Introduction

> *Power objected . . . that he was tired of nationality and wanted to be international, like all the great writers. 'They were national first,' Joyce contended, 'and it was the intensity of their own nationalism which made them international in the end . . . I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world.* ***In the particular is contained the universal****.*
> (Ellmann, 1982: 505. Emphasis Added)

I have had several false dawns with this Element. Finding 'a way in' proved challenging, and, for a period of time, I couldn't see clearly where or how I should begin. After all, Heidegger had effectively dismissed ethics as a viable philosophical enterprise, had he not? This appeared to be a prevailing view in the literature, even among those commentators who argued that one could think through some ethical ideas with Heidegger (often 'with' Heidegger but 'against' Heidegger), despite the latter's apparent foreclosure of that domain of questioning. How then could I contribute anything worthwhile? Why write a short Element on Heidegger and ethics if the upshot is that one will be submitting views that are not effectively Heidegger's or a book that is, for the most part, negative, that is, explaining why Heidegger dismisses the very idea of ethics?

There was then, of course, not just the proverbial elephant in the room but a herd of elephants stampeding around the house any time I tried to get some part of the enterprise off the ground. The stampeding registered as a series of loud remonstrations: 'Heidegger was a card-carrying member of the Nazi party!' 'Heidegger was the first Nazi Rector of Freiburg University in 1933!' 'Heidegger's vocal support for Hitler and his foreign policy in the early 1930s was nothing short of repugnant!' 'Heidegger was an antisemite – his private notebooks from the 1930s are teeming with incriminating and definitive evidence!' All of this is true. The file 'against' Heidegger on these issues continues to swell: his remarks on the historylessness and worldlessness of the Jewish people, 'Semitic nomads', what have you; his use of terms like *Verjudung* (Jewification) as he decries, for example, the 'Jewification' of German Universities; his despicable attempt to destroy the career prospects of Eduard Baumgarten, owing (among other things) to Baumgarten's association with 'the Jew Frankel' (but ultimately due to a petty grievance that attests to the vindictiveness of a man possessed of quite an extraordinary capacity for jealousy) – we could chronicle the offences over many, many pages and it would make for damning testimony indeed. There was the further matter of the character of the man. He has been portrayed as a mendacious philanderer and an arrogant, ruthless careerist with very few redeeming qualities.[1] Why on Earth would we

[1] See O'Brien (2015, 2020, 2022).

enlist the work of such a person to discuss ethics? I hope, in the pages that follow, the answer will become clear.[2]

My 'way in', then, as is so often the way with philosophical progress, was a sort of epiphany. I don't mean to suggest a religious experience in any conventional sense, but something closer to the Socratic idea of *anamnesis*, a seeing again of what one already knew but in a new way – a recognition that somehow seems new and familiar at the same time. Years ago, while finishing my doctoral thesis on Heidegger, I had a similar experience during the course of some routine morning tasks at my childhood home in a valley in the West of Ireland. What felt like a minor breakthrough all those years ago involved some sudden clarity concerning time, nothingness, and being in Heidegger. My thrownness and sense of being historically grounded in this particular place – the sounds and scents that drifted up the valley and that seemed to somehow form an invisible chain reaching back to my childhood – opened the door to some of Heidegger's fundamental ideas. It was the gift of my placed thrownness that once again played a pivotal role for this project, as I struggled to come to terms with Heidegger's comments concerning the urgent need to rethink ethics given the threats posed to humanity in the technological age. It also allowed me to get clear on the correctives needed to forestall the problematic ways that Heidegger attempted to mobilise his own thinking in the 1930s.[3] In such a short text, I cannot pretend to have offered something comprehensive or exhaustive. However, I hope at least to have indicated a 'way in' to the question of the relevance of Heidegger's thinking for ethics.[4]

1 The 'Way' In

> *The greatest care must be fostered upon the ethical bond at a time when technological man* [*humanity*]*, delivered over to mass society, can be kept reliably on call only by gathering and ordering all his* [*its*] *plans and activities in a way that corresponds to technology.* (GA9: 353/268)

When hiking through the countryside, according to a well-known anecdote, Heidegger was known to stop at chapels and wayside shrines, dip his finger in the stoup (before making the sign of the cross presumably), and genuflect.

[2] That is not in any way to suggest that I am disavowing my robust criticisms of Heidegger in some of my other work, where I take him to task for his illegitimate attempts to mobilise aspects of his own thought in the service of a despicable political vision.

[3] I elected not to engage directly with these issues in this Element. I have directed readers to my own engagement with these issues as and when they are relevant to the discussion at hand.

[4] I would like to thank Paul Davies, Christos Hadjioannou, Alex Obrigewitsch, Conor Edwards, and Michael Jonik for comments and feedback on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank Cambridge University Press's anonymous reviewer for their generous and constructive feedback.

Often, when I recall this story, I am prompted to reflect on my own childhood. I grew up in a rural, Catholic community in the 1980s in the West of Ireland where such acts would have been commonplace, undertaken as much out of habit as anything else. I am still inclined to quickly make the sign of the cross in certain situations; if I am attending a religious ceremony for a friend or relative in a Catholic church, I normally dip my fingers in the stoup and make the sign quickly upon entering and leaving. It happens almost as a reflex; often I'm already in the midst of the activity or have finished before I begin to wonder as to its legitimacy or significance. After all, I don't actually *mean* to invoke the Christian God; whatever meaning it is imbued with is as much historical and cultural for me as anything else. And yet, it is certainly not an empty gesture.

Sometimes, upon realising what I've done automatically, I begin to think of how the Catholic church was very much a focal point of the local community and how such habits and customs were a part of my daily life. A stream of associated memories often follows: a noisy phalanx of schoolchildren rushing along the footpath to mass in St Peter's Church, Broadford, Co. Clare each morning of Lent – before we run back along the main street, through the village to the school after mass, just in time for roll call. I sometimes recall the nervous anticipation of my first morning as an altar boy, the distinctive odour of the vestry – a musky, aromatic mixture of candle wax, wood polish, and faded incense; clouds of incense smoke belching from the thurible and images of somnolent mourners shuffling behind a coffin out of the church to the appointed slot in the graveyard outside – the pit covered for now but with the tell-tale, horrifying mound of freshly dug Earth heaped beside it; my exhilaration when it was my turn in the rotation to carry the paten during Holy Communion; rapidly intoned Hail Marys and Our Fathers – interweaving lines chanted in lockstep of increasing cadence building to mini crescendos at the wake of a neighbour or relative; images of the Stations of the Cross that fascinated and horrified me as a I sat in a cold pew, in silent turmoil at the depictions of the most gruesome torture on the walls, yet unable somehow to resist fixating on the tormented cruciform figure in the final scenes.

As I walk down a busy street in Brighton, in the south east of England (where I have been living now for some time), surrounded by the colour and spectacle one might associate with a summer afternoon in this part of the world, the glimpse of a hearse slipping by can pull me out of the lively, carnival-like atmosphere and suddenly my mind is flooded with these sights, smells, and sounds of childhood experiences, rituals, and customs. I sometimes find myself muttering half-remembered fragments of prayers under my breath, or various bits of the mass that we recited with the same automaticity as the poems we learned by heart at school, and thinking of how narrowly my horizon hooped

around me during my childhood – the hills around our family home, the valley weaving its verdant way down from the elevated bowl our house is nestled in, the primary school, the shop with petrol pumps across the road from Vaughan's Pub, the dark, dank Post-Office with its high counter and pockmarked sponge for wetting stamps, the hurling pitch, the Dispensary, the church and graveyard, the church bells that sounded out their doleful reminders on the half hour and hour throughout the day, the handball alley, the village hall, the shallow river – wide in places making it easy to ford.[5] These few square miles were the extent of my world for the most part, and there was a mixture of adventure and apprehension any time we ventured beyond those local borders to exotic, far-flung regions where my relatives lived – effectively other parts of the same province in the south west of Ireland. On Sundays, we sometimes rushed out of eleven o'clock mass early (or skipped it altogether – my family were not especially devout) in a frantic dash to make the first point-to-point[6] – the names of each of those point-to-point venues transport me back any time I see them on a signpost or map – the names reel past along with images, sounds, and smells that are often quite vivid. On those Sundays, in the South, it felt as though I was briefly orbiting around a world with its own significance – familiar yet foreign – a place where different co-ordinates dictated movement and understanding. It was not quite *my* home, but one to which I felt some sort of gravitational pull all the same. As time went on, I realised that I belonged to both of these worlds, even if one was more 'home' than the other, until one day I no longer lived in Ireland, and they began to merge into one large 'place' that I called 'home'. I often feel as though these places call to me; they make demands of a sort; they solicit gestures of commitment and allegiance. I feel obliged in certain ways – though it might be difficult to articulate exactly what

[5] Broadford is a compound based on a literal translation of the original Irish name – *Áth* (Ford) *Leathan* (Broad/Wide). Running through the middle of the village is the O'Garney river with a wide, shallow ford 'where people travelling from East Clare were able to cross the O'Garney river on their way through the two passes in the Slieve Bearnagh Mountains before heading Southwards to Limerick or Eastwards to Killaloe' (see www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/heritage/pdfs/broadford.pdf). The village is described as 'nestled' in the Glenomra valley. Glenomra is most likely the anglicised compound of Gleann (glen) and Ómra (amber). The area was known then as the amber glen: "Glemomra, the amber valley, gets its name from the distinctive colouring revealed as the rays of the sinking sun catches [sic] the heather clad hillside". (see Pat O'Brien, 2022: 11). My family home is in the townland of Muingboy, about a mile and a half from the village on the road to Limerick. The original Irish name would have been *An* (The) *Mhoing* (Fen) *Bhuí* (Yellow) – the yellow fen.

[6] Point-to-Points are a type of steeplechase that date back to a match race in North Cork in 1752 when Cornelius O'Callaghan and Edmund Blake raced each other on horseback between the Church steeples in Doneraile and Buttevant. Point-to-Points evolved into three-mile races around a circuit with fences, where young National Hunt horses are introduced to the sport and ridden by amateur jockeys. My father's side of the family has been breeding and training thoroughbred horses for almost a century.

those demands are and how they are relevant for what we might think of as 'ethics'. Seamus Heaney evokes something of this when he describes the recognition and pull of allegiance (something which he is at once compelled and repelled by) when reflecting on the persecution of young Catholic women, punished by their neighbours for consorting with English soldiers in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. He confesses that he

> would connive
> in civilized outrage
> yet understand the exact
> and tribal, intimate revenge. (Heaney, 2018: 42)

I am quite certain that Heidegger was *profoundly* concerned with these elements of our historical situatedness. That is not to say that Heidegger thinks that we should begin issuing rules and directives based on local prejudices. Nevertheless, to think historically means to understand how things come to be meaningful for us as people who are *bound* in certain ways and that this can and/or should inform how we might think of being bound ethically, how we might have an ethos. As we shall see in what follows, Heidegger rejects conventional forms of morality owing, among other things, to their non-situated ahistoricality, and their reliance on metaphysical presuppositions that he wants to resist. Instead, for Heidegger, our historical situatedness is key to identifying how we can feel bound or obliged as ethical beings.

Now, we have to proceed with caution here, and this is something that has been flagged repeatedly. We find a version of the relevant concern addressed in the 'exchanges' between Peter Singer and Bernard Williams on the question of speciesism and the notion of a human prejudice. Group membership, and the sense of commitment that such 'belonging' can issue in, has been the cause of a great deal of cruelty and persecution – not least as a result of the exclusionary convictions it can issue in. How far can we (i.e., should we) leverage cherished 'differences' in the service of our political or ethical views? What kind of relationship should obtain between our sense of belonging and ethics to begin with? For all that, as Williams points out, we have to think carefully about where and how our moral commitments and intuitions arise. Demanding that they stem from an ahistorical perspective, that of an ideal observer, for instance, might well, as Williams memorably quips in a well-known talk at Princeton University, be more inhumane and nightmarish than those injustices and horrors such absolutist principles and perspectives would have us avoid. I take this to be part of Plato's cautionary lesson in *Republic*. If we strip away the very features of human existence

that make us human to begin with, in the hope of eradicating any partiality, bias, or injustice, then the cure can quickly become worse than the disease.[7]

Heidegger presents us with quite the tangle when it comes to these questions. He certainly wants to insist on the specificity and situatedness of Dasein and how they shape and determine what it is for us to be human and to belong to historical communities with their shared values and identities. Indeed, he clearly tries to conjure up, for a time, something like an exclusionary politics on that basis. And yet, we can see very clearly in his Bremen lectures that precisely the same conditions that render us historically specific and human, all too human, are the very conditions he invokes to condemn strategies of exclusion, persecution, in short, dehumanisation.[8] It would be too quick to say that we can derive a principle or set of concrete norms on that basis. Indeed, Heidegger would resist any such proposal. That would be to succumb to forms of universalism and value thinking that prevent us from taking ownership and responsibility for specific situations. Even so, I think there is certainly something to the idea that to ignore our essence as human beings, something that Heidegger laments again and again (not least in his famous letter on the question of humanism), is to ignore our ethical bond. Perhaps the most that we can hope for from Heidegger is some help in sketching the outlines of what we might call an originary and preparatory ethics, but that is not a trivial result.

According to the story recounted by Mueller that we alluded to earlier, he reports that

> on hikes, whenever they came to a church or a chapel, Heidegger always dipped his finger in the stoup and genuflected. On one occasion he [Mueller] had asked him if this was not inconsistent, since he had distanced himself from the dogma of the Church. Heidegger's answer had been: 'One must think historically. And where there has been so much praying, there the divine is present in a very special way.' (Safranski, 1998: 432–433)

This passage captures nicely just how Heidegger thinks communities can have a shared sense of what matters, where commitments might come from, and how they might have traction for us – as opposed to abstract, ungrounded imperatives plucked from the ether.[9]

[7] For a brief discussion of this interpretation of Plato, see O'Brien (2021).
[8] For a detailed discussion of this point, see O'Brien (2022). We also discuss it briefly in Section 2.
[9] As Vogel argues, the attempt to act according to such 'timeless' principles is, in itself, a kind of failure to face one's authentic moral situation for Heidegger (see Vogel, 1994: 19–20). Again, there is a link here to Williams' pointed response at the end of his address at the Centre for Human Values in Princeton. An audience member asks what it might be for someone to "act inhumanly". "What is it that they've lost or what is it that they've become, because they have not become an alien?" Williams' response bears reproducing in its entirety: "that's right, that's a very, very good question and I think there are a lot of complex answers to it . . . when they behave inhumanly

Some commentators are keen to exploit these sporadic instances of terms like 'divine' to impute to Heidegger a religious mysticism or theological outlook. However, to read Heidegger as straightforwardly theological or mystical in this way is a failure to think through how Heidegger uses these terms. Heidegger's invocations of awe and wonder, for example, are really just the flip side of the angst we sometimes experience when meditating on the *Abgrund* that lurks behind all meaningfulness. Each instance of meaningfulness is shot through with utter meaninglessness, the nothingness which sits on the other side of meaning, everything pointing towards, ultimately, our own non-existence and loss of meaning at some point in the future. There is no divine principle understood as 'constant', vouching safe our meaningful existence, any more than there are the metaphysical constants dreamt up by Aristotle or Kant according to which we can secure our understanding of things. Indeed, as Heidegger makes clear in "Letter on Humanism", the very notion of god as first cause is itself an achievement of subjectivity and the metaphysics of presence since it begins with things that are present/extant and then simply posits the cause of everything present/extant/actual as the ultimate source or cause of these created things. To think through what terms like 'god' or 'divine' might truly mean requires that we forgo this kind of thinking, that we think properly about being and the nothing.

Part of how meaningfulness, our 'sense' of the 'real', emerges in the first place is itself, if we pay close attention, run through with the meaninglessness around it, the yawning abyss of nothingness which sits either side of any moment of it. Heidegger describes us as the 'null basis of a nullity', and each 'occasion', each meaningful moment of our lives, takes place against the backdrop of our own future non-existence (i.e., meaninglessness) and is prefigured by the nothingness, the abyssal, the meaninglessness that precedes it and will come after it. This is enough to inspire the dread and awe that have long been associated with religious experience in the past, but Heidegger's thought is no latter-day mysticism. Even when requesting a Catholic funeral service and burial, Heidegger was not, I believe, thinking in terms of religion but, rather, he was, as the passage above indicates, thinking 'historically'. He was submitting himself to and being reclaimed by the 'place', the 'ground' from which his own sense of self, in part, emerged. As Safranski recounts:

> In January 1976 Heidegger requested that his Messkirch compatriot, the Freiburg professor of theology Bernhard Welte, visit him for a talk. He

(interesting, as you rightly say, it doesn't mean that they act like an animal, for instance they don't destroy something in rage), typically, if they act inhumanly, what they typically do is that they behave either like a machine or a disembodied intelligence. And, one way of acting inhumanly is to act on certain kinds of principles" (Bernard Williams, 2002). Hatab offers a similar criticism of traditional moral theories (see Hatab, 2000: 62).