Being Brought to Light

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I

There is a certain urgency about the ethical today. Amid reports of the misery and injustice that seem to accompany all our human undertakings, and with increasing demand that it prove itself useful to an expanding range of unprecedented crises, the ethical is found to occupy a crucial place in contemporary thought. It stands at the point of a change, as our desire for a better world seeks the transformation of the one in which we find ourselves, and so it is to become the means by which we may be carried over from one situation to another, by which we are to make a difference. The ethical is to save us, and so the urgency of our salvation comes to rest in a particular and intense way on the salvation of ethics itself, saved and preserved for our sake, so that we might also be rescued and kept in safety and brought into the fulness of life that is to be ours. The enormity of this expectation of the ethical has become a kind of running theme through all sorts of contemporary discourses, assuming in many cases a force that would compel agreement without question, and at times erupting in expressions of disgust or even censure at those who would defy this logic. What else are we to do or think?

There is a sense in which this ethical has become the last sounding of the thinking of being in the western tradition, taking on the now empty form of its hegemony, while that thinking of being itself is already known to be fraught with difficulty, and so pronouncing itself as the final grand narrative by which nonetheless our redemption is to be secured. Such is the accomplishment and perhaps the culmination of that humanism which unfolds from the beginning of western thought, which has brought us to light as the beings we are and which keeps us illuminated by its glow. To demonstrate the basic elements, or capabilities as Nussbaum would have it, of our humanity is believed to give grounds for the construction of a framework of ideas concerning the basic requirements of human well-being, that in turn will allow considerations of human rights and dignity to be conducted with seriousness and good will. So the breadth of universal appeal of the ethical, and its boundless capacity to accommodate apparent diversity have rendered it a common language for postmodern humanity.

Yet ours is a dis-illusioned time, in which the very categories of the ethical seem themselves to be exhausted, under strain to be proven worthy of the tasks now required, and so also pressed into providing conclusive

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reasons for their continued importance. Thus to show the nature of the relation between being and the ethical lies in the centre of this urgency. It is here that the work of Levinas appears, to argue that even in the face of a hollowed-out metaphysics, the ethical may prove its necessity otherwise than being, and so become the means by which we come to our senses, saving the phenomenal as a relation with the immediately presentable face of the other. It is here also that a return to Platonism lies, in the effort to know again the relation of human being with a transcendent divine, articulated in some of John Milbank's work as a renewed emphasis on participation. The participation of the human mind with and in the divine mind as the ground of the ethical provides a way of proclaiming the distinctiveness of the Christian moral vision that may be displayed again today, turning the world towards the love which is its utmost possibility else all is noise and fury. Such thoughts prompt a consideration of the work which has become a kind of *ur*-text for thinking the relation of ethics and being, and to ask with the guidance of Heidegger, what happens in this text as being is brought to light, and so what happens for us in the alliance of the true with the good that makes its appearance here.

II

The text is Book VII of Plato's *Republic* which, in its giving of an allegory for being-in-the-world, allows entry into this fascinatingly enigmatic realm in which thinking finds its home. The figures represented there are human beings inhabiting a world of light and shadow, in which what is seen is what is known, and the movement of the allegory is to take these figures through the stages of seeing and of knowing until they reach a realm other than this world, where what is true and what is good may be yielded to them. The stages are steps in the path of knowledge, and so they are set out as a teaching about the way to knowledge and as an illustration of the kinds of difficulties that ensue for those who would teach and be taught this way. So Plato describes the move from a certainty engrossed in the flickering shadows of things, to one that must assert itself as certainty when the things themselves are to be seen; from there to a freedom gained outside of the cave in the concentrated presence of the *eide*, the essences of these things that now show themselves, and finally to the dangerous effort of liberating others undertaken by the one who returns to tell what can be known there.

This is a familiar enough account, but Heidegger draws us to think through what is said here about truth, and in particular to notice how a new teaching about truth occurs in Plato's thinking, found not so much, he suggests, in what is laid out before us and so in what is said, but in what lies within what is laid out — and so in what is unspoken, before which we

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are placed and upon which our thinking spends itself. For it is here that the change in the determination of truth takes place, of which western thought has been the unfolding until Nietzsche. The allegory depends upon the Greek understanding of truth, *aletheia*, as un-hiddenness, as that which is wrought out of hiddenness, that which is struggled for, and it is in the context of this relation of co-determination of hidden and unhidden that the imagery of the cave works so compellingly.

Yet Plato asks those who would learn from him to consider the things that are unhidden *in the aspect of their being visible*, in their shining, their appearance as themselves. By this way, the being of beings, the being-ness of these visible things, is understood as a coming to stand in presence as what each thing is, disclosed in its whatness, its *quidditas*, and accessible to us by means of seeing, dimly at first with the senses and then completely with the mind's eye of apprehension, through *noein*, which must be taken from the cave of appearances alone to discern the being of beings in the *idea*. In drawing us up from out of the cave, Plato directs the attention of the one who would know to that upon which this visibility itself depends, the source of light, of illumination, by which what is unhidden may be seen and talked about. With this move, Heidegger shows that Plato himself banishes, or exiles (the German word here is *verweisen*) what is unsaid in the essence of truth as unhiddenness, so that this relation of co-determination in which the unhidden is to be wrought out of the hidden through struggle, is no longer the essential fullness out of which truth unfolds.

Rather the essence of truth is displaced to the essence of the *idea*, for the *idea* is that which presents, which allows or gives a view of something, and which thus sets the measure of what a thing is to be in its particular being. In this way, the *idea* comes to constitute being, bringing beings into a relation with what is exemplary, with what each being is to strive for, to make good for itself, in the face of what must be a constant degradation of, a falling away from being in the world of the everyday.[2] So the human coming to know truth is the discovery of this realm beyond beings, in which that which constitutes their beingness is to be seen, and the bringing of what one thinks into conformity with it through right reason, *orthos logos*. Truth is now about the human comportment to beings subject to our gaze, a comportment that in its correctness serves the interpretation of being itself as *idea*, and that gives a place of privilege to the human exercise of reason.

But Plato's account suggests that the *idea* itself must be determined, so that there is something further in which it itself is bound, held together in a single view by what he calls the yoke, *to zdugon*, of the *idea tou agathou*. Heidegger translates,

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> In the sphere of what can be known, the idea of the good is the power of visibility that accomplishes all shining forth and that therefore is properly seen only last, in fact it is hardly (only with great pains) really seen at all.[3]

To agathon becomes the highest idea, the idea of ideas, that which is most fit to reign over, the worthy, the valiant, and so it becomes the origin, the original source, *Ur-sache*, of all things in their thingness, giving human beings what is needful for true seeing (in the sense now of correctness), for true speaking and true acting. *To agathon* becomes that which surmounts being with an ought, which as the bestower of the power of being (meaning to be seen, to be brought into view) stands beyond being itself, *epekeina tes ousias*, as that upon which being is itself dependent over and above itself, and with which it must align itself. Such relation of the true with the good enables the ethical to emerge in the course of western thinking as a matter of insight into this ought which is then to inform *praxis*, leading one, through the method of *paideia*, out of a lack of knowledge into a fullness of truth. It is by following these steps that an individual life is turned around, freed and transformed into the essence of what is human being as one takes up one's proper place in the order of truth under the rule of the good. To understand this in Plato's enigmatic tale, his parable (rendered in German as *das Gleichnis*), is to recollect what it at once clarifies and obscures, renders familiar and strange at once, and to allow the possibility of another beginning from out of the still-sheltered thought of being.

III

As this relation of the good and the true has determined the direction of the ethical in western thinking, so its further securing with reference to *to theion* has framed the development of theological ethics. That the human being should now find its true calling as one made in the image of the divine and so destined for eternal enjoyment of the beatific vision, in which one will be able to see as God sees, becomes the sustaining assumption of a Christian ethics that shows the way for us most to imitate the Creator and so to match our lives to His providential knowledge of us. So it is precisely the overturning of this relation in the work of Nietzsche, and the news of this god's demise that now shapes our time as one living under threat of nihilism, in which even our highest efforts can only appear as will to power, and the very ethics that would save us is simultaneously emptied of promise.

Anyone who has heard the hollow calls for renewed vision, or worse, for corporate visioning exercises, already knows the despair that follows upon this change, and already anticipates an ethics that will only demand more and more as there is nothing any longer to be received. The consequences of this event are felt so keenly in the gender debate (to take just one example), as the question of what gender has to do with being and

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with the being of being human as an enduring in presence, can no longer be radically thought within this onto-theological tradition. So it is perhaps unsurprising to witness a reinstatement of the Platonic, even in inverted forms, in an effort to save the ethical. I bring out this last point, not to dwell on it here (because I have presented the case more fully elsewhere),[4] but to bring out another possibility for thinking the relation of ethics and being, one that is also found in Heidegger, and which I only sketch here briefly by making two final points.

The first is that insofar as the relation of being and time has been rendered as a contrast between the changing nature of this shadowy ill-lit world and the bright constancy of presence which the mind's eye may gaze upon in the *eide*, then the more fundamental determination of temporality cannot be thought. For the distinctive character of human being, of Dasein, is to be concerned with its being, and to know itself in this concern as a comportment to time in which there is a projecting forward and stepping back, a being-free-for-possibilities and a closing-up into what has passed, and it is in its fundamental nature as temporal that Dasein finds itself already in the midst of the world in its own yet-to-be-disclosed existentiell freedom. Accordingly the *epikeina tes ousias* of Plato, this 'outstripping of being' which is taken as the condition of possibility for all knowledge, is understood to be already a projection, a making something to stand as *a priori*, a projection that is grounded in the temporality of Dasein, reaching out for what is futural and coming back to itself in a becoming that presences.[5] 'In this coming back to itself, Heidegger says, 'it *brings* itself with everything that it is *back again* into its own most peculiar chosen can-be.'[6] This constitution of Dasein as being-in-time is again what is unsaid in Plato's teaching and which thus awaits our consideration of being, now not as enduring presence in the light, but as a coming-out-of-and-towards-itself, as *ekstasis*.

The second is that the ethical may be found its distinctive place in the being of being human as that mode of thinking which is most essentially of time. For Dasein lives by understanding; it is that way of being that reaches out to understand being and so to grasp itself ahead of itself, and which brings itself into its own understanding, thereby 'coming toward itself from its chosen possibility of itself'.[7] This self-understanding, which is not in the modern sense subjective, but which bears forth a world, comes from the things Dasein attends to and cares for, and so is shaped by that which it awaits as already a worlded being, and towards which it lives in expectation. In this having to do with things, in our commerce with the world given us, is formed the distinctive character of my self, that continually slips out of my hands into a past I cannot re-enter, and that presents me before anticipated ends that await my coming into them

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through the modes of resolution and of letting-be that comprise my habits. The outline of this thinking is already to be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, its essential possibility for thinking the ethical today as yet fully unexplored.

With this kind of thinking, I suggest, the urgency of the ethical may be heard today not so much as the problematisation of illumination of being, in relation to which one may as well choose to reinstall its effectiveness as to resign oneself to its loss, for either path is worked out of the same rendering of the relation of the true and the good. Rather this urgency may be received as the distant echo of a moment of forgetfulness of being, which may yet in the silence it holds bring us before the necessity of our, of Dasein itself, being-the-difference.

1 See e.g. his description of the relation of faith and reason as 'not essentially distinct, since both are but differing degrees of participation in the mind of God', and since both 'are framed by the participation of our being and knowing in the divine being and intellection.' John Milbank, *The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy in Radical Orthodoxy — A Catholic Enquiry?*, Laurence Paul Hemming (ed.), (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 35. Whether or not this is the view of Aquinas, upon which Milbank seems here to base his own understanding, is matter for another debate.

2 See the discussion of 'Being and the Ought' in Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Ralph Manheim (trans.), (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1961), pp. 164-167. ['In dem Maße als das Sein selbst sich hinsichtlich seines Ideencharakters verfestigt, in dem gleichen Maße drängt es dazu, die damit geschehende Herabsetzung des Seins wieder wettzumachen.' *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1987 [original publication 1953]), p. 150

3 'Im Bereich des Kennbaren ist die Idee des Guten die alles Scheinen vollendende und daher auch erst zuletzt eigentlich gesichtete Sichtsamheit, so zwar, daß sie kaum (nur mit großer Mühe) eigens gesehen wird.' This is Heidegger's translation of Plato's Republic, 517b, 8: *en toi gnostoi teleutaia he tou agathou idea kai mogis orasthai*. Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit* in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1967), p. 132. [ET *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, Thos. Sheehan (transl.), in *Pathmarks*, Win. McNeill (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 174.] See also Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 283-6.

4 Susan Frank Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 200 1); 'To Be or not to Be: Gender and Ontology', paper given at the Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, 28 June 2002.

5 Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, p. 284.

6 Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, p. 287.

7 Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, p. 287.

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