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The Ethics (*Ethos*) of History*

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Abstract

*This paper provides a critical analysis of Heidegger's brief remarks in his "Letter on Humanism" in which he links ethics to ethos and ultimately to our relation to time and history. Central to this analysis is the phrase of Heraclitus, $\epsilon\theta\omicron\varsigma$ $\alpha\nu\theta\rho\acute{o}\pi\omicron\iota$ $daim\acute{o}\nu$, from which Heidegger claims that human living (*ethos*) is inseparable from the event of appropriation (*Ereignis*) which generates our historical destiny. Through further analysis that draws from the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, it is shown just how Heraclitus's phrase can be interpreted differently and thus presents us with an idea of human destiny that serves to qualify Heidegger's claim.*

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How is it possible to speak of the ethics of history? Certainly when the word “ethics” is understood solely from its modern determination of a normativity with respect to living, the expression the “ethics of history” makes little sense. And yet the expression is not without significance for we know that with respect to the interpretation of history there is a normative force at work in the questions and decisions involved in any interpretation. We can see something of this, more generally so, in a philosophy of history such as Hegel’s where history becomes the scene of the actualization of human freedom. And if we broaden the meaning of the word “ethics” through its etymology, our expression can actually revert to something like a tautology. Ethics, as we know, is derived from *ēthos*, which in ancient Greek pertained first and foremost to an individual’s accustomed place. It pertained to the habitual and the customary, and in this basic determination *ēthos* approximates what the early Hegel called positivity—the historical element in a religion or a society which is opposed to the purely natural. What is positive is the historically given, produced in the generational movement of life. For Hegel this positivity amounts to traditional authority and the task is to reconcile it with reason where it would be transformed into living history. Suffice it to say that in this regard at least human history is the portrayal of human *ēthos*, or better, *ēthos* is inseparable from a historical element.

These brief preliminary comments serve to point us to the specific focus of my remarks, namely, to Heidegger who in a more decisive way links ethics to *ēthos* and ultimately to our relation to time and history.¹ In the “Letter on Humanism” from 1946 Heidegger responds to the question about writing an ethics by placing the question of ethics against the background of modern technological life and framing it in its relation to ontology, insisting that what needs to be determined first is precisely what ethics and ontology themselves are. To this end, while noting that ethics appeared for the first time in the school of Plato where it is taken up in relation to philosophical science, Heidegger provocatively claims that “the tragedies of Sophocles ... preserve the *ēthos* in their sagas more primordially than Aristotle’s lectures on “ethics.” He explains this claim with the equally provocative remark that the essence of this *ēthos* is captured in

the simplicity of the three word saying of Heraclitus: *ēthos anthrōpōi daimōn*. Heidegger then comments that this saying is usually translated as “a man’s character is his *daimōn*,” but this translation is a modern one and attention should be paid to the meaning of *ēthos* as abode, dwelling place. More specifically, according to Heidegger “the word [*ēthos*] names the open region in which man dwells,” allowing what pertains to man’s essence to appear. As one could anticipate, Heidegger has translated the saying of Heraclitus in relation to the “truth of being” as the primordial element of the human, and the ethics that ponders the abode of man Heidegger calls “original ethics.”² But as Heidegger himself admits, this original ethics that thinks the abode of man is not really an ethics at all; it is ontology.

But how does this bear on the issue of history and our concern with the ethics of history? Certainly what Heidegger means by the truth of being is not without its historical element. In fact this relation between the truth of being and the historical occupies Heidegger’s thinking throughout the 1930s and 40s. In recognizing this, it is curious to see just how Heidegger has translated the saying of Heraclitus in the “Letter on Humanism.” He initially leaves the word “*daimōn*” untranslated and then in his subsequent analysis he translates it with only one of the possible meanings of the word, namely, pertaining to a god. His most complete translation of the saying soon follows along with a more precise determination of the phrase he had chosen to translate for the Greek *daimōn*: “The (familiar) abode of man is the open region for the presencing of god (the unfamiliar one).” (Letter on Humanism,” 258) While this complete translation resonates with what is at the center of the being question for Heidegger, it avoids the word that has most frequently been used in modern translations for the Greek *daimōn* and which would directly introduce the historical element into the saying of Heraclitus, namely, fate (*Schicksal*). Perhaps Heidegger’s choice of a word and the resulting determination of meaning in this matter had everything to do with his current situation and his interpretation of his time in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Certainly it does have something to do with his change of perspective from *Being and Time* where the word ‘fate’ designated the condition of a Dasein in which it takes over what has been handed down to it. In any case, without reverting to the usual

modern translation, it is yet to be determined in a more precise way—and in a way that does not abandon the intentions within Heidegger’s thinking—how the idea of the ethics of history can be pursued from this starting point. And this is the specific focus of my remarks.

Let me proceed here by noting, along with Heidegger, the insufficiency of the modern translation: “man’s character is his fate.” The insufficiency, though, has just as much to do with the inadequacy of the translation of *daimōn* as with that of *ēthos*. In point of fact the word *daimōn* is the more difficult word to translate since its meaning shifts in its various usage and its etymological meaning is impossible to discover with certainty. In Homer the word is indeed often synonymous with *theos*, a god, but it is not simply interchangeable with it. According to Walter Burkert, the word refers generally to a force that drives one forward where no agent can be named. What is being ordained in the driving power of *daimōn* is never visible.³ In this sense *daimōn* signifies something like fate or destiny, and there appears to be little conceptual difference here between *daimōn* and *moira*. But even this association between these two words depends on a meaningful translation. *Moira* does not simply mean fate as an inevitable outcome, but pertains foremost to portion and the apportionment that is the order of life. And in *daimōn* one must hear the associated verb *daiomoi*, which means to divide, to make a cut, and thus *daimōn* can pertain to the invisible power that assigns a portion—what we ordinarily describe as one’s lot in life.

Accordingly, when Heraclitus says *ēthos anthrōpōi daimōn*, not only must we hear in the word *daimon* the sense of one’s lot in life, but also we must hear in the word *ethos* the original sense of the word as the haunt of an animal, the customary place from which it may be expected to appear, to show itself. Thus, as one among several possible translations, Heraclitus’s expression can read: “in the living and shaping of human life (where human life comes to appear) the human lives out its good or ill fortune. This translation has the virtue of bringing us closer to the *ēthos* of Sophocles. As we learn from *Antigone*, it is in relation to the *daimonic* that the human is said to be most strange (*deinotaton*). The human has this designation of strangeness—perhaps it is best to say being formidable—precisely

because it is only the human animal that has the capacity to create; and this capacity to create is more than an ability for the production of artifacts. It is primarily an ability for the creation that occurs by virtue of being that being who is never helpless before its future.⁴ In this resourcefulness lies the making that is self-creation—the bringing of a human life into its very being. And apropos the tragic, such living and shaping involves the double destiny of not being able to know all that the individual says and in wanting to know the individual is subject to error and hubris. And for Heidegger too, even in a desperate time of need, the human is not helpless before its future, and in the living and shaping of life commensurate with Dasein's belonging to being, the human faces this double destiny of not knowing and being subject to error.⁵ Certainly it cannot go unnoticed here that Heidegger speaks of error and errancy in his essay "The Anaximander Fragment," which was also written in 1946.⁶ On Heidegger's account, in the unconcealment of beings being itself is withdrawn and thus concealed: "the brightness of the unconcealment of beings darkens the light of being." By virtue of this withdrawing "beings are adrift in errancy," establishing "the realm of error" as the sphere of common history. "The inability of human beings to see themselves corresponds to the self-concealing of the lighting of being."⁷

In order to bring closer this thinking of Heidegger and with it the idea of the ethics of history in relation to our starting point, let me offer yet another possible translation of Heraclitus's expression: "in humankind's place in life there is the elemental power of destining." This translation also requires further determination. Specifically, it requires that we determine the meaning of the "place in life" to which we belong, this in-habiting that is now capturing the evolving sense of *ēthos*. In his 1941 lecture course entitled *Basic Concepts* [*Grundbegriffe*], Heidegger provides us with a direct answer to this query:

We must listen our way into that place where we ourselves belong. With this, reflection leads us through the question as to whether we still belong anywhere at all. Even to merely anticipate where we could belong, it is necessary to experience ourselves. This means

“ourselves” not according to any historiologically given condition... but “ourselves” in respect to what determines us and is other than us, which nevertheless governs our essence. We call this, arbitrarily at first, the inception of our history. By this we do not mean history as a series of events in terms of a “causal nexus,” of which what occurs later and today is an effect. History means, again at first appearance arbitrarily, *the happening [Ereignis] of a decision about the essence of truth*. The manner in which the whole of beings is revealed, in which man is allowed to stand in the midst of this revelation, is grounded and transformed in such a decision. Such a happening is exceptional, and this exceptional history is so simple when it happens and prepares itself that man at first and for a long time thereafter fails to see it and fails to recognize it. This is because his vision is confused by habituation to the multiplicity of the ordinary..... Remembrance of the inception of our history is the awakening of knowing about the decision that, even now, and in the future, determines Western humanity. Remembrance of the inception is therefore not a flight into the past but readiness for what is to come.⁸

This passage, in its succinctness, actually captures the entirety of the translation of the saying from Heraclitus and not just the translation of *ēthos*. In it we see Heidegger making three interrelated claims. With some interpretation we can state them as follows: 1) properly speaking, our place in life involves our belonging not simply to history with its factuality, but to the inception of history; 2) by virtue of this inception, we are involved in a decision about the essence of truth, i.e., our place in life entails the specificity of our time, which gathers together historical life in its conditions and values; 3) remembrance of the inception is a readiness for what is to come, i.e., our place in life is oriented to the arrival of what occurs at the inception as destining. Let us consider these claims in more detail.

As we could anticipate from the outset, in the first claim Heidegger does not locate the inhabiting in which human life comes to appear where one would expect to find it, namely, in what Hegel comes to call *Sittlichkeit*, ethical life—the life of family and civil society and its institutions. It is not found, in other words, in the norms of living together that we find, as our classic example, in Sophocles’ *Antigone*.

Rather, the place to which we first belong and which governs our essence is the inception of our history. By any standard this is a remarkable claim, a claim that, to say the least, is indicative of the shift in Heidegger's thinking in comparison with his earlier work. In linking human living not simply to history but to the inception of history, the issue for Heidegger is no longer the determination of Dasein's stretching along between birth and death as such, that is to say, it is no longer a matter of Dasein's historicity, but of the determining that occurs in advance of Dasein's historical enactment. This shift is, of course, the turning with respect to his question of being in which, as we see throughout the 1930s and 40s, Heidegger is concerned with the issue of origination.⁹

But what then does it mean to belong to the inception of our history? The answer to this question is complicated in part because Heidegger will use other terms alongside that of inception which in itself produces a complication. In the "Origin of the work of Art" from 1935/6, for example, Heidegger tells us that "as every origin [*Ursprung*] has its inception [*Anfang*], so every inception has its beginning [*Beginn*]."¹⁰ The three terms indicated here, fashioned in a common relation, are all indicative of an event involving a point of departure. The complication lies not just in the fact that Heidegger brings these three terms together, but that the terms themselves become entangled together. In his preliminary considerations to his 1943 lecture course on Heraclitus, Heidegger notes that for his title, "'*Der Anfang des abendländischen Denkens (Heraklit)*' one might also say '*Der Beginn (oder der Ursprung) der Philosophie im Abendland*'."¹¹ The entanglement occurs here because Heidegger intersects the ontological with the historical. Thus on the one hand the terms are indicative of the birth of presencing, as if Heidegger were employing these terms in an attempt to re-think the Greek *arche*, which, as we learn from Aristotle, has multiple meanings in its ordinary use. Common to most of these meanings is the notion of "first," of what is at the beginning.¹² As it pertains to the movement of being, "first" is understood as that out of which being becomes and that which rules in the becoming. Thus *arche* has for Aristotle the sense of a ruling beginning that is unsurpassable. If Heidegger is indeed thinking *arche* in relation to at least two of the terms,

Ursprung and *Anfang*, he will not only disengage these terms from this classical determination of *arche* as that which establishes command and also rule—as it becomes translated into the Latin *principium*—he will also disengage it from its connection in Aristotle with cause (*aitia*).¹³ But, on the other hand, the terms are indicative of a historical meaning, of how presencing becomes history. For Heidegger the Presocratics are *anfängliche Denker* and the birth of metaphysics begins in Plato and Aristotle.

For us to then see precisely what Heidegger means by inception, we need to briefly sort out this entanglement. Immediately following the sentence in the “Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger writes:

The [beginning] is that through which the always-sudden inception arises up, as something already found. An occasion belongs to the way the beginning is this one or that one. And the occasion is always a coincidence or happenstance, a happenstance in the light of and the breaking-open region of the inception as the leap of an origin, i.e., as a leap wherein the truth as openness of beings arises. Where this happens, history commences [*anfangen*].¹⁴

While Heidegger continues to stress the connection between the three terms, we can begin to see here the difference between *Beginn* and *Anfang*. *Beginn* has the sense of the place from which something starts, and as such can be left behind. With an inception, *Anfang*, something originates and as an occurrence completes itself only at its end.¹⁵ In saying this Heidegger is surely not suggesting that there is a teleological component in this kind of occurrence; rather, he is pointing to what is essentially configured by an initiating, founding event. *Anfang* is an inception in the sense of *incipere* as to take in hand, to seize. *Anfang* is that which seizes and takes hold first, not unlike what happens in *thaumazein*, wonder, which Plato tells us is the *arche* of philosophizing.¹⁶ *Anfang* thus conveys in a way that *Beginn* does not, the character of an address; i.e., its character is that of an initiating claim to which one responds, taking hold of one, as if captured by it. As such it is not that which has started and is left behind as something finished, but that which, in being unfinished, comes toward one. In belonging to Western history we are captured by that founding event of Western history that has issued in the

technological and globalized life we currently inhabit. To add then the third term, the initiating event is only understandable in relation to *Ursprung* as the event proper. In the “Origin of the Work of Art, Heidegger writes: “Art lets truth originate [*entspringen*].... To originate something by a leap, to bring something into its being from out of the source of its nature in a founding leap—this what the word origin means.”(The Origin of the Work of Art: 77-8.) In originating, something rises up and is brought into being, and for Heidegger presencing itself is to be understood from this sense of the originary.

Let us return to our question: What does it mean to belong to the inception of our history? In relation to the *inceptive* we can now say that it means to be seized by an event of appropriation (*Ereignis*) in which being is given to us and enables our being to become what it is. It is to be in relation to what being initiates and what generates thereby historical destiny (*Geschick*). To relate this to our translation of Heraclitus’s saying: in the inception of history something has been sent our way, and it is in relation to this sending (*Schickung*) that we have our place in life. But relating to this sending is more than hearing a message, as Heidegger seems to be announcing at the outset of the key passage from *Basic Concepts*, for according to Heidegger, the source of the sending is constituted by a certain reserve, a certain holding back. “To hold back,” Heidegger tells us, “is in Greek *epokhē*,” and accordingly the destiny of being can be described in relation to epochs in which the original sending of being is “more and more obscured in different ways.”¹⁷ What is being described here is the essential forgetting that characterizes the history of metaphysics in relation to which, for philosophy at least, a recollection in metaphysics becomes necessary. Such a recollection thinks history as the arrival of truth’s essence, i.e., the revealing/concealing that Heidegger thematizes in relation to *aletheia*. Hearing the message will thus require a specific task for contemporary philosophy. It is no longer a task of taking hold of the givenness of things in which beings are gathered together in a definite manner but one of thinking the arriving from and departing into a hidden being through a destructuring of epochs. Despite its speculative and grand narrative overtones, the task of thinking is an urgent one for Heidegger precisely because, as we have already noted, “the inability of human beings to see themselves

corresponds to the self-concealing of the lighting of being.”¹⁸ And in relation to this task destiny is not at all the outcome of an inevitable course of events; it is rather something of the opposite, a contingency, since we can respond differently to the opening of human destiny.¹⁹ This is just what Heidegger puts in play in what he calls inceptive thinking, namely, the preparatory thinking for another beginning beyond the first beginning which occurred in Greek philosophy that would initiate another history.

To belong to the inception of our history, then, is not a matter of a passivity in which we simply take over a heritage. It is rather a matter of being set within the historical as the happening itself in relation to which “we have to be concerned with the meaning, the possible standards, the necessary goals, the ineluctable powers, and that from which all human happenings begin [*anheben*].”²⁰ If these goals and powers came to pass long ago, they still await the liberation of their influence. And so Heidegger contends that what is most futural is the great inception as the hidden destiny of all inceptions. But herein lies the problem of human living that we have already alluded to: the hidden destiny of all inceptions is forced aside, if not refuted, by “what they themselves begin and by what follows them.” (*The Basic Questions of Philosophy*: 38). For Heidegger, this means that “the customariness of that which then becomes accustomed becomes master over that which is always uncustomary in the inception. Therefore, in order to rescue the inception, and consequently the future as well, from time to time a breaking of the mastery of the customary and the all too accustomed is needed. The overthrowing of the customary is the genuine relation to inception.” (Ibid) In his 1937-38 lecture course from which this passage is taken, *The Basic Questions of Philosophy*, Heidegger continues his remarks using the language of revolution, contrasting it with the conservative in which there is a holding onto what began as a consequence of the inception. In this context, the ethics of history, we might say, is one that is concerned with a certain renewal. And in this context we should see that what Heidegger is suggesting here mirrors Hegel’s analysis of positivity. Just as Hegel sees the necessity of a purging of the dead elements of the tradition or for the sake of living spirit and its truth, for Heidegger too, there is an overturning of the customary for the

sake of a different kind of living spirit. But what exactly this renewal entails beyond the overthrowing of the customary is not yet fully clear. What is clear is that for Heidegger it will affect our place in life. In the first draft of this 1937-38 lecture course Heidegger writes: “The determination of the essence of truth is accompanied by a necessary transformation of the human.... This transformation signifies the dislocation of humanity out of its previous home into the ground of its essence in order for the human to become the founder and the preserver of the truth of being.”(Ibid: 181)

If we ask ourselves now where we stand with respect to the further determination of the saying of Heraclitus that in our latest translation reads “in humankind’s place in life there is the elemental power of destining,” we see that we have for the most part really captured only half of the translation. What we have captured is the specific determination of *ēthos*, as the abode of the human, as being-in-relation to history as happening (*Geschehen*) from the event of being. Without explicitly identifying it as such, we have been describing at the same time what Heidegger means by original ethics.²¹ As noted at the outset, this ethics has little to do with what we mean by ethics today. An original ethics does not offer guidelines for acting in everyday situations, and in fact it shuns the realm of valuing insofar as valuing has come to mean nothing more than an estimating from subjectivity. And this means for the ethics of history that we are not concerned with what in another context deserves the most serious attention, namely, a historiography of poverty or injustice, or any other ethical history organized around a value of the present. But at the same time, what is meant by the ethics of history cannot be without significance for the way in which the determination of our living gets worked out in relation to its aspirations. What the ethics of history must ultimately capture, if not the idea of an original ethics as such, then is certainly one of its conclusions, namely, that ethical life is inseparable from “our relation to both time and history.”(Hermeneutics as Original Ethics: 42) Heidegger seems to bring us closer to what needs to be captured from the way in which destining, and with it the second half of our translation, is to be understood.

To pursue this and at the same time to begin to bring the entire analysis together, we need to see precisely what it means with respect to history to speak of destining and not destiny. Minimally, it would seem to convert destiny as allotment and order in life to that of an “ever moving order of presencing-absencing.” (*Heidegger on Being and Acting*: 271) But it is precisely here that Reiner Schürmann warns us we must be most careful in reading Heidegger. The boundary of the last epoch of metaphysics should not be seen as an opening of a place or site where an idea of humanity, thought in relation to the crisis of the current epoch, is restored. Such a view would amount to, in Heidegger’s words, “chasing after the future so as to work out a picture of it through calculation in order to extend what is present and half-thought into what, now veiled, is yet to come.”²² Such chasing would still move within the prevailing attitude belonging to technological, calculating representation. No historiographical representation of history as happening “ever brings us into the proper relation to destining.” If the efficacy of a beginning inception remains in force for philosophy and for our living, this truth cannot be measured by any history or historical thinking.²³ Any talk of a renewal amounts to, again in Schürmann’s words, “a disseminating crisis.” Minimally then, we can say that in destining we remain in relation to what comes first, and only in this engagement where we conduct ourselves according to the truth of being is there the “to come” that will transform history. Now, while it would be possible for us to continue to follow Heidegger in this matter of what is first, for the sake of the very idea of the ethics of history presented here, I want to pursue this still open issue of destiny and history through the interpretive extension of Heidegger’s thinking undertaken by Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben.

Nancy, for his part, interprets destining, which for him still holds to the “logic” of *Ereignis*, as finitude. Here finitude is defined not in opposition to the infinite as simple limit, but in relation to the non-appearing of being itself; i.e., finitude means “we are infinitely finite, infinitely exposed to our existence as a non-essence.” We are, in other words, infinitely exposed to the otherness of our own being. We begin and end “without having a beginning and an end that is ours.” (*The Birth to Presence*: 155) Finitude is thus a lack of accomplishment of an

essence of existence, or better, it is the emptying out of essence (Ibid: 158). To say this yet one other way, existence is simply abandoned to its very positing, constituting the finitude of being. Accordingly, our history can only be finite history—“the becoming present of existence insofar as existence is itself finite.”(Ibid: 163) To make this idea of history clearer Nancy contrasts it with finished history in which history maintains its end. Finished history is thought as a collection that can be collected. But Nancy insists that this idea of history as collecting and collection, a history perhaps where there is the becoming subject of substance, a history that issues in a grand narrative, is exhausted. In contrast to this there is history precisely as history—a finite history that entails the rupturing of history where there is the infinite deferral of any nature.”²⁴ This history as happening is thus history without summation, a history that has not and cannot absolve itself, as Hegel, in principle at least, proposes. And so, for Nancy, finite history is not the accomplishment of essence, but simply an arriving. Destining is destiny without destiny.

But if destiny is simply arriving what significance can this hold for our living? In what sense can we still speak in a credible manner of the ethics of history? To answer this question we need to see precisely what Nancy means when he says that finite history pertains foremost to a history that is “infinitely exposed to its own finite happening as such.”(*The Birth to Presence*: 157) For Nancy it means that the model of historical time is nothing other than an opening of a spacing of time, “the happening of the time of existence” where “we” happens. Finite history, in other words, entails the very notion of “our time.” Our time would have to be some aspect of time without stopping time. It would be a certain suspension of time, an epoch, a spacing where something takes place precisely by being ours. But what is ours is not a collective property “as if first we exist and then we possess a certain time.”(Ibid: 151) Rather, it is our being in common, which Nancy thinks precisely as exposure. Our time as the happening of history becomes the time in which being-in-common happens, and finite history is the becoming present of existence as finite: “History is the proper exposition of existence.”(Ibid: 161)

Now, Nancy will say this in yet another way. Nancy calls this being-in-common, this exposition of existence, sharing (*partage*). The word sharing means first of all to divide something up; it is an act of division. But sharing also means to take part in something. Taken together sharing names community, not as a common being, but as a relating in which there is exposure to others. Hopefully without appearing forced, with Nancy we are translating the apportionment that is destiny not as that which comes from the outside, but as that which has entered into the very fabric of existence. If the *daimōn* is not an unknown god, but rather the apportionment given to human life, then here the *daimonic* is “the spacing and distancing that opens up world.”²⁵ Thus Nancy will translate the “decision” that becomes our time as a decision to enunciate our “we”—a decision “about if and how we allow our otherness to exist.” We have to decide to make history, “which is to expose ourselves to the non-presence of our present, and to its coming.” (*The Birth to Presence*: 166) And in this exposing is the conduct toward which thinking strives, a conducting “in such a way as to take the measure of the incomprehensible interval between every ‘thinking’ (idea, representation, etc.) and the fundamental action through which it makes itself think.”²⁶ Accordingly, with Nancy’s interpretive extension of Heidegger’s thinking we have before us another possible translation of Heraclitus’s saying *ēthos anthrōpōi daimōn*. The saying can now read: in being infinitely exposed to our own finite happening, there is sharing (i.e., allotment, portioning out).

Let me turn now to Agamben. Agamben’s translation of destining draws us into an even greater analysis to which I may be unable to do justice here. To begin, it is interesting to see in an analogous way to Nancy, how Agamben characterizes “our time.” In a small essay from 2006, Agamben asks about what it means to be a contemporary. Citing Nietzsche’s “Untimely Meditations” Agamben notes how Nietzsche attempts to situate his own contemporariness with respect to the present by being out of joint. The true contemporary is one who neither coincides with nor simply placates oneself to the demands of the current times. But it is just because of this that the true contemporary is best at grasping his or her own time. The contemporary is in a relationship with his or her own time precisely by

being able to keep a distance from it. But how is such distancing and thus seeing possible? It cannot be a matter of simple reflection for the question would remain as to how, in the reflection, one could see differently. Agamben claims that what the contemporary sees is not some other time that is then contrasted with the contemporary times, but rather, in language reminiscent of Heidegger's description of the being event in the "Anaximander Fragment" essay, the very darkness rather than the light of one's own time. Every time, i.e., every epoch, holds obscurity, and the contemporary is one who knows how to see this obscurity.²⁷ Agamben's description of seeing this darkness suggests something of the impossible and should remind us of Heidegger's question concerning where we belong (and thus to our place in life) in relation to the truth of being. In the darkness of the sky, Agamben notes, what we perceive is actually the light that cannot reach us "since the galaxies from which the light originates moves away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light." (What is the Contemporary: 46) And so the contemporary who fixes his or her gaze on the darkness of the epoch is attempting to perceive, in that darkness, a light "that infinitely distances itself from us, yet is voyaging toward us. Our time is, in fact, most distant, it cannot in any way reach us. And so, for Agamben: "Contemporariness inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic. Only those who perceive the indices and the signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary." (Ibid: 50) Agamben's "archaic" functions in a way similar to Heidegger's inception. It is, in Agamben's words, that which is "contemporary with historical becoming and does not cease to operate with it." (Ibid) "The present [or what we can call the proper dwelling place of humanity] is thus nothing other than this un-lived element in everything that is lived," and so the contemporary is one who returns to a present where we have never been (Ibid: 51).

This peculiar way of accustoming oneself to "our time" reflects Agamben's understanding of our historical being in general, which approximates that of Heidegger being discussed here. Agamben reads Heidegger to be saying with respect to *Ereignis* that it is a movement of concealment without anything being hidden or anything hiding. Accordingly, what is at issue in the event is destiny without destiny,

and with it the abandonment of the human to itself. Now, according to Agamben—and let me read this sentence carefully—“this abandonment of the self to itself is precisely what destines humankind to tradition and to history, remaining concealed, the ungrounded at the ground of every ground, the nameless that, as unsaid and untransmissible, transmits itself in every name and every historical transmission.”²⁸ For Agamben the question then becomes one of seeing how this ungrounded foundation is actually the taking place of language as the event of speech. It is not that Heidegger does not himself take up this question. Of course he regards the experience of language to be precisely that of saying (*Sage*) coming to speech, i.e., of the experience of the difference between language and speech. But for Agamben this is not an experience that I have been called to by a voice (as in the voice of conscience). Agamben calls his version of this transmitting of the untransmissible in relation to the being of the human, as the taking place of language, the experience of infancy.

So, what is infancy? For Agamben infancy frames the character of the potentiality of language that, in turn, will describe in yet another way the *ēthos* of the human. His use of the word suggests that he wants to make a reference to the child, and indeed this is so with an important qualification. What is distinctive of the condition of the child is being without language while having the potentiality of language, and thus the ability to grow up in a language. Beginning with the condition of childhood there is a movement—one we associate with chronological development—in which language is acquired as an actualization of a potential. Now the qualification. Agamben does want to think of infancy in this way, but not literally, as if our relation to infancy is only in this chronological development. Infancy means then first of all that we are *not* simply the animal with language, as Aristotle states in what is now the classical definition of the human, but the animal deprived of language. And to further invert this classical distinction, Agamben claims that it is the non-human animal that actually is the one by nature with language. To be more precise, the animal with its voice, its *phone*, is one with its language. With its voice the animal communicates immediately without signs, whereas the human animal does not have language in this natural way. The human animal is at first only capable of speech, and thus must in some

sense acquire it, receive it, as if it comes from the outside.

Accordingly—and this is the second point—what infancy means more precisely is to register on an ontological level as an experience of speechlessness—an experience prior to saying “I” and with it the very idea of subjectivity. In speaking the human subject emerges from infancy, which now functions as the negative ground of our being, as the very potentiality of language. The origin in relation to which we have our place in life lies here. It is an origin that we can never grasp. It is that in relation to which we remain divided for it is “the place where one can never really be from the beginning.”²⁹ And thus here too the origin is not a first cause but that which moves between being first and the present moment, transforming pure language into speech. In this mediation, which now sets out the difference between language and speech and which we can say along with Agamben is the *ēthos* of our humanity, is history. To quote Agamben: “the human is nothing other than this passage from pure language to discourse, and this transition, this instant, is history.” (Agamben, *Infancy and History*: 56)

From this account of the *ēthos* of our humanity Agamben seems to give us a modern version of Sophocles’ description of the human animal. Indeed, it is the case that here too the human is the one who is not helpless before its future, but also here we find the human whose destiny is one with “its praxis and its history”—a self-giving of a foundation. And with this account we have yet another possible translation of Heraclitus’s saying. For Agamben, our habitual dwelling place is nothing other than that of the *daimōnic* as, recalling from its verbal form, what lacerates and divides. The *daimōn* is first the one who cuts and divides, for “only insofar as it is what divides can the *daimōn* also be what assigns a fate and what destines.” (*Potentialities*: 118) A *daimōnic* scission thus threatens the human in its very *ēthos*. Our place in life can never be grasped without receiving a laceration. Thus as Agamben himself translates the saying: “for man, *ēthos*, the dwelling in the ‘self’ that is what is most proper and habitual for him, is what lacerates and divides, the principle and place of a fracture.” (Ibid) Corresponding to this, the activities of philosophy and our living must have their beginnings in marvel and wonder. For Agamben, the philosopher can only ever return to where language has

already happened. He or she must be at home in the marvel and the division. But if the return is the supreme problem for the philosopher, Agamben asks what is the “there” to which he or she must, in the end, return? What if, Agamben asks, the place to which we return is simply the trite words that we have? And, if so, perhaps we could also translate Heraclitus’s saying in a final way: “(in) the haunt of the human <history, language, transmission> is the division and the force that drives us forward.

Notes:

1. See Dennis J. Schmidt, “Hermeneutics as Original Ethics,” in *Difficulties of Ethical Life*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Dennis J. Schmidt (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 35-47.

2. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, revised edition, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 256-58.

3. See Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 180-181.

4. “Only against death can he call on no means of escape; but escape from hopeless diseases he has found in the depths of his mind. With some sort of cunning, inventive beyond all expectation he reaches something evil, and sometimes good.” Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 360-364.

5. See William J. Richardson, “Heidegger’s Fall,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 69, 2 (Spring 1995), 229-253.

6. It would be easy at this point to offer the case of Heidegger himself as an illustration of this falling into error. About this so much has been written. See especially, William J. Richardson, “Heidegger’s Fall,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 69, 2 (Spring 1995), 229-253.

7. Heidegger, “The Anaximander Fragment,” *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 26.

8. Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, trans. Gary Aylesworth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17.

9. To list the texts where Heidegger deals with the issue of origination would be to catalogue most of Heidegger’s lectures and writings from 1935

through 1946. The issue is especially prominent in *Heraklit* (Band 55), *Beiträge* (Band 65) and *Über den Anfang* (Band 70).

10. Heidegger, "Origin of the work of Art, First Version" in *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. Günter Figal, trans. Jerome Veith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 149. I have modified the translation for a consistency to be explained below. English translations of Heidegger's works will add confusion to this complication by translating *Anfang* as beginning, as we see here and in Hofstadter's translation of the original published version of the "Origin of the Work of Art." Heidegger's use of these three terms is worked out in a masterful way by Reiner Schürmann, whose translation of the terms I am following here. See Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros in collaboration with the author (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), Part Three.

11. Heidegger, *Heraklit*, Gesamtausgabe Band 55 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1987), 3-4.

12. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1012b34-1013a23.

13. For Aristotle all causes are principles. See *Metaphysics*, 1013a17. Aristotle will also identify the *arche* with the *telos* since without the end in the beginning there can be no becoming. Heidegger, of course, does not regard being teleologically, and yet the relation stands for Heidegger. See Heidegger's remark in "The Origin of the Work of Art": "A genuine inception [*Anfang*], as a leap, is always a head start, in which everything to come is already leaped over, even if as something disguised. The inception already contains the end latent within itself." Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1972), 63; English translation by Albert Hofstadter, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 76.

14. "Wie jeder Ursprung seinen Anfang hat, so jeder Anfang seinen Beginn. Das is Jenes, wobei als einem Vorgefundenen der immer plötzliche Anfang anhebt. Dass der Beginn gerade dieser oder jener ist, dazu gehört ein Anlass. Und der Anlass ist immer ein Zufall, zufällig nämlich im Lichte und im aufbrechenden Bereich des Anfangs als des Sprunges eines Ursprungs, d.h. eines solchen, worin die Wahrheit als Offenheit des Seienden entspringt. Wo dieses geschieht, fängt geschieht an." Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, Erse Ausarbeitung," *Heidegger Studies* 5 (1989), 21.

15. See Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen »Germanien« und »Der Rhein«*, Gesamtausgabe 39 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980), 3.

16. See *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 122.

17. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambauch (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 9.

18. Heidegger, "The Anaximander Fragment," *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 26.

19. To be precise, Heidegger does say that the sequence of epochs is not accidental. The key passage reads: "The sequence of epochs in the destiny of being is not accidental, nor can it be calculated as necessary. Still, what is appropriate shows itself in the destiny, what is appropriate shows itself in the belonging together of the epochs." *On Time and Being*, 9.

20. Heidegger, *The Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected 'Problems' of 'Logic'*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 38.

21. "If the name of 'ethics', in keeping with the basic meaning of the word *ēthos*, should now say that 'ethics' ponders the abode of man, then that thinking which thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of man, as one who ek-sists, is in itself the original ethics." "Letter on Humanism," 258.

22. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 48.

23. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 147.

24. Nancy, *On the Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 79.

25. See Walter Brogan, "The Parting of Being" On Creation and sharing in Nancy's Political Ontology," *Research in Phenomenology* 40, 3 (2010): 299.

26. Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford university Press, 2003), 190.

27. Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary," *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stephen Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University press, 2009), 44.

28. Agamben, *Potentialities*, trans. David Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 131.

29. Agamben, *Language and Death*, trans. Karen Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 93.