

## thoughts on the unthinkable

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Art critic Sister Wendy Beckett once said that before Picasso, painters took it for granted that their job was to produce works of beauty. What else is art to do, after all? It was only after Picasso—specifically, after 1907’s “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. Version O),” with its squatting French prostitutes with faces like grotesque African masks—that painters realized they were not bound to beauty, that beauty was not a fate but, in a way, a limitation. Picasso showed that ugliness too could be the subject of great art, that artists could capture ugliness without rendering it beautiful,<sup>1</sup> and this forever changed the course of culture. Like all truly deep assumptions, this one about beauty had hardly seemed like an assumption at all. It had seemed rather like an unquestionable, inescapable truth—until someone questioned it and thereby escaped it. What had seemed self-evident came to be seen as a self-imposed restriction. How much of the world, how much ugliness, how much mundanity had artists been ignoring? How much more could they now capture? This was perhaps *the* question of twentieth century art, with its depictions of hideous slaughter, its sliced-up cow carcasses, its snow shovels and urinals and soup cans, paint splashes and blank canvases.

As I pondered Sister Wendy’s insight into Picasso’s revolutionary discovery, I wondered about my own profession: what kind of self-bound limitation might philosophers have long labored under? It must be very deep indeed, since rooting out and questioning presuppositions is our very bread and butter.

What characterization of our subject-matter has seemed so self-evident to its practitioners that it hardly seemed like a characterization at all? This question leads us to that question that all philosophers seem enamored of: What is philosophy? Surely no other discipline is as narcissistic as ours, with virtually every great philosopher interrogating herself about what this strange occupation is that she is so preoccupied with. So let us turn to this perennial question.

We need a definition of philosophy that is as open-ended as possible if we are to find our other, our structural blind spot, the back of our head, so to speak. Well, whatever else it is, philosophizing means thinking about things. Of course, that's not very specific—lots of disciplines think, despite what Heidegger said. So let's sharpen our definition up a bit: philosophy means thinking *hard* about things—really, really hard. That's better. Now, if that defines what we do in a maximally loose sense—and I'd say that's pretty loose—does it contain a tacit limitation the way “producing beautiful artifacts” quietly bound art before 1907? How might this characterization restrict our subject matter?

If what we are doing is thinking, then it seems self-evident that whatever we are thinking about must, by that very fact, be thinkable. We must be able to think about it if it is to become the subject of our thought. That's even more obvious than the idea that art produces beauty, as it seems to be logically necessary (we philosophers always try to outdo others—even in our limitations!). Following Sister Wendy's account of Picasso's strategy, the next step is then to *question* this definition, to view it as a restriction rather than an unbreakable necessity, in order to reveal what possibilities might lie outside of it. If philosophy has always been about the thinkable, could we extend it to what transcends that, to that which is *un*-thinkable? Is this as perverse as painting intentionally ugly works? If we try to think about that which we cannot think about, will we in fact be able to think anything about it? And if we do, wouldn't any success thereby compromise the very quality we are trying to capture—namely, its unthinkability—and so actually constitute a failure, like the Liar's paradox?

This is what has been occupying, or perhaps I should say troubling my mind these last few years, and today I want to share with you some of the thoughts I have been having, these thoughts on the unthinkable. They are, as is surely appropriate to the subject matter, tentative and exploratory.

One of the first things I found is that I am hardly the first to think about these questions. There is a long and rich vein of philosophical speculation on this topic,

going all the way back to Parmenides. In saying that thought and being are one, he seems to be declaring a rather extreme version of what we can call the Thinkability Restriction: this is the idea that we must limit thought to what can be and, going the opposite direction, limit what can be to what can be thought. However, he gets ensnared in his own interdiction, for in forbidding discussion of what cannot be thought or said—namely, the conceptual abomination that non-being is—he must discuss it! In order to specify what it is that we cannot say or think, Parmenides is compelled to say and think it, a common trap in this treacherous territory. The very act of laying down a limitation, as both Hegel and Wittgenstein later argue, transgresses itself by giving *some* specification to what lies on the far side.

Kant gives a fascinating spin to Parmenides' idea. He both makes reality completely thinkable in regards to phenomena—the world as we experience it is knowable through and through—and completely unthinkable, or at least unknowable, when talking about noumena—the world as it really is, independent of our mind's processing of it. He thus enforces both branches of Parmenides' maxim simultaneously: "it is necessary to speak and think what is" phenomenal, but "not to be said and not to be thought/ is" noumenal being.

But while formally similar, this formulation actually marks a dramatic departure from Parmenides, for where Parmenides had said that it is non-being that is unthinkable, Kant makes *being* off-limits conceptually. Indeed, noumena represent what traditionally would have been considered the true world, the "really real" realm in Plato's phrase (*ontos on*). Thus, on closer examination, Kant actually reverses Parmenides' maxim—it is being that we cannot know or discuss; intelligible discourse must restrict itself to phenomena, which is ontologically peculiar—it both is and is not, bearing an unsettling similarity to mass hallucination. The object of knowledge is a shimmering subjective projection which we know is not how the world actually is; science becomes merely discerning the patterns projected on the wall of the cave by the transcendental fire of our minds. Kant binds us to Parmenides' path of mortals, for goddesses no longer speak to us.

We reach with Kant one of the great insights into my topic: let us call it, somewhat ostentatiously, The Principle of Anthropomorphic Humility. Kant makes the very simple point, hashed out in extremely complicated conceptual machinery, that all we can do is think with our thoughts. When we try to make sense of the world, it is inescapably by means of *our* concepts. Pure empiricism from the bottom up, where the world teaches us how to make sense of it from the beginning, can't work for Kant; the mind must prepare data for it to be digestible. To avoid dogmatic

assumptions, he has given up Descartes and Leibniz' reliance on God as the Great Coordinator in the Sky, the one who harmonizes world and mind so that they are attuned to each other before they touch.

Without the rationalists' strategy of a third party coordinating mind and world with each other, or the empiricist solution of the world imprinting its structure on our passive minds, the only other alternative is for *us* to make the world thinkable in order to think it. We have to make the world we experience over in our own epistemological image, structuring it like our mind to make it experienceable. The two clocks that Leibniz' God calibrated have come apart; they can only be brought back together by setting one clock to the time of the other without checking what time it *really* is, the Greenwich-Mean Time of reality. For Kant, this conclusion is inescapable. Any attempt to check to see if the world really is the way we think it is would require us to think it, like trying to see the inside of the refrigerator when the light is off—we never reach it as unthought. There is no getting out of our own heads.

But this is precisely Kant's mistake, according to Hegel, Kant's greatest successor and critic. If we really can't get out of our heads, then what exactly is this outside we're talking about? That outside too must be inside if we are discussing it intelligibly, even just to say that it exists and is unreachably outside. Kant's subjective idealism turns into Hegel's objective or absolute idealism when thought through all the way. Kant shouldn't feel bad about this; according to Hegel, everyone turns into Hegel when thought through all the way. Kant says that we cannot help but use our concepts in thinking and talking about the world, and that keeps us from ever truly thinking or talking about the world in-itself. But then, Hegel responds, this world in-itself is something we are thinking of too. Reality-in-itself is, necessarily, in-itself-*for-us*; indeed, all in-itself's can only be for-us by Kant's own reasoning, so there is nothing we are cut off from by our thoughts for in thinking something we are connected to it. Our thoughts cannot achieve escape velocity from the orbit of our concepts and vocabularies to touch on something genuinely apart from them. Even just saying that it is separate pulls it back into the gravitational well of our minds. Wittgenstein was right: that which we cannot talk about, we must pass over in silence, despite the fact that he himself, like most, went on about it at some length.

Hegel of course does not keep silent about it either, but he doesn't have to—that's because the very meaning of reality changes if we think this through. Without the contrast of an in-itself, the qualification "for-us" loses its traditional

meaning. If we can't use our concepts to refer to something radically apart from these concepts, then the distinction collapses and the contrasting terms lose the meaning they had when they were used to contrast with each other. Nietzsche says it best, as usual: "The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.*"<sup>2</sup> The true world begins as transcendent, becomes a fable, and then turns imminent. We are not left with an imminent world, though, since imminence itself conceptually requires the contrast with transcendence. The world we experience simply is the world, full stop.

This restores Parmenides' Thinkability Restriction but now made coherent because we have gotten rid of its illicit unthinkable side. Hegel's formulation of the idea is: the real is rational and the rational is real. This is not the joining of thought and reality like two halves of a locket, so much as realizing that what we thought was one-half is actually the whole, so no matching is needed or even possible. Others share a similar view. Early Heidegger makes the same move when he argues that "*only as phenomenology, is ontology possible*" because "our investigation... asks about Being itself in so far as Being enters into the intelligibility of Dasein."<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes the point nicely when he says, "we must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive."<sup>4</sup> I call this The Principle of Phenomenological Ontology. The idea is that for us to say anything at all about something, we must have some access to it. This is why Heidegger identifies beings with phenomena, that which comes into the clearing or our awareness. This is also why, at the outset of *Being and Time*, the question of being immediately becomes the question of our understanding of being, for what else can we inquire into?

Let's pause a moment to see where we have gotten. Parmenides started things off by trying to limit thinking to that which is, in what I called the Thinkability Restriction. This Restriction however violated itself by thinking about what lay beyond it, just to say that it was off-limits. Kant then gave us The Principle of Anthropomorphic Humility: the truism that we can only think with our own thoughts, which means that whatever we think about bears their stamp, and so is really the world as it is for-us, not the world in-itself. That—we can never know, because the only way we could ever know it is with these all-too-human thoughts, which leave their prints on whatever they grasp. We cannot see the world unseen, or know the world apart from the conditions that enable us to know it. Hegel followed this line of thought out until it became The Principle of Phenomenological Ontology. This applies Kant's Principle even to that which

supposedly exceeds our thought, bringing the in-itself within the realm of thought and hence our ways of thinking, so that nothing can exceed it—not even nothing. This brings back Parmenides’ Thinkability Restriction but now without having to think something lying on the other side of the thinkable by forbidding it, because there is no other side. The world is entirely thinkable for the very good reason that the world simply is whatever is thinkable; that which is not comprehensible cannot be said to be for if it is incomprehensible, we don’t even know what we’re talking about when we say that it is not.

This represents an advance over Kant’s views by removing the contradiction involved in the Thinkability Restriction. But it also loses Kant’s Humility, an attribute rather lacking in Hegel, a philosopher who believes that his work brought humanity to the state of godhood, and himself before all others.

I admire Kant’s Humility and would like to preserve it. It’s an act of breath-taking hubris to say that the world must be cut to the measure of our minds, either with the rationalists that our thoughts line up with reality as they were made for each other, literally, or with Hegel that they encompass it exhaustively. On the other hand, the way Kant tried to accommodate this insight is deeply flawed, even self-contradictory. In positing a transcendent realm, he had to make use of immanent materials—our own transcendental concepts like substance, existence, arguably causality—thereby compromising its transcendence. It’s still us thinking about noumena, after all. Hegel is right to dismiss the notion of noumena, but the way he did it shrank the real to what is thinkable by us—what arrogance, what profligacy.

Moving forward would require taking these two ideas—Humility on the one hand and Phenomenology Ontology on the other—and performing what Hegel called an *Aufhebung* on them, that is, a combination of their best features that simultaneously prunes out their worst. As a matter of fact, I think that a powerful critic of both Kant and Hegel has given us just such a view, ironically a thinker with a personal antipathy for the very notion of *Aufhebung*: Kierkegaard.<sup>5</sup>

Surely humility is one of the watch-words of Kierkegaard’s thought, outraged as he is by Hegel’s attempt to make humanity continuous with God. Kierkegaard resurrects in the ethical realm what Kant insisted on in his epistemology: that we don’t know everything, that we are limited to *our* concepts—here our understanding of good and evil—but that our line is surely too short to fathom the depths of the real. In *Fear and Trembling*, God asks of Abraham something that *cannot* be justified, something that by our best understanding can only be

considered evil. What good could possibly come of the death of this child promised for so long, the child of such promise who is to bring forth a nation? And if God wants him, why such cruelty in making the child's own father, His faithful servant, do it? Even if it is a test and no murder takes place, we cannot skip to the end of the story, for Abraham could not. We are, like him, stuck in time; we must move through events sequentially, and decide without knowing the outcome.

When Abraham hears the command, he faces a decision: on the one hand, he can judge God by his own morality—this is what Kant tells us we must do. On Kant's picture, we can only recognize what our minds are prepared to see, the single set of categories our mind is born open to, and this applies to morality and religion just as much as it does to science. We come into this world with morality hard-wired into our reason, and Kant argues that if we encounter what we think might be God, we must match this apparent apparition against our pre-existing notion to see if He measures up to our standards: "Even the Holy One of the Gospel must be compared with our idea of moral perfection before He is recognized as such."<sup>6</sup> If the Lord of all creation fails the categorical imperative, then a rational being is obligated to disobey Him. Of course, by this measure, the being who commanded a father to murder his innocent son could not be God; if God isn't a Kantian, He cannot be God.<sup>7</sup>

This is bound up with the very meaning of autonomy—if I take the law from *anywhere* else, no matter the authority and no matter the content of the law, I have compromised myself and my actions. I must practice, as the title of one of his works has it, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, and that means within the limits of my reason and that means my self. Just as with science, we can only experience what we are transcendently prepared to experience, learn what we already know—which of course, is not really learning. Even God has nothing to teach Kant about right and wrong. The humility I praised in Kant's epistemology is wholly absent from his ethics. In his ethics, Kant has recreated a Leibnizian metaphysics where we are windowless; nothing from the outside may intrude.<sup>8</sup>

Kierkegaard says, "for he who loves God without faith reflects on himself, while the person who loves God reflects on God."<sup>9</sup> We could extend this and say that he who loves God without faith, within the limits of reason alone, autonomously, loves a *reflection* of himself, for that is all he can ever encounter—reflections of himself, the same as we encounter in science. One who is unable to acknowledge even the possibility of goods that transcend our comprehension of the good cannot genuinely worship God, for to worship only a God that you recognize

according to your standards is no more than worshipping oneself. It is not to acknowledge any higher authority, which of course an ethics based on autonomy cannot. “The whole of human existence is in that case entirely self-enclosed, as a sphere,” Kierkegaard writes, “and the ethical is at once the limit and completion. God becomes an invisible, vanishing point, an impotent thought.” “But if one cannot say more one says in effect that really I have no duty to God. The duty becomes duty to God by being referred to God, but I do not enter into relation with God in the duty.”<sup>10</sup>

What would it mean to actually enter into a relation with God? What does God mean? To ask the question that both Kant and Hegel try to disqualify, in different ways, what is the transcendent? Well, to state the obvious, it is that which transcends and, by transcending, shows that which is ours to be *merely* ours, contra Kant’s attempts to close off speculation about what exceeds our access and Hegel’s attempt to make “ours” into “all there is.” Abraham is commanded to do something that violates ethics—to murder an innocent. Does this violate ethics, or might it transcend ethics? Might it expose our understanding of good and evil as just that—*our* understanding—to which there may be others, than which there may be better but—and this is important—better in ways that we cannot comprehend or appreciate. Surely this possibility, blocked off in principle by Kant and Hegel, is at least part of what we might mean by encountering God, as John Caputo has argued. We do not praise Abraham for his willingness to do a heinous act, but for his sense of the limits of his own sense of right and wrong, his understanding that all of his understanding is underwritten only by an abyss of 70,000 fathoms of water.

If God could explain His reasons, that would imply that He owes us an explanation, but also that He *can* explain his reasoning to us, that we share a common form of reasoning, that, as Kant insists, understanding is so universal that it even spans the gap between finite and infinite. But if this is so, then there is no transcendence, and our reasoning reaches as far as far goes, and God is simply a very smart, very powerful Prussian gentleman in the sky. And indeed Kant does at times describe humanity “as analogous to the divinity.”<sup>11</sup> When we obey the moral law out of respect and strip away all influence of inclinations, what separates us from the holy will, at least for the span of that decision? Kierkegaard, however, wants to preserve the godness of God, His transcendence, His strangeness, which simultaneously preserves the finitude of ourselves. “God’s love is for me,” he says, “incommensurable with the whole of reality.... In the temporal world God and I cannot talk together, we have no common language.”<sup>12</sup> Or, as Derrida puts it in his

book on Kierkegaard,

God doesn't give his reasons.... Otherwise he wouldn't be God, we wouldn't be dealing with the Other as God or with God as wholly other. If the other were to share his reasons with us by explaining them to us, if he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn't be the other."<sup>13</sup>

If encounters with the divine are at times sharp, if they burn us, if they are perhaps indistinguishable from the demonic—well, why wouldn't we expect touching the infinite to hurt and confound? God may be loving and benevolent in His own way, but if He is also transcendent and mysterious, then we may not always find his benevolence gentle or his love recognizable.

When God calls to Abraham, Abraham does not employ his own categories to see if this voice matches his previous notions of what God and goodness must be, as Kant insists all rational autonomous beings must do; he answers "Here I am," and he does what is asked of him. When Isaac calls to his father to ask him what they are doing, he answers "Here I am." When the angel of the Lord calls to Abraham to stay his hand, he answers "Here I am." This extraordinary thrice repeated phrase represents Abraham's willingness to answer his God's call without setting down conditions or setting up transcendental preparations. He doesn't hesitate to respond to the child he is about to burn or the God who commands such a horror. What are we to make of this?

In one way, it's horrible, an abdication of responsibility, of the Enlightenment command to think for yourself, and Kierkegaard doesn't shy away from this aspect.<sup>14</sup> Abraham stifles his own reason, obeying without determining whether the command is just or not. But what more powerful demonstration of Humility can there be? Abraham is not simply silencing his reason, but submitting it to something greater, to a force who knows more about goodness than he ever can. This is impossible on Kant's account, which renders God and humanity as commensurable on ethics as Hegel does on everything. God cannot know more about morality than we do for there is no more to it than what our reason can discover through its own efforts, for Kant's ethics has jettisoned the Humility that his epistemology worked so hard to establish.

Kierkegaard rehabilitates Abraham's Humility. Acknowledging God's radical transcendence means accepting our lack of ethical omniscience, our ability and need to learn. Abraham's "Here I am" is his opening himself up to what lies beyond his own understanding, what he can't understand without something

outside himself breaking in and enabling him to think something genuinely new. This is how Kierkegaard understands the Incarnation, in contrast to Kant's view of it as essentially unnecessary, and Hegel's interpretation as an allegory of humanity's rising to godhood: God had to break into time and human nature to change their course in order to allow something new to occur—salvation. For God to become human, bodily, temporal so stretches and distends these forms that they can never resume their former shapes; they now accommodate new contents, to which we must be receptive. Like Kant, the epistemological midwife Socrates gives us conscious possession of what we had without realizing it, thereby helping us become who we already are; Christ, on the other hand, lets us become “a new person,”<sup>15</sup> enabling us to become what we are not and could not have been beforehand. “Here we see the need for a new category for understanding Abraham,”<sup>16</sup> namely, the new category of new categories. God's miraculous, incomprehensible entrance into time, space, and womb would hardly have been warranted were it just to tell us something we already knew or could learn on our own. In contrast to Kant, Kierkegaard's religion is only justified *beyond* the limits of reason alone. This is the divine breaking into, and thus breaking us out of, the closed circle of Platonic recollection or Kantian concepts. This is the opening up of the transcendental by and to the transcendent.

This view, which I am calling Transgressive Realism, combines the best of Kant and Hegel, as an *Aufhebung* should. With Kant, we insist on our finitude, the smallness of our reach before the vast ocean of the real; with Hegel, we accept the further consequence of finitude that we cannot speak of what is completely beyond us with no possibility of access. On my reconstruction, Kierkegaard accepts Hegel's Phenomenological Ontology which restricts us to what we encounter, but he combines this with a version of Kant's Humility, so that what we encounter can transcend and transgress our best understanding. Transgressive Realism preserves a transcendent against Hegel's absorption of all reality into rationality. But unlike Kant's noumenon, this beyond makes contact with us, thus accommodating Hegel's Phenomenological Ontology. The Beyond makes contact not *through* our concepts but by *violating* them, making them tremble and us fear. Indeed, our most vivid encounters are precisely when our preconceptions are shattered by recalcitrant, shocking experiences, when we run across things we just don't know understand. And this is a realism because the world's independence is vividly demonstrated by the radical alienness of what we experience. As Levinas, a thinker not particularly known for his taste for ontology, writes, “the idea of being does not therefore suffice to sustain the claim of realism, if realism is equivalent to affirming an alterity outside the Same. Only the idea of the infinite renders

realism possible.”<sup>17</sup> What does he mean by the infinite?

“The idea of the infinite consists precisely and paradoxically in thinking more than what I thought [Transgression] while nevertheless conserving it in its excessive relation to thought [Phenomenological Ontology]. The idea of the infinite consists in grasping the ungraspable [Phenomenological Ontology] while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable [Transgression].”<sup>18</sup>

So what exactly does it mean to say that we experience the impossible, think the unthinkable, once we strip away the flashy rhetoric? I am an American, not a French thinker, so I tend to ask that slightly bothersome question—call it my pragmatist heritage. As I understand it, it means to think about things that have no place in our present understanding, ideas that don’t fit any concept in our intellectual arsenal, that don’t play by the rules of the language-games we’re now playing. They aren’t so much false as incommensurable—they’d have to make sense to be false, as Foucault argues. Now such ideas can be Relatively Unthinkable, which means that they don’t make sense by the standards we presently accept but we can construct a new system of thoughts around them with rules which render them sensible; presently unthinkable, but thinkable according to a future way of thinking.

Or they can be Absolutely Unthinkable. That would mean that they would continue to resist all attempts to tame or contextualize them, such that no matter how we frame them or what system we build around them, they just don’t make sense. Obviously, we can never know whether a particular idea is Relatively or Absolutely Unthinkable until we try to think it—seriously endeavor to understand it by constructing a conceptual edifice around it to accommodate its pointy angles. Picasso’s painting made aesthetic sense once we started getting cubism and African art. Lorentz’s ridiculously ad hoc contraction of space and time became scientifically respectable and true within Relativity Theory. Derrida’s bizarre writings became thinkable, teachable, the subject of entire conferences once a theory of deconstruction let us see why he was paying attention to such strange details of writings. This is why Nietzsche’s experimentalism is so important; I think this is why Deleuze says that the job of philosophy is to invent new concepts. First someone creates an unthinkable, then others weave a context that lets us think it. Then, when the idea, once shocking, has been tamed, when it takes its place in museums or university press catalogs, and we, once shocked, now sated, can gaze upon the understood with satisfaction and perhaps just a touch of smugness—we

seek out the next unthinkable.

And what of the Absolutely Unthinkable ideas? The ones that no matter what we do, will not go quietly into any system? Well, for many recent continental thinkers, those are the most precious of all. It is strange for a discipline devoted to thinking, but the more I have looked, the more it has struck me how enamored continental philosophers have been of that which we cannot think. For this is what opens us up to that which transcends us—to reality, to others, to the new, and to our own future selves. Once again, Kierkegaard: “this, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.”<sup>19</sup>

I have a mild philosophical condition: when I focus on a topic, I start seeing it everywhere. I wrote my first book on anti-realism, and while I wrote it, I saw it wherever I looked. The book’s subtitle could have been “Look! Everyone’s an Anti-Realist!” When I examined the connections between Heidegger and Wittgenstein for my third book, they just kept multiplying. And now that I’m writing about Transgressive Realism, once again it has become ubiquitous before my eyes. It’s the absurd that the existentialists see in life—the faith that Kierkegaard claims “is and remains in all eternity a paradox, inaccessible to thought,”<sup>20</sup> the uncanny revealed by anxiety in *Being and Time*, the reason why Meurseault shot the Arab, why Gregor Samsa awoke from uneasy dreams as a giant insect and why Josef K was on trial, the way the tramps wait for Godot—they don’t know who he is, even Beckett didn’t know that, or why they should wait for him or whether he will come or what might happen if he shows up, and yet they wait, day after day. It’s Heidegger’s earth which “appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undisclosable,”<sup>21</sup> Being’s mysterious sendings. It is being itself: “Being offers us no ground and no basis—as beings do—to which we can turn, on which we can build, and to which we can cling. Being is the rejection of the role of such grounding; it renounces all ground, is abyssal [*ab-gründig*].”<sup>22</sup> It’s in the face of the other for Levinas that violates and commands us from on high. It’s in God for Marion, great works of art for Gadamer and Lyotard. It’s in Foucault’s excavations of past systems of thought which

shattered... all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things.... The thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that... is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark

impossibility of thinking *that*.<sup>23</sup>

It's all over the place in Derrida: in the gift that disrupts the economy, the future that breaks with the present, hospitality that welcomes the unknowable, absolute forgiveness that forgives the unforgivable. In general, he says, "the interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible."<sup>24</sup>

I started out this paper looking for philosophy's other, what is hidden from it, what it must ignore, and what I have come to find, to my surprise, is that this topic is in many ways at its very heart. Continental philosophy, I put it to you, has been oriented towards that which it cannot think, that which is inaccessible to reason and concepts, because it brings us face to face with our finitude. Philosophy was for so long made as if for gods; now the task that falls to us is to make a philosophy for mortals, one that reminds us of how little we grasp while at the same time spurring us on to reach for more, to think new, heretofore unthinkable thoughts which change the very way we think. I don't know about you, but that's the experience that drew me to philosophy in the first place, as a freshman, in my first semester in college, in an enormous Intro to Philosophy class, reading, ironically enough, *Fear and Trembling*. As you can see, I've never fully recovered from the shock.

Why is this topic so prevalent? Perhaps because of our attitude towards time and history, an attitude which almost defines Continental philosophy. Heidegger once said that in the ponderous title of his first book, *Being and Time*, bookended by two such weighty words, the really tough one was "and." That's because for millennia, philosophers had been writing in an "or" instead: being and time were considered mutually exclusive. Either temporality, change, instability, and novelty, *or* genuine reality, but not both. The really real is that which does not change, and knowledge sought the eternal, the stable, that which you can find and fix once and for all and you never have to revisit or change your mind about. Hegel recognized the importance of history, but he couldn't accept history in all its unruly, unbound historicity. He had to force it into a controlled, fully formed circle that allowed in no absolute novelty. Yes there are new phases, but each of these emerges logically from the previous one, all of which are contained in embryo in the very beginning. This is time defanged, domesticated, bent back upon itself in a well-behaved infinity. The Transgressive Realists free time, allowing the wild thoughts that break in upon us in ways we could never have anticipated or prepared for. That is what it means to be in time. That is what it means to be finite, to give up

control, foundations, to relinquish the attempt to know things once and for all, to control the future, so that no one, not even yourself tomorrow, will revisit your conclusions. As Kierkegaard says in *Fear and Trembling*: “temporality, finitude is what it all turns on”.<sup>25</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Here is how John Richardson, author of a highly respected three volume biography of Picasso, describes the work: “Picasso was out to shock, if need be appall. Hence the jarringly discordant fright-masks he contrived for the two right-hand heads. Familiarity has inured us to the horror that these dog-faced *demoiselles* caused when they were first unveiled, almost a century ago. It was as if Picasso had unleashed a new race of gorgons on the world.... His *Demoiselles* was an exorcism of more than private demons; it was also an exorcism of traditional concepts of ‘ideal beauty.’ The fright-masks constitute an assault as much on ‘beauty’ as on women.” He continues, “some scholars see these monstrous faces as embodying Picasso’s fear of syphilis” [John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso: The Cubist Rebel, 1907-1916*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 32]. André Derain, an avant-garde painter and follower of both Matisse and Picasso, who was in fact the one who introduced Picasso to the African art exhibit that partially inspired the work, was so revolted by the painting when he saw it that he told one of their circle that, “painting of this sort was an impasse at the end of which lay only suicide; that one fine morning we would find Picasso hanged behind his large canvas.” Arthur I. Miller, *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time, and the Beauty That Causes Havoc*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 124.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*. Ed. and Trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954), 486; italics in original.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), 60/35, 193/152.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), xviii.
5. Rejecting the notion of an *Aufhebung* is part of the significance of the title of his first book, *Either/Or*, which insists on unbridgeable choices that inevitably leave essential things behind. Heidegger picked up this idea in what he calls nullity and guilt (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 331/285).
6. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. 2nd ed. Trans. Lewis White Beck. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Library of Liberal Arts, 1995), 24/408. See also 60/443.
7. Kant in fact concludes that Abraham must have “misheard” the command. In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, a title that gives the book away, he states that, “though it does indeed sound dangerous, it is in no way reprehensible to say that every man *creates a God* for himself, nay, must make himself such a God ... For in whatever manner a being has been made known to him by another and described as God, yea, even if such a being had appeared to him (if this is possible), he must first of all compare this representation with his ideal in order to judge whether he is entitled to regard it and to honor it as a divinity. Hence there can be no religion springing from revelation alone” Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 157n. See also Kant, *Religion*, 143. Extraordinarily, as an example of a possible revelation that fails our own moral test and thus cannot be of genuinely divine origin, Kant names the possibility of “a father ordered to kill his son who is, so far as he knows, perfectly innocent,” later even pointing to “the command delivered to Abraham to slaughter his own son like a sheep,” as an example of someone who must have misheard God’s command (Kant, *Religion*, 82, 175). “We... shall believe ourselves to be acting in conformity with the divine will in so far only as we hold sacred the moral law which reason teaches us from the nature of the actions themselves ... Moral theology is thus of immanent use only... by warning us against the fanaticism, and indeed the impiety, of abandoning the guidance of a morally legislative reason in the right conduct of our lives, in order to derive guidance directly from the idea of the Supreme Being” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1965), A819/B847.
8. “We may not, therefore, in reversal of such procedure, regard them [moral laws] as accidental and as derived from the mere will of the Ruler, especially as we have no conception of such a will, except as formed in accordance with these laws. So far, then, as practical reason has the right to

- serve as our guide, we shall not look upon actions as obligatory because they are the commands of God, but shall regard them as divine commands because we have an inward obligation to them” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A818-19/B846-7).
9. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric* by Johannes de Silentio. Trans. Alastair Hannay. (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 66.
  10. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 96.
  11. Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*. Ed. Hans Reiss. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 65.
  12. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 63-4. “If a human being is to come truly to know something about the unknown (the god), he must first come to know that it is different from him, absolutely different from him” Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*. Ed. and Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1985, 46.
  13. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Trans. David Wills. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 58.
  14. “So let us either forget all about Abraham or learn how to be horrified at the monstrous paradox which is the significance of his life” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 81).
  15. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, 18; see also Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments.”* Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 576.
  16. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 88.
  17. Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 21.
  18. *ibid.*, 19; bracketed remarks added.
  19. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, 37.
  20. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 85.
  21. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*. Rev. ed. Ed. David Farrell Krell. (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1993), 172.
  22. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*. Volume 4. Ed. David Farrell Krell. (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1982), 193.
  23. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), xv.
  24. Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other. Volume I*. Ed. Peggy Kamuf. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 15. See also: Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 43; Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. Eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.
  25. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 78.