224

individual beings and Being.”<sup>307</sup> Put simply, “the foundation of metaphysics is the duality of beings and Being.”<sup>308</sup> Heidegger argues that philosophical language is unable to move beyond this dualism, and is therefore insufficient for the task of ‘inceptual thinking’. Heidegger: “In keeping with its dual nature, a being has its nature in Being, and Being persists as the Being of a being.”<sup>309</sup> As a result of the ‘ontological difference’, truth is perceived dualistically – as the ‘Being of beings’. Truth is always perceived within this dualistic framework; “We are always speaking within the duality.”<sup>310</sup>

Metaphysically understood, truth is the adequate correspondence of the intellect to the thing, or the correct representation of the object in thought. Again, truth is “the correspondence of representing with what is present.”<sup>311</sup> Metaphysics therefore understands truth as correctness, or the correct correspondence of knowledge to matter, just as untruth can be understood as incorrectness. According to this correspondence theory of truth, “the true is what is made fast and therefore permanent in representational thought.”<sup>312</sup> In this sense, truth is an idea. More specifically, truth is the correct adequation of the idea to the thing. Heidegger: “An idea is called correct when it conforms to its object. Such correctness in the forming of the idea has long since been equated with truth – that is, we determine the nature of truth by the conformity of the idea.”<sup>313</sup> In opposition to the correspondence theory of truth, and

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 223

<sup>308</sup> Ibid, 224

<sup>309</sup> Ibid, 221

<sup>310</sup> Ibid, 227

<sup>311</sup> Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, 71

<sup>312</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche vls III-IV*, 235

<sup>313</sup> Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 58

therefore the entire tradition of Western philosophy, Heidegger suggests that truth is not a cognitive representation at all. Instead, truth refers to the open clearing of *alethia*, the primordial disclosure of a phenomenal world. *Alethia* is the pre-objective, non-dual opening of the epochal horizons of a world, prior to the cognition of any specific entity that appears within that open region. The implication of Heidegger's interpretation of truth as *alethia* is that the correspondence theory of truth is merely derivative of a more basic 'truth of being'. Prior to the cognition of any object in the world, *there is* the primordial opening of the world itself. In order to have an intellectual representation of an object, there must already be an open 'clearing' in which phenomena emerge and come to presence. In Heidegger's words, "*alethia*, un-concealment thought as opening, first grants the possibility of truth."<sup>314</sup> More primordial than any notion of truth as representation, correspondence, or adequation is the notion of truth as *alethia*, or un-concealment.

Heidegger's understanding of truth as *alethia* constitutes a fundamental difference between Heidegger's late thought and the philosophical tradition of 'the West'. At the inception of metaphysics in ancient Greece, truth is perceived as the open 'clearing' of an encompassing world. Heidegger: "Since Plato, *alethia* [has been interpreted as] the illumination in which beings as such stand, the visibility of beings as their presence."<sup>315</sup> Subsequently, being is perceived as the endurance of beings as 'constant presence'. With the culmination of metaphysics in the modern era, beings are objectified as 'standing reserve' and abandoned to technological 'framing' and

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<sup>314</sup> Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, 69

<sup>315</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions To Philosophy*, 264



‘machination’. In this sense, the technological ‘framing’ of being is akin to the consummation of the destiny of ‘the West’. Heidegger: “Metaphysics, as the history of the truth of what is as such, would have come to pass from out of the destining of being itself. Metaphysics would be, in its essence, the history of being itself . . .”<sup>316</sup> Throughout the ‘history of being’, truth, understood as *alethia*, is concealed by the technological ‘framing’ of nature as a mere resource for instrumental ‘machination’. In Heidegger’s words, the concealment of the truth of being “occurs through the collapse of the world characterized by metaphysics, and at the same time through the desolation of the Earth stemming from metaphysics.”<sup>317</sup> The metaphysical determination of being as presence conceals the fundamental experience of truth as *alethia* – the ‘open region’ of being. Following the inception of metaphysics, truth “is no longer that which presences; it is rather that which . . . has the character of an object.”<sup>318</sup> Metaphysics conceals the primordial un-concealment of truth as *alethia*, thereby abandoning all living beings to the fate of ‘objectification’. Contrary to the metaphysical determination of truth as representation, the ‘truth of being’ indicates that truth is an exposure to the pre-objective ‘happening’, ‘occurrence’, or ‘event’ of being. In Heidegger’s words “time and space *are* not; instead, they essentially occur.”<sup>319</sup> Again, “truth never *is*; instead, it essentially occurs.”<sup>320</sup> Once more, “being essentially occurs as event.”<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 110

<sup>317</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 86

<sup>318</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 150

<sup>319</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions To Philosophy*, 304

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid*, 271

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid*, 272

Heidegger's early 'fundamental ontology' called attention to the primordial 'un-concealment' of being; an 'un-concealment' that is itself concealed by the technological 'framing' of beings as objects. The intention is therefore to indicate this primordial 'un-concealment, 'clearing', or 'openness' of being that is concealed by the metaphysical determination of truth as objectivity. Heidegger's discovery of the primordial openness of being nevertheless takes on a different meaning in his late thought. Heidegger judges his own understanding of truth as *alethia* to be insufficient. The notion of truth as *alethia* incorrectly presupposes that if openness is truth, then untruth must therefore be characterized by the 'concealment', 'withdrawal', or 'passage' of being from the 'open region' of phenomenal manifestation. Heidegger: "*Alethia* means un-concealment . . . which already indicates that concealment itself is experienced only as what is to be cleared away, what is to be removed."<sup>322</sup> What is needed, therefore, is to think "*alethia* in a Greek manner as un-concealment, and then, above and beyond the Greek, think [*alethia*] as the opening of self-concealing."<sup>323</sup> Heidegger's late thinking abandons the notion of untruth as the concealment of truth. Instead the intention is to cultivate a 'mindfulness' of the self-concealing 'event'. There is a remarkable affinity between certain aspects of Heidegger's late thought and elements of 'Eastern' philosophy. For instance, Heidegger's understanding of being as the 'essential occurrence' of the event can be further clarified when juxtaposed with the Buddhist notion of *pratityasamutpada*, or 'dependent origination'. The term 'dependent origination', 'dependent arising', or 'interdependent co-arising' indicates the interdependence and

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid, 277

<sup>323</sup> Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, 71

impermanence of all phenomenal manifestation. The Buddhist notion of interdependence teaches that separate things do not exist. Phenomenal manifestation is undifferentiated and without distinction. The perception of separate and distinct things in the world is an effect of conceptual discernment. When discernment ceases, so too does the existence of distinct things. The Buddhist notion of impermanence teaches that nothing is permanent; phenomenal manifestation is not a state, but rather a process of continual flux. Identity does not therefore persist over time, only difference. Perceptual phenomena continually arise to presence and recede into concealment. While Western metaphysics is well suited for thinking *what* there is, it is completely incapable of thinking *that* there is. In other words, philosophy cannot account for simple miracle of *being there*. For this reason, the intention of Heidegger's analysis of the 'essential occurrence' of being is to elucidate the basic experience that *there is*.

According to Heidegger, being is not an object, but a gift. The etymology of the German language indicates a relationship between being and giving. Heidegger suggests that the expression *es gibt* has two distinct meanings, the first of which is *there is*. However, the expression *es gibt* also means *it gives*. *Es gibt* therefore means both *there is* and *it gives*. In light of this etymological relationship, Heidegger ventures to suggest that "all presence has its source in grace."<sup>324</sup> For this reason, Heidegger explains that "instead of saying 'it is', we say 'there is' / 'it gives.'"<sup>325</sup> Heidegger expresses the same in a more fragmentary style, which is a common feature of his late philosophy; "There is, It

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<sup>324</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On The Way To Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz, (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1971), 44

<sup>325</sup> Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, 5

gives Being as the un-concealing of presencing.”<sup>326</sup> Put simply, existence is a gift. Heidegger: “A giving which gives only its gift, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws, such a giving we call sending. According to the meaning of giving which is to be thought in this way, Being – that which It gives – is what is sent. Each of its transformations remains destined in this manner.”<sup>327</sup> But if being is indeed a gift, then what is that which gives? According to Heidegger, the ‘event’ reveals by concealing itself. The ‘event’ withdraws from being, and through that withdrawal, gives being. Heidegger: “The event: hesitant self-withholding as ripeness, fruit, bestowal.”<sup>328</sup> The giving is concealed by the gift of being. Although hidden, concealed, and withdrawn, the giving of being nevertheless solicits a response. The self-concealing ‘event’ of un-concealment is thought provoking; it ‘calls for thinking’. The appropriate response to the gift of being is therefore ‘thoughtfulness’. For Heidegger, there is no difference between genuine thinking and heartfelt thanking. Just as *es gibt* can mean either *there is* or *it gives*, the German word *denken* means both thinking and thanking. Heidegger therefore suggests that the essence of thinking is thanking, or ‘thankfulness’ for the gift of being. Again, thinking is thanking; Thinking is ‘thankfulness’ and ‘wonderment’ of the miracle of being. For Heidegger, the end of philosophy does not necessarily signify the completion of nihilism, as it does for Nietzsche. Instead, for Heidegger, the closure of metaphysics signifies the opening of thought.

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>327</sup> Ibid, 8

<sup>328</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions To Philosophy*, 273

Heidegger's understanding of thinking as 'thankfulness' for *being there* is completely foreign to the Platonic tradition of Western metaphysics. Heidegger claims that "in the beginning of Western thinking, Being is thought, but not the 'It gives' as such. The latter withdraws in favor of the gift that 'It' gives."<sup>329</sup> The giving withdraws behind the gift. As a result, Heidegger suggests that "only what *alethia* as opening grants is experienced and thought, not what it is as such. This remains concealed . . ."<sup>330</sup> It should be clear that Heidegger's experimental notion of 'It gives', or 'That which gives' does not refer to any determinate presence, but instead names "the presence of an absence."<sup>331</sup> While 'It gives' the destiny of the epochal transfigurations of being, at the same time, "to giving as sending there belongs keeping back."<sup>332</sup> The 'epochal-sending' of 'the event' withdraws behind the 'clearing' of being. The event 'sends' the epochal transfigurations of being through its own 'withdrawal', 'departure', or 'abandonment'. The self-concealing 'event' therefore opens a 'time-space' in which being may occur. In Heidegger's words "the opening is not the mere opening of presence, but the opening of presence concealing itself, the opening of self-concealing sheltering."<sup>333</sup> Heidegger's meditative style of thinking / thanking is not intended to overcome metaphysics from within the tradition of metaphysics itself, but instead "leads us in a certain sense away from Being, and we think the destiny that gives Being as a gift."<sup>334</sup> In other words, the aim is to 'turn' away from *what is given*, and instead cultivate 'thankfulness' for *that*

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<sup>329</sup> Heidegger, *On Time And Being*, 8

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, 71

<sup>331</sup> Ibid, 18

<sup>332</sup> Ibid, 22

<sup>333</sup> Ibid, 71

<sup>334</sup> Ibid, 10

*which gives*. Heidegger: “To think being explicitly requires us to relinquish being as the ground of beings in favor of the giving which prevails concealed in un-concealment, that is, in favor of the It gives.”<sup>335</sup> Again: “Being is the event. It has no ground.”<sup>336</sup> While the intention of metaphysical thinking is to penetrate to the foundation or ground of being, the task of ‘being-historical’ thinking is to endure the ‘passage’ of being into the ‘oblivion’ of self-concealment.

In light of the ‘abandonment’ of nature to the ‘machination’ of the planetary technological ‘frame’, and in light of the need for a non-instrumental way of ‘dwelling’ upon Earth, Heidegger poses the following question: “Can the measure of intense suffering that surrounds the Earth awaken a transformation?”<sup>337</sup> In other words, “Is man, as man in his true nature until now, prepared to assume domination over the whole Earth? . . . Must man, as he is, not be brought *beyond* himself in order to fulfill this task?”<sup>338</sup> In this context, Heidegger’s notion of man’s ‘dominion’ over the Earth should not be understood as the ‘domination’ of nature. Instead, Heidegger is asking what it would take for man to fulfill his destiny, as stated not by philosophy, but by the Hebrew Torah and Christian Old Testament. According to the Biblical tradition, it is the destiny of humanity to assume dominion of the Earth. Heidegger interprets ‘dominion’ to indicate a responsibility for the ‘guardianship’ of the all beings. While metaphysics does indeed constitute “the epoch of the development and instillation of human

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>336</sup> Heidegger, *The History Of Beying*, 116

<sup>337</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 110

<sup>338</sup> Heidegger, *Who Is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?*, Review Of Metaphysics, 20:30, (1967:Mar), 415

mastery over the Earth,” the instrumental domination of nature is not necessarily akin to Fate.<sup>339</sup> The ‘essence’ of humanity is not innately destructive. Another history is still possible. For Heidegger, the authentic calling of humanity is to assume responsibility for the ‘guardianship’ of Earth. Heidegger: “Unrealized essence: to ground the guardianship of the truth of being.”<sup>340</sup> The realization of such ‘guardianship’ would presuppose a radical break from the nihilistic devastation of Earth unleashed by the ‘first beginning’. Nothing short of ‘another beginning’ would suffice. If humanity is to realize its authentic call to ‘guardianship’, then the very ‘essence of man’ must undergo a transfiguration. In this sense, the epochal transfiguration of ‘the event’ involves “an essential transformation of the human.”<sup>341</sup> Humanity must be compelled ‘beyond’ the epochal frame of metaphysics, and therefore ‘beyond’ the nihilistic destiny of the instrumental ‘will to power’. If the danger lies in the instrumental relation to nature, then salvation must involve a transformation of our inherently predatory relation to life. Heidegger finds hope for such a transformation of human ‘essence’ in Holderlin’s visionary poetry. Holderlin: “He who thinks most deeply loves that which is most alive”<sup>342</sup>. Heidegger also finds inspiration in certain ‘Eastern’ ways of thought, especially Buddhism and Taoism. For instance, the *Heart Sutra* compels one to “dwell without thought-coverings.”<sup>343</sup> Similarly, the *Tao Te Ching* compels one to “make the Earth a dwelling place.”<sup>344</sup> In both

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<sup>339</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction To Philosophy: Thinking & Poetizing*, trans. Phillip Jacques Braunstein, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2011, 65

<sup>340</sup> Heidegger, *The History Of Beying*, 106

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid*, 76

<sup>342</sup> Holderlin, [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Friedrich\\_H%C3%B6lderlin](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Friedrich_H%C3%B6lderlin), 2016

<sup>343</sup> *The Heart Sutra*, trans. Edward Conze, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1958), 86

<sup>344</sup> *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Sam Hamill, (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2007), 11

texts, 'dwelling' arises from a direct non-dual insight into pre-objective reality. According to these religious traditions, unconditional compassion for all living beings is the mark of the full realization of human essence. The same is true for Heidegger; the mark of an attuned 'mindfulness' of being is a compassionate and contemplative way of 'dwelling' upon Earth. For Heidegger, "the fundamental character of dwelling is sparing and preserving."<sup>345</sup> Again, to 'dwell' upon Earth is "to cherish, protect, preserve, and care for" all beings.<sup>346</sup>

Such a meditative style of 'dwelling' on Earth would be equivalent to 'non-willing'. The term 'non-willing' indicates a relation to being that is prior to the intentional act of subjective cognition. In this sense, the practice of 'non-willing' cultivates a non-instrumental relation to nature as more than just a resource available for exploitation. Moreover, 'non-willing' lends itself to a more meditative, non-violent way of 'being-in-the-world'. Heidegger argues that it would be a mistake to interpret 'non-willing' as an act of renunciation, but rather as the experience of being 'released' towards "the sought-for essence of a thinking that is not a willing."<sup>347</sup> Heidegger appropriates the notion of *Gelassenheit*, or 'releasement', from the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart. For Heidegger, the fundamental point is that "releasement is effected from somewhere else," and is therefore not a subjective intention of the

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<sup>345</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, (New York, NY: Perennial, 1971), 147

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid*, 145

<sup>347</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Discourse On Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson & E. Hans Freud, (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 59



autonomous will.<sup>348</sup> Heidegger therefore argues that “authentic releasement consists in this: that man in his very nature belongs to [the event], i.e., he is released to it.”<sup>349</sup> A non-instrumental way of ‘dwelling’ on Earth cannot come about via sovereign decision. Instead, “the transformation of man becomes a necessity springing forth from being itself.”<sup>350</sup> Though regrettably obscure, Heidegger’s notion of *Gelassenheit* is quite important in my opinion. What Heidegger means by ‘releasement’ from the instrumental relation to nature can be more readily discerned when juxtaposed with the Taoist notion of *wu wei*. Indeed, this comparison is not an interpretive leap, given that Heidegger was deeply engaged in the study of Taoism in his later years. *Wu wei* translates literally as non-action, but a more faithful rendering of *wu wei* is spontaneous or effortless action. *Wu wei* refers to a way of being and acting in the world that is *not* a determination of the subjective will. The intention is not to shape the world according to the arbitrary will, but instead to align one’s will to the universal way of nature. *Wu wei* is the alignment of one’s own action with the *Tao*, the universal *Way* of nature and the cosmos. *Wu wei* can be symbolically represented as a tree that bends but does not break in the wind. Just as the tree bends in the wind, Heidegger seeks a way of being that is more receptive and responsive to nature.

In light of the nihilistic destiny of Western metaphysics, it is Heidegger’s contention that the inception of another beginning “comes to intimate only in the

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid, 61

<sup>349</sup> Ibid, 82

<sup>350</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 138

resonating of beings out of the plight of the abandonment by being.”<sup>351</sup> The attunement of another beginning “comes to intimate only in the resonating of beings out of the plight of the abandonment by being.”<sup>352</sup> Only in light of the ‘plight’ of living beings, abandoned to the fate of technological ‘machination’, does the need for ‘another beginning’ become acutely felt as an urgent need. The fundamental aim of ‘mindfulness’ is to accomplish a ‘releasement’ from the instrumental ‘will to power’. The aim is to ‘dwell’ gently upon Earth and to ‘shelter’ the self-concealing epochal ‘sending’ of the event. A receptivity to the ‘epochal sending’ of the event is “an insight whose illuminating lightening flash enters into what is and what is taken to be.”<sup>353</sup> Such an “event-related shift in being . . . is the historical origin of the transition from the first to the other beginning.”<sup>354</sup> The ‘directives’ of the ‘other beginning’ compel one beyond the sovereignty of the will towards *Dasein*’s authentic responsibility for the ‘guardianship’ of the truth of being; “a mystery that is unthought because withheld.”<sup>355</sup> The self-interested and predatory essence of man must be ‘released’ in order “to receive the blessing of the Earth and to become at home in the law of this reception in order to shepherd the mystery of being . . . .”<sup>356</sup> To shepherd, shelter, or guard ‘the mystery’ means to let being remain mysterious: veiled, withdrawn, or concealed. The point is to let go of the compulsive drive to reify and exploit nature for our own self-destructive purposes. Left unchecked, the metaphysical ‘will-to-power’ ultimately culminates with

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<sup>351</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions To Philosophy*, 304

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid*, 304

<sup>353</sup> Heidegger, *On The Way To Language*, 133

<sup>354</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*, 70

<sup>355</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 110

<sup>356</sup> Heidegger, *The End Of Philosophy*, 109

the extinction of life and the complete 'oblivion' of being. Heidegger: "The consummation of metaphysics is characterized by being's oblivion."<sup>357</sup> In order to 'leap beyond' the epochal frame of Western metaphysics, the necessity of doing so must first be acutely felt. The challenge, then, is to adequately express this need in language without merely replicating the same metaphysical 'concepts and categories' that ought to be discarded.

### *The Trace*

If, as the romantic poet Novalis claims, philosophy is indeed a form of homesickness, then the 'inceptual saying' of another beginning is something akin to a homecoming. Heidegger famously says that "language is the house of being."<sup>358</sup> For Heidegger, it is therefore towards the 'house of language' which thinking must return in order to become truly 'inceptual'. Heidegger puts forward the shocking argument that it is not man, but language that speaks. Language is typically thought to be a human creation, emerging from out of the customs, norms, and traditions of various nations and cultures. Nevertheless, Heidegger suggests that the inverse is the case; that we are not the creators, but rather the creations of language. 'Saying' is therefore not a mere human activity; "man acts as though he were the master and shaper of language, while in fact language remains the master of man."<sup>359</sup> Language is the most ancient technology; it is a form of 'showing', 'structuring, or 'revealing' the world within an

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<sup>357</sup> Heidegger, *The History Of Beyng*, 33

<sup>358</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Writings*. 217

<sup>359</sup> Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 144

epochal framework of history. For this reason, Heidegger claims that “to ‘Say’ means to show, to let appear, to let be seen and heard.”<sup>360</sup> Language is ‘world-disclosing’ by revealing the horizons of an historical epoch. Heidegger: “Saying pervades and structures the openness of the clearing.”<sup>361</sup> In other words, ‘saying’ discloses entities within a certain framework of intelligibility. Moreover, this horizon of intelligibility is independent of the cognitive act of representation. Heidegger: “There prevails a Showing which causes to appear what is present, and to fade from appearance what is absent . . . All radiant appearance and all fading away is grounded in the showing Saying.”<sup>362</sup> Again, “saying brings the thing as thing to radiance.”<sup>363</sup> If language ‘frames’ our basic experience of being, then language too is metaphysical. In this case, Heidegger is not only attempting to ‘de-structure’ the limits of metaphysical language. Moreover, the poetic style of Heidegger’s late thought is intended to transform our conventional use of language, and, in so doing, transfigure our instrumental way of ‘being-in-the-world’.

The most basic elements of human experience are mediated by language. Just as different ‘world-historical’ epochs reveal different horizons of intelligibility and meaning, language reveals fundamentally different ways of experiencing and relating to the world. For Heidegger, the metaphysical framework of language privileges the temporal mode of the present. The language of Western metaphysics tends to frame nature as ‘standing reserve’ constantly available for exploitation by ‘instrumental

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<sup>360</sup> Heidegger, *On The Way To Language*, 122

<sup>361</sup> Ibid, 126

<sup>362</sup> Ibid, 126

<sup>363</sup> Ibid, 154

reason'. For this reason, it is quite challenging to linguistically express the enigmatic emergence to presence, and, moreover, the passing into concealment of phenomenal manifestation. In light of 'the abandonment' of beings to the fate of 'machination', the challenge is to express the 'departure', 'withdrawal', or 'passage' of being from presence into concealment. Any attempt to adequately 'say', 'show', or 'reveal' the self-concealing event of un-concealment therefore requires non-conventional modes of expression. For Heidegger, the attempt to 'say', or bear witness to the epochal 'sending' of the event must therefore become less instrumental and more poetic in style. Heidegger: "The words of the beginning comes to language within the naming of that poetry which founds what is lasting and in the saying within that thinking which brings the truth of being to endurance."<sup>364</sup> Consequently, much of Heidegger's late thought bears a closer resemblance to avant-garde experimental poetry than to traditional philosophical discourse. Heidegger draws upon poetic modes of 'saying' in order to express the linguistic clearing of a non-instrumental 'world-historical' epoch of being. As a result, an epochal transfiguration must therefore include a transformation of language.

For language to undergo such a profound transformation, poetry must 'resonate' with the 'withdrawal' of being from presence into concealment. According to Heidegger, the 'attunement' to being from which 'poetic-saying' arises is difficult to endure, and therefore quite rare. The challenge of 'poetic-saying' is to 'resolutely' endure the 'passage' of being into the ungrounded 'abandonment' of self-concealment. For this

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<sup>364</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*, 150

reason, Heidegger argues that 'poetic-saying' "resides in the pain of the experience of the departure."<sup>365</sup> The task of poetry is therefore to 'echo' the 'plight' of the 'abandonment'. It is Heidegger's contention that the poetic 'resonance' of the 'passage' of being into self-concealment 'reveals' the horizons of a 'world-historical' epoch. Heidegger: "The resonating is the first and most proximate indication of the other beginning. It indicates accordingly the transition from the first to other beginning."<sup>366</sup> The resolute endurance of 'the abandonment' cannot be accomplished through strength of will. Instead, authentic resolution should be understood as a 'releasement' from the technological frame towards the self-concealing epochal 'sending' of the event. Heidegger: "Indeed, humans cannot start this overcoming and cannot bring it about, and yet they are a party to it."<sup>367</sup> An epochal transformation of being is not initiated by man, but rather 'appropriated', 'destined', or 'sent' by the event. Heidegger: "When mortals are made appropriate for Saying, human nature is released into the needfulness out of which man is used for bringing soundless Saying to the sound of language."<sup>368</sup> The simple, but profound implication of Heidegger's claim is that "it is language that speaks. Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal."<sup>369</sup> Heidegger: "Man is capable of speaking only insofar as he, belonging to Saying, listens to Saying, so that in resaying it he may be able to say a

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid, 205

<sup>366</sup> Ibid, 63

<sup>367</sup> Ibid, 73

<sup>368</sup> Heidegger, *On The Way To Language*, 129

<sup>369</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 214

word.”<sup>370</sup> The poetic ‘resonance’ of the primordial ‘saying’ of the event is the ultimate responsibility of the poet. Heidegger: “The responsibility of the response prepares the word of language for the claim of the event.”<sup>371</sup> Again, “the response is the human counter-word of language to the voice of being. To remain steadfast in the response is the essence of historical responsibility.”<sup>372</sup> Put simply, man does not speak, but is spoken. For Heidegger, poetry is ‘inceptual’ only when it ‘resonates’ with the primordial saying of ‘the appropriating event’. Poetry is only an ‘echo’ of the more primordial ‘sending’ of the event. The challenge, therefore, is for poetry to ‘resonate’ with the ‘saying’ of the event. Only the poet is ‘attuned’ to the ‘saying’ of the non-conceptual, pre-objective, non-dual ‘event’.

By enduring the epochal sending of ‘the event’, the poet is receptive to the necessity of ‘dwelling’ mindfully upon Earth. This style of ‘mindful dwelling’ expresses a sense of ‘thankfulness’ for the gift of *being there*. According to Heidegger’s visionary insight, the ‘directives’ of the event “are appropriations of humans into the uniqueness of their distinctive role: carefulness – i.e., the protection and stewardship of the truth of being.”<sup>373</sup> According to Heidegger’s interpretation of the ‘history of being’, the saying of the ‘first beginning’ expresses the radiant emergence of phenomenal manifestation to presence. The saying of the ‘other beginning’ signifies a leap beyond the ‘first beginning’. While the ‘saying’ of the ‘first beginning’ reveals the radiant un-concealment of being, the ‘saying’ of ‘another beginning’ bears witness to the abysmal self-

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<sup>370</sup> Heidegger, *On The Way To Language*, 134

<sup>371</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*. 134

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid*, 134

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid*, 201

concealment of 'the event'. Heidegger: "Here is the origin of the experience of the event. This experience is the pain of the departure of being . . ." <sup>374</sup> The words of the poet must 'resonate' with the 'withdrawal' of being into the self-concealing 'sending' of the event. While the 'directive' of the first beginning is to bear witness to the radiant self-emergence of being to presence, the 'saying' of another beginning must signify the 'departure', 'withdrawal', or 'passage' of being into the 'oblivion' of self-concealment.

Heidegger wishes to supplant the rule of Plato's philosopher-kings with that of the poets; only poetry can delineate another 'world-historical' epoch of being. Heidegger suggests that the poetic expression of the 'passage' of being into concealment arises from an experience of temporality that is fundamental opposed to the trajectory of modern-time consciousness. The poet must resolutely endure the temporal 'passage' from the radiance of presence into the oblivion of concealment. Ultimately, Heidegger's discussion of poetry and language indicates the necessity of breaking the encompassing planetary frame of metaphysics. The destiny of 'the West' does not culminate with human freedom, but with planetary extinction. For Heidegger, everything depends upon whether the 'sending' of the event comes to 'resonate' in poetic language. But surely it can be objected that Heidegger is guilty of overstating the 'world-historical' significance of poetry. One may very well ask whether it is in fact realistic to think that poetry alone could inaugurate an 'epochal transfiguration' of the event. Nevertheless, Heidegger is no doubt correct – language *does* shape a world. Any one who has learned another language can attest the way in which language opens up

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid, 243



and reveals different contours of the world. Likewise, language can also diminish a world. Take for instance the neo-liberal discourse of ‘innovation’, ‘productivity’, and ‘knowledge mobilization’ replicated by the modern research University. Such impoverishment of language constricts the horizons of a world. Nothing could be further from that which Heidegger calls thinking. If the poetic transformation of language alone cannot escape the innate violence of the ‘first beginning’, then it can at the very least articulate the pressing need for a more ‘mindful’ way of inhabiting the Earth. It is in this sense that poetry ‘shelters’ the truth of being from the planetary ‘enframent’ of technology. At its most visionary heights, poetry can in fact ‘resonate’ with the ‘abandonment’ of being, and in so doing ‘reveal’ the contours of a new epoch of ‘world-history’. Is there any poet whose words truly ‘resonate’ with the ‘passage’ of being into oblivion? In my judgment, the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke achieves such a feat. Rilke’s most visionary poetry was written at the height of destruction wrought by the World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Rilke’s poetry bears witness to what Heidegger names the ‘wasteland’ of the planetary ‘enframent’ of technology. In my judgment, Rilke’s poetry genuinely ‘resonates’ with the plight of beings, and, in so doing, calls us to an authentic ‘guardianship’ of rivers, mountains, forests, and fields:

“Dear darkening ground,  
 You’ve endured so patiently the walls we’ve built,  
 Perhaps you’ll give the cities one more hour . . .  
 Before you become forest again, and water, and widening wilderness  
 In that hour of inconceivable terror  
 When you take back your name  
 From all things . . .”<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book Of Hours*, trans. Anita Barrows & Joanna Macy (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2005), 125

The reception of Heidegger's late thought must be evaluated according to whether or not a receptive 'attunement' to the primordial saying of 'the event' can truly affect an epochal transfiguration of being. It would seem that the affectivity of Heidegger's late thought depends upon whether the 'clearing-concealing' of the event comes to 'resonate' in poetic language. In other words, everything depends upon whether or not being speaks. Can poetry 'shelter' the truth of rivers, mountains, forests, and fields from the planetary frame of technological machination? Emmanuel Levinas, a remarkably original philosopher and student of Heidegger, responds with a resounding no. Being, understood temporally as 'event', does not speak. Only another human being is capable of speaking and of expressing the need for a non-instrumental way of life. Ultimately, what is fundamental for Levinas is not ontology, but ethics. In opposition to Heidegger's 'being-historical' thinking, Levinas makes the radical claim that ontology is not fundamental. Levinas states his intention as follows: "We are looking for a way to get outside of ontology starting from [the ethical relationship], which makes objectivity impossible . . ." <sup>376</sup> Ethics, not ontology is first philosophy. The genesis of metaphysical transcendence is not the 'ontological difference' between being and beings, but rather the difference between oneself and another. Levinas' evaluation of Heidegger is reminiscent of Heidegger's own evaluation of Nietzsche. While Nietzsche's confrontation with nihilism is intended to overcome the history of Western metaphysics, Heidegger suggests that Nietzsche's thinking actually signifies the

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<sup>376</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, And Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 180

culmination of nihilism rather than its overcoming. Similarly, while Heidegger's late thinking is intended to affect a break from the instrumental 'frame' of Western metaphysics, Levinas suggests that even Heidegger's late poetic style of thinking is insufficiently post-metaphysical.

According to Levinas, Heidegger's thinking remains metaphysically grounded in at least one significant way. Levinas claims that "for the Western philosophical tradition, all spirituality is consciousness, the thematic exposition of being, that is to say, knowledge."<sup>377</sup> For instance, Aristotle says that 'all men by nature desire to know.' Since Aristotle, the search for knowledge has distinguished humanity from the rest of nature; the knower is distinguished from the known. Western philosophy therefore understands the human being as the 'rational animal'. The same is true of Heidegger's poetic thinking. For Heidegger, as well as for Aristotle, the essence of man is thinking. Consequently, the mind is distinguished from the encompassing world, which is in turn objectified as a resource for exploitation. The body is colonized and nature is disenchanting. Remarkably, Heidegger's late thought is not entirely inconsistent with Descartes' famous declaration that *cogito ergo sum*; 'I think therefore I am'. By privileging thinking as the fundamental human essence, Heidegger inadvertently distinguishes between mind and matter, and therefore risks replicating the same subject-object relationship that the phenomenological description of 'being-in-the-world' was intended to supplant. As a result, even Heidegger's late thought too readily lends itself to the Cartesian distinction between the mind, understood as *ego cogito*,

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<sup>377</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, & Robert Bernasconi, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 80

and matter, understood as *res extensa*. While Heidegger's stated intent is to give an account of the 'event' of *being there*, the interpretation of *Dasein* as the 'thinking being' inadvertently replicates the 'onto-theological' determination of man as the 'rational animal'. In response to this insufficiency, Levinas takes up Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics in a novel way. I am in agreement with Levinas' basic claim – while it would be foolish to evade Heidegger's groundbreaking innovations in philosophy, it is nevertheless necessary to move beyond the milieu of Heidegger's late thought. But in going beyond being-historical thinking, one must not retreat to a naïve pre-Heideggerian philosophy; there is no turning back.

Although Heidegger contests the supremacy of objective knowledge in Western philosophy, he nevertheless fails to contest the supremacy of knowledge as such. For Heidegger, *to be* is still to think. In opposition to Heidegger, Levinas argues that the other "does not affect us in terms of a concept."<sup>378</sup> Levinas: "The very relation originally established between myself and others, between myself and someone, cannot properly be said to reside in an act of knowledge."<sup>379</sup> Levinas articulates his own project as follows: "The sense of this whole effort is to contest the ineradicable conviction of every philosophy that objective knowledge is the ultimate relation of transcendence, that the Other . . . should be known objectively."<sup>380</sup> Levinas famously declares that every other is 'wholly other'. The other is infinitely *beyond* the horizon of being. What, then, is 'the

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>379</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside The Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 40

<sup>380</sup> Emmaneul Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburg, PN: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 89

other’? Traditionally, only God is thought to completely transcend knowledge. For this reason, scholars occasionally interpret ‘the other’ in light of the ‘onto-theological’ notion of God. In my view, Levinas’ notion of ‘the other’ should be interpreted a secular exegesis of the theistic idea of God. Levinas: “Now ethics, when proposed as a modality of transcendence, can be thought on the basis of the secularization of the sacred.”<sup>381</sup> It is not God who is ‘other’, but rather each and every human being. Levinas: “The Other (*l’Autre*) thus presents itself as human Other (*Autrui*); it shows a face and opens the dimension of *height*, that is to say, it *infinitely* overflows the bounds of knowledge.”<sup>382</sup> Reason is not a transcendental human faculty. The transcendence of the other remains forever concealed from the light of reason.

Levinas views the history of Western philosophy as ‘the destruction of transcendence’. The totality of being is encompassed within the framework of a closed metaphysical system. Metaphysics admits no other; nothing escapes the sovereignty of reason. There are nevertheless latent possibilities within the tradition that indicate a path beyond it. Plato’s account of ‘the Good’ bears within itself such a latent potential. The transcendence of ‘the Good’ indicates a ‘breakthrough’ equivalent to that which Levinas seeks. The ‘Highest Good’ signifies the intersection the vertical dimension of transcendence within the horizontal plane of immanence.<sup>383</sup> ‘The Good’ is transcendent; it exceeds the totality of being. In *The Republic*, ‘the Good’ is symbolized by the radiant light of the Sun. The light of the Sun illuminates an intelligible world, thereby making the

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<sup>381</sup> Levinas, *God Death And Time*, 163

<sup>382</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 12

<sup>383</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, trans. Betino Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 56

knowledge of things possible. As the source of intelligibility, 'the Good' is itself beyond comprehension. Nevertheless, for Levinas, that which transcends intelligibility is not an ideal form that lies beyond or behind this world, but rather the 'alterity' of the human face that is encountered in daily life. Levinas: "The relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence."<sup>384</sup> Levinas: "There is no model of transcendence outside of ethics."<sup>385</sup> Levinas' retrieval of the Platonic Good reinvigorates the fundamental question of ancient philosophy that is too often absent from contemporary thought – the question of the good life. As we will see, the good life is not one of solitary contemplation. 'The Good' doesn't just provoke thought; it demands justice.

To the extent that 'the other' remains forever concealed from the knowing mind, Levinas' thinking bears a striking affinity with the apophatic theological tradition. Apophaticism, more commonly named *via negativa*, or simply negative theology, refers to a non-cognitive relation to the absolute. Negative theology is most commonly attributed to the Neo-Platonic pseudonymous authorship of Pseudo-Dionysus. According to Pseudo-Dionysus' *Mystical Theology*, the representation of God as the Supreme Being is merely a false image of the true nature of the divine. Moreover, negative theology indicates a divine 'godhead' beyond the 'onto-theological' image of god. The godhead is "that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge."<sup>386</sup> The radiant 'godhead' is the Supreme Source of all. The 'godhead' illuminates the world while

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<sup>384</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 193

<sup>385</sup> Levinas, *God Death And Time*, 194

<sup>386</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 138

remaining beyond the world and therefore beyond knowledge as well. The 'godhead' is not merely unknown, but absolutely unknowable. The 'godhead' infinitely exceeds any 'onto-theological' concept of God as the foundation, ground, or origin. For this reason, it is impossible to make any positive claim about the nature of the 'godhead'. Instead, 'negative theology' endeavors to "remove any obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image."<sup>387</sup> The task is to negate the epistemological constructs that inhibit the original unobstructed attunement to the divine radiance that shines through the unconcealment of all phenomenal manifestation. Pseudo-Dionysius describes his vision of the 'godhead' as follows: "Here [in the mysterious darkness of unknowing], renouncing all that the mind can conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing."<sup>388</sup> The method of *via negativa* cultivates an unobstructed attunement to "the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence."<sup>389</sup> For Levinas, however, it is not the transcendent vision of the 'godhead' that is obstructed, but instead, the non-cognitive relation with 'the other'.

Levinas' account of the ethical relation to 'the other' also bears a striking similarity to the theology of Soren Kierkegaard. For both Levinas and Kierkegaard, the absolute is not an object to be known, but instead an experience to be undergone. Kierkegaard calls one's relation to the other an 'absolute relationship with the absolute'.

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid, 138

<sup>388</sup> Ibid, 137

<sup>389</sup> Ibid, 135

Echoing Kierkegaard, Levinas calls one's relation to the other a 'relation without relation'. Levinas: "Transcendence designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance . . ." <sup>390</sup> For Kierkegaard, the Absolute reveals itself through a personal relationship with God – the One without a second. The unknown godhead is the supreme source. God gives the truth as well as the condition to receive it. For Levinas, however, the 'the absolute relationship with the absolute' is not religious, but ethical. The transcendence of 'the other' is not only apophatic, but prophetic. The plight of 'the other' demands justice not prayer. The genesis of meaning is not the religious contemplation of God, but instead one's 'ethical relationship' with each and every other. Levinas: "The exposition of the ethical meaning of transcendence, and of the Infinite beyond being, can be carried out starting from the proximity of the neighbor and from my responsibility for the other." <sup>391</sup> Levinas neither reverts to the false security of a metaphysical foundation, nor does he celebrate the ultimately meaningless 'free play' of the ungrounded will. On the contrary, Levinas seeks to salvage unconditional meaning without reference to God. Levinas: "Meaning is the face of the Other." <sup>392</sup> For Levinas, "man himself is the temple and liturgy". <sup>393</sup> In spite of their many similarities, there remains a significant difference between the tradition of *via negativa* and Levinas' secular theology. Both Levinas and negative theologians are concerned

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<sup>390</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 41

<sup>391</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 70

<sup>392</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 206

<sup>393</sup> Levinas, *Outside The Subject*, 82



with the method of conceptual negation. Nevertheless, Levinas' ultimate concern remains the ethical exposition of God's absence. Ethics is true religion.

Levinas' exposition of 'the trace' is akin to a secular eschatology. The mythical 'flight of the gods' leaves a trace of the holy in the face of the other. Levinas: "It is in the trace of the Other that a face shines."<sup>394</sup> Levinas describes 'the trace' as "this way of passing, troubling the present, without allowing itself to be invested with consciousness, this striation of rays across the clarity of the exposible . . ."<sup>395</sup> Eschewing Heidegger's mysticism, Levinas argues that 'the trace' of the other is encountered in the expressive signification of 'the face'. Levinas: "What is this original trace? It is the nakedness of the face expressing itself, interrupting order."<sup>396</sup> Levinas: "The face is a living presence; it is expression."<sup>397</sup> Ethics is transcendence within imminence. The 'alterity' of the face is an encounter with the 'wholly other'; "the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."<sup>398</sup> The self-expression of the face is akin to a transcendent force; it "breaks up the unity of transcendental apperception."<sup>399</sup> 'The face' is not the disclosure of knowledge. Instead, 'the face' amounts to a revelation of an enigmatic 'alterity' that exceeds recognition, identification, and comprehension. Levinas: "the trace signifies beyond being."<sup>400</sup> Levinas argues that ethics is "a movement going forth from a world

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<sup>394</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 63

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid*, 81

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid*, 69

<sup>397</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 66

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid*, 78

<sup>399</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 78

<sup>400</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 61

that is familiar to us . . . toward an alien outside-of-oneself, towards a beyond.”<sup>401</sup> In my view, the temporal dimension of ethical transcendence is the most conceptually challenging element of Levinas’ philosophy. It would seem that ‘the trace’ withdraws in to the concealment of the ‘immemorial past’. The past is ‘immemorial’ in the sense that is incommensurable with any present – “a past that was never present”.<sup>402</sup> ‘The trace’ withdraws from presence into the concealment of “an irreversible, immemorial, and unrepresentable past.”<sup>403</sup> The ‘immemorial past’ has never been present. Levinas: “the trace is the presence of that which properly speaking has never been, of what is always past.”<sup>404</sup> For this reason, the past cannot be recollected or represented in thought. ‘The trace’ is equivalent to “a past that no memory could resurrect as a present.”<sup>405</sup> Again, the voice of the other “is the trace of a past that refuses itself to the present and to representation, the trace of an immemorial past.”<sup>406</sup> Once more for good measure, “the trace does not simply lead to the past, but is the very passing toward a past more remote than any past and any future . . .”<sup>407</sup> This eschatological element of the ‘ethical relationship’ achieves that which Heidegger seeks, though fails to achieve – an epochal break from the history of being.

Heidegger’s account of the poetic resonance of ‘the event’ exerts a significant influence upon Levinas’ own project. Heidegger: “What is decisive in the thinking of

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<sup>401</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 33

<sup>402</sup> Levinas, *God Death And Time*, 175

<sup>403</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 69

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid*, 63

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid*, 67

<sup>406</sup> Levinas, *Humanism Of The Other*, 54

<sup>407</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 63

being – to be sure, not in metaphysics and philosophy – is the act of saying what is said and not what is said itself in the sense of some graspable content of knowledge and of truth.”<sup>408</sup> For both Levinas and Heidegger, the subjective voice is merely a response to a more primordial event of ‘saying’. For Heidegger, this primordial ‘saying’ is constituted by the voice of being itself. For Levinas, however, ‘saying’ is the voice of the other. Consequently, ‘saying’ is not the resonance of the event, but rather the expression of the face. Ethics is dialogical. ‘Saying’ names the original condition of being addressed by another in speech. Levinas: “Speech delineates an original relation.”<sup>409</sup> Levinas: “The I receives absolutely and learns absolutely a signification that it has not itself given, a signification that precedes any meaning of being.”<sup>410</sup> Again, the expression of the face is “an anteriority that is older than any a priori.”<sup>411</sup> The primordial signification of ‘the other’ is always prior to that which is signified, shown, or revealed. Levinas makes an important distinction between the act of ‘saying’, and what is ‘said’. In other words, Levinas distinguishes between expression and what is expressed. The expression of ‘the other’ is more important than what is expressed. For Levinas, “saying is not a communication of something said.”<sup>412</sup> Instead, “the first content of expression is the expression itself.”<sup>413</sup> All dialogue, whether poetic or political, presupposes this original exposure to the other.

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<sup>408</sup> Heidegger, *The Event*, 226

<sup>409</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 6

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid*, 19

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid*, 81

<sup>412</sup> Levinas, *God Death And Time*, 191

<sup>413</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 51

The difference between the 'saying' and the 'said' is structurally similar to Heidegger's notion of the 'ontological difference'. Giorgio Agamben, whose philosophy of language is deeply influenced by Levinas, expresses the matter clearly. Echoing Levinas, Agamben argues that "the opening of the *ontological* dimension (being, the world) corresponds to the pure taking place of language as an original event, while the *ontic* dimension (entities, things) corresponds to that which, in this opening, is said and signified."<sup>414</sup> In Levinas' words, "The signification of saying goes beyond the said."<sup>415</sup> The problem, however, is that the initial difference between the 'saying' and 'said' is concealed and forgotten. Agamben: "The taking place of language (the pure fact that language is) is obliterated in that which is said in the instance of discourse; that is, this taking place (the Saying) is thought only as the foundation of the said, in such a way that the Saying itself never truly arrives at thought."<sup>416</sup> In other words, the event of 'saying' recedes behind the objectification of that which is 'said'. In Levinas' more poetic language, "the absolute withdraws from the illumined site, the 'clearing' of the present."<sup>417</sup> For this reason, Levinas argues that what is needed is "an indication that would reveal the withdrawal of the indicated, instead of a reference that rejoins it."<sup>418</sup> In this regard, Levinas' account of ethical signification is structurally similar to Heidegger's notion of poetic expression. For both, 'saying' delineates the passage from

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<sup>414</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Language And Death*, trans. Karen Pinkus & Michael Hart, (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 26

<sup>415</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburg, PN: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 37

<sup>416</sup> Agamben, *Language And Death*, 102

<sup>417</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 77

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*, 69

constant presence into the concealment of deep time. For Levinas, however, the task is to bear witness to the basic condition of ethical interdependence. In the 'pre-original' speech situation, one is always already compelled to respond. Agamben expresses the matter succinctly: "As you now speak, that is ethics."<sup>419</sup> It is Levinas' contention that the height of the Good survives the death of God. Levinas claims that "in this relation of the Good to me, which is the assignment of me to another person, something comes to pass that survives the death of God."<sup>420</sup> The expression of 'the face' bears a 'trace' of the infinite. Levinas shows a path beyond nihilism, but it difficult; it demands justice.

We have now looked at Heidegger's reflections on the innate nihilism of the technological 'framing' of nature. We traced the destruction of nature back to the metaphysical dualism of ancient philosophy that views nature as an object and truth as objectivity. We then looked at the more fundamental experience of being as *event*. Heidegger's non-linear temporality of 'the event' challenges Nietzsche's tragic notion of time as the endless repetition of closed circle as well as Hegel's dogmatic concept of history as progress. Nevertheless, the political implications of Heidegger's environmental ethic of 'dwelling' require further exposition. In what follows, I transition from looking at political nihilism in light of Heidegger's confrontation with Nietzsche towards a more explicit engagement with the possibility of post-foundational democracy after the 'death of God'. This requires that we transition from Heidegger's appropriation of Nietzsche to the post-structural appropriation of Heidegger by Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy. I will argue that Levinas' account of the radical separation of 'the

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<sup>419</sup> Agamben, *Language And Death*, 108

<sup>420</sup> Levinas, *God Death And Time*, 177

ethical' and 'the political' offers a much-needed corrective to the false reconciliation of Hegel's universal state. I suggest, however, that the endless deconstruction of political community and sovereign power risks reducing democracy from a mode of self-government to nothing but a form of protest.

#### IV. The Body-Politic

##### *The Strife Of The Political*

Much has been written on the relationship between Levinas and Derrida. Simon Critchley's *Ethics Of Deconstruction* comes to mind as an example of this approach. It is unfortunate that this treatment tends to overlook one of the most remarkable innovations of Levinas' thinking – attention to the corporality of the 'ethical relationship'. Levinas' attention to embodied sensation is inspired by the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl. Although Derrida is also influenced by phenomenology, he nevertheless has relatively little to say about materiality, corporality, and embodiment. As Tom Sparrow demonstrates convincingly in *Levinas Unhinged*, ethics has a material genesis. Levinas discovers a post-foundational grounding of ethics in the 'proximity' of one body to another. The central aim of phenomenology is to determine the aspects of experience that remain absolutely

certain when subjected to critical doubt. Phenomenology therefore attempts to negate, bracket, or suspend habitual modes of consciousness that inhibit one's undistorted perception of the world. For this reason, the rallying cry of phenomenology is 'back to the things themselves!' The goal is to reach an unmediated perception of objective reality; "Husserl's main objective is to separate perception from representation in such a way that the latter should not interfere with primary self-evidence of knowledge."<sup>421</sup> The 'phenomenological reduction' is intended to distinguish between the ossified patterns of subjective consciousness from the elements of experience that are objectively true.<sup>422</sup> In this sense, Husserl's phenomenology is a continuation and development of Descartes' attempt to attain objective certainty through critical doubt. It is this phenomenological tradition that leads Levinas to the discovery of ethical embodiment.

Phenomenology is nevertheless widely considered to be a failure. Husserl's phenomenological method repeats many of the same errors of Descartes' rational idealism. The well-worn criticisms of Descartes therefore apply to Husserl as well: the traumatic diremption of body and mind, the unfounded privileging of abstract reason, and the naïve search for absolute certainty. As a result, phenomenology maintains the same elements of subjectivism that Husserl wishes to 'bracket'. Contrary to Husserl's own search for a transcendental grounding of reason, phenomenology instead discloses the ungrounded chasm at the heart of being. It turns out that there is nothing certain or

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<sup>421</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory & Practice*, (London, UK: Methuen, 1982), 47

<sup>422</sup> Norris, *Deconstruction*, 43



objective underlying subjective consciousness. Our concepts are always inadequate. Nothing can be said about existence with certainty. Regardless, just as Descartes' rational idealism exerted a revolutionary impact on early modern philosophy, Husserl's phenomenological method likewise invigorated twentieth century European philosophy. Martin Heidegger was a student of Husserl, as was Emmanuel Levinas. Both Heidegger and Levinas reject Husserl's unfounded Cartesian presuppositions in an attempt to remain more faithful to the phenomenological method than Husserl himself. The phenomenological element retained by both Heidegger and Levinas is direct attention to non-dual experience. Heidegger's phenomenological description of 'being-in-the-world' is a rejection of Husserl's subject-object distinction. Levinas goes even further, refuting Husserl's Cartesian rationalism through an account of the intrinsic meaning of embodied sensation.

According to Levinas, the most significant insufficiency of phenomenology is the enduring metaphysical and methodological primacy of subjective reason. This remains true of Heidegger's appropriation of Husserl as well. Heidegger's late philosophy abandons the phenomenological method in order to cultivate a non-instrumental mindfulness of 'the event'. Nevertheless, even Heidegger's late philosophy replicates the metaphysical presupposition that thinking is the genesis of all meaning. In opposition to both Heidegger and Husserl, Levinas suggests that ethics has no relation whatsoever to thinking. The origin of meaning is not the mind, but the body. In spite of its limitations, the phenomenological method of 'bracketing' subjective consciousness is absolutely essential to Levinas' discovery of the corporality of 'the ethical relation'. For

instance, Husserl's idea of 'intentionality' refutes the notion of pure consciousness *in-itself*. In this sense, 'intentionality' is opposed to Aristotle's notion of thought thinking itself. Instead, Husserl suggests that there is only ever consciousness *of* something. In other words, self-consciousness is the turning of awareness back on itself upon encountering its *other*. Put simply, Husserl discovers that the other is the genesis of self-consciousness. Levinas nevertheless rejects Husserl's division of being into the thinking mind and inert matter. Instead, Levinas argues that "there is no Cartesian separation between me and my body, nor a synthesis, but immediately and un-objectifiable, lived participation."<sup>423</sup> Levinas therefore locates a post-metaphysical corporeal grounding of ethics in the 'sensible proximity' of one body to another. According to Levinas, ethics is the teaching of the body. Ethics originates from the 'anarchy' of sensation, prior to any 'onto-theological' grounding of first principles or highest values. Levinas inverts Western philosophy since Plato, arguing that 'the Good' is not accessible to knowledge, but to sensation. The other is not encountered as a constant presence, but as a corporeal trace. Levinas refutes Kantian morality, arguing that "responsibility is not a knowledge."<sup>424</sup> While transcending rational cognition, the trace of 'alterity' is perceptible to embodied sensation. Levinas: "The transcendent cuts across sensibility."<sup>425</sup> The genesis of ethics is the *fear and trembling* of the flesh. Levinas argues that "sensation recovers a 'reality' . . . anterior to the crystallization of consciousness, I

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<sup>423</sup> Levinas, *Outside The Subject*, 26

<sup>424</sup> Levinas, *God Death And Time*, 186

<sup>425</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 193

and non-I, into subject and object.”<sup>426</sup> For this reason, it is necessary to ‘bracket’ standardized modes of perception in order to ‘attune’ the senses to the proximity of the other. Put simply, ethics requires bringing the senses back to life!

In opposition to Husserl, Levinas argues that the ‘bracketing’ of subjective consciousness does not actually disclose objective reality. Instead, the ‘phenomenological reduction’ facilitates a receptivity towards that which resists all objectivity – the expression of the body. The signification of the face “affects us despite ourselves.”<sup>427</sup> Levinas: “The subject – the famous subject resting upon itself – is unseated by the other . . .”<sup>428</sup> The vulnerability of our embodiment amounts to a bare expose to the other; “an exposure without shelter.”<sup>429</sup> The implication is that ethics is innate; the body is the genesis of meaning. Responsibility is neither a decision nor a commitment, but the corporeal affect of another body. Levinas: “To be responsible is to be responsible before any decision.”<sup>430</sup> Again, “from the moment of sensibility, the subject is *for the other* . . .”<sup>431</sup> It is instructive to briefly mention the appropriation of Levinas’ ethics by post-colonial theory. Yes, the other is indeed the stranger, the refugee, and the migrant. But the other is *not* only ‘the subaltern’. *Every* other is *wholly* other! The ‘face-to-face’ encounter with my neighbor – the one who is nearest, whoever that may be – is the genesis of meaning. Levinas: “The proximity of the neighbor is my

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid, 188

<sup>427</sup> Levinas, *God Death And Time*, 184

<sup>428</sup> Ibid, 181

<sup>429</sup> Ibid, 196

<sup>430</sup> Ibid, 172

<sup>431</sup> Levinas, *Humanism Of The Other*, 64

responsibility for him: to be a guardian of one's brother . . ."432 One's exposure to the corporeal expression of 'the face' is inherently meaningful: it is not *what* is said that is significant, but *that* one is addressed. What is meaningful is the encounter itself. Levinas: "The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation . . ."433 Again, the ethical signification of "the face summons me to my obligations . . ."434 But it follows that even if ethics is innate to the body, the 'body-politic' operates according to the violent logic of sovereign power. The result is an irreconcilable 'strife' between the ethical and the political.

In addition to phenomenology, the philosophy of ancient Greece is an inspiration for both Heidegger and Levinas. The ancient Greeks envision a generative 'strife' operative at the very heart of being. According to Heidegger, the Pre-Socratics had an entirely different attunement to being than that of us late moderns. We tend to perceive being as a linear sequence of events stretching from the past into the future. Heidegger: "For the Greeks, what is decisive is not the causal sequence, the coming to be out of and through one another, but purely and simply the *stepping-forth*, the looming up." 435 In this sense, the Pre-Socratics can be understood as proto-phenomenologists. Heidegger attempts to retrieve the Pre-Socratic vision of phenomenal 'strife' between appearance and concealment. Pre-Socratic philosophy is continually directing our attention to 'the strife' between the radiant self-emergence of

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<sup>432</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 72

<sup>433</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 201

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid*, 215

<sup>435</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Beginning Of Western Philosophy: Interpretation of Anaximander & Parmenides*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 6

beings into 'the open', and the subsequent passage of being into the darkness of self-concealment. Heidegger: "Stepping forth means originating arrival, arriving emergence, self-manifestation, appearance; correspondingly, receding means disappearance, withdrawal, going away."<sup>436</sup> For Heidegger, it is the task of the poet to 'shelter' the strife of the self-concealing 'event'.

The experimental style of Heidegger's late philosophy is a poetic remembrance of the generative 'strife' of being. Heidegger envisions 'the event' allegorically as the strife of 'Earth' and 'World'. 'Earth' is a poetic image of the passage of being into self-concealment while 'World' signifies the opening of being to self-manifestation. 'World' is rooted in the dark ground of 'Earth', just as 'Earth' opens unto the open realm of 'World'. In this sense, Heidegger's thinking echoes Heraclitus' fragmentary saying – 'Strife is the father of all'. Heidegger's notion of 'the strife' of World and Earth is no doubt inspired by the mythical cosmology of ancient Greece. Hesiod, the earliest poet of the classical Greek era, attributes the genesis of the cosmos to primordial Chaos, or 'Strife'. For Hesiod, the cosmic origin of being is not God, understood as the 'Supreme Being'. Instead, the cosmos is grounded in the primordial Chaos, void, or emptiness that precedes any 'onto-theological' notion of God as 'first cause'. Hesiod's cosmological vision predates and informs the inception of Western metaphysics. The creation mythology of *Theogony* bears witness to 'the fourfold strife' of Tartarus, Earth, Sea, and Sky. According to Hesiod, the 'strife' of Earth (Gaia) and Sky (Uranus) generates the first race of primordial gods, or Titans, the most terrible of whom is Kronos (Time). For

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<sup>436</sup> Heidegger. *The Beginning Of Western Philosophy*. 6

Heidegger, the 'fourfold strife' of being 'sends' the destiny of an epochal transfiguration of 'world-history'. Echoing Hesiod, Heidegger utilizes a poetic style of expression in order to 'shelter' the 'strife' of concealment (Earth) and un-concealment (World) in poetry and art. In this sense, the poetic expression of Heidegger's late philosophy is intended to signify the 'epochal strife' of the truth of being as 'event'.

We can also see 'strife' at work in *Antigone*, the culmination of Sophocles' *Theban Trilogy*. Sophocles' attic tragedy is a brilliant depiction of the irreconcilable 'strife' between the laws of the state and the higher law of the gods. I disagree with the common Hegelian interpretation of *Antigone*. For Hegel, the dialectical conflict between Antigone (*Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life) and Creon (*Rechtsstaat*, or legal state) represents the elevation of self-consciousness via the reconciliation of conflicting points of view. Hegel argues that the tragic opposition between the ethical and the political is reconciled through the historical development of the Absolute State. In my judgment, Sophocles' tragedy expresses a far more pessimistic view of history. It is not that the ethical and political are reconciled in the absolute sovereignty of the state. Instead, the ethical is sacrificed at the bloodstained alter of history. The inherent tragedy of the political is that sovereign power recognizes no higher law. There is no reconciliation here. I interpret Sophocles' play through a Levinasian lens as expressing the essential strife of the ethical command and sovereign power. The world-view of *Antigone* is radically pessimistic; the tragic conflict between the divine law (Antigone) and the laws of the state (Creon) is fated to culminate in the catastrophic ruin. Sophocles delineates

the irrevocable antagonism between obedience to the divine command and submission to state violence.

The stage is set amidst the 'strife' of civil war. The exile of King Oedipus from the state has left the crown vacant, with Creon acting as regent. Eteocles and Polynices, sons of Oedipus, vie for sovereign power. The two brothers encounter each other in battle, each killing the other in 'face to face' combat. With the death of Oedipus' sons, the burden of the crown falls to Creon, uncle to Antigone. As King, Creon is obligated to defend the state above all. In light of this responsibility, Creon hands down a harsh punishment for insurgent fighters: that the bodies of the dead be unburied to rot without the sanctification of the sacred funeral rights. As per Creon's decree, the sanctification of the body of Antigone's brother Polynices is forbidden. Antigone is torn between her sacred duty to honor her brother and her obligation to obey the laws of the state. As King, Creon has a responsibility to uphold and defend the state. Creon: "I find intolerable the man who puts his country second to his friends . . . Never could I make by country's enemy my private friend . . . So there you have the principles by which I govern . . . I'll honour him alone, alive or dead, who honours Thebes."<sup>437</sup> Allowing the sanctification of his nephew's body would signify an unconscionable betrayal of Creon's duty to uphold the law. Similarly, Antigone's sacred duty to her brother supersedes any obligation to the state. For Antigone, the divine law is higher than the laws of the state. Ismene, Antigone's sister, cautions her against transgressing the state. Ismene: "Right unfortunately is right and makes us bow to things like this and

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<sup>437</sup> Sophocles. *The Oedipus Plays Of Sophocles*, trans. Paul Roche, (New York NY: Meridian Books, 1996), 199

worse. Therefore I beg the shades below to judge me leniently as one who kneeled to force.”<sup>438</sup> Antigone is compelled by a transcendent force; she rebukes her timid sister, resolving to remain faithful to the gods regardless of the consequences. Antigone: “He is my brother still . . . I shall not abandon him.”<sup>439</sup> Antigone upholds the divine law; she performs the sacred burial rights and lays her brother to rest.

Antigone’s resolve to honour the gods is equaled only by the resolve of Creon to defend the state. When Creon inquires as to whether she was simply ignorant of the law, Antigone responds defiantly; “I never thought your moral edicts had such force they nullified the laws of heaven . . .”<sup>440</sup> A secondary character, named Leader, reacts with contempt to Antigone’s defiance. Leader: “See how she goes, headlong driven by the capricious gusts of her own will!”<sup>441</sup> Leader: “My word! The daughter is as headstrong as her father. Submission is a thing she’s never learned.”<sup>442</sup> Leader, however, completely misses the point. Antigone’s refusal to submit to the established order is fated; her transgression does not indicate willful defiance, but rather submission to a higher law. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, and as such, is fated to share his tragic destiny. The Chorus speaks the truth: “The ageless grey-grim Fates struck her down.”<sup>443</sup> Chorus: “You fall to pay a father’s sin.”<sup>444</sup> Antigone’s transgression

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid, 193

<sup>439</sup> Ibid, 193

<sup>440</sup> Ibid, 210

<sup>441</sup> Ibid, 232

<sup>442</sup> Ibid, 211

<sup>443</sup> Ibid, 235

<sup>444</sup> Ibid, 230



of the law does not signify a rebellion of the will. Instead, Antigone's 'crime' is her recognition of an authority higher than the state.

The irreconcilable conflict between the divine law and the laws of the state is evident in light of the antagonism between Antigone and Creon. This antagonism discloses 'the strife' between ethical peace and sovereign violence. As King, Creon must preserve order and defend the state. Creon: "The state is he who rules it . . . My crime, of course, the discharge of my rule."<sup>445</sup> From Creon's point of view, the greatest crime is not the transgression of divine law, but instead treason, sedition, and anarchy. Creon: "Unswerving submission to whomever the state has put in charge is what is asked: in little things as well as great, in right and wrong."<sup>446</sup> Creon too must endure his tragic fate; he must uphold his duty to enforce the law without exception, not even for his own niece. Creon: "How can I, if I nurse sedition in my house, not foster it outside?"<sup>447</sup> Creon witnessed first-hand the devastation of Oedipus' pious search for truth. Antigone's' father remained faithful to the command of the Delphic oracle to 'know thyself'. Nevertheless, Oedipus' faithful devotion to the gods brings nothing but ruin to the *polis*. For Creon, the nihilism of Oedipus' insight into the ungrounded void of being delineates the absolute necessity of the state. The abysmal groundlessness of being indicates the need to preserve the social order at any cost. Creon: "In the end it is the ancient codes that one must keep; to value life then, one must value law."<sup>448</sup> In defiance of the state, Antigone submits to a higher law. Antigone: "By what law do I assert so

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid, 224

<sup>446</sup> Ibid, 221

<sup>447</sup> Ibid, 221

<sup>448</sup> Ibid, 241

much? Just this: once a brother's lost no other brother can be born or grown again. This is my principle, which Creon stigmatized as criminal, my principle for honoring you, my dearest brother."<sup>449</sup> I interpret Antigone's devotion through a secular Levinasian lens. For Levinas, the command of the other is higher than any law of the state. In other words, it is the absolute singularity of human life that compels Antigone's respect.

As King of Thebes, Creon is forbidden to exercise favor or show mercy when upholding the laws of the state. He must enforce the law universally. For this reason, Antigone's punishment is as harsh as it is swift. Creon imprisons Antigone and sentences her to death. Antigone's fate is truly horrific; she is to be buried alive within the depths of an underground cave. Creon: "I'll take her down a path untrod by man. I'll hide her living in a rock-hewn vault, with ritual food enough to clear the taint of murder from the City's name."<sup>450</sup> The citizens of Thebes are outraged by the brutality of Creon's savage rule. Tiresias, the blind prophet who first appears in *Oedipus Rex*, emerges to bear witness to the wrathful gods. Tiresias: "You plunged a child of light into the dark; entombed the living with the dead."<sup>451</sup> In an act of divine retribution, the gods strike Thebes with plague as punishment for Antigone's cruel mistreatment. Tiresias: "See it – how the City sickens, Creon, these the symptoms, you're the fanatic will that caused them."<sup>452</sup> To appease the wrath of the gods, Creon must free Antigone and to honor Polynices with the sacred burial rights. Creon relents; his will is turned, but it is too late. Antigone has taken her own life. Creon is devastated. It would be a mistake to interpret

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid, 232

<sup>450</sup> Ibid, 226

<sup>451</sup> Ibid, 239

<sup>452</sup> Ibid, 236

Creon as the villain of Sophocles' Attic tragedy. To understand Creon as a villainous tyrant would overlook the tragedy of the irreconcilable 'strife' between divine law and the laws of the state. Creon is bound to defend the laws of the state, just as Antigone is compelled to obey a higher law. There is an irreconcilable conflict between these two realms of law.

Against Hegel's influential interpretation, the antagonism between Antigone and Creon does not offer a mythical image of the reconciliation of dialectical conflict in the Absolute State. There is no reconciliation here, only devastation. With the sacrifice of Antigone, the state has been preserved, but at what cost? The result is utter ruin; even the 'savage' gods lament the brutality of Antigone's fate. If Heidegger is correct, then Antigone's tragic fate delineates the nihilistic destiny of 'the West'. The dialectical unfolding of 'world-history' must be arrested before reaching its nihilistic fulfillment. In my judgment, it is an implicit task of Levinas' corpus to overturn the 'epochal sending' of this nihilistic destiny. In response to the sacrificial violence of the Absolute State, Levinas argues that "the State cannot set itself up as a Whole."<sup>453</sup> For Levinas, the two 'regimes of law' are irreducible. Ethics is anarchy! Responsibility for the other takes precedence over any duty to the state. In this sense, the distinction between the ethical and the political spheres constitutes a non-dialectical antinomy. As non-dialectical, the ethical and the political cannot be gathered into a totality, sublated into a metaphysical system, or reconciled within a universal state. The 'strife' between the divine law and the laws of the state issue into an 'eschatological break' from the history of being. Levinas: "When

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<sup>453</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*. trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburg PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 194

Man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history.”<sup>454</sup> The unconditional command of the other must exert an eschatological force upon sovereign power. As Asher Horowitz argues in *Ethics At A Standstill*, the ethical must be made operative within the political.

### *The Force Of Law*

As I noted previously, Derrida’s political thought is deeply indebted to Levinas’ post-foundational ethical materialism. For Derrida as well, there are two ‘regimes of law’ – the unconditional *Law* of hospitality and the conditional *laws* of the state. I take it that this is similar to the distinction between Justice and law. Justice is Absolute, or it is not at all. In this sense, Justice constitutes a transcendental basis of judgment. For Derrida, the unconditional *Law* of hospitality signifies the realm of ethics, while the conditional *laws* of the state delineate the political sphere. These two basic forms of law signify an abyss, chasm, or ‘aporia’ between the ethical and the political. Although irreconcilable, the two regimes of hospitality are constituted by a relationship of mutual dependence. While the law of unconditional hospitality is the origin and inspiration of the conditional laws of the state, this unconditional law would nevertheless remain completely without political affect if not for their conditional inscription via democratic self-legislation. Levinas’ phenomenological description of the ‘sensible proximity’ of the other delineates the limits to any political appropriation of the ethical. According to

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<sup>454</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburg PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 52

Levinas, “politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself.”<sup>455</sup> While the ‘ethical relationship’ indicates an ‘eschatological peace’, the political bears within itself the principle of ‘perpetual war’. Unfortunately, Levinas occasionally seems resigned to abandon politics to its internal logic of agonistic struggle. In other words, while Levinas offers a captivating account of the unconditional *Law* of hospitality distinct from the conditional laws of the state, responsibly for the other nevertheless lacks the affective force of sovereign power. For this reason, Derrida stresses that the unconditional *Law* of ethics must be ‘inscribed’ in the conditional *laws* of the state. While Derrida shares Levinas’ interpretation of the distinction between the ethical and the political, Derrida places a greater emphasis on the political implications of the ‘ethical relationship’. For Derrida, politics is a matter of transforming and improving the law, rather than its outright rejection. In other words, the ‘ethical relationship’ must not only contest, but also transform the political. Derrida: “This improvement is possible within an historical space between the *Law* of an unconditional hospitality . . . and the conditional *laws* of a right to hospitality, without which the unconditional *Law* of hospitality would be in danger of remaining a pious and irresponsible desire, without form and without potency, and of even being perverted at any moment.”<sup>456</sup> The difficult task of justice is to inscribe the ethical within the political, even if ethics and politics can never be reconciled in a universal state.

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<sup>455</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 300

<sup>456</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism And Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley & Michael Hughes, (London, UK: Routledge, 2001), 23

Ethics, for Levinas, is a ‘face-to-face’ relation. The ‘sensible proximity’ of the other makes a singular and unconditional claim upon me. Derrida’s thinking is deeply indebted to this discovery. For Derrida as well, “There is no true binding responsibility or obligation that doesn’t come from someone, from a person . . . who transfixes me, takes possession of me, holds me in its hand and in its gaze.”<sup>457</sup> For this reason, Derrida suggests that “the original moment of responsibility exposes me to the singular other, the one who appeals to me.”<sup>458</sup> Consequently, I am “obliged by a law that falls upon me before I even choose to obey it.”<sup>459</sup> Nevertheless, this ‘ethical relationship’ is interrupted by the presence of the third person. Levinas: “The passage from ethical inequality – from the dissymmetry of intersubjective space – to equality between persons comes from the political order of citizens in a state. The birth of the state from the ethical order is intelligible to the extent that I have also to answer for the third party ‘next to’ my neighbor.”<sup>460</sup> The implication is that responsibility is universal, as well as unconditional. My unconditional responsibility for the other is at the same time a betrayal of my universal duty to all. In other words, the political need arises from the fact that I am not only responsible for the singular other, but for each and every other as well. There is no individual salvation; none are free until all are free. Ethical responsibility demands an emancipatory-egalitarian project. In Derrida’s words, “the antinomy of hospitality irreconcilably opposes *The law*, in its universal singularity, to a

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<sup>457</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift Of Death*, trans. David Wills, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 32

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid*, 71

<sup>459</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 109

<sup>460</sup> Levinas, *Outside The Subject*, 45

plurality [of laws] . . .”<sup>461</sup> For this reason, Derrida claims that there is a non-dialectical antinomy between, “the law of unlimited hospitality . . . and the laws, those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional . . .”<sup>462</sup> The antinomy between my responsibility for one and my responsibility for all can neither be reconciled, sublated, nor negated. This non-dialectical antinomy between the *Law* and the *laws* indicates an irreducible opposition between the ethical and the political. For unconditional responsibility to be politically affective, the unconditional command of the other must nevertheless be ‘inscribed’ in the conditional laws of the state. Derrida therefore argues that while “unconditional hospitality is transcendent with regard to the political . . . unconditional hospitality, which is neither juridical nor political, is nonetheless the condition of both the juridical and the political.”<sup>463</sup> By emphasizing the necessary ‘inscription’ of the ethical in the political, Derrida offers a much needed correction to Levinas’ account of the irreconcilable strife between these two forms of law. However, Derrida’s thinking requires a similar corrective. While Derrida argues persuasively for the inscription of the unconditional within the conditional, his trenchant critique of political fraternity and national sovereignty severely undermines the prospects of any such transformation of democracy.

According to Derrida, democracy is a structural concept without any fixed normative content. Moreover, Derrida understands democracy in light of the temporality of inheritance. Democracy is not only a matter of openness to an

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<sup>461</sup> Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 79

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid*, 77

<sup>463</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Philosophy In A Time Of Terror*, ed. Giovanna Borradori, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 129

indeterminate future, but also involves the inheritance of a contested past. That which is inherited is not a pre-determined set of democratic institutions and practices, but rather the promise of 'the democracy to come'. According to Derrida, democracy does not refer to any particular state-form, but rather to the concrete practice of collective self-legislation. Derrida: "Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task."<sup>464</sup> It is Derrida's hope that the open-ended transformation of democracy may, to a greater extent, 'inscribe' the unconditional law of responsibility within the conditional laws of the state. Nevertheless, this hopeful expectation would be naïve without a more sobering consideration of the 'auto-immune' function of the 'body-politic'. 'Auto-immunity' refers to the paradoxical tendency of an organism to undermine its own internal defense mechanism through the very act of self-defense. Derrida claims that the U.S. War on Terror is an instance of such an 'auto-immune' response. For instance, the pre-emptive invasion of Iraq amounted to an attack upon itself. The 'auto-immune' response of the American 'body-politic' is to attack the very defense systems of democracy itself, such as the rule of constitutional law. The violation of civil liberties by the U.S. Patriot Act is another example of such an 'auto-immune' response. The auto-immunity of the 'body-politic' indicates a troubling and persistent feature of political community. Traditionally, community is defined against an 'outside' threat. In this sense, community requires a fairly strict delimitation between 'inside' and 'outside'. Community therefore bears within itself the persistent threat of exclusionary violence. The problem of 'auto-immunity' can also be understood in light of the 'scapegoat'

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<sup>464</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (London, UK: Routledge, 2001), 67



mechanism. The ‘scapegoat mechanism’ preserves social cohesion through the repetition of communal violence. The foundational violence of the scapegoat mechanism requires the death of a sacrificial victim. The ‘essential sacrifice’ of a scapegoat facilitates a sense of communal belonging through the cathartic release of repressed violence. For Derrida, the perpetual threat of communal violence justifies the abandonment of sovereignty altogether to the framework of international law.

A brief look at Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* may offer further clarification. The exile of Oedipus from the *polis* can be interpreted in light of the scapegoat mechanism. The illegitimate rule of Oedipus signifies a contagion to ‘body-politic’. As ‘defender of the state’ against the monstrous Sphinx, Oedipus is at first welcomed into the *polis* as King. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Oedipus in Thebes signifies the infection of a bio-political contagion. Thebes is stricken with plague as an act of divine retribution for the impurity of the city. Ignorant of himself as the cause of the cities affliction, Oedipus endeavors “to learn what act or covenant of mine could still redeem the state.”<sup>465</sup> Oedipus vows “to sever from the body-politic a monstrous growth that battens there . . .”<sup>466</sup> Oedipus: “I am resolute, and shall not stop till with Apollo’s help all-blessed we emerge, or else we are lost: beyond all purge.”<sup>467</sup> Nevertheless, the prophet Tiresias reveals the horrific truth that Oedipus himself is affliction of the *polis*. Tiresias: “The rotten canker in the state is you.”<sup>468</sup> In order to heal the plague, Oedipus must ‘purge’ the state of its bio-political contagion – himself. Oedipus: “Thrust out from every home, I’ll be the very

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<sup>465</sup> Sophocles, *The Oedipus Plays Of Sophocles*, 7

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid*, 8

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid*, 11

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid*, 20

picture of that pestilence he brought upon our city.”<sup>469</sup> As a sacrificial victim offered to communal fellowship, Oedipus must endure being “severed from all fellowship of speech and shelter, sacrifice, and sacrament.”<sup>470</sup> Only with the exile of Oedipus, the outsider, will the wounds of the ‘body-politic’ issue into blessings.<sup>471</sup> Only Creon perceives the true horror of Oedipus’ fate. Oedipus’ sacrifice amounts to “a ruin that saved the state.”<sup>472</sup> Horrified by the savagery of Oedipus’ exile, Creon recoils from the sacrificial violence operative within sovereign power. Creon: “How could I suit myself with power and sovereignty if power and sovereignty once grasped were grasped in pain?”<sup>473</sup> In my judgment, Creon must not have the final word. The rejection of sovereignty risks abandoning the difficult work of justice.

For Derrida, the inherent danger of bio-political ‘auto-immunity’ necessitates a sustained critique of the notion of democratic community, solidarity, and fraternity. While Derrida calls for ‘the democracy to come’, he nevertheless refrains from calling for a ‘fraternity to come’ as well. Derrida’s hostility to the notion of fraternity seems to indicate that there is something about community that resists the transformation of democratic inheritance. More specifically, Derrida argues that democratic ‘fraternity’, or brotherhood, presupposes the exclusion of women from the *polis*. Furthermore, the biological connotations of the term could be used to limit national citizenship to birth rather than residence, thereby bringing about a premature closure to democratic

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>470</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>471</sup> Ibid, 8

<sup>472</sup> Ibid, 25

<sup>473</sup> Ibid, 33

hospitality. Nevertheless, it is Derrida's treatment of fraternity that, in my opinion, reveals his insufficiencies as a political thinker. According to Levinas, the approach of the other does not necessarily foretell the irruption of communal violence. Instead, Levinas suggests that "the relation with the Other as face heals allergy."<sup>474</sup> Encountering the other does not threaten fraternity, but facilitates it. Levinas differs from Derrida in this regard. Contrary to Derrida's opposition to fraternity, Levinas argues that "society must be a fraternal community to be commensurate with . . . the primary proximity in which the face presents itself to my welcome."<sup>475</sup> According to Levinas, while ethical responsibility is more fundamental than any sense of democratic fraternity, fraternity nevertheless remains essential to the political task of creating a more just society. It is therefore problematic that in addition to rejecting fraternity, Derrida also opposes any notion of 'party, class, or nation'. If party, class, and nation are all unsuitable bases for solidarity, fraternity, and community, then what is? Unfortunately, Derrida does not seriously pursue this question. Instead, Derrida defends the notion of democracy without a *demos*, or without a people. Derrida repeats the errors of classical liberalism in this regard. Derrida's strident opposition to the fraternity of a community, nation, or people risks abandoning the fate of the political to that which Nancy calls "an unlimited process of an eco-technological framing and a vanishing of the possibilities of forms of life and / or common ground."<sup>476</sup> In other words, by rejecting the notion of a *demos*, Derrida risks abandoning democracy as well. Against his original intent, Derrida's

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<sup>474</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 197

<sup>475</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 214

<sup>476</sup> Nancy, *The Creation Of The World*, 95

deconstruction of bio-political 'auto-immunity' ultimately undermines the 'inscription' of the ethical in the political.

In advocating for the passage from the ethical to the political, Derrida turns to the city rather than the nation in the hope of reconstituting the current state-form. Derrida: "If we look to the city rather than the nation-state, it is because we have given up hope that the state might create a new image for the city."<sup>477</sup> Derrida's 'new image' of the city envisions a post-national constellation of sovereign city-states. In light of this vision, Derrida advocates for a decentralized federation of cities constituted by participatory modes of local democracy. In my judgment, Derrida's 'new image' of the city should be understood as an alternative to Plato's ideal city of justice. While Plato prescribes a hierarchal caste based social order, Derrida envisions an egalitarian 'city of refuge' wherein each is the guardian of the other. This 'new image' of the city is inspired by Levinas' Talmudic discussion of the Medieval European 'cities of refuge'. Levinas describes the 'city of refuge' as a place "where men dwell, and where they are faced with concrete questions related to their relations with their neighbors . . ."<sup>478</sup> Dwelling, for Levinas, is characterized by a sense of belonging to a living community. Levinas thus indicates an inter-corporeal genesis of democratic fraternity. However, Derrida does not discuss in sufficient detail what is *new* about this image of the city. In my judgment, the 'new image' of the city must bear little resemblance to the modern urban form. Global cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Toronto are not cities at all in the sense that Levinas intends. Instead, the modern city is a sprawling economic mega-region that

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<sup>477</sup> Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism And Forgiveness*, 6

<sup>478</sup> Levinas, *Beyond The Verge*, 38

exists solely for the sake of capital accumulation. In this sense, the modern city is not a space in which one ‘dwells’. As Jean-Luc Nancy, a close interlocutor of Derrida contends, “the city spreads and extends to the point where, while it tends to cover the entire orb of the planet, it loses its properties as a city.”<sup>479</sup> Nancy suggests that a city “which extends in this way is no longer properly urban.”<sup>480</sup> Moreover, Nancy draws attention to “the social inequality and apartheid structure concerning access to the urban milieu.”<sup>481</sup> For Nancy, there are two contrary effects of the modern urban form: “on the one hand there is a concentration of the well-being that used to be urban or civil in a few neighborhoods, in few houses, sometimes in a few gated communities. On the other hand, there is a proliferation of what bears the simple and unmerciful name of misery.”<sup>482</sup> The exponential growth of population and the intensification of inequality establish an apartheid structure of urban misery.<sup>483</sup> The misery of the urban milieu inhibits a sense of community, fellowship, or solidarity with others. For this reason, the city-state is not a true alternative to the current state-form. Instead, the modern global city cultivates a sense of social alienation, anonymity, and isolation. Perhaps Walter Benjamin best articulates the alienation of the modern city: “The inhabitants of the great urban centers revert to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation. The feeling of being dependent upon others . . . is gradually blunted by the smooth functioning of the

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<sup>479</sup> Nancy, *The Creation Of The World*, 33

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid*, 33

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid*, 33

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid*, 33

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid*, 34

social mechanism.”<sup>484</sup> Consequently, the ethical responsibility for the other is degraded, sublimated, and repressed by the daily misery of the new urban apartheid of planetary civilization.

Although Derrida remains committed to the empty ideal of urban cosmopolitanism, Nancy echoes Heidegger’s critique of the ontological ‘homelessness’ of modernity. According to Nancy, “the gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world . . . is the testimony of the dissolution, dislocation, or conflagration of community.”<sup>485</sup> For Nancy, ‘being-there’ is always already ‘being-together’. The liberal notion of the isolated individual is a complete abstraction from social existence. Nancy: “The individual is merely the residue of the dissolution of community.”<sup>486</sup> It is unfortunate that Nancy, while offering a nuanced criticism of the devastating alienation of liberal individualism, risks repeating Derrida’s mistaken rejection of community for the sake of the individual. While lamenting the fragmentation of community in the modern era, Nancy nevertheless rejects all forms of communitarian politics as inherently violent. Community is traditionally understood ‘onto-theologically’ as the participation in a common substance, essence, or being. However, Nancy proposes an alternative understanding of “community without common origin.”<sup>487</sup> In other words, Nancy is opposed to the foundational myth of ontological foundations. Instead, community is without foundation, principle, or ground. Nancy therefore refutes the

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<sup>484</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York, NY: Schocken, 1968), 174

<sup>485</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 1

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid*, 3

<sup>487</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 23

mythical understanding of community as ‘onto-theologically’ grounded in a common substance. It is this shared essence that distinguishes a people, nation, or culture. The problem is that such an ontological basis of community too often motivates racist ideology and nationalist violence. As a result, Nancy seeks to develop a communitarian understanding of “being-in-common that is not a common being.”<sup>488</sup> Such a bare community would be stripped any common historical, cultural, or linguistic background – a community with nothing in common apart from ‘bare life’. Nancy: “Community is bare, but it is imperative.”<sup>489</sup> The question, however, is whether such a community of ‘bare exposure’ of one to another could provide a sufficient basis for political sovereignty. Put simply, Nancy’s ‘inoperative community’ risks abandoning the political as such. Nancy: “Peace comes at the price of abandoned sovereignty.”<sup>490</sup> It is nevertheless my contention the innate violence of sovereignty signifies the need to think democracy anew rather than reject the political outright.

‘An-*arche*’ means without *arche*, principle, or foundation. For Heidegger, ‘an-*arche*’ names our condition of ontological groundlessness. The absence of any fundamental ‘*arche*’ takes on an ethical significance for Levinas. Levinas argues that ‘an-*arche*’ does not signify an ontological condition of being, but rather an ethical relation to the other. For Levinas, there is no ‘onto-theological’ ground, origin, or foundation of law. In place of a ‘fixed origin’, there is only the withdrawal of any *arche* that may serve as a foundation. The proximity of the other bears a “the trace of pre-historic an-archic

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<sup>488</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 62

<sup>489</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 36

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid*, 141

saying.”<sup>491</sup> This ‘an-archic’ command of the other is higher than any political power. The basis of law is ethical, not political. Basic rights are not conferred by the State, by Nature, or by God, but instead originate from an ‘anarchic relation’ to the other. The anarchy of the ethical relationship is the genesis of law. Levinas therefore indicates a ‘pre-original’ anarchic relation to the other. Levinas: “Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.”<sup>492</sup> Contrary to Derrida, for whom “any juridico-political founding of a ‘living together’ is, by essence, violent, since it inaugurates there where a law did not yet exist”<sup>493</sup>, Levinas suggests that “the Other does not limit freedom; calling it to responsibility, it founds it and justifies it.”<sup>494</sup> My freedom is not for my own sake, but rather for the sake of the other. In this sense, Levinas’ account of responsibility retrieves the true meaning of ethics: “The free man is dedicated to his fellow man; no one can save himself without others.”<sup>495</sup> None are free until all are free. It is not the state, but the other to whom one owes responsibility. There is a *Law* that is higher than the *laws* of the state: not the commandment of God, but of the other. Levinas indicates “an original, non-allergic, ethical relationship with alterity . . . capable of founding communal meaning.”<sup>496</sup> For this reason, the post-foundational anarchy of the ethical relationship lends itself to more

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<sup>491</sup> Levinas, *Humanism Of The Other*, 57

<sup>492</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 84

<sup>493</sup> Quoted from: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/deconstruction-religion-politics>, 2016

<sup>494</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 197

<sup>495</sup> Levinas, *Humanism Of The Other*, 66

<sup>496</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 47



direct modes of participatory democracy than the standard liberal forms of parliamentary representation.

We have just looked at 1) whether or not there is law that is higher than the laws of the state, and 2) how such a higher law might gain political affect. While, Levinas' phenomenological account of the ethical relationship does indeed illuminate a moral absolute that survives the 'death of God', it is not clear whether or to what extent such a post-metaphysical ethic of embodiment directs us towards a post-foundational model democracy. Indeed, the liberal cosmopolitanism of Derrida and Nancy often appears hostile to the communitarian basis of democracy. I suggested that deconstruction too often justifies the current planetary framework of neo-liberal capitalism rather than point towards a genuine democratic alternative. Indeed, we are not pursuing a post-democratic liberalism, but rather a post-foundational democracy. For this reason, the final chapter turns from the post-structuralist appropriation of Heidegger's late thought to a confrontation with the political theology of Benjamin, Schmitt, and Agamben. I argue that post-foundational democracy is akin to a *negative political theology*.

## V. Negative Political Theology

### *Sovereignty*

In his deeply influential treatise on *Political Theology*, the legal theorist Carl Schmitt undertakes a highly influential analysis of the theological origins of sovereign power. The fundamental argument of Schmitt's political theology is that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."<sup>497</sup> According to Schmitt, sovereign power is a political reflection of the theological notion of divine power. Political sovereignty, like divine sovereignty, "is the highest, legally independent, underived power."<sup>498</sup> Put simply, the laws of the state are a mirror image of the divine laws of heaven. The King establishes the laws of his kingdom just as God establishes the laws of nature. Schmitt: "The world architect is simultaneously the

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<sup>497</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid*, 17

creator and the legislator.”<sup>499</sup> Just as God establishes the laws of nature through the divine act of creation, he has the power to suspend the law in the miracle. It is the same for the sovereign ruler; he can either create or suspend the law at will. In this sense, the sovereign ruler is an image of the God-King – ‘God on Earth’.<sup>500</sup> The sovereignty of the King is a reflection of the absolute sovereignty of God. The theological legacy of sovereignty therefore poses a significant problem for democracy. While democracy is ostensibly characterized by the rule of the multitude, even democratic forms of popular sovereignty are characterized by the ‘rule of One’. During a state of emergency, even in a democratic polity, the sovereign must suspend the law in order to preserve the state. The suspension of civil liberties in the United States following the Al Qaeda attacks of 9/11 and the state of emergency in France following the ISIS attacks are both instances of such exceptional circumstances. It is Schmitt’s radical claim that such a ‘state of emergency’ is not merely an exception to the norm. Instead, Schmitt argues that the ‘state of exception’ is constitutive of political order as such!

Reminiscent of Heidegger’s discussion of the ‘world-historical’ epochs of being, Schmitt argues that “metaphysics is the most intensive and the clearest expression of an epoch.”<sup>501</sup> For Schmitt, the epoch of modernity is characterized by radical immanence and a corresponding lack of transcendence, exception, or event. Schmitt: “The rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form.”<sup>502</sup> Rationalism

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid, 48

<sup>500</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology Of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 140

<sup>501</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46

<sup>502</sup> Ibid, 36

perceives the world to be governed by natural laws that are accessible to human reason. According to Enlightenment thinking, the 'clock-like' universe is akin to a self-propelling machine operating according to intrinsic laws. Once set in motion, not even a miracle can violate the laws of nature that govern the universe. Enlightenment thinking presupposes: 1) that existence is rational, and 2) that reason is the highest human faculty. However, the 'flight of the gods' in the wake of scientific reason leaves nature thoroughly disenchanted. Superstition is vanquished in the name of progress. The world is viewed scientifically as void of transcendence, miracle, or wonder. The Enlightenment world-view collapses reality into a horizontal plane of immanence. Transcendence is subtracted from theology just as 'the exception' is subtracted from politics.

In the late modern era, the sovereign is 'beheaded' and supplanted by the instrumental framework of neo-liberal administration. The state comes to resemble a self-referential metaphysical system. The restriction of sovereignty by the immanent frame of law means that politics is increasingly characterized by the mechanized state-apparatus. In other words, the 'exception' of sovereign decision descends into mere technocratic administration. For Schmitt, the mechanization of the state signifies the historical culmination of the mechanization of man. There is no need to look any further than the philosophy of Descartes to see this process of mechanization at work. Descartes' rationalism views the body as a mechanism governed by mind, or spirit. Schmitt: "Because [Descartes] understood the human body to be a mechanism, all things human, in their very core, had already been changed in a revolutionary manner.

This change signaled the coming technical-industrial revolution.”<sup>503</sup> It is Schmitt’s contention that the conceptual mechanization of the body paved the way for the mechanization the body-politic. Schmitt: “The mechanization of the concept of the state thus completed the mechanization of the anthropological image of man.”<sup>504</sup> Consequently, sovereignty is supplanted by the rational administration of ‘managed democracy’.

Political Theology attributes the origin of political order to ‘the exception’ of executive decision. Schmitt: “The exception reveals most clearly the essence of the state’s sovereignty.”<sup>505</sup> Akin to a divine intervention, sovereign decision conjures order out of chaos. Schmitt’s notion of sovereignty is decisionistic in this sense; sovereignty is indistinguishable from the executive decision of the sovereign ruler. Schmitt: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”<sup>506</sup> It is of little consequence *what* the sovereign decides, only *that* he decides. For Schmitt, “what matters for the reality of legal life is who decides.”<sup>507</sup> Aside from Hobbes, the greatest inspiration for Schmitt’s concept of political theology is the protestant theologian Soren Kierkegaard. According to Schmitt, Kierkegaard “demonstrated the vital intensity possible in theological reflection . . .”<sup>508</sup> Schmitt suggests that Kierkegaard is the first thinker to understand the proper relationship between the exception and the rule. For Kierkegaard, as for Schmitt, “the

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<sup>503</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan In The State Theory Of Thomas Hobbes*, trans. George Schwab & Erna Hilfstein, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 91

<sup>504</sup> Schmitt, *Leviathan*, 99

<sup>505</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 13

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid*, 5

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid*, 34

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid*, 15

exception confounds the unity and order of the rationalist scheme.”<sup>509</sup> Schmitt explains that legal theory involves two distinct concepts: norm and decision.<sup>510</sup> It is Schmitt’s argument that political order is not constituted by legal norms. Instead, “legal order rests on decision, and not the norm.”<sup>511</sup> It is not the rule that determines the exception, but rather the exception that establishes the rule. In Kierkegaard’s words, “the exception explains the general and itself.”<sup>512</sup> It is Schmitt’s intention to translate Kierkegaard’s theology into legal theory. Just as the sovereign power decides on both the norm and the exception to the norm, “authority proves that to produce law it need not be based on law.”<sup>513</sup> The authority of the sovereign is absolute or it is not at all. Schmitt: “What characterizes an exception is principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order.”<sup>514</sup> Schmitt: “The decision frees itself from all normative ties and becomes in the true sense absolute.”<sup>515</sup> The exception interrupts the mechanistic administration of the post-democratic state, just as the mechanistic laws of nature are suspended by a miracle of divine intervention in theology. Just as God suspends the laws of nature in a miracle, “the state suspends the law in the exception . . .”<sup>516</sup> For this reason, Schmitt argues that it would be mistaken to unduly restrict sovereign power via constitutional law.

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<sup>509</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>510</sup> Ibid, 10

<sup>511</sup> Ibid, 10

<sup>512</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>513</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>514</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>515</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>516</sup> Ibid, 12

Schmitt describes sovereignty as a 'borderline concept'. A borderline concept refers to: 1) the concept of a border, and 2) the border of conceptuality. Sovereignty is a borderline concept because it is *a priori*; it is derived from *nothing* prior to itself. In this sense, sovereignty exists at the border between existence and nothingness. Schmitt distinguishes between decision and 'pure decision'. While decision is the application of a legal norm, 'pure decision' does not refer to any existing norms but instead founds the law *ex nihilo*. Schmitt argues that "for a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist."<sup>517</sup> If this normal situation does not exist, it must be brought about through sovereign decision. Schmitt: "The exception appears in its absolute form when a situation in which legal prescriptions can be valid must first be brought about."<sup>518</sup> In other words, 'the exception', or 'event' indicates a situation in which legal norms must be brought about through sovereign decision. In the exceptional situation, notions of legality and illegality are simply irrelevant. Schmitt explains that "unlike the normal situation, when the autonomous moment of decision recedes to a minimum, the norm is destroyed in the exception."<sup>519</sup> Establishing a 'normal situation' therefore presupposes the suspension of the current state of affairs. The exceptional decision, or deciding on the exception, signifies the 'unlimited authority' to either establish or suspend a situation in which law is operative.<sup>520</sup> In this sense, sovereignty harnesses the

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>518</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>519</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>520</sup> Ibid, 12

divine power to conjure order out of chaos. For this reason, Schmitt argues that “the decision emanates from nothingness.”<sup>521</sup>

The genealogy of Schmitt’s concept of sovereign decision can be traced to Soren Kierkegaard’s notion of existential decision. However, Schmitt’s appropriation of Kierkegaard amounts to a fundamental misinterpretation of the early modern philosopher and theologian. It is indeed true that for Kierkegaard, as well as for Schmitt, ‘the exception is more interesting than the rule’. I nevertheless agree with James Martel’s argument in *Divine Violence* that Schmitt’s political theology is akin to idolatry. Schmitt’s notion of sovereign decision is both nihilistic and decisionistic. For Schmitt, decision is not an application of the rule, and is therefore not based on any fixed origin, foundation, or ground. For this reason, Schmitt argues that sovereign decision is metaphysically ungrounded. For Schmitt, it is of utmost importance that security and order are established and preserved. It is of little consequence *what* is decided. Instead, it is of greatest significance *that* one decides, so long as order prevails. Decision arises from an existential confrontation with the abysmal groundlessness of being. While Schmitt argues that sovereign decision emanates from nothingness, for Kierkegaard, decision is grounded in the unconditional command of God. Decision is not an act of will, but rather obedience to the will of God. Put simply, decision, for Kierkegaard, is submission to ‘the Absolute’.

In *Fear And Trembling*, Kierkegaard performs a detailed exegesis of the Biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac. Even a brief look at Kierkegaard’s analysis

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid, 32



indicates that Abraham's decision does not 'emanate from nothingness', as Schmitt argues. Instead, Abraham's decision is undergone in the *fear and trembling* of psychological torment and existential despair before the unconditional command of 'the Absolute'. According to Kierkegaard, Abraham's decision is not characterized by unlimited authority emanating from the force of will, as Schmitt's analysis would suggest. Instead, Abraham's decision is endured in *fear and trembling* before the absolute command of God. In this sense, Abraham's decision is not a free choice. Instead, decision signifies faith that the absolute command of God is higher than the laws and norms of the state. For Kierkegaard, God's command signifies the 'teleological suspension' of any historical custom, social norm, or state law. It is Kierkegaard's position that there is a *telos*, or purpose, that is more fundamental than the historically mediated laws of the state. Kierkegaard therefore argues that the divine *telos* ruptures, arrests, or 'suspends' the secular *nomos*. While Schmitt is correct to argue that Kierkegaard's decision involves a suspension of the *telos* of history, Schmitt is incorrect to suggest that Abraham's decision is an instance of 'pure decision' that suspends the 'normal situation'. I take it that the suspension of the existing order is an allusion to Kierkegaard's notion of 'the teleological suspension.' 'Pure decision' is *ex nihilo*, emanating from the nothingness of the ungrounded void. For Kierkegaard, however, decision does not emanate from nothingness; decision does not found, it responds. More specifically, decision is a response to the absolute command of God. In the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, it is the command of God that is sovereign, not the decision of Abraham.

In the *Book of Genesis*, Abraham is commanded by God to commit an unspeakable crime – to sacrifice his only son Isaac. God demands the sacrifice of an innocent life. God commands Abraham to kill: “Take Isaac, your only Son, who you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I shall show you.”<sup>522</sup> Against his own will, Abraham must take the life of another. Although the social prohibition against murder is universal, Kierkegaard nevertheless asks whether there can be a ‘teleological suspension’ of the universal? In other words, is there a purpose that is higher than the *telos* of history? Is there a Good that is higher than social customs, laws, and norms? If not then, Abraham is not a man of faith, but a savage killer. For Kierkegaard, the story of Isaac’s sacrifice indicates that the divine will supersedes all conventional notions of good and evil. In order to remain faithful Abraham must renounce everything that he thought to be good, right, and true. Indeed, God’s commandment is a revelation of abject horror. Abraham: “I have seen the terrifying face to face, and I do not flee from it in horror”.<sup>523</sup> Faith, for Kierkegaard, is the conviction that “the singular individual is higher than the universal.”<sup>524</sup> Abraham’s faith indicates that the singular individual standing before the Absolute is higher than the morality of social convention.

Abraham must make an impossible decision; he must decide upon the undecidable. If Abraham obeys God, he will uphold his faith while becoming a killer in the eyes of the world. If he transgresses God’s command, he will betray his faith while

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<sup>522</sup> Quoted in: Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear And Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 10

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid*, 33

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid*, 55

retaining the honor of his community. Abraham's faith is resolute, he submits to the will of God. In so doing, Abraham represents that which Kierkegaard calls the 'knight of faith'. The 'knight of faith' must be prepared to 'renounce everything' and make the ultimate sacrifice to fulfill his absolute duty to God. Kierkegaard distinguishes between the 'knight of faith' and the 'tragic hero'. While the knight of faith "stands in an absolute relation to the absolute",<sup>525</sup> the tragic hero seeks to "annul his singularity in order to become the universal."<sup>526</sup> The 'tragic hero' strives for self-annihilation. If Abraham represents the 'knight of faith', then Antigone represents the image of 'tragic hero'. Creon sacrifices Antigone to preserve the laws of the state. Sophocles' *Theban Trilogy* depicts the tragic cycle of sacrificial violence. Oedipus' exile does not return peace to the *polis*, but instead uncovers the essential strife at the heart of the political. Likewise, Antigone's sacrifice does not redeem the state, but merely repeats the eternal cycle of mythical violence. It is necessary break the cycle of sacrificial violence, just as an angel of God suspends Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In the blink of an eye, an angel stops his hand. Abraham's decision is a decision without autonomy. It would seem that decision is not willed *ex nihilo*; it is the response to an absolute command. If Kierkegaard's analysis of Isaac's sacrifice were correct, then it would seem that sovereign power demands non-violence, not war, as Schmitt contends. Indeed, sovereignty does not pose a challenge to democracy, but instead serves as its post-foundational grounding.

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid, 56

<sup>526</sup> Ibid, 54

### *Violence*

Given the communitarian nationalism and political conservatism of both Heidegger and Schmitt, one might expect Heidegger's fundamental ontology to complement Schmitt's political theology. In fact, the opposite is the case; Heidegger's overcoming of 'onto-theology' is fully consistent with the task of overcoming political theology. Indeed, it would seem that National Socialism is not at all inherent to Heidegger's philosophy, as Emmanuel Faye and Richard Wolen contend, but instead an unforgivable error in personal character and judgment. This is also Levinas' claim: "There is in Heidegger's 'late philosophy' an impossibility for power to maintain itself as monarchy, to ensure its total mastery."<sup>527</sup> In my judgment, Heidegger's philosophy of time more closely resembles Benjamin's messianic eschatology than Schmitt's authoritarian political theology. That which Benjamin calls 'divine violence', Heidegger simply names 'the event'; both indicate a 'true exception' to linear time. But I do not want to dwell on Heidegger here. It is Benjamin who most accurately depicts the paradox of sovereignty. Benjamin turns Schmitt's political theology on its head. In my view, Schmitt's political theology is a corruption rather than a genuine expression of the triple-headed monotheism of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Contra Schmitt, Benjamin argues that the suspension of law by sovereign decision is not at all 'the exception' that Schmitt claims it to be. Indeed, Benjamin suggests that the 'state of emergency' describes the normal operation of the neo-liberal security state apparatus. Increasingly,

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<sup>527</sup> Levinas, *Totality And Infinity*, 275

the suspension of constitutional law is not exception at all. Instead, the suspension of law merely indicates the normal operation of sovereign power.

The Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben takes up and further develops Benjamin's thesis. Agamben: "The state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics."<sup>528</sup> This 'paradigm' is observable within the contemporary United States. Take for instance Obama's 'Kill List'. Assassination via predatory drone strike is completely beyond the framework of constitutional law, yet occurs on a routine basis. It would seem that the 'state of emergency' indicates the rule rather than the exception. Agamben: "Since 'the state of exception . . . has become the rule', it not only appears increasingly as a technique of government rather than an exceptional measure, but it also lets its own nature as the constitutive paradigm of the judicial order come to light."<sup>529</sup> The ongoing operation of the Guantanamo Bay detention center is yet another instance of 'the exception' as a routine 'technique of government'. This extra-legal space of detention must exist 'outside' of the law in order to maintain the normal operation of the law. Agamben suggests that "the state of exception has today reached its maximum worldwide deployment. The normative content of law can thus be obliterated and contradicted with impunity by a governmental violence that . . . nevertheless still claims to be

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<sup>528</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State Of Exception*, trans. Kevill Attell, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid*, 7

applying the law.”<sup>530</sup> ‘The exception’ is not at all exceptional. Indeed, the suspension of law is the norm.

For Agamben and Benjamin both, what is needed is not an ‘exception’ to the norm, but rather an interruption of the standard operation of the ‘state of exception’. Again, the intention is to arrest the standard operation of sovereign violence. Benjamin: “The ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule . . . our task to bring about a real state of emergency.”<sup>531</sup> According to Benjamin’s inversion of political theology, sovereignty operates according to a perpetual cycle of violence. Benjamin distinguishes between mythical violence and divine violence. Mythical violence is ‘law-founding’; it refers to the mythical foundation upon which the polity is established. Sophocles’ *Oedipus Trilogy* bears witness to the tragic desolation of such mythical violence. Antigone’s sacrifice and Oedipus’ exile from the *polis* are both instances of ‘law-making’ violence. Antigone and her father share a common fate: both are sacrificed at the alter of the state. In this sense, mythical violence enacts a foundational sacrifice. While mythical violence is ‘law-making’, legal violence is ‘law-preserving’. It would be mistaken to oppose mythical violence to positive law. On the contrary, “the mythical manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence . . .”<sup>532</sup> Benjamin: “All mythical, lawmaking violence, which we call executive, is pernicious. Pernicious too is the law-preserving,

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid, 87

<sup>531</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York, NY: Schocken, 1968), 257

<sup>532</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, (New York, NY: Schocken, 1978), 296

administrative violence that serves it.”<sup>533</sup> Positive law does not refer to the absence of violence, but its procedural legitimation. Only an eschatological temporality can arrest the eternal return of ‘law-founding’ and ‘law-preserving’.

Agamben is basically correct when he articulates Benjamin’s task as follows: “To ensure the possibility of a violence that lies absolutely ‘outside’ and ‘beyond’ the law and that, as such, could rupture the dialectic between law-making and law-preserving violence. Benjamin calls this other figure of violence ‘pure’, or ‘divine’, and in the human sphere, ‘revolutionary’.”<sup>534</sup> Agamben’s notion of revolutionary time should be understood in light of the catastrophic failure of proletarian revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The revolutionary seizure of the ‘mode of production’ is not a break from, but rather an expression of modern time-consciousness. The disintegration of the USSR disenchanted the communist horizon; it is no longer possible to imagine a utopian future. It is therefore necessary to recall a time prior to the mediation of planetary civilization. The intention is not to return to the past, as if that were possible, but to access a temporality that is *beyond* the ‘eternal return’ of mythical violence. For Agamben, political revolution does not indicate the fulfillment, or *telos* of modernity, but its end, or *eschaton*. For this reason, political revolution presupposes an eschatological temporality – *a revolution of time*. Agamben: “Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it . . . . Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid, 300

<sup>534</sup> Agamben, *State Of Exception*. 53

genuine revolution, therefore, is never to merely ‘change the world’, but also – and above all – to ‘change time’.<sup>535</sup> For Agamben, such a revolutionary temporality would arrest the catastrophic dialectic of ‘world-history’.

Agamben’s notion of a messianic revolution of time ought to be understood in opposition to Hegel’s dialectic of ‘universal history’. The dialectical model of history is a secularization of medieval Christian cosmology. Agamben: “The modern concept of time is a secularization of rectilinear, irreversible Christian time . . .”<sup>536</sup> Agamben explains that “while the classic representation of time is a circle, the image guiding the Christian conceptualization of it is a straight line.”<sup>537</sup> Hegel argues that history has a universal structure – the continual progression from lower to higher stages of consciousness and civilization. Put simply, history is the history of progress. However, Benjamin and Agamben argue that this is not the case – history is not at all the history of progress. Benjamin: “History is not, as the dominant ideology would have it, man’s servitude to continuous linear time, but man’s liberation from it.”<sup>538</sup> Benjamin explains that:

“Progress was conceived ‘first of all, as the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men’s ability and knowledge). Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course.”<sup>539</sup>

This ideology of progress is reliant upon an even more fundamental notion of empty homogenous time. Benjamin: “The concept of the historical progress of mankind

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<sup>535</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy And History: On The Destruction Of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron, (London, UK: Verso, 1993), 99

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid*, 105

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid*, 103

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid*, 115

<sup>539</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 260



cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time.”<sup>540</sup> For Benjamin, time is not a projection into the future. Instead, time is an event, each time unique. Benjamin: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of *the now*.”<sup>541</sup> Agamben discovers an alternative mode of temporality in that the heterodox traditions of ‘the West’. Agamben: “The elements for a different conception of time lie scattered among the folds and shadows of the Western cultural tradition.”<sup>542</sup> Both Agamben and Benjamin turn to the Jewish messianic tradition for an account of time in opposition to Hegel’s ‘universal history’. Contrary to the temporality of universal history, Benjamin claims that the stillness of the moment “is shot through with chips of Messianic time.”<sup>543</sup> Likewise, Agamben suggests that “the messianic time of Judaism, in which every second was ‘the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter’, thus becomes a model for the conception of history ‘that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which politicians continue to adhere’.”<sup>544</sup>

Benjamin’s description of Klee’s image *Angelus Novas* refutes the modern view of history as a linear sequence of events. For Benjamin, Klees’ angel is an eschatological image of the catastrophe of history. Benjamin envisions the angel turned to face the past as a cosmic storm of annihilation propels it blindly into the future:

“A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid, 261

<sup>541</sup> Ibid, 261

<sup>542</sup> Agamben, *Infancy And History*, 111

<sup>543</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 263

<sup>544</sup> Agamben, *Infancy And History*, 112

contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”<sup>545</sup>

While us moderns view progressive development of history through empty time, the angel sees “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.”<sup>546</sup> Benjamin draws from heterodox traditions located at the margins of history including Kabbalah, romanticism, and eschatology. Eschatology is a theological tradition belonging to various currents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Eschatology refers to the messianic promise that justice will be accomplished on Earth. Put simply, the eschatological promise is that ‘the Kingdom will come’. Typically, the fulfillment of the eschatological promise takes an apocalyptic form; the literal meaning of the term *eschaton* is ‘end time’. The passing of the *eschaton* signifies the ‘end of an age’. Benjamin: “The Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal but the end.”<sup>547</sup> The eschatological ‘end of an age’ should be distinguished from ‘end of history’. The *eschaton* indicates the ‘end’ of an age, not its teleological fulfillment. The apocalyptic ‘end time’ indicates the redemption of an age, not its dialectical fulfillment. The redemption of history is an apocalyptic event; it is a break from the historical dialectic.

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<sup>545</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid*, 257

<sup>547</sup> Benjamin, *Reflections*, 312

Eschatological peace signifies the interruption of any such *telos* and the arrival of a 'new age'. The apocalyptic event ruptures the linear flow of history as a temporal sequence of 'nows'. While the historical time-consciousness of modernity is an ascending trajectory towards an ideal future, the eschatological event arrests the temporal acceleration of planetary civilization towards oblivion.

Benjamin's account of 'the moment' refers to the non-linear temporality to which the mystics of various religious traditions bear witness. The intention of the mystic is to attain full presence in the *now*. But this intention is arrested as soon as it is undertaken. Phenomenological attention to experience suggests that the time of the *now* does not actually exist. As Heidegger demonstrates, there is no such enduring 'constant presence'. It would seem that the present moment does not exist. As soon as we become aware of 'the moment' it is already gone. The temporal 'event' withdraws without permanence. All we can perceive is the 'trace' of messianic deep time. Perhaps Heidegger says it best: "Powerful, incalculable time lets emerge everything not manifest and conceals everything standing in appearance. Time has all things in its power, (namely) it lets emerge the concealed and conceals (lets disappear) what has appeared."<sup>548</sup> It follows that if the time of the *now* is an illusion, then so too is the concept of history as a linear sequence of *nows*. In the modern era, we tend to perceive history as a linear chain of cause and effect. In Heidegger's words, "we are accustomed to thinking of coming to be as development, as a sequence of processes in which the

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<sup>548</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Beginning Of Western Philosophy: Interpretation of Anaximander & Parmenides*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 15

earlier ones are always the cause of the following ones, as transition, progression, as *direction* . . .”<sup>549</sup> The impermanence of the moment discloses a time apart from the linear temporality of universal history. As an experience of time apart from history, messianic time has the potential to exert an eschatological force upon the catastrophic unfolding of universal history. The temporality of ‘the event’ is one of radical impermanence. Heidegger: “Time is situated in passing. Time passes by ceasing to be. That which arrives in time arrives not to abide, but to pass on. Where to? Into transience . . . The temporal signifies what must pass, the transient.”<sup>550</sup> Messianic time signifies the passing of an age, aeon, or epoch. Contrary to the linear trajectory of ‘universal history’, messianic time is a temporality of discontinuity, rupture, and break. In the Greek of the New Testament, there is a *kairos*, or temporal interruption of the relentless historical unfolding of *chronos*, or chronological time.

The Judaic eschatological tradition gives an account of a non-linear temporality “whose spatial model can be represented by a broken line.”<sup>551</sup> According to eschatology, “history cannot be the continuous progress of humanity through linear time, but its essence is hiatus, discontinuity, epoch.”<sup>552</sup> The eschatological vision is not to bring the *telos* of history to its nihilistic fulfillment, but “to blast open the continuum of history”<sup>553</sup> In opposition to the enteral cycle of ‘law-making’ and ‘law-preserving’ violence, Benjamin offers a notion of divine violence. Benjamin suggests that “if mythical violence

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<sup>549</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>550</sup> Heidegger, *Who Is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?*, Review Of Metaphysics, 20:30, (1967:Mar), 423

<sup>551</sup> Agamben, *Infancy And History*, 110

<sup>552</sup> Agamben, *Infancy And History*, 60

<sup>553</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 262

is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying.”<sup>554</sup> Divine violence annihilates law; it sweeps away the mythical cycles of law-forming and law-preserving violence. Only sovereign power can suspend the law. It follows that if divine violence is indeed ‘law-destroying’, then divine violence is therefore ‘outside’ the mythical cycles of ‘law-founding’ and ‘law-preserving’ violence. In this sense, ‘divine violence’ indicates a notion of sovereignty beyond the dialectic of mythical and positive law. It is Benjamin’s contention that in arresting the dialectic of ‘law-making’ violence, ‘divine violence’ is akin to a messianic break from the history of being. Benjamin: “On the breaking of this cycle [between law-making and law-preserving violence] . . . on the abolition of state power, a new historical epoch is founded.”<sup>555</sup> According to Benjamin, “the proper characteristic of this violence is that it neither makes nor preserves law, but deposes it and thus inaugurates a new historical epoch.”<sup>556</sup> Benjamin: “What exists must be reduced to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for the way leading through it.”<sup>557</sup> Divine violence is akin to an apocalyptic event; it signifies the inception of a new epoch from out of the apocalypse of planetary civilization. As ‘law-destroying’, ‘divine violence’ is apocalyptic; it signifies the end of an age and the beginning of a new epoch of ‘world-history’. In this context, apocalypse should not be interpreted nihilistically, but instead in light of its original meaning – revelation.

As Benjamin’s reflections on *Angelus Novus* demonstrate, that at its very best art can bear witness to the memory of the ‘deep time’. In my opinion, Terrence Malick’s

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<sup>554</sup> Benjamin, *Reflections*, 297

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid*, 300

<sup>556</sup> Agamben, *State Of Exception*, 53

<sup>557</sup> Benjamin, *Reflections*, 303

film *The Tree Of Life* (2011) performs an eschatological remembrance of non-linear time. Malick, who wrote and directed the film, is deeply influenced by Heidegger's philosophy of time. In fact, Malick is the English translator of Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes*, (*The Ground Of Reason*). Moreover, the visionary cinematography and sweeping camera movement bears a distinct phenomenological style; the camera is continually sweeping upwards towards the bright open sky or diving into the shadows of the deep. All things shine through the screen of Malick's films. *The Tree Of Life* is certainly no exception. The film can be understood in light of a question posed in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), Malick's soulful meditation on war. The opening sequence of *The Thin Red Line* depicts the protagonist stranded on an island somewhere in the Pacific theatre. Enveloped in the shadows of the forest canopy, he can be heard reflecting on the elemental strife at the heart of being: "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?" This question is taken up again in the opening sequence of *The Tree Of Life*. The film begins with the childhood memory of the mother character played brilliantly by Jessica Chastain. There is a voiceover accompanied by the groundbreaking cinematography of Emmanuel Lubezki. The character states: "When I was young the nuns taught us there are two ways through life; the way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow." Malick's use of the term 'nature' can be misleading in this context. The dualism of 'nature' and 'grace' risks replicating Platonic metaphysics by suggesting that this world is somehow inadequate or unreal in comparison to some other actual or ideal realm. Indeed, the entire film is permeated

with a Neo-Platonic Christian cosmology more evocative of Hegel than Heidegger. Nevertheless, this apparent dualism does not subtract from Malick's essential insight – that nature is not a state of war; that war exists only between states. Instead, the 'Tree of Life' is an eschatological image of the original gift of being in the world.

The 'Tree of Life' is an eschatological vision of the redemption of history via revolutionary time. The entire film can be interpreted as a modern retelling of the *Book of Job*. The story of Job bears witness to a remarkable vision of the ungrounded horror of being. Job is considered virtuous among men. Tragically, it would seem that virtue does not equate happiness. There is no karmic law of justice at work in the cosmos. In exchange for his virtue, Job is afflicted with a plague of unbearable suffering. In pain, Job cries out to God for justice. In *The Tree Of Life*, the character played by Jessica Chastain is afflicted with Job's fate. The product of a traditional religious upbringing, she was taught: "No one who believes in God can come to a bad end." This naïve belief is nevertheless shattered when confronted with tragedy. When hearing of the death of her son, the mother is stricken with grief. Family assures her that "time heals, nothing remains the same." She walks along a path into a forest clearing. With eyes turned upward towards the open sky, the mother receives a revelation of the infinite scale of time. Physicists say that the arrow of time is an illusion. All of time, both past and future, occurs at once. It is this temporality that is depicted in the mother's vision. Tears stream down her face as she closes her eyes in wonder before 'the glory'. Malick's depiction of creation is scientifically accurate, from the creation of the Cosmos to the formation of Earth and the genesis of Life. Malick's films are certainly worthy of being

called poetry. *The Tree Of Life* resonates with the wonder evoked in the films' epigraph. When Job cries to God in despair, God responds with a question: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? . . . When the morning stars sang with glory and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"<sup>558</sup> It is this non-linear temporality of 'deep time' which Benjamin and Agamben call 'revolutionary'. It is only from the perspective of this eschatological remembrance of history that the innate nihilism of modernity comes into focus.

### *Anarchy*

In my judgment, Schmitt is much like a contemporary Thomas Hobbes. Both Schmitt and Hobbes understand mythology as being absolutely essential to the foundation and preservation of the state. Following Hobbes, Schmitt argues that the state comes into being via a foundational myth, or a myth of foundation. Schmitt: "Whatever value human life has does not come from reason; it emerges from a state of war between those who are inspired by great mythical images to join battle."<sup>559</sup> Apart from Plato's myth of the metals, the most influential foundational myth of the state is without a doubt Hobbes' myth of Leviathan. Hobbes appropriates the mythical image of Leviathan from the Hebrew Torah. In the Torah, Leviathan is the name of a great beast of the sea. However, Schmitt's own interpretation of the meaning and significance of Leviathan is considerably more esoteric. Schmitt draws from Kabbalistic imagery,

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<sup>558</sup> Holy Bible, Job 38: 4-7

<sup>559</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis Of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy, (London, UK: MIT Press, 1985), 71



suggesting that the Leviathan is an anthropomorphic image of divine creation. Just like God, the Leviathan state demands absolute submission. Schmitt: “Hobbes’ Leviathan . . . is the mortal god who brings to man peace and security. Because of this . . . the Leviathan demands unconditional obedience. There exists no right of resistance to him . . .”<sup>560</sup> For Schmitt, the Leviathan conjures order out of chaos; “the deep meaning of the concept of the Leviathan consists of the concreteness of the ‘earthly’ and ‘mortal’ god who is totally attuned to the political deeds of man, who, time and time again, must bring man out of the ‘chaos’ of the ‘natural’ condition.”<sup>561</sup> In this sense, the Leviathan is an image of the Lawgiver who compels man out of the state of nature and into the frame of the civil state.

The meaning and significance of the Leviathan myth cannot be understood apart from its inverse image – the Behemoth. The mythical images of Leviathan and Behemoth signify the primordial strife between the elemental forces of order and chaos. While the Leviathan represents the order of the ‘social contract’, the Behemoth represents the chaos of the ‘state of nature’. Schmitt: “As a symbol of a political entity, the Leviathan is not just any ‘corpus’ or just any kind of beast. It is an image from the Hebrew Bible, on garbed during the course of many centuries in mythical, theological, and Kabbalistic meanings. In the Book of Job, it is depicted as the strongest and most tremendous sea monster. Portrayed in vivid detail beside him is a land animal, the Behemoth.”<sup>562</sup> For both Schmitt and Hobbes, the brutality of Leviathan (Order) is

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<sup>560</sup> Schmitt, *Leviathan*, 51

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid*, 11

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid*, 6

justified by the even greater threat of Behemoth (Chaos). Schmitt explains that “the starting point of Hobbes’ construction of the state is fear of the state of nature; the goal and terminus is security of the civil, stately condition.”<sup>563</sup> For Hobbes and Schmitt alike, “security exists only in the state . . . everything outside of the state is therefore a ‘state of nature’.”<sup>564</sup> The Behemoth is an image of the perpetual war that exists in ‘state of nature’ prior to the foundation of political order. The mythical violence of a forgotten past serves to justify the very real violence of the Leviathan state.

The prospect of returning to this mythical ‘state of nature’ provokes widespread fear that serves to justify state violence. Schmitt: “The terror of the state of nature drives anguished individuals to come together; their fear rises to an extreme, a spark of reason flashes, and suddenly there stands in front of them a new god.”<sup>565</sup> According to Schmitt’s interpretation, “the state of nature, or the Behemoth, is none other than civil war, which can only be prevented by the overarching might of the state, or the Leviathan. It follows that one of the monsters, the Leviathan ‘state’, continuously holds down the other monster, the Behemoth ‘revolutionary people’.”<sup>566</sup> In other words, the ungrounded anarchy of human nature necessitates the rule of the authoritarian state. Schmitt: “The absolutism of the state is the oppressor of the irrepressible chaos inherent in man.”<sup>567</sup> In this sense, the essential strife of Leviathan and Behemoth is a mythical image of the moral conflict between good and evil. Schmitt explains that

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>564</sup> Ibid, 48

<sup>565</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>566</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>567</sup> Ibid, 22

“every political ideal in one way or another takes a position on the ‘nature’ of man and presupposes that he is either ‘by nature good’ or ‘by nature evil’.”<sup>568</sup> Schmitt argues that since evil is innate to the human condition salvation can only be secured through the absolute authority of the state. Schmitt: “In the face of radical evil the only solution is dictatorship.”<sup>569</sup> It would seem that in order to refute the logic of dictatorship, it is also necessary to go beyond the morality of good and evil. Against Hobbes’ radical pessimism, Rousseau argues that “there is no general war between man and man; and the human species was not formed merely to destroy itself.”<sup>570</sup> Indeed, “there is no war between men; there is war only between States.”<sup>571</sup>

Contra the elemental strife of Leviathan (Order) and Behemoth (Chaos), I propose the alternative mythical image of the ‘Tree of Life’. The image of the ‘Tree of Life’ can be glimpsed in the creation myth depicted in the Book of Genesis. According to the story, the intended dwelling place of humanity is the primordial garden. Within this garden two trees grow – the ‘Tree of Life’ and ‘The Tree of Knowledge’. To dwell in the garden is to commune with the divine ‘face-to-face’. In this time before history, nature is the sacred dwelling place of both Man and God. Within the refuge of the garden, the first humans enjoy complete freedom, except for one law: To *never* eat from the ‘Tree of Knowledge’. The Creator warns that the fruit of the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ means certain death! Adam and Eve nevertheless rebel against God’s rule; they transgress the

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<sup>568</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 56

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid*, 66

<sup>570</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract & Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 166

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid*, 168

divine law and eat of the 'Tree of Knowledge'. Upon eating of this deadly fruit, there is a traumatic diremption between the real and the good. The good is no longer conceived as the simplicity of one's original condition. Instead, the good is abstracted from being and projected into an ideal realm towards which one perpetually strives, though never reaches. Enraged by Adam and Eve's betrayal, God exiles humanity from the garden, condemning us to toil and die in mortal anguish. The orthodox interpretation of 'original sin' is misleading. It is not sin, but peace that is original. Peace precedes any covenant, history, or nation. In pursuing Knowledge we have forsaken the way of Life. By eating from the 'Tree of Knowledge', Adam and Eve forever lose the 'Tree of Life'. Henceforth, humanity must endure a 'fallen' state. In my opinion, the mythical image of the 'Tree of Life' provokes the memory of that which has been lost and shattered along the relentless march of progress. The 'Tree of Life' provides a counter-myth to Hobbes' mythical Leviathan - that although 'everywhere in chains', man was 'born free'. Pre-history is not in fact a state of perpetual war - a struggle of 'all against all.' Indeed, Hobbes projects the very real savagery of modern European history into the distance of pre-history before law, order, and the state. Rousseau: "The error of Hobbes and of the philosophers is to confuse the natural man with the men they have before their eyes . . ."<sup>572</sup> Hobbes sees the savagery at the heart of civilization and calls it the 'state of nature'. Rousseau: "Hobbes' error is therefore to have assumed the state of war . . . to

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<sup>572</sup> Ibid, 164

be natural to the species, and to have given it as the cause of the vices of which it is the effect.”<sup>573</sup>

Rousseau’s reference to the original nature of the species should not be prematurely dismissed as mere essentialism. Of course there is no innate ‘species essence’, whether good, as Rousseau would have it, or evil, as Hobbes warns forebodingly. While Hobbes projects the modern ‘state of war’ into a forgotten past, Rousseau can be criticized for perpetuating the Euro-centric myth of the ‘noble savage’. In both instances, a social construct is mistaken for objective reality. However, fixating on this criticism risks missing the point of Rousseau’s utopian image. As Agamben argues, “the past becomes possible in some fashion through memory . . .”<sup>574</sup> Rousseau’s reflections on the ‘state of nature’ should be understood as such a recollection. Rousseau does not take it for granted (as almost all of us do) that the emergence and development of civilization over the past 10 000 years is an unfolding of the history of progress. Rousseau entertains a dangerous thought: that the transition to civilization was an irrevocable mistake in the history of the species. In fact, contemporary anthropologists such as Yuval Hariri suggest that this may in fact be the case. Perhaps it is we moderns, not Rousseau, who are blinded by ideology. Western civilization is 2 0000 years old. Known civilization extends 10 000 years into the past. Yet *homo sapiens* have dwelt on Earth for 250 000 years. It is Rousseau’s intention to direct our attention to the 240 000 years of the species’ history lost to the concealment of ‘deep time’.

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid, 159

<sup>574</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary On The Letter To The Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 77

Early modern social contract theory is a secularization of the theological notion of Abraham's covenant with God. According to social contract theory, a collection of individuals agree to leave the 'state of nature' and enter into a 'social contract' with one another in exchange for the guarantee of security against anarchic violence. Just as Abraham submits to the will of God, the citizen submits to the laws of the state in exchange for peace, order, and security. Only the Leviathan can create order out of the primordial anarchy that prevails in the absence of sovereign power. Abraham is not the only mortal with whom God makes a covenant. Indeed, God's covenant with Moses proves most instructive. Schmitt's political theology betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of Mosaic Law. Moreover, Schmitt's political theology is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of theology. Earlier, I suggested that Schmitt misinterprets Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as an instance of sovereign decision. Similarly, Schmitt incorrectly interprets Moses as a 'law-giver', or founder of a people. It is from this understanding of Moses as the 'law-giver' that Schmitt derives his notion of the sovereign ruler. However, for the ancient Hebrews, it is not Moses, but Yahweh who is the 'law-giver'. The gift of law is given in and through the withdrawal of the 'law-giver'. God reveals himself only as a trace. Yahweh says to Moses: "While my glory passes . . . thou shalt see my *trace*, but my face shall not be seen."<sup>575</sup> Even Moses cannot look upon the face of his God and live. It is the same for sovereignty as well. Popular sovereignty is constituted by that which Agamben calls a 'judicial void'. This logic is also at work in the story of Solon, who is attributed with the foundation of ancient Athenian

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<sup>575</sup> Holy Bible, Exodus 33: 20-23

democracy. Solon is the 'law-giver' and founder of the polity. After establishing the city's laws, rather than rule as sovereign, Solon withdraws from the polity. Solon's withdrawal from the polity is at the same time its foundation. The foundation of democracy is at the same time the abdication of executive power. The space of the sovereign must remain open, empty and free. Democracy is founded upon the absence of an executive, president, or King. True democracy more closely resembles Rousseau's popular assemblies than Hobbes's Leviathan state. If Hobbes and Schmitt propose a political theology, then Rousseau offers a *negative political theology*.

While I disagree strongly with Schmitt's advocacy for a political theology of absolute sovereignty, his analysis of democracy nevertheless proves invaluable to the task of outlining a negative political theology. It is common to speak of liberal democracy as if there were not a significant difference or even contradiction between liberalism and democracy. Against this common error, Schmitt argues that "liberalism and democracy have to be distinguished from one another".<sup>576</sup> Indeed, Schmitt indicates "the inescapable contradiction of liberal individualism and democratic homogeneity."<sup>577</sup> In distinguishing between liberalism and democracy, Schmitt provides valuable insight where the vast majority of political theorists fail. According to Schmitt, "democracy is correctly defined as the identity of governed and governing."<sup>578</sup> If this statement is correct, and I believe it is, then it follows that democracy is rendered inoperative within the modern context for the reason that the scale of the nation-state is simply too vast a

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<sup>576</sup> Schmitt, *The Crisis Of Parliamentary Democracy*, 8

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid*, 17

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid*, 14

political entity to lend itself to direct self-government. Schmitt: “The crisis of the modern state arises from the fact that no state can realize a mass democracy, a democracy of mankind, not even a democratic state.”<sup>579</sup> In order to address this problem of scale, the nation-state utilizes representative rather than direct modes of democracy. It is for this reason that we tend to associate democracy with parliamentary bodies rather than with popular assemblies. But, as Schmitt contends, “parliamentarism is not democracy.”<sup>580</sup> Schmitt: “Democracy is something other than a registration system of secret ballots. Compared to a democracy that is direct . . . parliament appears an artificial machinery produced by liberal reasoning.”<sup>581</sup> Representative democracy must be distinguished from local forms of participatory democracy. Indeed, the former is simply liberalism while only the latter names *true democracy*. When faced with the problem of scale, the vast majority of political theorists opt to discard democracy in the name of liberalism. Indeed, I believe this is Derrida’s approach. However, I would prefer to discard liberalism in order to salvage democracy from the ruins of modernity.

According to Schmitt, Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* fractures Hobbes’ Leviathan state. Spinoza’s separation between religious authority and sovereign power fatally divides the ‘body-politic’ against itself. Schmitt: “The liberal Jew [Spinoza] recognized the barely visible crack in the theoretical justification of the sovereign state.”<sup>582</sup> Spinoza introduces “the revolutionary state-destroying distinction between

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<sup>579</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>580</sup> Ibid, 34

<sup>581</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>582</sup> Schmitt, *Leviathan*, 57



religion and politics.”<sup>583</sup> While Hobbes argues that sovereignty is both unconditional and indivisible, Spinoza suggests that sovereignty is unconditional but not indivisible. With poetic flourish, Schmitt bemoans the fact that Spinoza’s distinction of religion and politics “contained the seed of death that destroyed the mighty leviathan from within and brought about the end of the mortal god.”<sup>584</sup> Spinoza’s notion of divided sovereignty attains its full expression in the democratic pluralism of Rousseau’s ‘general will’. For Rousseau, democracy is akin to permanent revolution. Schmitt: “The periodic revival of the national convention as an eternal natural right was to [Rousseau] a natural occurrence; in other words, he allowed for the incorporation of Revolution into the configuration of the state. Hobbes, on the other hand, asserted the necessity to deny and negate the state of nature in the true and perfect civil state.”<sup>585</sup> Rousseau’s notion of democratic sovereignty is irrecoverable with political theology. As we will see, democracy it is also irreconcilable with the modern state.

Rousseau argues that only direct democracy is *true democracy*. It is not the state, but the people who constitute the sovereign power. Rousseau even goes as far to argue that “as soon as a People gives itself Representatives, it ceases to be free; it ceases to be.”<sup>586</sup> Rousseau: “The Sovereign can act only when the people are assembled.”<sup>587</sup> In fact, Rousseau argues that “any law which the People has not ratified in person is null; it

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<sup>583</sup> Ibid, 10

<sup>584</sup> Ibid, 57

<sup>585</sup> Ibid, 68

<sup>586</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 115

<sup>587</sup> Ibid, 110

is not a law.”<sup>588</sup> For this reason, Schmitt accuses Rousseau of annihilating the notion of sovereign decision. Schmitt: “The general will of Rousseau is identical with the will of the sovereign . . . which means that the people became the sovereign. The decisionistic and personalistic element in the concept of sovereignty was thus lost.”<sup>589</sup> Although Schmitt intends this as a criticism, Rousseau’s negation of sovereign decision points the way towards the genuine *praxis* of popular sovereignty. Contrary to contemporary liberal ideology, there is not, never was, and never will be a democratic *state*. Representative democracy is a contradiction in terms. The practice of participatory democracy is simply impossible at the state level. Rather, genuine popular sovereignty can only be practiced on a local level. For this reason, true democracy presupposes the decentralization of sovereignty from national parliaments to local communities via institutions such as the general assembly, the cooperative, and the commune. Rousseau’s native Geneva serves as an inspiration, as does the ancient Athenian *polis*. Both are instances of small, decentralized polities wherein it is possible for the people to gather, debate, and decide for themselves on their common destiny.

I concede that the prospect of a political revolution along the lines of what Rousseau advocates may seem unlikely. The decentralization of sovereignty and the development of local forms of direct democracy would amount to an inversion of the historical trajectory of ‘the West’. The historical *telos* driving Western civilization reaches its completion with the emergence and development of a truly planetary

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid, 114

<sup>589</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 48

civilization. In this sense, globalization is akin to the fate of 'the West.' Over the course of several centuries, tribes, villages and cities have consolidated into nations. Today, these nations are consolidating into continental governing bodies, and, inevitably, into a 'world-state'. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that local forms of self-government will replace the nation-state. Instead, we are witnessing the transition from national sovereignty to the centralization of power within regional supra-state institutions such as those that characterize the European Union. In my view, the European project signifies an attempt to gather the continent together under a single political authority. The point is to arrest the nihilistic *telos* of globalization before its inevitable culmination in the totalitarian planetary state. If historical development is analogous to a train moving along a one-way track, the point is not to accelerate or decelerate the engine of history. Instead, the point is to get off the track altogether. The European project is not only post-national it is also post-democratic. For Rousseau, even the nation-state is simply too vast to support a functioning democracy. Participatory democracy is an even more unlikely prospect within the post-national super-state comprised of unaccountable technocratic institutions. There is nevertheless reason to hope. If Benjamin, Levinas, and Agamben are correct, then such epochal transfigurations are far from rare. Indeed, the various epochs of being are comprised of such breaks, ruptures, or interruptions of history. It is possible that the age of 'world-history' inaugurated by the Treaty of Westphalia has reached its end. While the nation-state is approaching its end, the neo-liberal administration that characterizes the EU is not necessarily its inevitable successor. It is

not too late to set off along another path – if only we could remember a past that is different from the present and its catastrophic future.

Conclusion:

*Democracy Now!*

Jeremy Valentine surveys the field of current democratic theory in his article 'The Political'. I will outline and elaborate upon Valentine's theoretical distinctions in relation to my own engagement with post-foundational democratic theory. In doing so, I hope to clarify my own project as well as how it fits into the broader constellation of contemporary democratic theory.

Valentine begins by defining the political as "the ground of the polity".<sup>590</sup> Valentine takes up Reiner Schürmann's description of the epochal horizon of the political as 'self-grounding ground'. In the epoch of modernity, the political is understood as self-grounding; "Modernity is that which would be fully present to itself, self-sufficient and thus, in a manner of speaking, self-grounding."<sup>591</sup> Schürmann's writing on anarchy and metaphysics demonstrates that Heidegger's deconstruction of

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<sup>590</sup> Jeremy Valentine, 'The Political', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2-3), 507

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid*, 507

any metaphysical *arche*, foundation, or ground of the political opens up a 'site' of 'an-*arche*'.<sup>592</sup> The question, however, is whether or not this ungrounded 'site' of the political can avoid succumbing to the nihilist violence of Chaos on the one hand, and the foundational violence of Order on the other. There is a very real risk that metaphysical groundlessness could give way to the horror of political nihilism rather than the promise of an alternative post-foundational democracy. This is the problem to which my dissertation ventures a response.

Schürmann's post-foundational notion of democracy poses a significant challenge to the liberal notion of representative democracy. Understood as the 'site' of the political, true democracy is necessarily local. While representative democracy is grounded in the *arche* of constitutional law, I suggest that post-foundational democracy occurs in the inter-subjective 'site' of the *demos*. The notion of 'an-*arche*' allows me to trace a line from Heidegger's overcoming of 'onto-theology' to Benjamin's confrontation with political theology.

In the epoch of modernity, the ground of the political operates as the *arche* of the polity. However, Valentine argues that the understanding of the political as ground becomes problematic in the late-modern era. A confrontation with Nietzsche is necessary to come to terms with the innate nihilism of the metaphysical understanding of the political as self-grounding. Nietzsche shows that the 'self-grounding ground' is, in fact, ungrounded. More specifically, the polity is grounded on nothing other than the nihilistic 'will to power'. In the first chapter, I suggest that both the passive nihilism of

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<sup>592</sup> Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger: From Principles To Anarchy*,

radical pessimism and the active nihilism of the 'will to power' prove insufficient to the challenges posed by the abysmal groundlessness of being. As a result, I argue that Nietzsche's confrontation with nihilism succumbs to the tragic vision of time as an infinite circle. For this reason, it is necessary to turn to Heidegger's temporality of 'the event' and Benjamin's eschatological break with the 'moral arc of history' in order to move beyond political nihilism towards a genuine post-foundational democracy.

Valentine distinguishes between two different fields of contemporary democratic theory in order to demonstrate the problematic nature of the metaphysical understanding of the political as the 'ground' of the polity. Valentine distinguishes between: 1) deliberative democracy, and 2) political anti-modernism.

First, I will look at deliberative democracy in relation to my own engagement with post-foundational democracy and negative political theology. Valentine suggests that Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls most clearly outline the deliberative mode of democracy. Deliberative democracy nevertheless proves to be a failure. According to Valentine, "both Habermas and Rawls propose a version of Enlightenment without critique. In both cases, the political does not take place."<sup>593</sup> Lacking a sufficient understanding of the political, deliberative democracy succumbs to depoliticization, the process through which representative democracy gives way to 'managed democracy'.<sup>594</sup> In other words, deliberative democracy is not post-foundational, but post-democratic.

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<sup>593</sup> Jeremy Valentine, 'The Political', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2-3), 508

<sup>594</sup> Sheldon Wolin, *Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy*, Ch. 1 from J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach and Josiah Ober, eds. *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994)

Since Habermas is one of the most prominent theorists of deliberative democracy, I will discuss his views now.

Deliberative democracy is rooted in Habermas' rejection of the Frankfurt School's concept of the 'dialectic of Enlightenment'. Horkheimer and Adorno invert Hegel's dialectical notion of history as the progressive evolution towards ever more advanced stages of consciousness. On the contrary, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that history should be understood as a series of catastrophes; "the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from their fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened Earth radiates disaster triumphant."<sup>595</sup> The Frankfurt School criticizes Enlightenment rationality as an advanced form of barbarism. This critique arose within the historical context of the rise of European nihilism and the destructive violence of the second World War. While Horkheimer and Adorno view the war as symptomatic of the repressed elements of liberal modernity, Habermas views the destruction of Europe as an irrational rejection of Enlightenment rationality rather than as a consequence of the domination of nature intrinsic to the project of Enlightenment itself. Contra Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas views the outbreak of political violence as the result of an irrational anti-modernism rather than a catastrophic symptom of the ills of modernity.

Habermas understands modernity as the unfinished project of Enlightenment. Discourse theory is a continuation of this project; "Discourse theory works with the *higher-level intersubjectivity* of communication that unfolds in the institutionalized

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<sup>595</sup> Horkheimer & Adorno, *The Dialectic Of Enlightenment*, (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 3



deliberations of parliamentary bodies, on the one hand, and in the informal networks of the public sphere, on the other.”<sup>596</sup> In what follows I will argue that Habermas’ understanding of democracy and dialogue are both insufficient. I will also look at some ways in which my own project attempts to address some of these insufficiencies.

I understand Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy as a response to the decline of the nation-state and the transition to a new post-Westphalian political order. While the nation-state is undergoing a period of precipitous decline, a compelling alternative to the nation-state has yet to emerge. Habermas advocates for the transition from the nation-state to supra-national forms of administration such as the European Union (EU). The problem, however, is that which Habermas calls the ‘democratic deficit’ of such post-national forms of government. Although representative democracy is well suited for the nation-state, such models of democratic representation are less tenable at the super and supra-state level.

Habermas advocates for deliberative democracy as a solution to the democratic deficit of the EU. In my view, rather than offering a solution to the democratic deficit of the EU, deliberative democracy is symptomatic of the problem itself. The deliberative model of democracy draws inspiration from the historical transformation of the public sphere during the transition from the Medieval to early-Modern period. The emergence of the free press, coffee houses, and bourgeoisie social clubs nurtured and sustained the transition from feudalism to capitalist markets and representative government. Liberal democratic theory distinguishes between the state, civil society (the public sphere), and

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<sup>596</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion Of The Other*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 248

the individual (the private sphere). In a liberal polity, civil society is a necessary condition for representative democracy. Liberalism places a heavy emphasis on deliberative institutions such as the free press. The civil debates of the public sphere provide the political education necessary for national citizenship.

It is Habermas' naïve hope that if democracy can no longer be representative, then it can at least be transparent. Habermas relies on a transnational public sphere to cultivate a new post-national political consciousness to replace national identity. Habermas argues that democracy presupposes an ideal speech situation as a regulatory ideal. The problem, however, is that the transnational public sphere falls far short of this ideal. Indeed, the transnational public sphere is nothing but a synonym for international corporate media. Rather than fostering a new post-national political consciousness, this impoverished discourse undermines democracy through the standardization of consciousness and the repression of viable political alternatives. I therefore view Habermas' deliberative democracy as a regression from rather than an advancement of the original Frankfurt critique.

It is because of this impoverished notion of democracy and discourse that I turn to Levinas in order to seek a more productive understanding of democratic dialogue as an alternative to Habermas' discourse theory. For Habermas, language serves an instrumental function: discourse is undergone for the sake of testing the validity of truth claims. The discursive legitimation of diverse, often contradictory truth claims is intended to generate social consensus and foster post-national identity. For Levinas, however, discourse is not a tool to generate meaning. Rather, discourse is already

inherently meaningful. Levinas distinguishes between *the said* and *saying*; between *what* the other says, and *that* the other says. It is not the validity of *what* is said that is fundamental, but rather *that* one is addressed.

In my judgment, Levinas' notion of ethical inter-corporality lends itself to political models that are drastically different than Habermas' discourse theory of democracy.<sup>597</sup> While Habermas looks at formal structures of discourse at the institutional level, Levinas undertakes a phenomenological analysis, looking at dialogue as an interpersonal phenomenon. While deliberative democracy institutionalizes communicative processes in government bureaucracy and corporate media, a post-foundational democracy inspired by Levinas' ethics of responsibility would require a drastic transformation of the state along with the decentralization of sovereignty from the executive, legislature, and courts to the local community – the *site* where bodies meet.

We began with the problem of the modern understanding of the political as the ground of politics. This foundational understanding of the political set us on the search for an alternative post-foundational politics. Having looked at the first model of deliberative democracy, I will now look at Valentine's second model – the anti-modernist revolt against the depoliticization of democracy.

Valentine argues that the reactionary model views the political through a nostalgic lens, hoping for the return of a concept of the political that may in fact never

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<sup>597</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, (Pittsburg PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981)

have been.<sup>598</sup> In the second chapter, I suggested that Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics is not susceptible to this same criticism. Heidegger's 'step back' to the inception of Western metaphysics in ancient Greece is not rooted in nostalgia for the absolute. On the contrary, I view Heidegger's return to ancient philosophy through a Benjaminian lens – as the eschatological remembrance of repressed historical potential. In the final chapter, I discussed the temporal element of such an eschatological break from the linear flow of time. In my view, the notion of 'revolutionary time' is essential to an alternative political vision. But such a non-linear temporality must be more than an exception that proves the rule. Indeed, the perception of 'revolutionary time' must illuminate that which Benjamin calls a 'true exception' – a real political alternative.

Valentine suggests that the legal theorist Carl Schmitt is characteristic of reactionary anti-modernism. Contrary to Habermas, Schmitt argues that the political is determined by decision, not deliberation. Against the depoliticization of democracy, Schmitt argues that the executive ought to decide on the rule as well as the exception to the rule. Sovereign decision is 'above the law', founding political Order out of primordial Chaos. I take issue with Mouffe's claim that Schmitt's notion of the political is grounded in a naïve faith in absolute truth. On the contrary, I view Schmitt's political theology as a failed response to the problem of cosmic nihilism. Schmitt's notion of sovereign decision stems from the horror of the abysmal groundlessness of meaning, value, and truth. Since truth is ontologically ungrounded, political order must be created *ex nihilo*, from out of *nothing*.

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<sup>598</sup> Jeremy Valentine, 'The Political', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2-3), 510

For Schmitt, the political operates according to the distinction of friend and enemy. Schmitt views the political in light of an *Us*, a homogenous whole that is opposed to an equally homogenous *Them*. In this sense, Schmitt views the most salient political distinction as that which divides two mutually opposed nations rather than the division internal to a polity itself. I attempt to come to terms with the elemental strife of the political in the fourth and fifth chapters of the dissertation. I look at Heidegger's discussion of the 'strife' of Earth and World in ancient Greek cosmology, the irreconcilable conflict between the divine law and the law of the state in *Antigone*, the phenomenological strife of concealment and unconcealment, and the irreducible difference between the ethical and the political in Levinas and Derrida. I also looked at the elemental strife of Hobbes' *Leviathan* (Order) and *Behemoth* (Chaos). In all instances, I argued that such irreconcilable strife is an expression of the tragic Nietzschean view of history without redemption. In opposition to this tragic 'strife', I offer the non-dual image of the *Tree of Life*. The key to this image is the non-linear experience of 'revolutionary time'. I therefore distinguish between *Chronos* (chronological time) and *Kairos* (the revolutionary moment). This leads to a discussion of Benjamin and the dialectic of 'law-forming' and 'law-preserving' violence on the one hand, and divine violence on the other. For Benjamin, divine violence suspends the dialectic of foundation and abyss. But the question remains, can such an 'exception' be more than just a momentary interruption of the norm? Or can the non-linear experience of time clear an ungrounded 'site' of post-foundational democracy?

In response to the two dominant theoretical trends of deliberative and reactionary democracy, Valentine sketches three post-foundational models of democracy in order to point beyond the metaphysical concept of the political as the ground of politics. These models can be traced back to Heidegger's understanding of the political not as the ground of politics, but as the 'site' of politics. Valentine distinguishes between three models of post-foundational democracy: 1) deconstruction, 2) agonism, and 3) anarchy.

First, I will look at the deconstructive notion of post-foundational democracy. Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida are representative of this deconstructive approach. Nancy argues that in the modern epoch, any substantial grounding of the political has become unbelievable as a result of the planetary framework of globalization, modernization, and secularization. Nancy attempts to derive a post-foundational politics from a deconstructed ontology of 'being-with'. For Nancy it is neither the *Staat*, nor *Volk*, nor *Führer* that grounds the political, but rather our 'bare' ontological exposure to each other. In the modern era, it is no longer possible to ground politics on participation in a common ontological substance. Without a substantive notion of common being, post-foundational democracy must instead be fashioned from a fragile sense of being in common. The problem, however, is that Nancy's deconstructed ontology is simply too insubstantial to indicate a basis for an alternative post-foundational democracy. In Nancy's own words, deconstruction renders political community 'inoperative' (i.e. broken). Nancy fails to appreciate the true extent of social fragmentation in the modern era and the need to belong to something more substantial than a fragile ontology of

'bare life'. For this reason, I argue that the emergence of post-foundational democracy requires a much more extensive engagement with popular sovereignty and the problem of political community than either Nancy or Derrida are willing to undertake. I argue that a political community can only emerge from out of embodied practices of participatory democracy at the local 'site' of social interaction.

We encounter a similar problem in Derrida's political thought. Like Habermas' discourse ethics, Derrida's politics of deconstruction can be seen as a response to the historical transition from the Westphalian order of the nation-state to an undetermined post-Westphalian 'democracy to come'. In this sense, Derrida's political thought attempts to respond to the deterritorialization of democracy. Deterritorialization refers to the dissolution of sovereign territorial borders as a result of globalization. It involves "the disappearance of the site on which the democratic used to be situated. The site of representation and the stability of the location which make up parliament or assembly, the territorialization of power, the rooting of power to a particular place, if not to the ground as such – all this is over."<sup>599</sup> Derrida suggests that "since no locality remains, democracy must be thought today globally, if it is to have a future."<sup>600</sup> The problem, however, is that the transition from the nation-state to a transnational super-state is more likely to lead to a new regime of post-democratic administration rather than a post-national 'democracy to come'. Democracy must not deconstruct its own conditions of existence in the name of inclusion. A political community must always maintain a

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<sup>599</sup> Derrida interviewed by Richard Beardsworth: Nietzsche and the Machine, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 7, (1994), 7-66. <<http://foucault.info/pst/az-cf-74998-923601835>>

<sup>600</sup> Ibid, 7-66.

border, a limit, or a 'constitutive outside'. In order for there to be an *Us*, there must always be a *Them*. This logic simply cannot be avoided. What can be avoided, however, is a hegemonic notion of *Us*, along with a hostility towards *Them*. It is important to recognize that there are as many differences within a community as there are between communities. Contra Schmitt, the distinction between *Us* and *Them* need not lead to the distinction between friend and enemy. I nevertheless reject the cosmopolitan vision of Derrida and Habermas. Instead, I argue for an eschatological interruption of the *telos* of historical development leading from the nation-state, to the super-state, and culminating in the world-state. Against the centralization of sovereignty 'above' the nation-state, I advocate for the decentralization of sovereignty 'below' the state to the sub-state level. While it is true that the Westphalian model of the political is undergoing a period of precipitous decline, the solution to the problem of deterritorialization is not depoliticization, but rather decentralization. Democracy is local, not global!

Second, having looked at the deconstructive model of democracy, I will look at whether the democratic agonism of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Ranciere points towards the emergence of a genuinely post-foundational democracy. Lars Tønder argues that in addition to the deliberative theory of democracy, there should be a field called radical democracy.<sup>601</sup> Contrary to deliberative democracy, radical democracy is characterized by agonistic resistance to the state. In my judgment, the model of democratic agonism perceives the political through the tragic Nietzschean lens of conflict and division. Mouffe: "By 'the political' I refer to the dimension of antagonism

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<sup>601</sup> Lars Tønder ed, *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance And Lack*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2014)



that is inherent in human relations . . . ‘politics’ on the other side, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of the ‘the political’.”<sup>602</sup> Mouffe: “From the perspective of ‘agonistic pluralism’ the aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*.”<sup>603</sup> The problem, however, is that there is no firm distinction between antagonism and agonism. To some extent, agonistic politics will always be antagonistic. This proposition is simply too pessimistic for me to accept. There must be another way.

Mouffe’s political thought ought to be understood in light of the intellectual genealogy of Hobbes, Marx, and Schmitt. Like Hobbes, Mouffe argues that the ‘social contract’ should not be understood as a more advanced stage of history than the primitive ‘state of nature’. On the contrary, the ‘war of all against all’ persists at the very heart of civilization. Mouffe suggests that the task of politics is not to repress or replace our savage nature, but to desubliminate our inherently violent instincts through non-violent political discourse; “The state of nature in its Hobbessian dimension can never be completely eradicated but only controlled.”<sup>604</sup> Following Marx, Mouffe views social conflict as the driving force of history. Contra Marx, Mouffe pluralizes class conflict. While Marx views history as the manifestation of class-conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Mouffe views social strife as a plural rather than binary conflict.

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<sup>602</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, (London, UK: Verso, 2009), 101

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid*, 103

<sup>604</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Return Of The Political*, (London, UK: Verso, 1993), 6

Conflict does not only arise from class, but from gender, race, language, values, etc. Similar to her appropriation of Marx, Mouffe transforms Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction into the non-violent opposition between friend and opponent; "The category of the enemy does not disappear, but it is displaced."<sup>605</sup> Mouffe suggests that "far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence."<sup>606</sup>

One need look no further than the current polarization of political discourse in the United States to appreciate the insufficiencies of Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy. Such extreme political polarization is nothing but civil war by other means. In my view, while conflict cannot and ought not to be completely eliminated, social antagonism nevertheless should not constitute the ideal of political *praxis*. While Mouffe draws heavily from Hobbes' vision of social strife, I find greater inspiration in Rousseau's vision of social harmony. I view cooperation rather than antagonism as the true democratic ideal. I nevertheless reject the false consensus arrived at via bureaucratic procedure in Habermas' deliberative model of democracy. Contra Habermas, I argue that real consensus cannot be arrived at via deliberation between international corporate bodies such as the World Bank, the IMF, the Council on Foreign Relations, the G20, the Trilateral Commission, the UN, the World Economic Forum, the EU, etc. Instead, I advocate for democratic participation of corporeal bodies at the community level. Local self-government is the goal, not the planetary state.

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<sup>605</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>606</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, (London, UK: Verso, 2009), 103

In spite of my many differences with Mouffe's notion of political agonism, her distinction between liberalism and democracy is of fundamental importance to my own project. For Mouffe, liberalism and democracy are not at all 'co-original', as Habermas contends. Following Schmitt, Mouffe argues that liberal democracy is not a cohesive political model, but rather the juxtaposition of two different and often contradictory political traditions – one modern (liberalism) and the other ancient (democracy). Mouffe therefore distinguishes between liberalism on the one hand and democracy on the other. Mouffe: "On the one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defense of human rights, and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed, and popular sovereignty."<sup>607</sup> According to Mouffe, when liberalism and democracy come into conflict with each other, liberalism almost always wins out; "The dominant tendency today consists in envisioning democracy in such a way that it is almost exclusively identified with the *Rechtsstaat* and the defense of human rights, leaving aside the element of popular sovereignty, which is deemed to be obsolete."<sup>608</sup> Nevertheless, I am not convinced that Mouffe's own political thought is an exception to this tendency. Indeed, Mouffe views rights as a more salient site of political contestation than sovereignty. It is for this reason that Benjamin and Agamben's deconstruction of sovereign power proves indispensable to my own investigation of post-foundational democracy in the fifth and final chapter.

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>608</sup> Ibid, 3

While Mouffe's agonistic notion of the political replicates Nietzsche's tragic world-view, Rancière remains faithful to Benjamin's eschatological vision of a radical break from the 'charnel house' of history. For Rancière, there are two histories: "the cumulative history of the winners which, in a single move, pursues its 'triumphs' and consigns the memory of them to the past; and the messianic power that can make an authentic image of the past and shine in the present instant in order to ignite a spark of hope, at the very heart of past events."<sup>609</sup> The aim is to enact a break from the tragic Promethean fate of 'the West'. Like Prometheus, we moderns possess the gift of foresight but lack the gift of remembrance. We perceive the coming catastrophe but cannot evade its arrival. It is Benjamin's hope, and mine as well, that Klee's image of the 'angel of history' may provoke the remembrance of a non-linear temporality capable of breaking the 'arrow of time'.

I view Rancière's notion of the division between democracy and the political as a necessary correction to Hegel's notion of the unity of the Absolute State. Hegel perceives the State as a systematic totality that encompasses all of its parts in a unified organic whole. Against Hegel's authoritarian notion of the State, Rancière insists on the non-identity of democracy and the State. In this sense, Rancière is indebted to Levinas' distinction between the ethical and the political. According to Rancière's formulation, democracy is akin to Levinas' notion of the ethical; both ethics and democracy exist in opposition to politics and the State. For Rancière, the notion of a democratic State is a contradictory notion. While the State signifies the instrumental administration of

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<sup>609</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Figures Of History*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), 52

politics as usual, Rancière understands democracy as anarchic resistance to the State. In other words, democracy is not a way of organizing the State alongside other models such as oligarchy, aristocracy, and monarchy. Instead, democracy is constituted through resistance, dissent, and opposition to politics as such. The protestor becomes the model citizen, just as protest becomes the fundamental form of political *praxis*. Rancière: “Genuine participation is the invention of that unpredictable subject which momentarily occupies the street.”<sup>610</sup> Nevertheless, in providing a corrective to Hegel’s Absolute State, Rancière risks an overcorrection. The problem is that Rancière’s notion of the irreconcilable difference between democracy and the State is politically defeatist. Revolution is not an option, only resistance. A concrete alternative to the state remains lacking. I therefore point to participatory democracy as a possible alternative to the modern surveillance state. While far from perfect, participatory democracy remains preferable to representative democracy, deliberative democracy, and radical democratic agonism. In opposition to representative and deliberative bodies, I propose the council, commune, and cooperative as concrete political alternatives. Against the grain of history, Rousseau’s native Geneva and the ancient Athenian city-state should serve as inspiration for the future of democracy.

Finally, having looked at the deconstructive and agonistic models of democracy, I will now look at Sheldon Wolin’s anarchic notion of post-foundational democracy. Wolin defines “the *political* as an expression of the idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of community when, through public

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<sup>610</sup> Jacques Rancière, *On The Shores Of Politics*, (London, UK: Verso, 1995), 61

deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the wellbeing of the collectivity.”<sup>611</sup> Distinct from the political, “*politics* refers to the legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity.”<sup>612</sup> Wolin explains that “politics is continuous, ceaseless, and endless. In contrast, the political is episodic, rare.”<sup>613</sup> As a moment, democracy is an exception to the norm rather than the norm itself. Wolin therefore concedes that “democracy thus seems destined to be a moment rather than a form.”<sup>614</sup> Like Mouffe, Wolin’s conclusions are too pessimistic. Democracy can be more than just an exception to the norm, it can be a ‘true exception’, or that which Kierkegaard calls a teleological suspension of the law in the name of a higher law. Democracy is this higher law, as a form, as well as a moment. As a moment, democracy is not just a momentary ‘time-slice’ taken from the linear sequence of history. Instead, true democracy involves a remembrance of non-linear ‘deep time’, through which the unrealized potential of history finds expression in the time of the present. Wolin’s notion of the political as an *instant* rather than a *duration* of time compliments my own discussion of Benjamin’s philosophy of time. The advent of post-foundational democracy would be akin to an act of ‘divine violence’, an interruption of the violent *logos* of ‘world-history’ that swings between absolute order and the groundless abyss.

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<sup>611</sup> Sheldon Wolin, ‘Fugitive Democracy’, *Contellations* v1 1, No 1, 1994.

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*

Following Mouffe, Wolin also distinguishes between liberalism and democracy. Wolin suggests that the difference between liberalism and democracy is often overlooked given that the modern form of representative democracy is a hybrid model of liberal-democracy. Wolin: “The democracy we are familiar with is constitutional democracy, democracy indistinguishable from its constitutional form.”<sup>615</sup> I am in agreement with Wolin when he suggests that constitutional liberalism is designed to limit democracy. Originally, the will of the majority was limited by the constitution in order to protect the rights of minorities from the will of the majority. Today, however, constitutional law protects a very different minority – the so-called 1%.<sup>616</sup> For this reason, the constitutional framing of democracy should be understood as a depoliticization of democracy. Depoliticization refers to the narrowing of political *praxis* within the confines planetary neo-liberal framework. As the divine origins of sovereignty become increasingly disenchanting, sovereign decision undergoes a process of depoliticization. Democracy becomes limited, restricted, enframed as nothing more than a legitimation function of neo-liberal administration.

The enframing of democracy is an essential element of constitutional government. Wolin explains that “a constitution in setting limits to politics sets limits as well to democracy, constituting it in ways compatible with and legitimating of the dominant power groups in the society.”<sup>617</sup> But as Wolin points out, while “the crucial

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<sup>615</sup> Ibid.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid.

<sup>616</sup> One need look no further than the US Supreme Court ruling on ‘Citizens United’ for confirmation.

<sup>617</sup> Ibid.

institution [of constitutional democracy] is the Presidency,” this is not necessarily the case with true democracy.<sup>618</sup> On the contrary, I argue in the last chapter that democracy is not constituted the sovereign decision of the executive, but rather the general will of the people assembled. Mouffe points out that Wolin’s understanding of democracy as the absence of the presidency, executive, or king is identical to that of Claude Lefort. Mouffe: “As Claude Lefort has shown, the democratic revolution is at the origin of a new kind of institution of the social, in which power became an *empty place*.”<sup>619</sup> Democracy is thus “the absence of power embodied in the person of the prince and tied to a transcendental authority.”<sup>620</sup> Just as representative government saw the decentralization of sovereign power from the King to Parliament, post-foundational democracy involves the decentralization of sovereignty from the national Legislature to the local community, region, or neighborhood. After the death of God, the empty ‘site’ of the absent God-King must be left open and free.

I have now looked at elements of my own project in relation to the major trends of 1) deliberative democracy, and 2) radical anti-modernism in contemporary political theory. I then looked at various elements of my own argument in relation to three trends of post-foundational democracy as outlined by Valentine: 1) deconstruction, 2) agonism, and 3) anarchy. I argued in the dissertation that post-foundational democracy is participatory, not representative. From Schürmann to Wolin, we saw that the general

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<sup>617</sup> Ibid.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid.

<sup>619</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Return Of The Political*, (London, UK: Verso, 1993), 11

<sup>620</sup> Ibid, 11



will is ungrounded, with no foundation apart from the direct assembly of the people themselves. Democracy is an-*arche*: without *arche*, principle, or ground.

Postscript:

*No Future?*

Since writing this dissertation, accelerationism has become the most consequential ideological debate in political theory. Framing my argument in light of this debate could prove both interesting and beneficial.

My dissertation responds to the lack of an alternative vision in political theory. Today, the field is divided between: 1) left accelerationism, which advocates for full automation and a universal basic income, and 2) right accelerationism, which envisions technological singularity as post-human extinction. One is grounded in naïve optimism, the other in radical pessimism. While the former aims to revive social democracy re-branded as post-capitalism, the latter is an expression of the nihilistic death-drive. I find this left-right binary to be deeply unsatisfying. While my dissertation doesn't provide all the answers, it may indicate way beyond this rigid framework.

Accelerationism, which has deep roots in Italian Futurism, is grounded in the modern understanding of history as an ascending curvature of time. It aims to accelerate the innate logic of history towards its teleological fulfillment as either Enlightenment or Extinction. I have suggested that any attempt to delineate an alternative vision must first pass through the prism of political nihilism rooted in the ancient Greek experience of cyclical time. In my view, accelerationism has yet to come to terms with the 'death of God' as the essential site of 'the political' in the modern era. An alternative vision must dispense with the modern understanding of chronological time and historical progress. But in rejecting the deification of Reason, History, and the State, politics must not retreat into refusal, rebellion, and resistance. Indeed, neither left nor right accelerationism offers a compelling notion of political *praxis*.

In light of the 'deterritorialization' of the nation-state, the site of the political must either be trans-national or sub-national. I've argued that democracy is either local, or not at all. My advocacy for local democracy may prove vulnerable to Srnicek and Williams criticism of 'folk politics' outlined in their book *Inventing The Future*. Folk politics is characterized by 1) the reactionary *praxis* of resistance, and 2) the false authenticity of the local. Folk politics is accused of arresting the emergence of an alternative political vision. "The contemporary left tends towards a folk politics that is incapable of turning the tide against global capitalism. In its place, the left needs to reclaim the contested legacy of modernity and advance visions of a new future."<sup>621</sup> While I agree with the critique of *praxis* as mere protest, I am not prepared to discard

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<sup>621</sup> Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing The Future: Post-Capitalism And A World Without Work*, (London, UK: Verso, 2015), 85

with the local as 'the site' of the political. William and Srnicek fail to distinguish between local action such as protest and resistance on the one hand, and local modes of self-government such as assemblies and cooperatives on the other. I have argued that the local remains a promising 'site' for an emergent counter-hegemonic project, especially when the alternative to local self-government is post-democratic management.

William and Srnicek argue that "the contemporary left should reclaim modernity, build a populist and hegemonic force, and mobilize towards a post-work future."<sup>622</sup> "A counter-hegemonic strategy entails a project to overturn the dominant neo-liberal common sense and rejuvenate the collective imagination."<sup>623</sup> Although I agree with the need for a counter-hegemonic strategy, I have reservations about the necessity of reclaiming the modern Enlightenment project. Left-accelerationism lacks an appreciation of the nihilistic tendencies of Enlightenment reason and the technological framing of Earth. It is for this reason that I find Heidegger's philosophy of technology indisputable to my own argument.

In spite of my reservations with accelerationism, what I nevertheless find intriguing is the insight that "free time is the basic condition for self-determination and the development of our capacities."<sup>624</sup> I argued in the dissertation that post-foundational democracy is grounded in the non-linear experience of time. The memory of the ancient Athenian *polis* shines through the endless passage of time. The remembrance of democracy requires that we distinguish between liberalism, which is

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<sup>622</sup> Ibid, 69

<sup>623</sup> Ibid, 131

<sup>624</sup> Ibid, 80

modern, and democracy, which has more ancient beginnings. In my view, the most important question facing political theory today remains: 'Is there a future for democracy?'

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