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The Real Scandal

Lee Braver

The question of thinkability

First we asked what reality was. What is the nature of all this stuff around us, we wondered, and what is higher than it? What can withstand the ravages of time, rise above the imperfections of matter, to achieve a more real reality, a truer truth? This inquiry into the timeless sustained us for quite some time. But at some point the nature of the question changed. It became more reflexive, turned inwards, turned on itself. The questioning came to question the question itself. Rather than just asking about reality, we started to ask why we asked about the nature of reality. Not just the material stuff around us, but the loftier matters, that which is *meta* the *physis*—the transcendent, the necessary, the *a priori*, God, the soul, everything, 42. We asked whether this inquiry was impossible; we asked whether this inquiry was necessary. Kant, perhaps the originator of this phase of metaphysics, answered yes to both questions, casting metaphysics as a Greek tragedy where we are fated to do that one thing that we must never do. For Heidegger, on the other hand—the other great figure from this period¹—being does not so much trap us in metaphysics as seduce us into it, lure us with its scintillating charms. Metaphysics then becomes a rather clumsy set of love letters, as Derrida portrays them, sent from brilliant but awkward lovers, rather how Nietzsche depicts philosophers.²

And today, what is our question today? Is it just this—this question as to what is our question? That seems so feeble, like a pale shadow of true inquiry cast upon the wall of the history of philosophy. If that were our main preoccupation, would that not be an outrageous waste of our efforts, a squandering of our rich inheritance, something of a scandal?

There have, of course, been many scandals concerning reality and its investigation throughout the centuries. Kant found it scandalous that we still had no proof of an external world, surely the one thing the world should have expected our profession to have supplied them. Heidegger, in response, was scandalized at the notion that such a *passé* question could still generate a scandal. But they reach back much farther. Plato's metaphysics, the very birth of Western philosophy, arose in response to the twin scandals of the best man of his generation being condemned to death, and of the very existence of death, the degradation of matter, the corrosion of time. How could reality,

the self, knowledge, all be here only to disappear? Surely such an outrage cannot be, so there must be a realm where it is not; hence transcendence. Augustine was scandalized that we mortals prefer to shore up these worldly rotting treasures rather than investing in the incorruptible divine. Descartes was shocked at the poor education he had paid so much for and set out to reform the schools by re-forming knowledge itself. Perhaps philosophy begins in scandal rather than in wonder.

And philosophy's response to this shock, whether it be scandal or wonder, has always been to attempt to defuse it. The quintessential philosophical attitude is summed up in Aristotle's analysis of questioning: philosophy begins in wonder but "must end up in the contrary and (according to the proverb) the better state, the one that people achieve by learning."³ Wonder is useful as an initiating motivation because it starts us investigating, but it's like an itch that needs to be scratched. If reality presents us with a scandal, we must set up a political war room that will come up with a solution that dispels it. Questions are to be answered, puzzles to be solved, confusions resolved. Wonder, perplexity, inquiries—ladders to be climbed and then discarded.

But this *modus operandi*, no matter how obvious and natural, rests on an assumption—precisely the things we philosophers are trained to root out and question. It assumes that answers are preferable to questions, that the natural life cycle of a question is to seek its *telos* and fulfillment in coming to rest, or even dissolving itself in an answer. This view is not innocent or isolated but finds its place in a larger sense of cosmos, humanity, and their relationship, one that buys into what Leibniz called a pre-established harmony between mind and world, albeit without Leibniz's own Rube Goldbergesque mechanisms for its operation. At bottom, philosophy has generally seen reality as intelligible, as that which is intelligible, which underwrites the project of understanding it. Just think of the way Plato's divided line analogy from the *Republic* correlates degrees of realness with degrees of comprehensibility, or Descartes's determination that the quantifiable aspects of the world—those which can be captured in formulae and the webs of Cartesian grids—are the only ones we can be sure are out there the way we perceive them, or Hegel's neat summation that the real is the rational and the rational is the real. The world is at its most real where our understanding penetrates it most fully, where its ways of being fit our ways of thinking best, such that the two gear into each other seamlessly. We know we have struck the hard rock of reality when we can know it, when it makes sense to us.

Questions naturally lead into answers, then, because the world, in some sense, is made to make sense, is meant to have meaning. Whether that is simply how reality is, or God is communicating with us through the language of existence, or we ourselves have, as enlightened autonomous agents, made the world over in our minds' image—however it is accounted for, we have traditionally called real what confirms our expectations, what responds to our call, what slips tamely into our taxonomies. This underlying epistemo-metaphysical principle is what I call the Parmenidean Thinkability Principle, as Parmenides implanted this concept in philosophy in embryo at conception, an idea that has guided it ever since: that being and thinking are one. That which is is that which is thinkable, and that which is thinkable, is. In one way, it is a tremendously hubristic assumption. Why should we presume world and mind to be compatible? In another, it seems unavoidable. If there isn't at least some compatibility between the two, then all

thought is futile, all knowledge illusory. It's just common sense: the world and mind must have sense in common if they are to communicate with each other.

This notion, like so many others, took rather a sharp turn with Kant. For an Enlightenment thinker helping humanity finally reach maturity, simply taking up a world laying there predigested for us maintains us in our tutelage. No, we must light the light of knowledge ourselves; we must *make* sense of the world by making it sensible. We do this by fomenting the Copernican Revolution whereby the comprehensible world is rendered comprehensible by us, and so becomes a correlate of our transcendental faculties. The world becomes part of the subject, or the inextricable context of the subject, or the subject's meaning or posit or reification or constitution or historical situation—various forms, but all concluding that the world is the subject's. It is what gives meaning, and what receives it, both what overhangs and precedes and situates the subject, and what the subject projects and forms and transforms. And thus is born what is sometimes called anti-realism or correlationism.

But let us note that Kant left us another legacy alongside this anti-realist one, or rather underside it. For noumena, the world as we *don't* constitute it, are the other side of phenomena. Noumena are the conceptual shadows of phenomena since Kant believes that we cannot think the latter without the former although, at the same time, phenomena are the shadow cast by noumena when the blinding light of the in-itself hits our transcendental faculties. If we make over the world in order to render it intelligible, then the world as it is in-itself, as it *really* is, is fundamentally unintelligible to us. At its deepest level, where it is most independent of us, where it is most real, this view says, reality makes no sense to us, *can* make no sense to us in principle no matter how much we learn, no matter how far we extend our perception, knowledge, or understanding. Although he does occasionally say that noumena are thinkable, just not knowable—they must obey the laws of logic and be amenable to the concepts of the understanding even though they do not pass through the intuition to actually have concepts applied to them—this seems both unwarranted (how do you know, Kant?) and against the basic thrust of his system, since the only way to secure concepts' necessary, universal status is to place their origin in the mind, not in the world. At one point, Kant says that even if angels were to whisper the true physics of the universe to us, noumenal mechanics if you will, we should ignore it and continue our phenomenal experiments for it could be nothing but gibberish to us.⁴ Newton or Einstein would find their minds going blank, or perhaps they would be driven mad like the protagonists in a Lovecraft story when too much of the old gods' ways are revealed to them.

Kant set up an impervious shield against this mad, maddening, literally unnatural reality: our faculties automatically transform all incoming data into a familiar, digestible phenomenal form, thus making sure we can never make contact with anything that breaks the laws of Newton or Euclid, just as Midas can touch nothing but gold. There can be no cognitive indigestion for Kant, no unanswerable questions, for if it is a legitimate question then it must have a real answer, one that is, in principle even if not in practice, available to us. As we saw above, question and answer are suited to each other since mind and phenomenal world are. We can never be truly, deeply, radically surprised, for anything that conflicts with our set ways of thinking and experiencing

would either be filtered out or mashed into them. The *a posteriori* truly does follow the *a priori*, inexorably. No one can escape themselves.

But what if we could? What if the old gods could contact us, not for extended conversations, for that would make them contemporary, but what if we could get brief glimpses of a world that lay beyond the furthest reaches of our grasp? What if our experience outran our understanding, our thinking, our reasoning? And what if these experiences, these experiences that transgress our best and possibly inescapable ways of making sense of the world, turned out to be our most valuable? What if they mark our best, most unadulterated contact with reality, even if such contact outrages and scandalizes the mind?

I believe along with the anti-realism that has dominated continental thought since Kant, there has been a counter-strain of a peculiar kind of realism, one which I call transgressive realism. In many ways, this theory inverts Parmenidean realism. Whereas that view tracks reality with intelligibility, as in Plato's divided line, transgressive realism locates the most persuasive encounters with reality in those experiences that are unintelligible, that go against the grain of the mind, the ones that poke through the phenomenal cocoon that Kant's idealism weaves around us. If the real is that which is other to us, that which breaks in on us from outside, then the more other it is, the more outsider, the more it trails transcendence as it crashes into us. That which is beyond us conceptually is that which we could not have created ourselves, and hence cannot be an extension of our selves, thus breaking with all forms of idealism, anti-realism, or correlationism. Breaking with these ideas has taken a number of recent forms.

Transgressive realism

An exorcism is haunting twenty-first-century philosophy—the exorcism of the specter of anti-realism. It seems that a number of thinkers, from a variety of backgrounds, all woke up around the same time (2007) thinking that the last two centuries of anti-realism have been, or at least have become, a dead end. The way forward lay not through some more subtle extension or refinement of anti-realism, the most common strategy for progress over the last two centuries,⁵ but rather by some form or other of realism.

My version, transgressive realism, differs from speculative realism, perhaps the most prominent of these recent oppositions to Kant's anti-realist legacy, because I am still talking about experiences. I don't know how to talk about that which we never can and never will come into contact with; it's hard enough philosophizing about the things we can. The noumenal in the sense of that which stays on the dark side of the real, always on the other side of things, fundamentally outside our horizons—horizons of time, of space, of perception—to me, this smacks of that world well lost, the unheard tree falling in the forest, the object that vanishes just before you look at it. Philosophizing about such matters veers between fruitless speculation and the loss of meaning entirely, at least it does when I try to do it. I'm just not sure what or how much it means to talk about entities we can in principle never have any experience of. One of the ways Kant's successors improved upon his noumenal ruminations was to insist that any reality worthy of the name, any reality which we can understand how to apply the term to and

understand what it means to do so, must be something we can encounter in some way or other. We are rooted in Heidegger's clearing, confined to talking only about being as we have some experience of it, which I think leaves me still an anti-realist in their eyes.

Meillassoux's anti-correlationist ancestral thinking, on the other hand, uses our capacities to reason, especially scientific and mathematical reasoning, to surpass our horizons of experience.⁶ Astrophysics apparently enables us to reach back before all humans existed to the beginnings of the universe, as well as to what will happen after all have been extinguished. Meillassoux argues, among other things, that these modes of thinking are formal and impersonal enough to escape anthropomorphic and anthropocentric limitations. As Galileo had it, math allows us to listen in on the murmurings of the universe in its own language rather than remaining confined within our own, human-all-too-human speech. But how does one know from within these ways of thinking whether they succeed in touching the world as it escapes these ways, since the only way to compare the two is still through these very ways of thinking? As McDowell says, we cannot see our way of seeing and the world seen "sideways-on" to evaluate how we affect what we see; we only see what we see through our own ways of seeing.⁷ Thus, it seems to me that Meillassoux's strategy retroactively imposes our concepts onto the universe's past, such that his attempt to escape the bubble of human experience merely extends human conceptuality, making our escape into the great outdoors somewhat less adventuresome than it initially appears.⁸

Unlike speculative and Meillassoux's realisms, the transgressive version sticks to experiences. I am enough of a phenomenologist to want to philosophize only about what I can encounter, although encountering occurs in all kinds of wildly diverse ways. The first philosophical idea that Heidegger ever learned was that being is said, and is, in many ways; this notion guided a considerable portion of his thinking throughout his long career. I'm just not interested in analyzing anything falling entirely outside the cone of potential contact, and I'm not confident that we can. Nor am I interested in the scientific analysis of the long, long ago or ahead, as the scientificity of the analysis renders it conceptually, if not chronologically, contemporaneous. It is our concepts, our modes of temporality, our ways of understanding that roll out these horizons, making them transcendental rather than transcendent.

I am interested in what is intellectually transcendent but phenomenologically immanent, so that we do in fact encounter it but in moments of utter bafflement. These are impossible for Kant's transcendental idealism since for him, the encounter itself renders the phenomena encountered intellectually digestible, but they are the heart and soul of transgressive realism. These are the wild, untamed experiences, the bewildering, captivating and uncapturable, unanticipatable and unforgettable, inexplicable, sometimes headshaking, sometimes life-changing events. These are the times you know you're alive, you know that something has happened. These are the thoughts that can re-form your mind into strange new shapes and reveal heretofore unnoticed dimensions of the world. These are the moments that try humans' minds but, by that very trial, constitute our fullest, least-mediated contact with something other.

The dominant strain of continental philosophy has played out in some variation of an idealist, anti-realist, or correlationist key which, following Kant, rules out such

transgressions. If we encounter something, it must be meaningful, these philosophies say, for meaningfulness is the medium, the atmosphere, the gravitational field of experience. Even something surprising or confusing represents merely a temporary hiccup that necessarily can be smoothly assimilated into our ways of understanding reality. Phenomena must be Euclidean and Newtonian, or imbued with some degree of Spirit, or constituted as part of a harmonious and anticipated coalescence of adumbrations, or integrated into a holistic world, or text, or language, or epoch, or something—but however it happens, it must present itself as meaningful if it is to present itself to us at all. These philosophies emphasize holistic contexts which give meaning and are given meaning and in which everything finds its place and thereby has its sense. These senses may change in different contexts or historical periods or strategies or interpretations, yet all there is lives in meaning like fish in water: outside of it, it cannot.

The problem with this view, as a number of recent thinkers have pointed out, is that this makes external reality not very external. It makes the world in some sense an extension of the self, an appendage, a correlate, an effect of our transcendental faculties or will or everyday activities or interpretations, and these constructions can never really get us outside of ourselves. We never touch on something that has nothing of us to it, the transcendent, the fully non-human, what Meillassoux calls “the Great Outdoors,” Levinas “infinity,” Heidegger “earth.” The world narrows to a Potemkin village that we have unconsciously built to fool ourselves, behind which philosophy teaches us to find ourselves. Thus does idealism inflate the self to encompass all; thus does all dwindle down to our small selves. Thus is the astounding, prodigious world, with its shocks and mysteries, its spirits from the vasty deep and strangers from strange lands, its bazaar of the bizarre, its gods and monsters—thus is all this richness reduced to what the mind is prepared to process through its prior forms. What a loss. As Levinas, one of the great transcendental realists, says, “focusing on being, [thought] is outside itself, but remains marvelously within itself, or returns to itself. The exteriority or otherness of the self is recaptured in immanence. . . . One learns only what one already knows.”⁹

But the thing is, we don’t actually learn only what we already know, the eternal recurrence of recollection that Plato condemns us to; in fact, that’s precisely what we cannot learn, for that’s when learning by definition does not happen. We meet ideas and people and places that do not just bring us new facts to toss onto the homogeneous pile of already-gathered knowledge but new *kinds* of facts, genuinely new ideas that, as the phrase has it, expand our horizons, warping and distending the mind’s previous structure such that it can never simply reassume its old shape. And why would you ever want to go back, now that you have seen the open sea that Nietzsche speaks of, once you have practiced the gay science, a way of thinking deeply and questioning evilly that is to previous philosophizing as alchemy is to chemistry?¹⁰ Isn’t this literal changing of one’s mind precisely what we aspire to induce in our Intro students if, perhaps, quixotically? Isn’t this the high we scholars have been chasing all of our professional lives, with, as all junkies know, ever-diminishing success? Isn’t this why we got in this business in the first place (besides for the money, of course)?

What's so external about external reality?

Now these transgressive experiences are, of course, not proof of the external world, nothing like that. I take it that we no longer are concerned with such matters. To borrow Lyotard's term, we live today in an age of incredulity towards proofs of this kind, greeting an allegedly successful proof of the external world with as much of a raised eyebrow as a skeptical argument. Today, Heidegger's scandal is surely more on target than Kant's.

Rather, it is a matter of where we find external reality most genuinely external, and what we mean by this externality after all, and why we care about it in the first place. Why does it matter, as the old freshman head-scratcher goes, if you're in virtual reality with everything great but fake? What would it matter, as long as the Cubs win the World Series, Donald Trump gets impeached, and peanut butter still tastes good with chocolate? To move Nietzsche's question about truth one sub-discipline over to metaphysics,¹¹ why should external reality matter to us? And what do we mean when we apply this term, "external," to reality?

It seems to me that it is its externality that makes reality real, vital, and important. It is the fact that it is not us, that it can surprise us, change us, teach us something that we could not find out on our own. The problem with the way all idealisms slide into solipsisms is not that we know them to be false; it is that they would be hellishly dull. Sartre got it exactly wrong: hell is the *absence* of other people, and other things, and otherness in general. That's why solitary confinement is a worse punishment than being locked up with others. The transcendental hamster ball that Kant's idealism locks us into where the basic outline of all discoveries for all time have been sketched out in advance isn't the protection of science, as he thought, but its death by suffocation. For without discovery, without the conquest of the unknown, what is science? The extension of Kuhnian normal science forever would deserve the scorn Hegel pours on the bad infinite. It's the revolutions, the times we radically revise our most basic concepts, that rejuvenate the endeavor. As Heidegger says, anticipating Kuhn by some decades, "[t]he real 'movement' of the sciences takes place when their basic concepts undergo a more or less radical revision which is transparent to itself. . . . In such immanent crises the very relationship between positively investigative inquiry and those things themselves that are under interrogation comes to a point where it begins to totter."¹² Although here he is describing the positive sciences, what else is *Being and Time's* destruction of the tradition and proposal of the new ontological categories of readiness-to-hand, presence-at-hand, and existence but an attempt to make philosophy totter and undergo an epochal revolution? What else but the promise of such a shake-up stirred up so much excitement?

Kierkegaard captured this idea in *Philosophical Fragments* where he contrasted two epistemologies: Greek recollection and Christian incarnation. For the former, the teacher can be nothing more than a midwife, essentially gratuitous—simply a useful catalyst for touching off an internal self-discovery. Thus, for recollective epistemology, all inquiry can be summed in the Delphic maxim, "Know thyself." Kierkegaard held that this structure informed most philosophy. Some version of spiritual ascent marches in lockstep with epistemological education: as one ascends from the physical individuals

to the Forms, one becomes more soul and less body, and hence more akin to the Forms, and so more attracted to them upon death, thereby increasing the odds of a heavenly afterlife. Or one aspires to the more divine and less sinfully worldly, or more rationally scientific and less superstitiously dependent on society, tradition, the senses, emotions, etc. All of this occurs essentially on one's own, through recalling oneself to one's own inner resources, redirecting one's energies, rewiring the faculties.

In that case, though, why did the living category mistake, the God-man, come to earth and suffer crucifixion? What would be the point of a divine epiphany were this infinite being merely telling us what we already know, what we can find out for ourselves? Kant's morality, for example, ensures universality by placing the source of moral knowledge within rational creatures. This allows us to hold pre-Christian pagans as responsible as those who came afterwards and benefit from his teachings, but then, of course, no external authority, not even God, can teach us anything about morality. We come into this world with its lessons hard-wired into our reason, and Kant argues that if we encounter what we think might be God, we must match this apparent apparition against our pre-existing notions of goodness to see if He measures up to our standards: "Even the Holy One of the Gospel must be compared with our idea of moral perfection before He is recognized as such."¹³ Such a transcendent entity could not even teach us anything about religion: "there can be no religion springing from revelation alone."¹⁴ Not just morality, but religion too must be located entirely within the boundaries of mere reason.

Nothing outside of ourselves can tell us anything; as the etymology of "autonomy" tells us, we must give the law to ourselves rather than taking it from anywhere outside. "The whole of human existence is in that case entirely self-enclosed, as a sphere," Kierkegaard writes, "and the ethical is at once the limit and completion. God becomes an invisible, vanishing point, an impotent thought."¹⁵ Then there is only us, only the human, what our reason must tell us, which can in a sense over-rule what God in fact tells us. Kant thinks that Abraham failed his test since he should have told God that because the command to kill Isaac fails the test of the categorical imperative, it is his duty to disobey it.

But the very idea of the incarnation, of the infinite breaking into the immanent, finite horizons of this earth demonstrates the need for something beyond our comprehension, for it would be pointless otherwise. Thus Kierkegaard's life-long fascination with the paradoxical and absurd: this is how the transcendent must strike our reason, else it is not truly transcendent. "The new which he [the apostle] may have to proclaim is the essential paradox. However long a time it may be preached in the world, essentially it remains equally new, equally paradoxical, no immanence can assimilate it."¹⁶ Compare Derrida's analysis: "God doesn't give his reasons. . . . Otherwise he wouldn't be God, we wouldn't be dealing with the Other as God or with God as *wholly other*. If the other were to share his reasons with us by explaining them to us, if he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn't be the other."¹⁷ As Nietzsche says, the new in morality is, by definition, evil at first, for its novelty means that it must contravene previous standards.¹⁸ Now combine that with Derrida's claim that it is in the history of philosophy, even the nature of the discipline (to use a decidedly un-Derridean phrase) to forever question the nature of philosophy, of what counts as philosophical reasoning.¹⁹ Together,

the two points mean that every great philosopher becomes great at least partially by redefining how to philosophize, stretching and remolding the very contours of reason. Transferring Nietzsche's claim about morality, we can say that each new form of rationality necessarily appears irrational at first, for its newness means that it violates what had been taken as self-evident and necessary.

Transgressive philosophers and philosophizing

Transgressive realism neatly inverts traditional takes on philosophical questions, exposing and questioning their deeply held common assumptions, as all good theories do. Starting with Parmenides and Plato, intelligibility has always been a hallmark of realness; transgressive realism finds it in opacity, resistance to understanding, even its violation. Aesthetics had praised harmony and beauty but, finding our inspiration in the sublime—again left to us in an alternate inheritance from Kant—we seek out art that doesn't settle down peacefully, "anxious objects" in critic Harold Rosenberg's term. These are objects that call themselves into question—their status, their meaning, and by doing so, unsettle larger aesthetic ideas—the entire category of art, the notion of meaning itself. They resist attempts to settle "what they mean," all the while still beckoning us to interpret them; indeed, it is this very struggle against meaning something that captivates us and makes us feel sure that they do mean something. Duchamp, Kafka, Beckett, Beckmann—that sort of thing.

In epistemology, as discussed, inexplicable mysteries are preferred over answered questions, puzzles rather than solutions. It is the mystery that keeps the drowsy mind attentive and alert, that keeps the clearing open and bright and prevents forgetfulness of being in Heidegger's thought, for all is question-worthy. In logic, it is the meta-logical question that Heidegger and Derrida took up, the alogical fact that there is logic at all, the lack of a sufficient reason for the principle of sufficient reason, the groundless grounds of all reasoning. This is not a battle cry to abandon reason and embrace . . . what? Emotion? Irrationality? Intentional obfuscation? Whatever the misological caricature of continental philosophy of the day has it. Rather, it's to reason about reason, to become aware of it as reasoning, and to express thankfulness for our thinking. Its gratuitousness instills gratitude.

Heidegger often says in his later work that being calls us—being calls on us, calls to us, calls us to our essence, our destiny, our authentic selves if openness to being is later Heidegger's heir to authenticity. But being also prods us, provokes and unsettles us. In *Being and Time*, *Dasein* seems perpetually unsettled, not-at-home—*unheimlich*. Anxiety reveals that while we always are-in-a-world, we can never be-of-the-world; we can find no home in this world even after we have chosen our place in it for ourselves. Whereas being in the later work comes to comfort, to throw us instead of abandoning us,²⁰ to possibly overcome "the homelessness of contemporary man"²¹ as a temporary, historical phase we can surpass, the early work discourages us from ever feeling settled; our being is essentially unsettled, always already and always forever an issue for us.

Perhaps we can read this early acknowledgment of essentially anxious unsettledness into the later work, so that instead of seeing being as like a benevolent giver (the "like"

is important here, lest we fall into onto-theo-logy), we instead view it as an unending provocation. Rather than calling us to rise to our destiny as thinkers, it can serve as an incitement, a spur, a refusal of any destiny as final, settled. The way being is beyond reason (not irrational) is what draws us to reason endlessly about it. That's what the historical epochs amount to, after all—various attempts to conceptualize contemporary revelations of beings, to understand as a response to that which confuses, to draw up and systematize what rises up and presents itself to us.

This is what each epoch does, but just as consciousness on Hegel's highway of despair constantly forgets previous self-assurances that it finally has things aright once and for all, so each epochal understanding claims to surpass its epochal limitation to grasp the underlying structure of all that is and can be. Even if it were to master the beings around it—technologically and intellectually—as well as the epoch's beingness or basic understanding of what it is to be, no epoch can truly settle what being is. This is the “source” or giving of beings in their periodic beingness, and it cannot be captured within the concepts of any given understanding. It is *essentially* mysterious, incomprehensible as the wellspring of all comprehensibility and comprehension. This is one reason why Heidegger treasures thinking of being over understandings of beings or beingness: it will never exhaust its ability to provoke. This is one reason why it is better captured in irresolvable questions than any kind of answer.²²

Furthermore, the deep historicity of being that suffuses Heidegger's later thought ensures that there can be no final answer. Whatever we come up with will be overturned at the next turning. We don't understand better than previous generations, with the implicit promise of at least asymptotically approaching the one correct understanding; we understand differently, anew, and this is the most correct way to understand it. After all, being is said in many ways, diachronically. This awareness is what breaks the filtering circle of recollection that Kierkegaard warned us against but which *Being and Time*'s pre-ontological understandings seemed to trap us in.

Heidegger's thought didn't so much turn from early to late, as it turned to and into turning itself. “I have left an earlier standpoint, not in order to exchange it for another one, but because even the former standpoint was merely a way-station along a way. The lasting element in thinking is the way.”²³ Our being as thinkers is a “counter-resonance of en-ownment . . . to become itself: the preserver of the thrown projecting-open”;²⁴ we are those who receive what being gives, becoming ourselves in the receiving and responding because we become the receiving and responding, just as being gives itself in giving the given because it is only the giving. So we, in our being, echo and respond to being. And perhaps the essential point of his later ruminations on being is that it is historical, history itself in one sense. As it continually releases different kinds of beings, we must respond to them with new forms of thinking if we are to continue to dovetail with being like yin and yang to make up the clearing. The one thing we know about being is that there cannot be just one thing to know, one way to know it. Knowledge and understanding must also be said in many ways.

This lack of conclusions can be a boon rather than a burden. Heidegger enigmatically says that “*most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.*”²⁵ Let us recall the inconspicuousness of ready-to-hand equipment from *Being and Time*. It is our familiarity and facility with tools that renders them virtually

invisible, withdrawing from our attention as we go about our business. It is only when they break down or behave unexpectedly that our attention gets drawn to them and our world is “lit up . . . The world announces itself.”²⁶ In the more existential Division II, this inconspicuousness spreads throughout our selves and our world which supplies the place where and materials with which we make our existence, leading us to sleepwalk through life. Once again, what wakes us up to our ephemeral existence and to the capacity, obligation, and dread of choosing ourselves is a breakdown. Here, anxiety slices the futural pull of our projects so that our world as a whole falls slack, like a circus tent deflating after the center pole has been removed, and we are in a sense ejected from our world, our lives, our selves for a time. When we take these back up after the miasma clears, we do so in changed way. Indeed, in an important sense, we *take* them up for the first time.

Applying this analysis to thinking, we can say that our thinking is thoughtless—automatic, careless—while we encounter the straightforwardly thinkable. As long as our concepts grasp reality and experiences smoothly and unproblematically, they remain inconspicuous; our thinking, thoughts, and the very capacity to think—the clearing—go unnoticed. This happens above all for Heidegger in science since it “always encounters only what *its* kind of representation has admitted beforehand as an object possible for science,”²⁷ the hermeneutic circle weaponized. Like the Kantian subject, science filters out what does not conform to its conceptual expectations, which is what he means when he says that science does not think—it takes its basic concepts for granted.²⁸ Heidegger is surely thinking here of what Kuhn calls normal science; he praises the moments of revolutionary upheaval.

On the other hand, where concepts break down, where they run into dead-ends they cannot get through—*Holzwege*, or Derrida’s *aporiai*—here the resistance to our ideas throws off sparks that light them up.

Where beings are not very familiar to man and are scarcely and only roughly known by science, the openedness of beings as a whole can prevail more essentially than it can where the familiar and well-known has become boundless, and nothing is any longer able to withstand the business of knowing, since technical mastery over things bears itself without limit.²⁹

It is where thought fails in understanding beings that it can successfully hint at being. The two calls Heidegger talks about are the call of conscience in *Being and Time* and the call of thinking in the later work. Just as the former breaks in on our ongoing living in the familiar, comforting, reassuring tracks laid down by *das Man*, so the latter breaks through our normal, generally ontic and static ways of thinking. After all, for speaking and thinking about being, “we lack not only most of the words but, above all, the ‘grammar.’”³⁰ Both calls allow the intentional, mindful, actively aware taking up of what had previously been done on autopilot. The difference, as Kierkegaard discussed a century earlier, is that the call of conscience comes from ourselves, reinforcing the hermeneutic circle of pre-understanding, whereas the call to thinking comes from outside and beyond us, calling us forth into the unknown, to think the heretofore unthinkable.

Levinas comes to a similar conclusion but, instead of looking to history for inspiration, he mines ethics. It is the face of the other that provokes us, that even first opens us up to allow encounters with anything, making it the essential experience, what Levinas calls “experience preeminently,”³¹ or “the great experience.”³² “The idea of infinity exceeds my powers (not quantitatively, but, we will see later, by calling them into question); it does not come from our *a priori* depths—it is consequently experience *par excellence*.”³³ This is the experience of the personal other and of what is wholly Other. It is this experience of the unexperiencable that defies what Husserl had considered the necessary formal anticipations of all experience. Like Heidegger, Levinas sees reason and knowledge as perhaps the crucial enforcers of homogeneity between thought and being, what he calls the assimilation of the other into the same. “The achievement of knowledge consists of grasping the object. Its strangeness is then conquered. Its newness, the opening up of its otherness, is reduced to the ‘same,’ to what has already been seen, already known.”³⁴ What exceeds and violates our grasp is what can truly be other, so encounters with it can count as touching on something truly outside of ourselves. “The idea of being does not therefore suffice to sustain the claim of realism, if realism is equivalent to affirming an alterity outside the Same. Only the idea of the infinite renders realism possible.”³⁵

Thus, the success of knowledge means the elimination of the otherness of the object of knowledge. Alternately, like Heidegger’s thinking of being, its failure is what could actually put us in touch with that which can never be known. “What was taken as an imperfection of human knowledge measured by a certain ideal of self-evidence and certitude becomes a positive characteristic of the approach of a certain type of reality that would not be what it is if it were revealed in another way.”³⁶

And why would we think about reality in the first place, why philosophize at all, except in reaction to its perplexing us? We eat because we are drawn to food’s enticing us, drink when liquids like Alice’s potion call out “Drink me.” So too we think because what is other calls us to think it, and this call is one of challenge. Were being to open itself up transparently, with self-evident significance, we would have no cause to think it, just as one need not chew IV liquid nutrition. This is what Hegel mocked as

a philosophical utopia in which the Absolute itself readies itself for being something true and known, and surrenders itself for total enjoyment to the passivity of a thinking which only needs a mouth agape. Strenuous creative construction, in assertoric and categorical statements, is banished from this utopia. A problematic and hypothetical shaking of the tree of knowledge, which grows in a sandy grounding, brings the fruit of knowledge down, already chewed and self-digested.³⁷

In such a pre-understood utopia, there would be no call for wrestling with reality, creating new concepts and thoughts to grasp and settle it.

But our thought, cast out of pellucid perfection into this opaque, perplexing world, suffers a happy fall, forcing us to work to pull down and cut up the fruit of knowledge by the sweat of our brow. This disharmony is what awakens us to our task and to our privilege of being the being who thinks the real. This goes against the perpetually renewed task of philosophy to settle down into an established way of thinking that

one has concluded is Truth, but it preserves and responds more faithfully to its original provocation. Perhaps what is scandalous today is how scandal-less thought aspires to be.

Notes

- 1 See my *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-realism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 1–3.
- 3 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 983a 18–20. The quotation is from *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J. L. Ackrill (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 259.
- 4 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 101n.
- 5 See my *A Thing of This World*.
- 6 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (Bloomsbury, 2017).
- 7 John Henry McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- 8 For more on this, see my “Before Infinity: A Levinasian Response to Meillassoux’s Speculative Realism,” in *Continental Realism and its Discontents*, ed. Marie-Eve Morin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
- 9 Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 125.
- 10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Preface, §300.
- 11 See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §1.
- 12 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 29/9 (§3).
- 13 Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, 2nd edn (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Library of Liberal Arts, 1995), 24, see also 60.
- 14 Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 157n., see also 82, 143, 175.
- 15 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 96.
- 16 Søren Kierkegaard, *On Authority and Revelation: The Book on Adler, or a Cycle of Ethico-Religious Essays*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 107.
- 17 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death; Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills, 2nd edn (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 57.
- 18 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §4.
- 19 Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974–1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 217, 376, 411. See also Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Jan Plug et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 138, 147–8.
- 20 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: Ten Key Essays, plus the Introduction to Being and Time*, ed. David Farrell Krell, rev. edn (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 234.
- 21 Ibid., 241.

- 22 See my unpublished paper, "Questioning Heidegger: The Question of the Question in Late Heidegger."
- 23 Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 12.
- 24 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 169 (§122).
- 25 Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 6 (emphasis original).
- 26 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 105/75.
- 27 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 170.
- 28 Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 8.
- 29 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 129.
- 30 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 63/39.
- 31 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 109.
- 32 Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 234.
- 33 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 196.
- 34 Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 191.
- 35 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 21.
- 36 Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 68.
- 37 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), 185.