# *Introduction*
## *Ethics and Ontology*

"You don't intend to sing the praises of this book-making epidemic, do you?" So runs one of several questions raised by a fictional critic of eighteenth-century culture in a playful set of dialogues written in 1798 by the German philosophical poet Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg. Hardenberg's question, situated in a conversation that includes a defense of what was already becoming a publishing industry, anticipates a now commonplace, conservative uneasiness facing the proliferation of books, and books about books: the shadow of the past is too long, the catalog of worthwhile tomes already too large, and time too short to waste on the day's literary produce. Even the defender in the *Dialogues* of the unintended fruit of the revolution initiated by Gutenberg admits that important choices need to be made regarding what to read and what, just as importantly, to write about.

Why, then, devote time and energy to the work of Martin Heidegger, a thinker whose philosophical significance remains debatable, and whose political views during the period of National Socialism are detestable? If time is always *running out*, as Heidegger himself insists against the spurious sense we sometimes have of having all the time in the world, we would, perhaps, do better to come to grips with intellectual labor of less contestable philosophical value, and without any of the disturbing political affiliations that mar Heidegger's life and thought, and (for some) cast doubt upon his work as a whole, beyond the egregious political engagements and disturbing contaminations of the 1930s.

More troubling still: Why bother to take up a book on early Heidegger's contribution to *ethics*?[1] It is one thing to derive anti-Cartesian arguments

[1] There are still only a few book-length studies of Heidegger's contribution to ethics available in English, including Joanna Hodge's *Heidegger and Ethics*, Lawrence Vogel's *The Fragile We: Ethical Implications of Heidegger's "Being and Time,"* and Frederick Olafson's *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics: A Study of Mitsein*. Although not directly concerned with ethics, mention should also be made of Scott M. Campbell's volume on *The Early Heidegger's Philosophy of Life: Facticity, Being, and*

from *Sein und Zeit*, and to argue that what Heidegger means by "being" is just the background intelligibility of our everyday social practices,[2] or to take seriously early Heidegger's contribution to theories of judgment and truth,[3] or to see in Heidegger a Teutonic pragmatist.[4] It is something else to stress Heidegger's importance as a serious moral philosopher and to construe the path that leads to *Sein und Zeit* as the development of a compelling moral ontology and ethical anthropology. And surely we can dismiss without lengthy argument the ethical vision of a philosopher who defended his commitment to National Socialism by appealing to the charm of Hitler's hands,[5] scorned enlightenment and liberal democratic practices and institutions, and officially broke with the philosophical tradition, in the name of the elusive mystery of *Seyn*.

In what follows, I hope to show, against the grain, that the path leading to the existential analytic of *Sein und Zeit* is pervaded by concerns that can plausibly be addressed in ethical terms, broadly construed. And I hope to show that Heidegger's contribution in ontological categories to what goes by the name of "ethics" deserves to be taken seriously by anyone interested today in normative questions and questions about the status of normativity as such.[6]

## Ethics, Care, Authenticity

There are several good reasons to think that Heidegger is not interested in the issues that underwrite the discipline of moral philosophy or ethics. Heidegger never places at the center of his thought the question posed by Socrates in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*: How should one live?[7] Even when his work leans noticeably toward an ethic of spiritual renewal and self-transformation in lecture courses delivered in Freiburg between 1919 and 1923, or displays an interest in what we might call practical problems, as in the Aristotle courses held in Marburg, the question

*Language* and Irene McMullin's exemplary *Time and the Shared World: Heidegger on Social Relations*. Sonia Sikka's *Heidegger, Morality and Politics* appeared in December 2017, too late for me to have benefited from it at any step in the development of the current project.

[2] This is the thesis of Dreyfus' commentary on the first division of *Sein und Zeit*, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time," Division I*.

[3] See Wayne Martin's *Theories of Judgment* and Daniel Dahlstrom's *Heidegger's Concept of Truth*.

[4] See Okrent's *Heidegger's Pragmatism*.

[5] Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*, 24.

[6] Heidegger's potential contribution to discussions about the normativity of human life, or Dasein, is central to the ongoing work of Steven Crowell and, more recently, of Sacha Golob's informative *Heidegger on Concepts, Freedom, and Normativity*.

[7] See, for instance, *Gorgias*, 500b–c.

concerning the good life seems to stand on the margins of Heidegger's expanding list of fundamental questions. Nowhere does Heidegger defend a moral imperative or justify a list of duties and obligations or rework the principle of utility as the criterion of moral deliberation. (When Mill comes up in the winter semester of 1925–6, it is his logic that matters.) Hegel's defense of *Sittlichkeit* in the third part of the *Philosophy of Right*, a fruitful source of more recent communitarian views on the complex social weave of moral and political life, appears to have made no deep and lasting impression on Heidegger during the phenomenological decade (1919–29). The early works are silent on questions of social justice and the nature, sources, and limits of human rights. With the important exception of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Kant's conceptions of respect and the dignity of the person in the *Groundwork* and second *Critique*, Heidegger rarely engages with the classic texts of our moral tradition with a clearly defined ethical agenda. When he does address the Stagirite's account of the good life, he appears to give the *Nicomachean Ethics* an ontological make-over.[8] When he takes up Kant's conception of the human being as an end in itself, in an important course of lectures on logic or truth (Winter Semester [hereafter, WS] 1925–6), he interprets it as a distorted version of his own apparently morally neutral thesis that Dasein's being is to be defined as care: the moral implications of Kant's ontological distinction between persons and things remain largely unexplored.

If one sets up any of these projects as defining preoccupations of moral philosophy or ethics, it can be difficult to see anything ethically salient in *Sein und Zeit* and the surrounding lecture courses.

There is, to be sure, widespread agreement that the ideal of *Eigentlichkeit* in *Sein und Zeit* is fraught with normative weight, even if Heidegger is eager to frame basic questions of moral philosophy in more neutral, ontological terms.[9] Mark Wrathall, to take one recent example, speaks of Heidegger's "authenticity thesis" as "a normative claim about an ideal form of action," as a claim about how we *ought* to be or to behave and to understand ourselves in practical life.[10] And it has become increasingly common to read Heidegger's philosophy of authenticity as a normative

[8] See, for instance, Taminiaux's essays on Heidegger and Aristotle in *The Thracian Maid*. The texts in question include a course of lectures on the basic concepts of Aristotelian philosophy (SS 1924) and the material devoted to Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in a course on Plato's *Sophist* (WS 1924/5).

[9] See, for instance, Iain Thomson's helpful "Heidegger's Perfectionist Philosophy of Education in *Being and Time*" in *Continental Philosophy Review*.

[10] "Autonomy, Authenticity, and the Self" in *Heidegger, Authenticity and the Self*, 193.

account of human responsibility, moral or otherwise.[11] Not as a bare fact about us (in Wrathall's reading, that falls to Heidegger's account of autonomy, which we cannot entirely avoid), but as something we are called upon to assume, presumably because it would be *better* to act in certain ways. The source of the claim the "ideal form of action" ostensibly makes upon us is obscure, but its force in Heidegger's work is hard to deny.

Heidegger's early ontology appears to have been grafted onto a vision of what the philosopher of being takes to be a life lived *well*. Decisiveness, courage in the face of death, and the readiness to be moved by the voice of conscience seem like moral phenomena, even if the philosophical advantage of becoming authentic is just to be in a better position to discern ontological differences and to make ontological pronouncements about space, time, history, the wholeness of Dasein, and the like.[12] It is hard to read the descriptions of *das Man* in the first division of *Sein und Zeit* – curious to a fault, chattering idly, indifferent to what truly matters and insensitive to important distinctions, concerned about social status, absorbed in the petty details of a dislocated present, and ready to conform to unquestioned norms and public standards – without hearing ethical undertones beneath what appear to be neutral structural claims about the nature of the public sphere and the social structure of normativity.

How to formulate the ethical requirement, what exactly becoming authentic demands of a social agent, what sort of realignment in social space it requires, and what the consequences of failure are, are matters of controversy. But Heidegger is clearly not cataloguing the furniture of the world and explaining what there is, from a neutral point of view, lacking normative presuppositions and demands of an ethical sort.[13] If this turns out to be what it means to do ontology, then it would be closer to the truth to say that Heidegger's work offers no interesting contributions to the discipline of ontology. If we think of ontology as an adequate theory of being and its modes, then the author of *Being and Time* seems to be suggesting, in an unexpected inversion, that the sort of ontology you do, or how you think about the modal inflection of being, depends upon the sort

[11] See also Denis McManus's chapter in *Heidegger, Authenticity and the Self* on "Anxiety, Choice and Responsibility in Heidegger's Account of Authenticity."

[12] For a useful account of the methodological role played by authenticity in *Being and Time*, see Charles Guignon's "Authenticity and the Question of Being" in *Heidegger, Authenticity and the Self*.

[13] Robert Brandom associates the task of cataloguing what there is in the world with Heidegger's conception of "vulgar ontology" in "Heidegger's Categories in *Sein und Zeit*" in *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, 299.

of person you aspire to be; and, further, that some varieties of ontology will be deficient because the *lives* that underwrite the theories are spurious or somehow lacking. *Jemeinigkeit* (the fact that life is always owned), a crucial category in *Sein und Zeit* and the early lecture courses, is not merely a neutral structure of Dasein's being, but a polemical concept, directed against more impersonal ways of living. The problem with Descartes's conception of the *ego cogito* as the first philosophical truth, and Husserl's more recent variation on the theme of absolute subjectivity and its certainty, is not merely theoretical, but is grounded in what Heidegger considers an impoverished vision of what human life and its world should be allowed to be. As Heidegger insists throughout the period this study covers (1919–27), the Cartesian quest for certainty in its many guises is best understood as a motivated flight from being in uncertainties and mysteries. Our prevailing ideas of what exists and how to interpret what exists are in contention in early Heidegger because certain ways of life and the ends they embody are in question. Heidegger's various attacks on extant ontology are in some measure *ad hominem*, and rooted in a normative ideal that underwrites the abstract ontological pronouncements.

This is, I hope, a promising start in the defense of the ethical significance of the project that came to public expression in 1927 in *Being and Time*. We shall develop this point in some detail in the opening chapter below. But doubts about the *moral* worth of Heidegger's account of authenticity are likely to persist. If, for instance, morality involves certain duties to behave in certain ways, then Heidegger's account of authentic human existence does not seem to have much in common with moral experience, unless, as Golob notes, we can be said to have a duty to become authentic.[14] I don't believe that Heidegger thinks we have a duty or an obligation to own up. Authenticity places certain demands upon the agent, but there seems to be nothing like a categorical imperative (anchored, as Kant argues, in the very structure of finite rational agency as such) to live more transparently. And as we shall see below in the discussion of things and persons, the very capacity to be moved by moral requirements is not entirely up to us, at least not for Heidegger. One can say, at best, that owning up to the human condition is somehow more satisfying than failing to do so; but that still leaves the individual free to ignore the demand. There may be culpability in this, but it does not appear to resemble the sort of *moral* culpability at stake in, e.g., Kantian ethics. That may not prove fatal to the very idea of moral ontology (which,

[14] *Heidegger on Concepts, Freedom and Normativity*, 213.

as we shall soon see, embraces and elucidates a wide array of ethical phenomena, grounded in care), but it does place certain limits on what can be said on its behalf.

But there are other problems as well, at least on the surface. In some ears, Heidegger's various descriptions of the normative (or "ontic") ideal that makes his own fundamental ontology possible will strike a note of selfishness and self-absorption or, if it demands total detachment from what *we* think and do, impossible in principle (call this the Hegelian objection). To someone sympathetic to Russell's *The Conquest of Happiness*, the call might seem to subvert the proper order of the happy human life, where the task is precisely to forget yourself and "to center [your] attention increasingly on external objects: the state of the world, various branches of knowledge, individuals for whom [one feels] affection."[15] In the minds of still others, the jargon of authenticity is the sophisticated philosophical expression of a rebellious commonplace, with more distant (and richer) historical roots in the individualism we associate with the early modern era.[16] From this point of view, Heidegger might appear to have more in common with Descartes than is usually thought, despite his own self-proclaimed anti-Cartesian aspirations.[17]

We have, therefore, several questions to ask: What are we prepared to embrace under the umbrella of ethical or moral reflection and its objects? What does it mean to aspire after *Eigentlichkeit*? And can we locate points of contact between what we acknowledge as a moral or ethical concern and the aspirations of *Eigentlichkeit*? We may find points of convergence in the idea of what it would be good to be, not as a displacement of what it would be good or right to do, but as another register of the moral life.

We should probably be as suspicious as Heidegger was when it comes to saying something about *the* essence of ethical concern. Iris Murdoch voices a difficulty we ought to take seriously: "It is a peculiarity of ethics that the initial segregation of the items to be studied is less easy than in other branches of philosophy."[18] An important feature of our intellectual landscape is our lack of clarity about what ethics and ethical concern are

[15] *The Conquest of Happiness*, 18.
[16] Benjamin Crowe situates Heidegger's conception of authenticity within the context of romantic individualism in the fifth chapter of his *Heidegger's Religious Origins*.
[17] See, inter alia, Marion's *Reduction and Givenness* and several essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. Jacques Taminiaux argues at some length along these lines in *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology*. Matthew Shockey offers perhaps the most compelling case for a Cartesian line of thought in early Heidegger in "Heidegger's Descartes and Heidegger's Cartesianism" (*European Journal of Philosophy*).
[18] "Vision and Choice in Morality" in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 76.

about in the first place, and how far philosophy is able to ground an ethical vision of the world.

Our burden might seem lightened by important work on the difference between moral concerns and ethical matters, where the latter is said to consider not, or not exclusively, what we ought to do (what actions we have certain duties to perform) but what sort of life is best.[19] But taking seriously the broader claims and questions of ethical life has its own difficulties. If Kant and the Kantians limit themselves to the domain of moral obligation, the ethicist has to consider a wide range of values and concerns, including (perhaps in a different key) what the moralist analyzes; and she has to take more seriously the potential conflicts between areas of concern and the difficulty of assigning relative weight to what is discovered to be important in our various pursuits of human flourishing. Here it is not only a matter of what choices are morally required or permitted; we are equally interested in what form of life best satisfies whatever human strivings we take to be important, and these ambitions and their relative worth are difficult to pin down. Something like this broadening of concern is needed to appreciate what Heidegger is up to in *Sein und Zeit* and the early lecture courses and essays.

In several essays, Harry Frankfurt paints a compelling picture of *care* as the basic concern of a certain style of ethical reflection; and I would like to take this as my point of departure here, partly because Frankfurt, like Murdoch and Williams and others, situates moral concerns in a larger space of human interest (where the moral is often awarded second-place), in part because he offers a convenient summary of an important strand in the fabric of recent moral philosophy. But Frankfurt is also attuned to the *reflective* reach of our concerns and, most importantly, *Sorgen* stands at the center of Heidegger's view of being human and having world. Because Heidegger's ontology includes an account of what it is properly to care and what sorts of matters ought to matter, it is possible to read *Sein und Zeit* and related documents from the early period as contributions to ethics.[20] So why place concepts of caring, concern, importance, and mattering at the heart of ethics?

We ought to begin with care because "the fact that we do actually care about various things is of fundamental significance to the character of

[19] See Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness*.

[20] For Frankfurt on the importance of moral considerations and contexts in which they are less authoritative, see *The Reasons of Love*, 6ff. "Morality," Frankfurt writes, "can provide at most only a severely limited and insufficient answer to the question how a person should live."

human life."[21] It is a fundamental fact about us that we are creatures for whom things matter. We do not first encounter mere objects to be observed, classified, and explained, but things to be used and things of pressing concern (*pragmata*). It calls for no sophisticated piece of reasoning to conclude that things of use serve because they play a role in what we take to be worthwhile. Whatever enters into the context of our engagement plays whatever role it does in light of the point of what we take ourselves to be about. And care can be said to be fundamental in the sense that it cannot be derived from something more basic. Here we reach something like what the ancients called an *archê*, at once a first principle and a chronological beginning. The interest we take in reason, the desire to understand the cosmos, the affection between parents and children and among siblings, the aspirations of a novelist – these things, however diverse, are unthinkable in the absence of care. Their very quality, or being, is shaped and determined by the fact that we care about them. If we are incapable of caring, if we remain truly apathetic, we will be unmoved by the claim of reason, indifferent to the cosmos of ideas, unconcerned about what others call "loved ones," and unreachable by moral or ethical considerations: "What is *not* possible is for a person who does not already care about *something* to discover reasons for caring about anything."[22] For Frankfurt and, I suggest, for Heidegger as well, caring is the original source of reasons.[23] As Kant argues in his work on conscience and the "fact of reason" (*Faktum der Vernunft*) in the second *Critique*, you cannot be reasoned into a moral view of the world from the ground up. Moral philosophy has only to make explicit and to clarify what lies in the untutored understanding and moral preoccupation of every human being. Immorality is not ignorance of what we ought to do but an inclined refusal to do it. Someone who, *per impossible*, truly doesn't care about the claim of moral reason cannot be reasoned into taking an interest in a genuinely moral life. She could only feign an interest in appearing moral.

On Heidegger's view (and here we depart from Frankfurt), care grounds even our most trivial activities: an interest in distraction and mere entertainment is conditioned by care as much as our commitments to more serious pursuits in philosophy, science, politics, religion, and the arts. The care-structure of human existence can be ignored (Heidegger seems to think that the philosophical tradition as a whole has failed to acknowledge

[21] *The Reasons of Love*, 16. [22] Ibid., 26.
[23] Steven Crowell develops the connection between care and reason in "Responsibility, Autonomy, Affectivity: A Heideggerian Approach" in *Heidegger, Authenticity and the Self*.

the phenomenon), but it cannot be circumvented. Some of the things we care about may turn out to be unworthy of our concern; but any attempt to argue us out of an ethical stance will have to begin with what we do in fact care about and why. The fact that we care is nothing the ethical thinker, interested in the interest we take in our ethical existence, can afford to ignore; and Heidegger has a rich and compelling account of this fundamental, grounding condition of our engagement with the world, in theoretical and practical life alike.

We should also note that the importance of what we care about and the caring itself constitute whatever identity, moral or otherwise, we can be said to have or to win. "Caring is indispensably foundational as an activity that connects and binds us to ourselves."[24] Or, in one of Heidegger's earliest ways of speaking about the formation of identity, the *Selbstwelt*, the world that forms around an entity able to say "I," is a *Sorgenwelt* (a world of care).[25] The differences between one person and the next, and what makes a difference in our own lives and identities as moral agents, are partly constituted by the different objects of our concern, the intensity and constancy our commitments display, and the *way* we care for those persons and things we find important. Care is at work from the ground up in the formation of human agency and intelligence.

The standpoint of care is, further, large enough to allow us to puzzle over the diverse range of things we might be led to care about, without shuttling ethical inquiry too quickly down one highway at the expense of other, equally important paths. From this vantage point we can weigh, say, the values of the Kantian conception of the moral life against the claims of Aristotelian ethics, ponder the significance of utilitarian principles, reflect upon the worth of certain external goods, like friendship, wealth, and material possessions, and take more seriously the difficulty of living and choosing well. And we will take these questions seriously if Frankfurt is right that "what it is in particular that we care about has a considerable bearing upon the character and the quality of our lives. It makes a great difference that certain things, and not others, are important to us."[26] Getting clear about what ought to be important is hardly a simple affair. And developing the ontological and ethical implications of the point of departure in *Sorgen* would by itself be a significant philosophical achievement.

If Heidegger's ontology belongs to ethics or if ethics becomes an ontological affair, it is because the path to *Sein und Zeit* (and *Sein und*

[24] Ibid., 17. [25] *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, 70–1. [26] Ibid., 17.

*Zeit* itself) is pervaded by an interest in *authentic* care. Throughout the lecture courses and manuscripts I draw from in what follows, we discover various ways of marking the distinction between caring well or poorly, owning up to life and struggling to avoid what life demands. At times *Eigentlichkeit* appears to be the virtue of a solitary hero, detached from the crowd, indifferent to the vagaries of public opinion, disdainful of what we share with others, and unwilling to get situated in relation to a larger space of social concern. But more importantly (and, I think, more plausibly), *Eigentlichkeit* is often portrayed as the proper way to care about our own lives in relation to others and, just as importantly, about the *world* in which it is our shared lot to live. Far from being an isolating experience, authentic care could be said to consolidate an ethical interest in what lies beyond the *solus ipse*. In this light, *Eigentlichkeit* means something like coming to grips with the human condition, being true *not* (or not only) to our solitary selves, but to the sort of being we all have and are (owning up to life, owning up to the human); and this on the grounds that it is possible to evade or avoid something about ourselves, or to close ourselves off to the things of this world and to other persons.[27] Again, this may not add up to a definitive ethical vision of what we ought always to pursue and avoid in the concrete life of our uncertain affairs (and there is good reason to think that Heidegger never intended to offer anything of the sort); but it is, I hope to show, part of an effort to weave ethical concerns into what we think there is in the world of what we care about.

## The Shadow of the Object: Responding to Moral Skepticism

In "Metaphysics and Ethics," Iris Murdoch suggests that the more ancient question "What is goodness?" has been replaced by the question "What is the activity of valuing or commending?"[28] "The philosopher is now to speak no longer of the Good, as something real or transcendent, but to analyse the familiar human activity of endowing things with value."[29] We have a handy and familiar vocabulary of more or less interchangeable terms to name what we do when we experience something important or valuable: we *endow* the world with significance; we *project* meaning onto the world;

[27] I argue for this position, shared by Golob, at some length in Chapter 5: in Golob's words, one of the defining characteristics of authenticity "is that Dasein accurately understands its own nature . . . in a way that reflects facts about Dasein" (*Heidegger on Concepts, Freedom and Normativity*, 214).

[28] This section repeats, with slight modification, a passage of argument in my *Being Here Is Glorious: On Rilke, Poetry, and Philosophy*, pp. 35–7.

[29] *Existentialists and Mystics*, 60.