

# *EVENT and Its Mediation*

*Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Philosophy, Religious Studies,  
Literary Studies, and Cultural Theory*

Edited by  
Miklós Nyíró  
Zsuzsánna Lurcza  
Péter Makai

Miskolc University Press  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

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*Selected papers from the International Interdisciplinary Conference  
“EVENT and Its Mediation. Philosophical, Philological, Religious Studies, Literary  
and Cultural Theoretical Perspectives”  
(University of Miskolc, 2025)*

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## EDITORIAL PREFACE

In the preface to a volume publishing the materials of a conference, it is still permissible, and perhaps even appropriate for the chair of the editorial board — who, in this case, is also the conference's founder — to mention and explain what led him to choose the conference's theme, what considerations shaped his decision regarding the selection of the topic.

Although the fact that the concept of the 'event' had become one of the most important themes in postwar European thought would have been reason enough in itself to organize a conference titled *EVENT and Its Mediation*, this was not the only motive behind my decision. There was more to that choice, something that dated back many years. While rereading the magnum opus of Heidegger and that of Gadamer — being committed to hermeneutic philosophy — at one point I realized that both *Being and Time* and *Truth and Method* mention the so-called 'medial' form or sense of verbs, and they do so in contexts no less significant than the descriptions of the very concepts of 'phenomenon' and 'play', respectively. Heidegger writes: "The Greek expression *φαίνόμενον*, to which the term 'phenomenon' goes back, is derived from the verb *φαίνεσθαι*, which signifies "to show itself". [...] *φαίνεσθαι* itself is a *middle-voiced* form [*eine mediale Bildung*] which comes from *φαίνω*—to bring to the light of day, to put in the light."<sup>1</sup> Gadamer, for his part, emphasizes that play and playing have a medial sense. He reiterates twice that "the primordial sense of playing is the medial one [*der mediale Sinn*]", and he also speaks repeatedly about "the medial sense of play" itself.<sup>2</sup> These formulations clearly refer to the linguistic phenomenon of *μεσότης* (*mesotes*, middle voice), which is well known to those familiar with ancient Greek language and culture, and so these philosophers do not even go into detail to explain its meaning. People today, however — especially speakers of the major living Indo-European languages, which have undergone unique historical developments — generally find it unfamiliar and difficult to grasp.

I believe that not merely is the phenomenon of middle voice itself quite remarkable. What is particularly noteworthy is the fact that the meaning it conveys has been mostly forgotten. Therefore, it is especially important to explain why it has fallen into oblivion, what are the cultural and linguistic tendencies that have caused the 'medial sense' — as embodied by the middle voice — to fade into the background.

During my research, a few things became clear to me: The phenomenon classified by Greek linguists as *mesotes* is much more widespread and, at the same time, much older than

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London / New York: Continuum, 2006), 104, 105, and 105, 109, respectively.

the ancient Greek language; it is generally of fundamental importance within the Proto-Indo-European languages themselves, and can also be found in numerous other primordial languages. Nevertheless, its interpretation is disputed among linguists and historians of language. According to the influential interpretation of the renowned comparative linguist Emil Benveniste, however, which is carried out at an appropriate level of abstraction, the middle voice is — broadly speaking — used to express a situation where something or someone is being led by the very course of the process or event in which they are involved and to which they are sub-ject. Thus, the middle voice always implies an event, as well as a specific sense of ‘participatory agency’. Specifically, it is precisely from the perspective of such event that the middle voice defines or describes the entity or agent that participates in it, in full accordance with Gadamer’s phenomenological characterization of play and the player.

All of this, then, points to an ‘event-medial worldview’, in which events, rather than substances or subjects, are considered primary, while the latter are understood in terms of their involvement in ‘pure events’ that occur without causes or agents, which thus serve as their medium or element. Such a worldview stands in sharp contrast to both the worldview propagated by today’s major Western Indo-European languages — in which the active-passive opposition, and thus the juxtaposition of agent and patient, dominates — and to Cartesian subject-object dualism, which is but the philosophical fixation and systematization of the former.

I also believe that hermeneutic philosophy can best be understood from the perspective of such a concept of ‘event-mediality’. This, in turn, clearly places it within the context of recent philosophies of the event, in which the middle voice and related phenomena are also recurring themes. The task at hand, therefore, was to survey the wide range of philosophies of events that have emerged in great numbers in recent times and, in a broader sense, all those approaches from other disciplines that are in some way related to the concept of the event. This is how the conference’s theme came about.

Below, the Esteemed Reader will find a selection of papers presented at the international interdisciplinary conference titled *EVENT and Its Mediation. Philosophical, Philological, Religious Studies, Literary and Cultural Theoretical Perspectives* (September 1–4, 2025, Miskolc, Hungary). The submitted papers are written, expanded, and revised versions of the twenty-minute session presentations. Selected papers underwent a double editorial review process as described in the Editorial Review Statement, based on which the authors revised their manuscripts, if necessary, through multiple rounds of editorial consultation. During the selection process, only those submissions that met the academic and editorial standards were included in the volume.

Miklós Nyíró  
Budapest, 3 July 2026

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As the chair of the conference's Organizing Committee, I would like to express my gratitude to all staff members at the University of Miskolc who contributed to the successful organization of the conference and the management of the publication process. I would especially like to thank Barbara Lassúné Kozma for her steadfast assistance, as well as Vivien Horváth, Csilla Gramantik, and Zoltán Juhász for their dedicated work. Special thanks go to my son, Valter Nyírő, for his technical and creative support. I am also very grateful to all the members of the conference's Organizing Committee and Scientific Advisory Committee for their lasting cooperation, and especially to my friends Gaetano Chiurazzi, Csongor Lőrincz, and Wojciech Sowa, for their always inspiring and encouraging companionship. Above all, however, I would like to thank my partner, without whose devotion, wisdom, and support, this project would never have come to fruition.

I would also like to acknowledge the University of Miskolc, which provided the institutional framework for this project. Finally, I would like to extend special thanks to the supporting organizations, first and foremost, to the Ministry of Culture and Innovation of Hungary for its generous support, provided under the National Research, Development, and Innovation Fund (Grant No. MEC\_SZ 149221), which made the implementation of this project possible, as well as to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for generously sponsoring the conference as part of the Bicentenary of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Program.

## ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

The international interdisciplinary conference, from which this volume presents a selection of papers, was held September 1–4, 2025, in Miskolc, Hungary, under the title *EVENT and Its Mediation. Philosophical, Philological, Religious Studies, Literary and Cultural Theoretical Perspectives* (website: <https://eventandmediation.uni-miskolc.hu/en>). The conference was organized and implemented by the Department of Philosophy of the Institute of Anthropological and Philosophical Sciences at the University of Miskolc, under the auspices of the Philosophy Working Committee of the Miskolc Academic Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the Hermeneutics Division of the Hungarian Philosophical Society.

The idea of organizing a large-scale, international, interdisciplinary conference focused on the notion of ‘event’ arose from the unsettling realization that, although this concept has become one of the cornerstones of contemporary philosophy and also plays a significant role in many other disciplines, the academic community is still far from reaching a consensus on this concept, which would allow us — at least to some extent — to clearly define its meaning and the role events play in shaping the structure of reality. Questions concerning the various aspects and the very significance of the concept of ‘event’, as well as the different ways in which events are mediated, cover a vast range of phenomena and related academic disciplines. Thus, the Organizing Committee envisioned a conference that is primarily philosophical yet interdisciplinary, aimed at exploring the diverse dimensions and implications of the concept of the ‘event’, in order to better understand the place and role of events in reality, their transformative effects, and the numerous ways in which events are mediated, as well as to reexamine, from various systematic and historical perspectives, the philosophies and approaches developed in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences for defining and conceptualizing events. (A detailed description of the proposed conference topics can be found on the following page: <https://eventandmediation.uni-miskolc.hu/call-for-proposals>.)

The call for papers was well received by the scientific community, and ultimately, a total of fifty-five presentations were given during the four-day event. The conference featured one invited keynote speaker and four invited plenary speakers, who are among the most prominent contemporary figures in the field and have recently published important contributions to the philosophy of events. *Claude Romano* (Université Paris-Sorbonne / Australian Catholic University) gave the keynote lecture (online), who is author of numerous books in the fields of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and contemporary philosophy, including two early works of fundamental importance to the philosophy of the event, namely, *L'Événement et le Monde* (Paris: PUF, 1998; English, 2009), and

*L'Événement et le Temps* (Paris: PUF, 1999; English, 2013). Gert-Jan van der Heiden (Radboud University, Nijmegen) gave the conference's open plenary lecture, who is author of four books in the fields of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and contemporary continental philosophy, among them *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event, and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy* (Duquesne University Press, 2014), and *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy: The Outcast and the Spirit* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023). Gaetano Chiurazzi (University of Turin / Collège International de Philosophie, Paris) delivered another plenary lecture, who is author of numerous books in the fields of ontology, metaphysics, and philosophy of technology and information — with a particular focus on Ancient Greek, Classic German, and Contemporary French Philosophy — among them *Dynamis. Ontologia dell'incommensurabile* (Milan: Guerini & Associati, 2017; English and Spanish, 2021), and *Détours de Derrida* (Mimesis, 2020). Of the two American plenary speakers, François Raffoul (Louisiana State University) was the first to give his speech (online), who is author of four books on continental thought, among them *The Origins of Responsibility* (Indiana University Press, 2010); and *Thinking the Event* (Indiana University Press, 2020). Finally, Daniela Vallega-Neu (University of Oregon) delivered her plenary presentation (online), who is author of four books on Heidegger, and ontology related to the questions of body and time, among them *Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indiana University Press, 2003), and *Heidegger's Poietic Writings. From Contributions to Philosophy to The Event* (Indiana University Press, 2018). (These plenary presentations, as well as a conference video, can be viewed on YouTube at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/@EVENT-and-its-Mediation>.)

During the conference's seventeen sessions, an additional fifty scholars gave presentations. The speakers traveled to Miskolc from twenty countries around the world, including Austria, Canada, China, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the USA. The Organizing Committee also made a special effort to attract a significant number of doctoral students, and as a result, sixteen PhD candidate participated with presentations at the event.

As for publications based on the conference presentations, in addition to this edited open-access conference volume, a separate volume will also be published. From the fifty-five presentations given at the conference, the Editorial Board selected the written and revised versions of twenty-three authors' presentations for publication in this open-access volume. The other volume will appear in print and will contain the written versions of the conference's five plenary lectures and seven additional studies; it is planned to be published with the title *Contributions to Continental Event-Philosophy*, as part of the *Post-Kantian European Philosophy* (P-KEP) series by Mohr Siebeck in Tübingen.

The Organizing Committee would like to take this opportunity to thank all conference participants for their dedicated work and for contributing to the success of the event and the completion of this volume.

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## EDITORIAL REVIEW STATEMENT

The chapters included in this volume are revised and expanded versions of papers presented at the international interdisciplinary conference *EVENT and Its Mediation: Philosophical, Philological, Religious Studies, Literary and Cultural Theoretical Perspectives*, with a primary focus on philosophy.

Following the conference, authors were invited to submit full manuscripts for consideration. Each manuscript was independently evaluated by two members of the editorial board (double editorial review) according to predefined scholarly criteria. This process differs from external peer review, as the evaluations were conducted by the editors of the volume. The review considered the originality of the contribution, academic quality, argumentative rigor, relevance to the thematic focus of the volume, clarity of presentation, and compliance with accepted standards of scholarly writing.

Based on the reviewers' recommendations, manuscripts were accepted, accepted subject to revision, or rejected. Where revisions were requested, authors were required to address the reviewers' comments. The final publication decision was made by the volume editors on the basis of the review reports and the satisfactory completion of the revision process.

The editorial review was conducted confidentially, impartially, and in accordance with internationally recognized standards of academic publishing and the ethical principles promoted by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

This volume is published in Open Access by the University of Miskolc, with the aim of ensuring the widest possible dissemination of high-quality scholarly research.

## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Miklós Nyíró

### TOWARD A GENEALOGY OF PHILOSOPHIES OF THE EVENT: EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION\*

The concept of the ‘event’ did not play a significant role in the history of Western philosophy until the 20th century — with the Stoics perhaps being the only exception.<sup>1</sup> This philosophical tradition has mostly ascribed to ‘events’ a secondary, derivative status: They have generally been conceived as modifications of the attributes of substances or subjects.

Nietzsche, however, revealed that this traditional approach is based on an ‘inferential schema’ encoded in the very grammar — in this “folk metaphysics”<sup>2</sup> — of Indo-European languages: The constraint of the subject-predicate structure of sentence construction gives rise to the interpretative pattern according to which every predicate presupposes a subject, and every process or event is interpreted as the ‘action’ of some agent(s) that brings about a change in the predicate attributed to a subject.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche contrasts this with his own conception of ‘reality’, which is free from all kinds of linguistic (lexical-grammatical) as well as conceptual-logical-

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Miklós Nyíró (2026). “Toward a Genealogy of Philosophies of the Event: Editorial Introduction.” In M. Nyíró, Zs. Lurcza, P. Makai (eds.): *EVENT and Its Mediation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literary Studies, and Cultural Theory* (16–34). Miskolc: Miskolc University Press, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 4–9; Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 5–10.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 214, no. 354.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Project Gutenberg, 2009), no. 17, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm#link2HCH0001>.

metaphysical schematization, namely, reality as a ‘swirling sea of forces’, pure ‘becoming’, an image that exerted a fruitful influence on later philosophies of the event.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequent thought focusing on ‘relations,’ ‘processes,’ and ‘becoming’ also emerged largely in opposition to the long tradition of Greek substance-ontology, of which the Cartesian concept of the ‘subject’ — which defined modernity for centuries — was also an heir. In fact, many philosophical endeavors of the 19th and 20th centuries can be seen as a struggle against the formalism, self-referentiality, and self-sufficiency inherent in Descartes’ idea of *cogito me cogitare* (the subject as a reflective, thinking substance), and, more broadly, against the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy as a fundamental ontological framework.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, alongside Heidegger, it was especially the process philosophies of Bergson and Whitehead that challenged the traditional static, substantialist, and mechanistic ontologies in the most direct and comprehensive way, conceiving of reality as a system of a continuous creative unfolding, or that of processes (a complex network of ‘actual occasions’ in their mutual involvements in relational structures), respectively.

Over the course of the past century, however — in connection with the aforementioned endeavors, and more generally as part of efforts to overcome the so-called ‘metaphysical tradition’ that, while largely dominating the history of European philosophy, sought to uncover the necessary structures of reality and thus ignored contingencies — it is the concept of the event that has increasingly and explicitly

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of how Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical endeavor is underpinned by his early theory of language — rooted in the so-called German ‘semasiological’ tradition — which rejects the traditionally assumed mimetic-representational relationship between ‘reality’ and its linguistic expression, thereby offering a critique of ‘impure reason’ as embodied in language, see Miklós Nyíró, “Nietzsche mint az eseményfenomenológia előfutára [Nietzsche as a Pioneer of a Phenomenology of Events],” *Publicationes Universitatis Miskolcensis, Sectio Philosophica* 27, no. 3 (2023): 136–153. On the formulation of Nietzsche’s undertaking as “a critique of impure reason,” see Joseph Kopperschmidt, “Nietzsches Entdeckung der Rhetorik. Rhetorik im Dienste der Kritik der unreinen Vernunft,” in *Nietzsche oder „Die Sprache ist Rhetorik“*, ed. Josef Kopperschmidt and Helmut Schanze (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994), 39–62. It is noteworthy, furthermore, that Nietzsche understands even this revelatory breakthrough enacted by his own philosophy as an intrusion of ‘reality’ into the schematized human world, and he illuminates such an intrusion with the metaphor of ‘lightning’, through which the impersonal construction (e.g., ‘it’s lightning’, ‘it’ raining’, ‘es blitzt’, ‘es regnet’) and, in certain languages, the middle voice itself provide an adequate linguistic articulation of the ‘innocence of becoming.’

<sup>5</sup> One can refer here, for example, to Hegel’s concept of the formation of consciousness in relation to material work, Marx’s emphasis on the sociality of praxis, the Kierkegaardian focus on the paradoxical nature of human existence, Nietzsche’s critique of Europe’s theoretical culture, Freud’s concepts of the sub- and unconscious, Dilthey’s concept of life, Husserl’s attempt to trace how the entire realm of pure consciousness is constructed through the constitutive acts of transcendental consciousness, and many other philosophical endeavors, including the postmodern *topos* of the ‘death of the subject’. American pragmatism, which emerged in the second half of the 19th century, also began with a comprehensive critique of Cartesianism, rejecting its sharp distinction between subject and object, the mind-body dualism, the pursuit of certainty, as well as the ‘spectatorial’ conceptions of knowledge in general.

come to the forefront of philosophical interest across many different areas of philosophy. A growing number of philosophers have argued that, in describing reality, events should be accorded an independent, even primary and originary — or at the very least, ‘positive-constitutive’ — status. For about seven decades, we have witnessed — and continue to witness — a remarkable flourishing of continental philosophies of the event, a development that can be traced largely to the works of Bergson, Nietzsche, and, above all, Heidegger. Beginning in the 1970s, the concept of the event also came to the fore in the analytic philosophical tradition, particularly in the context of its ‘metaphysical turn’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, after Western philosophy had neglected the concept of the event for millennia, in recent times both the continental and the analytic philosophical traditions have been discussing it intensively and in diverse ways — theoretical reflection on the nature of events and their role in shaping reality has, so to speak, become one of the cornerstones of contemporary philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The program for the ‘rehabilitation’ of metaphysics — in contrast to the anti-metaphysical stance of the logical positivists, and also Quine — was initiated, on the one hand, by Strawson’s work, primarily through his distinction between a ‘descriptive’ metaphysics, which analyzes the structure of the concepts in the common-sense worldview, and a ‘revisionist’ metaphysics, which aims to replace that conceptual structure with a more appropriate one. However, the real breakthrough in this field came particularly from Kripke’s metaphysics — which is based on modal intuitions and applies to all possible worlds — and from Putnam’s semantic externalism, which relies on Kripke’s causal theory of reference. Regarding the nature of events, three distinctly separate theories emerged within the analytic tradition. These are: 1) the conception that individuates events through a specific region of spacetime regarded as their metaphysical constituent; 2) the so-called causal theory, according to which an event is an entity that plays a specific role in the causal processes occurring in the world; and 3) the theory that regards events as the exemplification of properties or relations of objects (substances) at a given time. On analytic metaphysics and competing theories of events, see János Tözsér, *Metafizika [Metaphysics]* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2009), chap. 5.

<sup>7</sup> In this study, I use expressions such as ‘philosophies of the event,’ ‘philosophies of events,’ and ‘event philosophy’ as broadly synonymous designations for philosophical approaches in which the event plays — whether directly or indirectly — a constitutive or otherwise significant role. For a selective list of contributions by thinkers who have anticipated, shaped, or explicitly developed contemporary continental philosophies of the event, see, among others: Giorgio Agamben’s transformation of the relation between potentiality and actuality; Alain Badiou’s seminal theory of events (*L’Être et l’Événement*); Renaud Barbaras’ radicalization of phenomenology toward an ontology of desire, movement, and subjectivity; Maurice Blanchot, who had a major influence on many post-structuralist thinkers (such as Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Nancy, etc.); Jocelyn Benoist’s critical rethinking of phenomenality, givenness, and the limits of phenomenology; Henri Bergson’s emphasis on pure mobility, unforeseeable novelty, and creativity; John D. Caputo’s post-metaphysical theology of the event; Jean-Louis Chrétien’s philosophy of call, response, and responsibility; Françoise Dastur’s analyses of temporality, finitude, death, and the event; Gilles Deleuze theorizing about immanent events and rhizomes; Natalie Depraz’s investigations of surprise, affectivity, and intersubjectivity; Jacques Derrida, who explored the deconstructive potential of the *arrivant*; Éliane Escoubas’ phenomenological engagement with art, imagination, and appearing; Emmanuel Falque’s work on birth, death, suffering, incarnation, finitude, etc.; Didier Franck’s rethinking of embodiment, flesh, and alterity; Ole Fogh Kirkeby’s distinction between the

In the field of continental philosophies of the event, one of the most decisive breakthroughs was undoubtedly Heidegger's rethinking of Being in terms of temporality, historicity, and eventually *Ereignis*. Already in his early philosophical project entitled 'pre-theoretical science of origins', the young Heidegger characterized lived experience as a non-objectifiable *Ereignis* — anticipating, though not yet

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three layers of the event; *Michel Foucault's* analyses of the evental emergence of discourses and historical formations; *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, who emphasized the event-like unfolding of understanding; *Martin Heidegger's* pioneering rethinking of Being in terms of *Ereignis*; *Michel Henry*, who conceived the event in relation to the immanent self-affection of life; *Pierre Klossowski's* exploration of the evental disruption of identity, subjectivity, and representation; *Jacques Lacan*, who situated the event in relation to the irruption of the Real and the transformative effects of the signifier; *François Laruelle's* reconceiving philosophical thought through the event of radical immanence; *Emmanuel Levinas's* notion of the encounter with the Other as an irreducible event of ethical alterity; *Jean-François Lyotard*, who explored the event as the occurrence of the unforeseen and the limits of representation; *Catherine Malabou*, who deals, among others, with traumatic events; *Henri Maldiney's* event-oriented phenomenology centered on the transformative encounter between existence and world; *Jean-Luc Marion*, who interprets the event as an excess of givenness and donation; *Quentin Meillassoux's* radicalization of the contingency of the event toward absolute contingency; *Jean-Luc Nancy*, who conceived the event in terms of exposure, and the coming-into-presence of existence; *Jan Patočka's* concept of the movements of existence and his phenomenology of appearing; *Marc Richir's* investigations of the evental and proto-temporal dimensions of phenomenological appearing; *Paul Ricoeur's* explorations of the evental character of interpretation, action, and the emergence of meaning; *Claude Romano's* eventual hermeneutics; *Gilbert Simondon's* theory of individuation; *Bernard Stiegler*, who linked the event to technics, individuation, and the transformation of temporal experience; *László Tengelyi*, who discussed 'fate-constituting events'; *Gianni Vattimo* developing the Heideggerian *Ereignis* in the direction of weak thought; *Paul Virilio's* philosophy of the accident produced by technological innovation; *Bernhard Waldenfels's* analyses of the disruptive experience of the 'foreign'; *Alfred North Whitehead's* process philosophy; and *Slavoj Žižek's* interpretation of the event as a rupture that transforms the symbolic coordinates of reality.

Among the important predecessors in the continental tradition, one can name, e.g., *Louis Althusser*, who reconceived history as a process marked by aleatory encounters and contingent conjunctures; *Georges Bataille*, as a precursor of later French thinking on rupture, excess, impossibility, and transformation; *Martin Buber's* philosophy centered on the I–Thou encounter; *Edmund Husserl*, as the foundational figure of phenomenology and an influential precursor of later event-oriented phenomenology; *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, who explored the event in the context of sensory experience and corporeality; *Friedrich Nietzsche*, whose critique of substantialist ontology anticipated key themes of event phenomenology; *Jacques Rancière*, who theorized the evental disruption of established orders of perception, representation, and political subjectivity; *Franz Rosenzweig*, whose philosophy explored revelation as an event that interrupts totality; and *Jean-Paul Sartre*, whose existentialist concepts of freedom, situation, and rupture contributed to the event-oriented rethinking of subjectivity and existence.

The core analytic canon within the field of the metaphysics of events includes, e.g., *Donald Davidson*, who developed an influential causal theory of events; *Jaegwon Kim*, who analyzed events as property exemplifications; *David Lewis*, who developed a systematic metaphysics of events centered on spatiotemporal and causal criteria of event identity; and *Terence Parsons*, who developed a theory of event individuation based on the properties exemplified by events.

equivalent to, the later concept of *Ereignis*.<sup>8</sup> In *Being and Time*, however, Heidegger comes to characterize the peculiar mobility of human existence as the distinctive “historizing” (*Geschehen*) of Being-there (*Dasein*).<sup>9</sup> By contrast, events (*Ereignisse*) appear in this work primarily as occurrences that happen to beings within the world and thus belong to the realm of actualities rather than possibilities. As a result, the concept of the event does not acquire a proper existential significance in *Being and Time*,<sup>10</sup> still less the distinctive philosophical role that *Ereignis* will come to occupy in Heidegger’s later thinking. From the very beginning, then, Heidegger’s thinking was oriented toward a primacy of the temporal, historical, and eventual over the substantial and objective. This orientation subsequently led him, within the framework of his critique of the history of Western ontology, to characterize the traditional understanding of Being in terms of ‘presence-at-hand’ (*Vorhandenheit*) and, more broadly, to criticize the metaphysical privileging of presence. He contrasted this with his own increasingly temporalized conception of Being, in which the ‘event of appropriation’ (*Ereignis*) came to serve as “the guiding word of [Heidegger’s] thinking since 1936.”<sup>11</sup>

Heidegger was undoubtedly one of the most pervasive and consequential sources for twentieth-century French thought. In his monumental work on Heidegger’s legacy in France from the late 1920s to the end of the 20th century, Dominique Janicaud demonstrates just how far Heidegger’s influence extended, beyond academic

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Die Idee der Philosophie und das Weltanschauungsproblem* (Kriegsnotsemester, 1919 winter), in *Gesamtausgabe* 56/57, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, ed. Bernd Heimbüchel (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1987), 75. Over the years, Heidegger would come to designate this realm of origin — traditionally regarded as ineffable — by the terms *Ur-etwas*, life-in-and-for-itself, the historical self, factual life experience, and, finally, Being-there (*Dasein*), cf. Theodor Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 9, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 427.

<sup>10</sup> See Miklós Nyíró, “A ’történés’ ontológiájáról, Veress Károly Bevezetés a hermeneutikába című kötete kapcsán [On the Ontology of ‘Historizing,’ in Connection with Károly Veress’s Book *Introduction to Hermeneutics*],” *Publicationes Universitatis Miskolcensis, Sectio Philosophica* 26, no. 1 (2022): 83–86.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 241. The transition from the project of *Being and Time* to Heidegger’s later thinking of *Ereignis* becomes particularly evident in *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and D. Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012). In her introductory volume to that work, Daniela Vallega-Neu reconstructs Heidegger’s transformative turn as that from propositional thought toward the poetic, performative mode of thinking and language, in which language itself participates in the coming-to-presence of what is thought, thereby allowing Being to speak — or eventuate — through language, with the consequence of the displacement of the subject, cf. Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

philosophy into literature, theology, psychoanalysis, politics, and the humanities and social sciences. As a matter of fact, Janicaud explicitly speaks of “the omnipresence in France of the influence, direct or indirect, of Heidegger’s thought and work”, and even puts forward a rather striking, conclusive historical thesis, namely that “[a]part from the mathematical sciences and life and earth sciences, there is hardly any sector of knowledge or intellectual activity that has not been positively or negatively affected by that thought.”<sup>12</sup>

Within French philosophy, however, Heidegger’s influence was by no means uniform, nor was it exclusive of other intellectual currents. As Janicaud’s reconstruction shows, instead of a single, continuous and homogeneous transmission of a fixed body of ideas, the French reception of Heidegger was heterogeneous, inventive, and complex, marked by ruptures, upheavals, reversals, and delays.<sup>13</sup> Heidegger’s presence in France was mediated, across successive and partly overlapping phases, by the interventions of particular thinkers — notably, among others, Koyré (and, indirectly, Kojève’s Heideggerian reception of Hegel) in the 1930s; Levinas from the late 1920s through the 1930s; Sartre and Merleau-Ponty from the 1940s; Beaufret, Hyppolite, and Birault in the postwar period; and, later, Derrida’s deconstructive reconfiguration of Heidegger.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger’s thought was shaped, moreover, by institutions, texts and translations, competing interpretations and controversies, and intellectual movements that appropriated different aspects of his work for different purposes. French philosophers often brought Heideggerian ideas into dialogue with a variety of other intellectual traditions, including Husserlian phenomenology, Hegelianism, Nietzscheanism, Marxism, existentialism, structuralism, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, theology, and French philosophy of science.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger in France*, trans. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 301.

<sup>13</sup> One particularly striking example of such delays is that *Being and Time* was not translated in its entirety into French until 1985–86: Emmanuel Martineau’s complete translation appeared in 1985, followed by François Vezin’s Gallimard edition in 1986. This helps explain why the French reception of Heidegger developed through a peculiar combination of partial translations, lectures, essays, personal mediation, and — crucially — Heidegger’s later writings.

<sup>14</sup> François Raffoul reconstructs three paradigmatic forms of Heidegger’s reception in France, arguing that, from the 1930s onward, his influence was articulated, respectively, through Sartre’s early existentialism and its reinterpretation of the Cartesian inheritance; ethics, phenomenology, and alterity in Levinas; and deconstruction and the question of the end of metaphysics in Derrida, cf. François Raffoul, “Heidegger in Modern French Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern French Philosophy*, ed. Mark Sinclair and Daniel Whistler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 471–486. On the fundamental importance of Heidegger for the development of French philosophy in the twentieth century, see Gary Gutting, “Footnotes to Heidegger? The ‘Master Thinker’ in Recent French Philosophy,” in *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 50–66.

<sup>15</sup> For a systematic account of the diverse intellectual traditions shaping modern French philosophy, see Mark Sinclair and Daniel Whistler, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern French Philosophy*; this

Indeed, although a significant portion of later French philosophies of the event takes, in one way or another, Heidegger's constellation of *Sein* and *Zeit*, and later *Ereignis*, as a point of departure, their engagement with Heidegger extends far beyond the appropriation of *Ereignis* as a philosophical concept. What they inherit from Heidegger is, rather, a broader constellation of problems and concepts — including Being, *Dasein*, temporality, ontology, existence, alterity, ethics, humanism, and the critique of metaphysics, among others — which is reconfigured in different ways in

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volume also offers accounts about the influence of major thinkers on French thought from abroad: pt. II, "Influences": Knox Peden, "Spinoza in Modern French Philosophy," 421–436; Andrea Bellantone, "Hegel in Modern French Philosophy," 437–454; Franck Fischbach, "Marx in Modern French Philosophy," 455–470; and François Raffoul, "Heidegger in Modern French Philosophy," 471–486. For a complementary account of the Hegelian, existentialist, Nietzschean, and phenomenological strands of postwar French philosophy, see Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960*, "The Hegelian Challenge," 24–49; "Whatever Happened to Existentialism?," 67–83; "How They All Are Nietzscheans," 84–116; "Phenomenology, Religion, and Incomprehensibility: Derrida and Marion," 149–164. For a broader intellectual and conceptual map that situates major twentieth-century French philosophical debates within wider networks of phenomenology, existentialism, Hegelianism, Nietzscheanism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, and the French philosophy of science, while also tracing changing conceptions of subjectivity, history, language, ethics, and ontology, see Alan D. Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy: Key Themes and Thinkers* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). For another comprehensive intellectual map of twentieth-century French philosophy, with particular attention to its Hegelian, Heideggerian, Nietzschean, phenomenological, existentialist, and post-structuralist strands, see Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a discussion of historical rupture, novelty, difference, and the breakdown of teleological time as recurring problems in postwar French philosophy, see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For the structuralist and post-structuralist background of later philosophies of the event, particularly the reconfiguration of relations among structure, history, discontinuity, and the subject, see François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. 1, *The Rising Sign, 1945–1966*, and vol. 2, *The Sign Sets, 1967–Present*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). For the role of psychoanalysis, particularly Freud and Lacan, in relation to Marxism, phenomenology, structuralism, and other major intellectual currents shaping postwar French philosophy, see Étienne Balibar and John Rajchman, eds., *French Philosophy Since 1945: Problems, Concepts, Inventions* (New York: The New Press, 2011). For an extensive historical-systematic account of the 'new phenomenology' in France, focusing particularly on Richir, Henry, and Marion and addressing questions of meaning-formation, embodiment, passivity, givenness, alterity, and the event, see Hans-Dieter Gondek and László Tengelyi, *Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011); for a concise English-language overview of that volume, highlighting the emergence and main concerns of the 'new phenomenology' in France, and its engagement with subjectivity, alterity, and the event-like character of appearing, see László Tengelyi, "New Phenomenology in France," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 50, no. 2 (2012): 295–303. For a comparative account of how post-Heideggerian thinkers rethink the possibility and limits of ontology, including sustained discussions of Badiou, Nancy, Agamben, Romano, Meillassoux, and Heidegger, see Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event, and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2014). For a systematic reconstruction of competing approaches to the event, with particular attention to Heidegger, Derrida, Nancy, and Marion and to the event's implications for phenomenology, ontology, subjectivity, ethics, and politics, see François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

their respective projects. At the same time, Heidegger constitutes only one strand within a plurality of overlapping genealogical lines of the ‘event’ in French philosophy, alongside Bergsonian duration, especially in Deleuze; phenomenological accounts of appearing and manifestation, from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to Richir and Tengelyi; conceptions of historical rupture and discontinuity, from Hegel and Marx to structuralism and Foucault; and the distinctive notions of the event articulated by Deleuze, Derrida, and Badiou.<sup>16</sup>

These genealogical lines, however, do not all engage the concept of the event in the same way or to the same degree. Not all of the thinkers included in this field developed an explicit ‘philosophy of the event’, and inclusion in the genealogy does not presuppose that they endorse the event as a privileged philosophical category. The genealogical reconstruction proposed here is therefore partly retrospective: It identifies event-oriented structures in philosophies that did not necessarily understand themselves as philosophies of the event. Accordingly, it is useful to distinguish among these approaches by means of three categories: First, those who develop an explicit philosophy of the event in a strict sense; second, those whose philosophies are strongly event-oriented, even without making the ‘event’ an explicit central category; and third, those for whom ‘event’ can serve as a productive reconstructive category for illuminating an important aspect of their thought. It seems justified to place Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, Badiou, Romano, and Tengelyi firmly in the first category, while Maldiney, Waldenfels, and Marion occupy a somewhat intermediate position. Among those whose philosophies are strongly event-oriented, we can include, for example, Bergson, Blanchot, Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard, Nancy, Simondon, Meillassoux, and Richir. Finally, among those whose philosophies are not explicitly organized around the concept of the event, but in whose work the concept nevertheless helps to bring certain important aspects of their thought into view, we may include Gadamer, Henry, Lacan, Laruelle, Malabou, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Ricoeur, Stiegler, and Žižek.

A further complication is that, even among philosophers who explicitly thematize the event, the terms they employ do not necessarily refer to the same phenomenon or philosophical structure. Yet the comparative scope of the inquiry requires a broad use of the term ‘event’. Accordingly, ‘event’ is used here deliberately as an umbrella term for a conceptual field encompassing different and often non-equivalent modalities of eventhood, including *Ereignis*, *Geschehen*, *événement*, *avènement*, *arrivant*, *event*, *happening*, *occurrence*, *actual occasion*, and related notions.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Janicaud’s reconstruction is particularly useful for distinguishing two genealogical constellations: The Heidegger–Levinas–Derrida–Marion–Nancy–Richir trajectory, on the one hand, and the Heidegger–Deleuze–Badiou trajectory, on the other.

<sup>17</sup> The use of ‘event’ as an umbrella term is well established in relevant literature; see Étienne Balibar and John Rajchman, eds., *French Philosophy Since 1945: Problems, Concepts, Inventions*. This anthology organizes postwar French philosophy around seven principal clusters of discussion, or areas of inquiry — “In Search of a New Critique”, “Histories of Truth”, “Questions of Difference”,

The concept of ‘process’, however, is more closely associated with the relatively neutral notions of ‘occurrence’ and ‘happening’ than with the more specific philosophical sense of ‘event’; the two should not therefore be treated as synonymous without further qualification. Several continental philosophies of the event do in fact distinguish the event from a mere process, change, or occurrence.<sup>18</sup> In Heideggerian terms, such a distinction can sometimes be drawn between *Ereignis* and *Vorgang*: The former concerns a transformation in the disclosure of Being and meaning rather than merely the occurrence of a change. In turn, a contrasting conception — especially prominent in analytic metaphysics — treats the event primarily as an occurrence or entity: Something that happens and can be individuated, counted, and situated within an ontological framework. The event is thus understood less as a transformation of a horizon of sense, possibility, or subjectivity than as an ontologically identifiable item within the world, as in the event theories of Davidson, Lewis, and Kim. Underlying this contrast, however, are broader differences in philosophical presuppositions and methodological orientation.<sup>19</sup>

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“Event”, “The Subject”, “Institution and Insurrection”, and “Thinking in Art” — and section “IV. Event” conceptualizes the event as a turning point that compels a new way of thinking, thereby bringing questions of time, history, political action, subjectivity, and the emergence of new meaning into a common conceptual field. Accordingly, this section brings together contributions by Goldschmidt, Sartre, Althusser and Balibar, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, and Badiou.

<sup>18</sup> This distinction is also suggested by the etymology of the word ‘event’: Its Latin verbal equivalent, *evenire*, means not only ‘to happen’ or ‘to occur’, but also ‘to befall someone’, for instance in the case of mourning or illness; cf. Alajos Györkösi, ed., *Latin–Magyar szótár [Latin–Hungarian Dictionary]* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994), 202. In this latter sense, an event is not merely something that takes place, but something that befalls or happens to someone who is irreplaceable in its occurrence. One may describe this as a ‘*pro me*’ dimension: The constitutive correlation between the event and its irreplaceable addressee.

<sup>19</sup> For example, analytic approaches have typically, though by no means uniformly, given greater weight to common-sense intuitions and to frameworks such as physicalism, causality, and extensional conceptions of time, whereas phenomenologically inspired approaches seek precisely to interrogate the apparent self-evidence of such presuppositions through a disciplined return to experience and to the conditions under which things come to appear.

These differences become especially significant when it comes to the conception of the ‘world’: Whereas, in much analytic metaphysics, events are treated primarily as entities or occurrences within an independently specified ontological framework, some phenomenologically oriented philosophies of the event conceive events in the strict sense as world-constituting — that is, as capable of opening or transforming the very horizon within which meaning, possibility, and experience are constituted. This, in turn, bears directly on the question of whether an event can be understood merely as a change occurring within an established order, or rather as the emergence of something genuinely new and potentially as a source of meaning-formation. However, for a contemporary effort to move beyond the analytic/continental divide in the philosophy of events, see James Bahoh, Marta Cassina, and Sergio Genovesi, eds., *21st-Century Philosophy of Events: Beyond the Analytic/Continental Divide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025).

These distinctions provide the methodological basis for a comparative typology of philosophies of the event, offered here as a preliminary and tentative orientation. Rather than seeking a single definition of the event, the following discussion approaches these philosophies through four interconnected questions: What is an event? What does an event make possible? What is the event set against? And what happens to the subject in or through the event? These configurations should not be understood as rival definitions of a single phenomenon. Instead, they are intended to identify different dimensions along which philosophies of the event may be compared.

To address the first question — what an event is, or, more precisely, what kind of phenomenon or structure different philosophies identify as an event — it is useful to distinguish several partially overlapping families of meanings associated with the concept of the event. In some, notably Bergson, Simondon, and Deleuze, the event is intimately bound up with ‘becoming and generative processes’. A different line, extending from Heidegger’s *Ereignis* to Gadamer’s *Geschehen*, shifts the question toward the ‘happening of intelligibility’ itself: What occurs in an event is the opening or transformation of a horizon in which Being, meaning, or understanding can appear at all. A third, distinctly phenomenological and ethical configuration, developed in different ways by Levinas, Derrida, Blanchot, Marion, and Waldenfels, conceives the event as an ‘arrival of alterity’. Closely related to this, but more explicitly phenomenological, are the accounts developed by Maldiney, Romano, Tengelyi, and Richir, who can be grouped, for the purposes of the present genealogy, around the idea of a ‘transformation in experience’: For them, the event names the a reconfiguration of experience and its sense.<sup>20</sup> A further family understands the event primarily in terms of ‘historical or ontological rupture’. In Foucault, for example, it marks the contingency and discontinuity of what appears historically necessary; in Badiou, it names a rupture within a situation; and in Žižek, the event assumes the form of a dialectical rupture that alters the coordinates within which a situation is understood. Meillassoux radicalizes the question in another direction by relocating it from historical or phenomenological experience to the level of speculative ontology, where the event becomes an expression of the ‘contingency of reality’ itself. These overlapping configurations should not be regarded as rival definitions of a single phenomenon; rather, they identify different ways in which ‘event’ can function as a philosophical operator.

The second question concerns the transformative efficacy of the event: What does an event make possible, and more specifically in what sense does it introduce something new? Here, too, different philosophies of the event diverge. In Bergson, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Simondon, novelty emerges as a form of creative production — whether understood in terms of duration, creative advance, actualization of the

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted, however, that, within this phenomenological line, Richir develops an important internal critique of the concept of the event, insofar as he resists reducing the archaic instability of appearing to a punctual ‘event’.

virtual, or individuation — rather than as a rupture interrupting an otherwise stable order. In Levinas, Derrida, Marion, Waldenfels, and Romano, by contrast, novelty takes the form of an encounter with what comes from beyond the subject's horizon. In Foucault, Badiou, Žižek, and, in a different register, Meillassoux, novelty assumes the more radical form of rupture: It transforms, suspends, or reconfigures the very regime within which possibilities are constituted.

A further comparative question concerns what each philosophy takes the event to be set against. What the event displaces, resists, or interrupts varies significantly across these philosophies: Mechanical repetition in Bergson; substance and substantialism in Whitehead; the metaphysical privileging of presence and beings in Heidegger; totalization in Levinas; fixed identity in Deleuze; calculability in Derrida; historical necessity in Foucault; established knowledge within the situation in Badiou; and the supposed necessity of the laws of nature in Meillassoux.

What ultimately differentiates these philosophies of the event, then, is not merely how they define the event, but what they mobilize it against and what they seek to make possible by granting it philosophical primacy. The event thus functions both as a critical operator directed against different forms of philosophical closure — through which thought fixes Being, identity, possibility, or meaning — and as a principle of transformation that opens what such closure excludes.

The final question concerns what happens to the subject in and through an event. One important line of thought conceives the event as transformative: An event befalls an already constituted subject, yet changes it in such a way that the subject is no longer quite the same. This is the position found, in different forms, in Badiou, Romano, Maldiney, and Tengelyi. A second line radicalizes this claim by treating the event not merely as something that transforms a subject, but as something constitutive of subjectivity itself. On this view — represented in markedly different ways by Deleuze, Foucault, and Žižek, and with a fundamentally ethical inflection by Levinas — there is no fully constituted subject standing prior to the transformative encounter; subjectivity emerges through what happens to the subject and through the transformations that this entails. A third configuration places greater emphasis on the subject's receptivity to what arrives from beyond its powers of anticipation and appropriation. In Derrida, Marion, Waldenfels, and Blanchot, the subject is thus understood primarily in terms of passivity, exposure, and responsiveness: Rather than mastering the event, it receives or undergoes something that exceeds its capacity to constitute it. Finally, in more radical processual approaches, the very distinction between subject and event is destabilized, since subjectivity is itself understood as an effect, mode, or temporary configuration of a more primordial process of becoming. This is especially evident in Bergson and Simondon, and in a different register in Deleuze. Henry represents an important qualification to this position: Rather than dissolving subjectivity into a process of becoming in the Deleuzian manner, he

relocates subjectivity in the sphere of immanent affective self-experience. Taken together, these configurations reveal markedly different ways of relating eventhood to subjectivity, ranging from transformation and constitution to receptivity and the destabilization of the subject–event distinction.

What ultimately distinguishes the philosophies of the event is not only what they take an event to be, but what they set it against, what kind of novelty they attribute to it, how that novelty opens or reconfigures the field of possibility, and what happens to subjectivity in and through the event.

These comparative distinctions finally point toward a set of fundamental philosophical problems that cut across the different genealogies of the event. The question of the event is not merely a question of definition or conceptual classification; it bears more broadly on fundamental problems in ontology, ethics, politics, and technics.<sup>21</sup>

One important fault line in continental event philosophy concerns the status of the event in relation to ontology. Some approaches, beginning with Heidegger and continuing in different forms in Deleuze and others, seek to rethink ontology through the event;<sup>22</sup> others, including Levinas, Derrida, Badiou, and Romano, emphasize, in different ways, the event’s irreducibility to an established ontological order or other

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event*, “The Event of Being,” 186–232; “Event, World, Democracy,” 233–286; and “The Ethics of the Event,” 309–322.

<sup>22</sup> Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, closely connected to both Heidegger’s early and later philosophical projects, though less directly to *Being and Time* itself, offers a related but less explicitly event-ontological trajectory, in which understanding itself takes on an event-like, participatory, and medial character. In articulating the central aims of his magnum opus, Gadamer repeatedly invoked Emil Staiger’s formulation: “To grasp [conceptually] what grips us” (*Begreifen, was uns ergreift*), quoted in Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer. Eine Biographie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1999), 320. Gadamer was thus concerned with what might be called the ‘event-like unfolding of understanding’ in this work — namely, with those instances in which self-transcending, ecstatic participation occurs in an event of meaning-formation — a concern that he explored in relation to the experience of art, history, and the linguistically mediated world. According to the work, however, these modes of experience are characterized at their core as an engagement in the ‘medial’ movement of play, or as a dialogical encounter akin to play, in the course of which the participants are grasped by, and thereby lose themselves in, an autonomous, self-contained, play-like, ‘medial’ movement, cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London / New York: Continuum, 1989), 91–98. Here, the player’s dissolution in the movement amounts to a paradigmatic realization of the idea of a ‘medial agent’ being led by the movement of a ‘medial event’ — with ‘medial’ referring to the ‘*pro me*’ dimension inherent in the constitutive correlation between the event and its irreplaceable addressee, as discussed in footnote 18. Gadamer’s approach may accordingly be characterized as ‘event-medial’, insofar as it is structured around this relation between a medial agent and a medial event. This structure finds a grammatical analogue in the linguistic phenomenon known as the ‘middle voice’; for a discussion of this parallel, see Miklós Nyíró, “Hermeneutics, Practice, Event. An Attempt at Re-Conceptualizing Human Agency,” *Phainomena: Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* 32, nos. 124–125 (2023), 38–42.

prior conditions of determination.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the ontological status of the event is only one of these broader, transversal problematics.

A second cluster of problems concerns the ethical implications of the event for alterity, exposure, and response, as articulated in different ways by Levinas, Derrida, and Waldenfels. In Levinas, the event can be understood, in this ethical register, through the encounter with alterity, in which the subject is constituted as responsible rather than as an autonomous origin of meaning. Derrida radicalizes this structure by linking the event to incalculability and to what he calls the ‘absolute future’, while Waldenfels reformulates it in terms of responsivity: What happens to us precedes our response, and the subject emerges as one who is called upon to respond.<sup>24</sup> In these different approaches, the event therefore marks not only

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<sup>23</sup> Badiou provides one of the most radical versions of this latter position. In his influential mathematical ontology, grounded in set theory — which conceives any situation in terms of the relation between the ‘void’ and the ‘infinite’, as unfolding according to the laws governing the presentation and representation of the multiplicity it contains — the event cannot be presented as an element of a situation and therefore cannot be identified ontologically from within the situation. From the standpoint of being-qua-being, the event does not exist; consequently, “ontology has nothing to say about the event”; cf. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 184–190, quote: 190.

In contrast, Romano offers a phenomenological critique of Heidegger’s attempt to think the event ‘ontologically’. He argues that the various ‘existentials’ of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology ultimately function as ‘timeless’ structural elements, rendering human existence insufficiently open to genuine events. As opposed to that, Romano’s phenomenological analysis presents events in the strict sense as anarchic origins in themselves: They generate the horizon of their own intelligibility and thereby transform and re-found the world of their addressees; cf. Claude Romano, *Event and World*, 10–22, esp. §3, “Events from the Perspective of Heideggerian ‘Ontology’,” and 23–56, esp. §§4–9. Thus, for Romano, events constitute a radically a-subjective and non-ontological starting point for understanding the world, the self, and historicity; cf. Miklós Nyirő, “Claude Romano az események ‘fenomenalitásáról’ [Claude Romano on the ‘Phenomenality’ of Events],” *Erdélyi Múzeum* 85, no. 4 (2023): 25–37.

On the priority of the ethical relation over ontology, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 48–52. On the event’s opposition to what is already possible, predictable, and programmable, see Jacques Derrida, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 2 (2007): 441–461, esp. 450–454. See also Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event, and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy*, esp. pt. II, chap. 4, “Advent or Birth: Two Models of the Event,” 138–184, and chap. 5, “Absolute Beginning or Absolute Contingency,” 185–224, which discuss Heidegger, Romano, and Meillassoux; see also the discussion of Badiou in chap. 1., 34–62.

<sup>24</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 99–129, esp. 112–114, on substitution, responsibility, and the constitution of subjectivity; Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 228–298, esp. 252–257, on undecidability, incalculability, decision, and responsibility; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 28–30, on the “absolute future” and the coming of the

the advent of something new but also a transformation in the very structure of ethical subjectivity.

A further problematic concerns the political significance of the event. Here, the event can mark a rupture or reconfiguration of an established political order and thereby alter the field of political possibility, as articulated in different ways by Foucault, Badiou, Rancière, and Derrida. In Foucault, the event is linked to historical discontinuities that reveal the contingency of apparently necessary forms of knowledge and social order; in Badiou, the political event constitutes a radical rupture within a situation and, through the procedures of intervention and fidelity that follow from it, makes possible the emergence of a political subject; in Rancière, it is associated with moments of dissensus that disturb established distributions of places, identities, and visibility; and in Derrida, it is tied to the undecidability and risk inherent in responsible political decision.<sup>25</sup> Across these approaches, the political significance of the event lies in its capacity to disrupt established configurations of power and intelligibility and to reconfigure the field of political possibility.

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event; Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 28–29, on the relations among the “perhaps,” the future, and the event; Bernhard Waldenfels, “Phenomenology between Pathos and Response,” *Coactivity: Philosophy, Communication / Santalka: Filosofija, Komunikacija* 17, no. 3 (2009): 92–102, esp. on the temporal precedence of pathos over response and the irreducible delay between them;

Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts*, trans. Tanja Stahler (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 21–42, esp. the sections “Patient and Respondent,” “Temporal Diastasis,” “Responsivity,” and “Call and Response.” See also Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960*, chap. 6, “The Turn to Ethics: Levinas and Deleuze,” 117–132; chap. 7, “The Turn to Ethics: Derrida, Levinas, and Foucault,” 133–148; and chap. 9, “Ontology, Ethics, and Incomprehensibility: Alain Badiou,” 165–183; and François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event*, “The Ethics of the Event,” 309–322.

<sup>25</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 4–12, on discontinuity as a positive category of historical analysis, and 21–31, esp. 27–28, on the description of discursive events and the specificity and conditions of their occurrence; Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–164, esp. 142–151, on the singularity of events, discontinuity, and genealogy’s rejection of teleological historical narratives; Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, 178–190, on the event and its irreducibility to the situation; 201–211, on intervention; 232–239, on fidelity; and 411–430, esp. 412–419, on subjectivization, truth, and the emergence of the subject; Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. and intro. Jason Barker (London / New York: Verso, 2005), 58–67, “Subjectivity without a Subject,” and 141–152, “Politics as Truth Procedure”; Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21–60, esp. 43–52, on dissensus and the disruption of the police order; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12–19, esp. 12–14, on the distribution of places and positions and the delimitation of the visible and invisible; and Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law,” 228–298, esp. 233–238, on law, justice, force, and the inaugural rupture of the founding act.

A final transversal problematic concerns the transformative role of technics in individuation and subject formation, as explored especially by Simondon, Stiegler, and Malabou. In Simondon, technical objects participate in processes of individuation and in the co-constitution of individuals and their milieu; Stiegler radicalizes this interrelation by treating technics as constitutive of human temporality, memory, and the formation of subjectivity; and in Malabou, the question can be approached through the plasticity and adaptive capacity of subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, the event may also be approached as a transformation mediated by technical, material, and situational conditions.

In conclusion, several broader implications emerge from the foregoing analysis. The genealogies and comparative distinctions traced here suggest that the contemporary turn to the event is less the emergence of a single philosophical doctrine than a broad reorientation of thought: From substance to becoming, from fixed structures to historical and experiential transformation, and from constituted subjects and established orders to the possibility of their disruption and reconfiguration. In this sense, the event — in its diverse and often non-equivalent forms — names not a single phenomenon or unified object of philosophical inquiry, but rather a family of strategies for engaging with what exceeds, disrupts, or transforms what is already given: A plurality of ways through which philosophy has sought to think the emergence of novelty and alterity, and the metamorphoses through which established horizons of meaning and possibility are reconfigured.

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<sup>26</sup> See Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017), 59–66, esp. 59–61 and 63–66; Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 134–182, esp. on the constitution of the human through technicity; 183–184, on temporality and technicity; and 204–238, on epiphylogenesis and the ‘already there’; and Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), “Plasticity’s Fields of Action,” 15–31; “The Central Power in Crisis,” 32–54; and “You Are Your Synapses,” 55–77. On the technical yet simultaneously ontological transversal problems of possibility and actuality, continuity and rupture, symmetry and asymmetry, contingency and transformation, and their implications for the event and the technological reconfiguration of reality, see Gaetano Chiurazzi, *Dynamis: Ontology of the Incommensurable* (Zürich: Springer, 2021), and *Seconde nature. De Lascaux au numérique*, rev. trans. Matteo Manicacci (Milan / Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2024).

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## EDITORIAL SUMMARY OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS

Miklós Nyíró

### THE ‘EVENT’ IS SAID IN MANY WAYS: EDITORIAL SUMMARY OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS\*

The present volume comprises twenty-three studies devoted to the theme of the ‘event’ and its mediation. While predominantly philosophical in orientation, it also includes contributions from theology, literary studies, and cultural theory.

Given not only the disciplinary, but also the thematic diversity of the contributions — even within the same field of study — as well as the multifaceted implications and overlaps of the topics discussed, it was not possible to group the studies according to any clear thematic order. Classifying them according to the chronological order of the authors they discuss also proved possible only to a limited extent. Nevertheless, a few basic distinctions or possible criteria for grouping have clearly emerged. The most fundamental of these is between studies that are explicitly philosophical in nature and those that belong to other disciplines. The concept of the ‘event’ is ubiquitous, and different academic disciplines approach events within their respective fields, examining them at varying levels of abstraction. They also describe and interpret phenomena related to the ‘mediation’ of events through their own disciplinary frameworks, thereby offering a wide range of perspectives on the topic. *The ‘event’ is said in many ways* — and this diversity is also reflected through different disciplinary approaches.

This could have justified classifying the studies into a philosophical chapter and a chapter devoted to other disciplines. We followed this approach only

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partially, however. Five papers in the fields of literary studies and cultural theory have been included in the concluding third chapter, but those studies that address some aspect of the ‘divine event’ — whether approached from the perspective of continental philosophy or Christian theology — have been placed in a separate chapter. The reason for this is primarily that the Christian tradition has proven to be a source of inspiration in many respects for the continental philosophies of the ‘event’: There are numerous aspects of classical Christian theology which — although they were not previously described using the concept of ‘event’ due to the millennia-long dominance of Greek metaphysical frameworks — are today characterized as ‘event-like’ in light of such philosophies. Examples, which obviously predate the recent boom of event philosophies, include revelation, the ‘Christ-event’, the Holy Trinity, grace, salvation, the Eucharist, liturgy, the Church, etc. Thus, we have placed two studies on religious topics, as well as an additional study on Schelling’s philosophy — as an important precursor to event philosophy — at the beginning of the volume, in the first chapter.

Of the fifteen studies representing the philosophical approach, the majority belong to the field of continental philosophy; one additional study discusses Wittgenstein, while another represents the analytic approach. Among the former, some are linked to one another through the authors discussed, others by exploring similar topics — e.g., that of responsibility and moral identity, which are also central themes in the present context — still others by focusing on authors who either offer an alternative to event philosophy or specifically critique it. The placement of one study was motivated by its comprehensive treatment of French philosophies of the event, while the study on artificial intelligence — which also draws on continental philosophies of language — was placed at the end of the chapter on philosophy, mainly because of its applied philosophical character. Nevertheless, even when all these factors are taken into account, the classification of the studies cannot be considered unambiguous.

In the following, I briefly summarize the individual studies included in the volume, reconstructing their main lines of argument as they appear from my reading of the contributions.

## **I. Divine Event: Philosophical and Theological Approaches**

*Robert Grzywacz*’s study compares Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of discourse and Richir’s transcendental phenomenology in their distinct interpretations of biblical prehistory, treated not as historical reports, but as a privileged narrative medium where the event of revelation occurs. Revelation thus appears not as a supernatural message but as a symbolic disclosure of the origins and fundamental truths about the human condition, a disclosure that emerges through the reading of these primordial narratives about pre-historical times. As the author shows,

however, the significance of these narratives will differ according to Ricoeur's and Richir's distinct approaches to the very act of reading. Namely, in Ricoeur's view, revelation may lead — due to the polyphonic, multiple literary forms of biblical texts that name God in diverse ways, without reducing it to a single concept — to the purification of the reader's self from narcissistic tendencies, reshaping it in the form of a 'shattered' identity with its center always to be newly regained. This process is accompanied in Ricoeur's case by a cosmically realist understanding of biblical prehistory, distinct from datable history yet foundational for it, framed along the temporally layered nodal points — borrowed from Rosenzweig — of creation (as a contingent and fragile order functioning as a continually renewed beginning of an immemorial past), revelation (as an ever-repeated address to the individual in the present), and redemption (as the advent of a new historical reality). In Richir's view, however — for whom the most archaic phenomenization takes place in schematism that operates within the domain of non-intentional *phantasia* (in the primordial and unrepresentable *chôra*) driven by blind and anonymous affectivity — revelation occurs not primarily through symbolic-linguistic structures but through immediate affective-empathic experience awakened by reading the emotional life of characters. Accordingly, his interpretation of biblical motifs — primarily through Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd* — portrays tyranny and self-hatred as distortions of primordial innocent affectivity (the 'lost paradise'), distortions that underlie the symbolic institution of culture and the socio-political order of humanity. The study concludes that, although for both thinkers 'revelation' essentially promises a possible liberation from the narcissistic illusions of the human self, Ricoeur takes a more positive stance, while Richir is far more skeptical regarding the possibility of renewal in the face of the internal conflicts within the human being.

Lorenzo Pompeo's essay draws attention to the central role of the concept of the 'event' in the recent rediscovery of Paul of Tarsus' thought (e. g., in the works of Heidegger, Badiou, Bultmann, and Tillich) and examines the theologian Erik Peterson's eschatological interpretation of St. Paul's *Letters* primarily because it is distinctive in explicitly connecting the notions of 'event' and 'sacrament'. Central to Peterson's sacramental understanding of the event is the Pauline inspired notion of the 'new aeon' — a radical temporal rupture, inaugurated by Christ's resurrection and enthronement, which ends the old cosmos and establishes a qualitatively new cosmic order — a notion that is closely linked to both the act of baptism and a new understanding of the relation between history and eternity. Namely, baptism is not to be understood merely as a ritual of symbolic significance, but rather, as the decisive event of an effective sacramental participation in the Christ-event, i. e., a real incorporation into Christ's death and

resurrection that is both present and incomplete, being the condition of the intermediate stage of an ‘eschatological reservation’ anticipating future resurrection. Baptism thus inaugurates entry into the new creation and thereby transfers believers from the old to the new aeon, giving them a new sacramental status in which their entire being merge into the sacramental union between the individual, the communal essence of the Church, and God. As the author emphasizes, this rupture between the old life (in the flesh) and the new life (in Christ) does not take place in the believer’s sovereign experience, but in the sacramental event that God makes happen and therefore cannot be appropriated. History is divided accordingly: The old passage of time is overcome by a new aeon brought about by the eschatological event of the enthronement of Christ, which is the event of the emergence of a new, eschatological quality of time, as opposed to mere historical time. The paper also points out Peterson’s critique of Lutheran interpretations of the Gospel, which reduce it to forgiveness of individual sins, although Paul announces Christ’s cosmic victory over Adamic original sin. It criticizes modern philosophical trends, too, that spiritualize or dematerialize the meaning of the sacraments, even though they involve real material substances that affect real bodies. The essay concludes by emphasizing that as a definitive experience of the true event of Christ’s self-giving, the sacramental event is a concrete irruption of the new aeon into history, which brings about a change of being, yet, it is also paradoxical: Christ is revealed and concealed, historically present yet eschatologically awaited.

*Huimin Wu*’s study fulfills two main objectives. It argues for the inherent unity of Schelling’s philosophy by demonstrating a unified ontological ‘logic’ at work in it, and shows how this logic supplements contemporary event philosophies. The essay challenges the traditional ‘myth of rupture’ that portrays Schelling’s philosophy as fragmented across disconnected periods, proposing instead that a unified ontological dynamics underpins the philosopher’s early and late thought, forming a coherent system. The dynamics in question is that of the ‘Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis’ triad rooted in the ‘*Ungrund*’ — which is not chaos, but a primordial source of two complementary latent potencies, namely, an inwardly contracting ‘rooting impulse’ of a ‘dark drive’ and an outwardly ekstastic ‘luminous force’ that guides toward self-manifestation, the undifferentiated unity of which transcends the opposition between being and non-being — a concept that Schelling posits in order to reject traditional metaphysics’ various notions of a static ‘ground of being’. The author shows that the ‘Latency’ of the unmanifested potency tension in the *Ungrund* compels a ‘decision’ that transforms latency into actuality by divine contraction. Namely, ‘Contraction’ is potency’s self-limitation that generates the ontological difference between *Grund*

and *Existenz* as embodiments of the two potencies, standing in a dialectical relation, but necessarily leaving an unintegrated ‘ontological remainder’ (the overly solidified ‘dark drive’ during contraction) that is the ontological origin of ‘the possibility of evil’. In turn, ‘Ekstasis’ refers to the domain-specific unfolding of this ontological difference, followed by a return to the original unity of potencies, completing the cycle. The study demonstrates how this Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic is at work unconsciously in nature (via physical, chemical, and biological phenomena) and consciously in history (via conflict, freedom, and evil), reenacting the *Ungrund*’s tension. The essay concludes by arguing that Schelling’s notion of the perpetual generative ‘meta-event’ of divine decision, reenacted across domains, is able to resolve tensions in current event philosophy. Namely, Deleuze’s principle of the ‘priority of difference’ (events unfold inherently ‘disjunctive’ potencies into actuality, generating difference) neglects a prior unifying field, and Badiou’s principle of the ‘priority of rupture’ (events are ‘irruptions of the infinite into the finite’) neglects the continuity of becoming, whereas Schelling’s model bridges these gaps by affirming disruptive difference (Contraction) while preserving integrative unity (Latency/Ekstasis), and framing rupture — not as an anomaly but — as part of being’s perpetual cycle of generation.

## II. The Event: Philosophical Approaches

Marlene Prosdocimo’s study interprets the intricate relations between Heidegger’s concepts of the ‘mediatedness’ of beings and the ‘immediateness’ of nature, the ‘holy’ as the latter’s essence, its ‘eventfulness’, and finally the ‘poetic word’ as the “event of the holy” (Heidegger), drawing on Heidegger’s *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* (more precisely, of *As when on a holiday...*). The author shows why the immediate cannot be some determinate being, why it is called ‘nature’ and in what sense it is omnipresent; what Heidegger might mean by saying that the holy is the essence of nature, without being its posited first origin in a foundational order; what meaning may be ascribed to Heidegger’s claims that nature, as simultaneously the oldest and the youngest, “is ‘begotten out of holy chaos’”, yet the holy is “present as what is coming (*Kommendes*)”; and how the temporality of such a generative dynamic should (and shouldn’t) be conceived. The study further argues that the mode of subsistence of the holy — which is one of the ‘names’ for the Heideggerian ‘other beginning of thinking’ — can only have an ‘evenemential’ nature; that Heidegger’s notion of originary ‘enowning’ (*Ereignis*) cannot be thought of as a form of monism, but rather incorporates a correlation (between be-ing and man); and that the originary opening of holy chaos that begets nature has an analogous structure of ‘correlation’ and therefore itself proves to be an event, namely, the event of

‘beginning’ (in the sense of ἀρχή) that always ‘reigns’ and ‘begins’, without a punctual beginning. In the concluding part of her essay the author suggests that the poetic word, which is the ‘event (*Ereignis*) of the holy’ according to Heidegger, not only corresponds to the event of the essencing of nature, but in such a word — due to the enowning correspondence between language and poet — ‘what is coming’ has begotten and continues to beget the omnipresent immediate (nature) in its difference from beings.

*Anton Sverdlikov*’s study attempts to outline the contours of a ‘metaphysics of events’ that is simultaneously realistic and phenomenological, drawing on ideas from the late Heidegger’s treatises on the history of being and their radicalization in Fink’s cosmological account of the event. The author argues that in Heidegger’s works, the ‘unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*) of beings’ can be considered the primary meaning of the ‘event’, and further shows that — in contrast to the early Heidegger, for whom such an event is closely tied (in a ‘correlationist’ way) to the accessibility of beings to the human being — Heidegger’s thinking from the 1930s onwards represents a de-anthropocentrization of his earlier existential conception, claiming that the event of unconcealment is an inherent, ‘quasi-realist’ (though not entirely human-independent) feature of beings as beings. In the next step, the author reconstructs Fink’s explicitly ‘realist’ project, which aims to de-subjectivize the concepts of phenomenality, event, and the ‘openness of beings’ (in which humans continue to participate, but are no longer constituent elements). He shows that both sides of Fink’s cosmological distinction between ‘intraworldly beings’ and the ‘world’ retain a radically eventful yet utterly human-independent character, namely, intraworldly beings are essentially phenomena that manifest themselves (not to a subject, but) in the world; while the world is the ‘real’, cosmological site of the subject-independent totality of the coming-to-appearance of beings. On that ground, the study further argues that 1) a systematic generalization of these results can lead to an explicitly metaphysical conception of the event as the ultimate form of reality (distinguished from both the classical metaphysics of the presence of beings, and its ‘correlationist’, transcendental-phenomenological critique), and that 2) such a metaphysics of the event can be developed in both speculative and empiricist directions, namely, as a speculative metaphysics of the one singular event (analogous to the One or the Absolute of speculative philosophies), conceived as radically distinct from, and the truth of, the multiplicity of non-autonomous beings; and also as a more moderate, empiricist perspective on the event, leading to a phenomenological metaphysics of finite, multiple things appearing as events.

*Pietro Prunotto*'s article aims to establish the concept of 'technical event' through investigating the relation between event, technics, and the human, as it appears in the work of Heidegger, Aristotle, and Stiegler. First, the author summarizes the significance of the concept of 'event' in Heidegger's endeavor to break away from onto-theology, as well as the ontological importance of the question of technology within the framework of this project. As the study points out, the issue of technology turns out to be liminal and amphibious for the later Heidegger. While he captures the connection between the destiny of Being and modern technology through his concepts of *Machenschaft* and *Gestell* — within the domain of which every being is reduced to a calculable and controllable *positum* — he also regards the rethinking of technology as a potential 'threshold' for non-metaphysical thinking — namely, a leap into a thinking of the event — which, according to the study, can be conceived of by grasping the unified co-belonging or mutual interdependence of the event, technology, and humanity. The author shows, however, that Heidegger's approach remains indebted to a metaphysical framework insofar as he (in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* B, 1) attempts to think *phýsis* — whose cause lies within itself — as the very site of the event and therefore ontologically superior over *téchne*, within whose realm the other causes are bound to exteriority and accidentality. The study therefore revisits Aristotle's discussion of the accidental causes (namely, fortune and chance, in B, 4–6) that refers to a constitutively non-objectifiable space within *phýsis* — a space of contingency that, as the author argues with the help of Stiegler's notion of the 'invention of the human', is the space of a 'technical event'. By the notion in question, Stiegler points to an event that, without reference to any substance or foundation, opens an internal difference within *phýsis* and — as some 'technical' middle voice — institutes the correlated processes of anthropo- and technogenesis, namely, the circular co-emergence of subject and object, interior and exterior, the human and the technical. The study concludes that — by avoiding both instrumentalism and naturalism, as well as any metaphysical opposition between *phýsis* and *téchne* — Stiegler's theory not only fulfills Heidegger's endeavor to rethink Being as event, but also extends and completes it by articulating a genuine technical ontology of the event.

*Simon Vincken* starts from the work of Gary Gutting (*Thinking the Impossible*, 2011) who gives an overall characterization of post-war French philosophy, and also introduces a division between its two branches. Gutting claims, first, that — as a response to the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics (according to which Being withdraws from full comprehension, and the Event signals the end of metaphysics), and also in utter difference to the approach of the analytic tradition (which mostly works within established logical and linguistic constraints) —

post-war French philosophy is characterized by a profound fascination with what appears to be beyond the limits of thought. Gutting also introduces a distinction between two camps of such a ‘thinking the impossible’ — corresponding to two distinct ways of addressing Hegelian thought —, namely, the ‘absolute skeptics’ who hold that there are insurmountable conceptual impossibilities (particularly in relation to ethics, alterity, and the divine; e. g., Levinas, Derrida, and Marion) and therefore reject the Hegelian model of dialectical resolution; and in turn, the ‘relative skeptics’ who — acknowledging the limits of thought only within given sets of concepts — believe in strategies to bypass such impossibilities (through ontology, mathematics, or power structures; e. g., Deleuze, Badiou, and Foucault) and that way they align with a reinterpretation of Hegel’s dialectical process. By concisely summarizing the pertaining thoughts of the mentioned thinkers, Vincken shows that Gutting’s distinction between relative and absolute ‘skepticism’ is indeed valid, yet, it is not exhaustive, primarily because it does not pertain to the pre-conceptual dimension of lived transformation brought about by the Event (as highlighted in particular in the work of Romano), a transformation that reconfigures the very structure through which we engage with the world.

*Michalis Tegos’* article examines the concept of the event focusing on Heidegger and Badiou. It claims that Heidegger’s notion of *Ereignis* is fundamentally ambiguous: The event names the primordial co-belonging of Being and Time, intertwining ontology and history, but their fusion creates a persistent tension between the ontological and historical dimensions of the event. Namely, it signifies the event of an ontological appropriation (the coming into its own of Being and *Dasein*) as the disclosure of the truth of Being, yet the event is also to be thought as a historical rupture within the History of Being, producing an ambiguity between the Event of primordial disclosure and historical events. Therefore the study argues that while the late Heidegger attempts to overcome not only Western metaphysics’ ‘first beginning’ (grounded in *arche*, sufficient reason, and metaphysical presence) but also his own notion of ‘ontological difference’ (between Being and beings), his thinking of the event as a new beginning for thought is nevertheless entangled in the remnants of the ontological difference. The central claim of the article is, however, that Badiou’s philosophy responds directly to this Heideggerian tension between the ontological and the historical. As the author shows, Badiou develops a mathematical ontology, based on set theory, that treats Being as pure multiplicity structured by the ‘count-as-one’, and thinks of any situation in terms of its laws of presentation, in the conjuncture of the void and the infinite. In this context, ontology can account only for ‘normal’ multiplicities, not for anomalies. The event is such an anomaly: It is

an exception or abnormal multiple constituted by the disequilibrium between its presentation and representation, introducing an ‘evental site’ that is unforeseeable and unrepresentable within the laws of a situation. The event is trans-ontological: “Of the event, ontology can say nothing” (Badiou). Furthermore, Badiou also subtracts the event from history: It does not belong to any linear or teleological narrative of history, it is not a destinal sending, nor is it theological or messianic, and it is not reducible to empirical happenings either. The event for Badiou is a contingent and hazardous supplement to any situation, which inaugurates a truth-procedure: Through subjective fidelity to it, a subject emerges and produces a finite fragment of an infinite-valid truth. Ultimately, the author argues that Heidegger opens the path, but Badiou radicalizes it: He succeeds in offering a conception of the event as a new beginning for thought — neither ontological nor historical, but an exceptional rupture enabling truths.

Zanan Akin’s paper examines the relationship between Heidegger’s concept of *Ereignis* and Badiou’s concept of *événement* as two philosophical attempts to rethink historical time. It argues that both thinkers respond to a shared — although differently interpreted — diagnosis of modernity: The rise of indifference, where everything becomes equivalent to everything else, eroding meaningful distinctions and historical depth by reducing time to an endless sequence of interchangeable ‘nows’. The author contrasts this with the historian François Hartog’s theory of ‘presentism’, which interprets this ‘never ending now’ not as the absence of a genuine ‘present’, but rather, as the omnipresence of the ‘present’ — where ‘events’ are constantly produced and consumed so that nothing actually happens in the present — suspending historical time altogether. As the author points out, according to Heidegger, the spread of indifference in modernity began with Descartes, in whose view beings became equally valid objects of the representing subject; this reached its peak in Hegel’s absolute idealism where the equally valid objects were said to be the products of a rational absolute subject, resulting in the indifference of the ‘thing’ as such, the loss of the sense of time, and that of finitude. This leads to pervasive ‘machination’, for which not only beings are indifferent, but Being itself also becomes indifferent in its abandoning of beings, which humans are passively exposed to. The only exception to this dual indifference is a ‘hint’ of the event silently pointing to Being in its complete retreat, which can be seized by a de-cision to actively withdraw from immersion in beings and enter into the truth of Being, the latter being the abysmal condition of any inceptive thinking and true historical deeds carried out only by the ‘few’ as ‘founders’ in poetry or politics, bridging the beginning to the future. For Badiou, in contrast, what underlies the structural indifference in modernity is not ‘machination’ or ‘technology’, but rather, the indifferentiative capacity of

capitalist ‘circulation’ as a repetitive process of homogenizing diversification. For him, any normal situation is a purely indifferent multiplicity structured by the ‘count-as-one’, sealing differences as a term that gains an equal validity of a ‘legal’ entity by recognizing it via de-singularization. The exception to such an overall structure of indifferent differences can only be a genuine event that breaks with the circulation of commensurable differences, opening a gap in the repetitive structure of time that at the same time bridges the gap between the past and the future. The study concludes that while both philosophers conceive the event as a rupture in the regime of indifference that generates a genuine present, restores historical time, and thus seems to break with the presentist condition, the inherent futurism of such notion of the event may turn out to be a sublime instrument of the presentist present.

*Joshua Royles’s* study aims to demonstrate that Badiou’s critique of Deleuze — according to which the latter’s metaphysical framework ‘suppresses difference’, that is, subsumes the multiple into the oppressive totality of the One at the expense of the radical singularity of the event — is incorrect. First, it explains how Deleuze’s univocal being implies a constant, real, and tumultuously dynamic tension between being and the event. It points out that events, for Deleuze, are radically singular manifestations of the repetition of the same and the different, as exemplified by the ‘festival’: It repeats the same in a cyclical and predictable manner, yet at the same time repeats it with an unpredictable, unique difference; thus, it is precisely the original event that commemorates its own repetitions, and not the other way around. Thus, for Deleuze, contrary to Badiou, events cannot simply spring up out of the void, and they are not rooted in a pure present either, since they are not entirely disconnected from their past and future, but rather, all events are co-implicated: The actualization of any one event expresses them all by virtue of a ‘counter-actualization’, which is a virtual link between all the previous events and those to come. The study further explores this issue by emphasizing that Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘Body without Organs’ must be regarded as a whole that resists the totalizing pressure of the organism, which compels all its parts to function solely for the sake of the whole’s operation. Namely, it is one substance whose foundations are cracked by its two sides or attributes: The plane of consistency, which is submersed in the possibilities of virtual infinity (where all separate substances freely collide through flows in all direction), and the plane of stratification, which is encased in the actuality of form (preventing such flowing together, strata being the source of individual beings). Insofar as these two, formally distinct planes stand in an irresolvable tension with one another, and as such, constantly generate the One as a unitary, fusional multiplicity in and because of their difference, Deleuze and Guattari’s re-

conception of substance falls outside the usual dyad of the one and the many. The study also points out that the objections raised by both Žižek and Badiou against Deleuze's project stem from their proximity to Lacanian psychoanalysis; and it is precisely on this basis that Badiou makes no mention of the collaboration between Deleuze and Guattari, while Žižek downplays its significance, even though Guattari's contribution was essential to Deleuze's overarching project. The author concludes by noting that Deleuze's response to the 'irreconcilable relationship' between being and event, as posited by Badiou, offers hope that, in our contemporary world splintered by recent events, connection and relationships can always be re-established.

*Andrea Sipos'* article — drawing primarily on the ideas of Romano, Tengelyi, and Maldiney — explores the temporality of personal, life-changing events and, in light of this, rethinks the the issue of time-consciousness. The study first examines the types of events that these authors discuss in their respectively hermeneutic, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic approaches; it then reviews their cumbersome and often paradoxical descriptions of the peculiar temporality of these events. The study argues that the difficulties associated with describing the temporality of the event stem from the legacy of the Husserlian phenomenological tradition, according to which temporality permeates every modality of consciousness and is a fundamental 'given' in both the so-called 'natural attitude' and the 'phenomenological attitude'. In contrast, the author puts forward the following two central theses: 1) Time is a 'symbolically instituted' phenomenon that in itself may pose an obstacle to a purely phenomenological approach — and must therefore be bracketed within it — especially when it comes to examining the affective aspects of our experiences without objectifying them in any reflective way. 2) Consciousness has two fundamental functions: One is the primary, first-person singular affective perception of constantly flowing, more or less intense, yet a-temporal impressions; the other is its reflective-thinking-interpreting mode, which, adopting a third-person perspective, maintains a distance from the immediate affective experience, mobilizes language, and is involved in concept formation, including the concept of time, thereby projecting temporality onto the originally 'timeless' affective experience. Thus, according to the author, even the adoption of the phenomenological approach (the execution of reductions) remains within the framework of reflective-objectifying conscious activity, and therefore seeks to conceptually capture the pre-reflective, non-intentional, non-objectifying modality of consciousness through the model of reflective acts. The study further argues that the event is primarily perceived in a direct and spontaneous manner — through non-intentional, pre-reflective, a-temporal affective perception — and only subsequently through reflective-

linguistic interpretation; that the apparent temporal paradox of the event stems from this two-stage structure of comprehension; and that the concepts of event and selfhood (*ipséité*) mutually presuppose one another — contrary to the views of Romano and Tengelyi, who argue that the singularity of the event determines the singularity of its addressee — insofar as the event marks a rupture in the ever-changing, pre-reflectively formed, and densely structured meaning of an always already unique self, which the author calls *singularity*. Consequently, the study concludes that a personal event is nothing other than the experience of a profound, radical metamorphosis occurring within the structure of its addressee's singularity.

*Ákos Attila Tóth's* article focuses on the significance of the concept of event in the context of ethics. It does so by examining the extent to which Levinas's and Waldenfels's conceptions of the moral subject — and, more broadly, the origin and status of ethics — represent a radical departure from classical ethical theories. First, the author briefly outlines the moral philosophies of Aristotle and Kant, pointing out that their shared conviction is that moral identity lies in calming the storms of life and achieving moral stability, whether through the habituation of virtue and the constant discipline of reason over desires, or through the legislation of reason and the alignment of freedom with universal law. As the study emphasizes, however, this classical view is fraught with difficulties in three main respects: The image of the stable moral subject is based on the abstract concept of a rational agent, it favors universality over singularity — a tendency that is particularly evident in Kantian ethics — and it denies vulnerability, even though in ethically significant situations we often encounter complexities that cannot be rationally explained, and we mostly experience ourselves as vulnerable, exposed subjects. The study then summarizes the relevant views of Levinas and Waldenfels as two approaches that break with this classical ethical paradigm. It shows that for none of these thinkers does the self form the basis of moral identity; rather, it emerges due to ethical events, which constitute the self from the outside. For Levinas, such an ethical event is the encounter with the face of the Other, while for Waldenfels, it is the unsettling intrusion of anything that is alien. In their view, ethics is not something a person does, but rather something that happens to a person and calls for a sense of responsibility. Although, accordingly, the starting point of ethics for them is the encounter with alterity, this does not render classical ethical theories false, the author argues, but merely highlights their incompleteness: The cultivation of character, the discipline of habits, the pursuit of rational consistency are not the sources of ethics, but rather help sustain it as sediments of earlier ethical events. The study concludes by noting that the views of Levinas and Waldenfels converge on a crucial reorientation, according

to which responsibility precedes freedom; subjectivity is not the foundation of ethics but its consequence; and the true origin of ethics lies in vulnerability and exposure, in openness to events that one cannot control.

*Péter Makai's* study develops an event-ontological framework that links events and responsibility, and argues that events are not so much ruptures as they are transformative processes woven into the fabric of existence. The author begins by noting that — although much of contemporary philosophy is moving away from traditional approaches based on clearly distinguishable substances and subjects, and instead regards as primary the specific dynamism that characterizes the mutual interpenetration of the contingent and context-dependent elements of existence — contemporary interpretations of the 'event' often draw a sharp distinction between structures and events, and thus overlook their perichoretic aspect. The study presents an illustrative example of the latter, from the intersection of moral philosophy and philosophical anthropology. It argues that events — especially actions performed by others — profoundly influence personal existence and create a 'transformative medium' that is governed by a specific moral responsiveness — one that differs from concepts of responsibility based on cause-effect relationships, roles, consequences, impersonal principles, or abstract duty. Namely, 'alternity' responsibility (from the Latin *alter*, meaning 'the other [of two]') is tied to the presence of, and lived proximity to, a 'you' (alternity) — in contrast to Lévinasian responsibility, which arises from the other's radical strangeness (alterity) — not merely as a response, but as a moral attentiveness and care that actively attends to the other's unique needs and circumstances and shapes them for the sake of his or her well-being and unfolding. The study distinguishes between 'proximic', 'mediative', and 'distal' types of alternity responsibility based on the degree of closeness and distance, and argues that the first type — characterized by asymmetrical devotion (care, giving, self-sacrifice) — precedes and lays the foundation for subsequent norms of reciprocity and justice: For only sufficient proximity to the other person enables one to recognize and respect that person as a concrete 'you' — which, in turn, is a prerequisite for turning away from ourselves toward the other, eventually adopting the other's perspective, or even subordinating our own interests to those of the other. In short, close relationships create a 'proximity field' that provides the setting for the genesis of genuine, personal, and unconditional responsibility toward the other, which selflessly shapes the personality in a way that reciprocity alone cannot achieve. The study concludes by emphasizing that personhood is therefore contingent and fragile, depending on whether others assume responsibility for us — others who, in this regard, do not represent a rupture in our world but embody the promise of an ethical order of proximity.

Zsuzsanna Lurczka's study focuses on two important aspects of the philosophical significance of the so-called 'event-medial' approach, which is reflected in the linguistic phenomenon known as the 'middle voice' — typically found in ancient Indo-European languages — as outlined in the Introduction to this volume. On the one hand, it reconstructs the pertaining views of Benveniste, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida on the impact of grammar on thought, as well as their responses to the resulting 'ontological' consequences. On the other hand, it examines the ways in which certain East Asian languages express that 'pre-subjective dimension' of actions which the middle voice captures as 'event-medial'. The author elaborates that Nietzsche is profoundly distrustful of language: He critiques grammar itself for fabricating subjects and 'doers', turning happenings (sheer becoming) into actions of fictional, metaphysically posited agents (being); that Heidegger, by contrast, embraces subject-less verbal structures — such as 'the world worlds' (*die Welt weltet*), or 'the naming calls' (*der Ruf ruft*), etc. — that give voice to the appropriating event (*Ereignis*) of the 'truth of Being' as a mediating middle within the 'difference' between 'world and things'; whereas Derrida invokes a middle-voice logic by his notion of *différance*, which destabilizes subject-centered grammar, displacing thereby the traditional role of the subject as the source of meaning. As its second main move, the study shows that Byung-Chul Han regards Old Chinese as a language of emptiness, in-difference, and flowing, in which signs possess no intrinsic traits and acquire identity only within a given context, reflecting a worldview based not on opposites but on complementary qualities and continuity, without a need for presence or absence, identity or difference; and that he considers Heidegger's notions of 'being', 'home', and 'dwelling' as standing in sharp contrast to the images of non-being, non-dwelling, selflessness, and aimless wandering found in Chinese philosophy and Zen Buddhism, where 'emptiness' is a central motif (opposing substance) that overrides the logic of subject/object and active/passive dichotomy. The author also shows that all of this resonate with both François Jullien's notion of 'blandness' — that pervades the entirety of Chinese culture, and functions as a middle associated with neutrality, indefinability, evanescence, transience, and balance — and the examples taken from Korean and Japanese for expressing the event as 'subjectless'. The study concludes that although the middle voice also points to such a pre-subjective field, being attuned to the 'pre-linguistic' flow of the world, it nevertheless internalizes the event within a subject rather than completely removing the subject, as is the case in Far Eastern thought.

Lasma Pirkatina's article traces the rise of 'event' as a key concept in postmodern continental philosophy, distinguishes three methodologically distinct approaches

in event philosophy, and offers a possible typology of the events in life. It points out that in postmodernism, interest in events is linked to criticism of the unified, transparent, rational, and active subject — emphasizing instead contingency, passivity, and openness to the Other — and that events only have meaning for free and responsible individuals who stand outside the totalitarian perspective of the system. Having emphasized the fact that the concept of the event is ambiguous and diverse, and that there is (and can be) no single, comprehensive philosophy of the event, the study goes on by characterizing the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach (e. g., Marion and Romano) that highlights how the event shows itself and demands interpretation; the structuralist-poststructuralist perspectives (e. g., Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida) that remove the subject entirely and instead analyze impersonal processes and transformations; and finally the so-called metaphysical or negative-ontological approaches (e. g., Heidegger, Levinas, Henry, Badiou, Derrida) that treat the event as transcendent, non-phenomenal, or beyond being. The author further argues that — despite the differences — all of these approaches ultimately describe the event as a break, intrusion, or transcendence of the subject's world, and that events must also be studied through lived experience, to which the typology she proposes aims to contribute. It distinguishes and briefly describes nine types of events according to their 'structures' — namely, that of the world, of truth, of a self, of vitality, of trauma, of stepping outside oneself, of the in-between, of entanglement, of beginning, and of the end — with the aim of illuminating life by preserving the diversity of events and avoiding totalizing theories.

*Ulrich Arnswald's* article interprets Wittgenstein's statement in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that "death is not an event in life; death is not lived through", with the aim of clarifying what the Austrian philosopher refers to as an 'event in life', and as the 'experience of death'. The study begins with the observation that the first part of the sentence has two possible interpretations. Namely, the statement "death is not an event in life" could mean that 'death is not a fact at all', or it could mean that 'death does not belong to the world'. Considering these two interpretative possibilities leads to the conclusion that our own death represents a boundary of what can be experienced in life, and thereby a boundary to our own world, which is coextensive with our sphere of experience. Although the experience of the death of other people makes it clear that a certain way of talking about death makes sense in life, it turns out to be pointless to talk about our own death because we do not know what the case is if that talk is supposed to be true. However, this cannot be a valid interpretation — the author objects — since Wittgenstein understood his *Tractatus* primarily as an ethical text, and although he does not attach any value connotation to death, he

nevertheless maintains that the right — and therefore ethical — life can only be seen against the backdrop of death. The study seeks to resolve this dilemma by pointing out that Wittgenstein proves to be a transcendental idealist, in the light of which the sentence in question can be interpreted as follows. On the one hand, death is that of the subject, the transcendental subject does not belong to the world (the world understood as a fact) but constitutes the condition of the world, thus the death of the subject is the point at which the world itself ends for that individual. On the other hand, death remains an abrupt, transitory, *sui generis* event between life and non-existence, the boundaries of which are impossible to determine, and it is for that reason that Wittgenstein does not give it either a positive or a negative connotation. What is decisive for a life, however, is the metaphysical relationship of the self to the world: Since death transcends the existence of a subject, yet it does not determine the events of life, it is possible to reflect on the authorship of life in the face of inevitable death, and therefore to give one's life an ethical direction. According to the study's ultimate argument, since for Wittgenstein the boundary between the totality of facts in the world and the world of the transcendental subject cannot be clearly defined, and since death is a *sui generis* event taking place between life and non-existence, the boundaries of which are impossible to define, the philosopher deliberately left the sentence about death vague. The author concludes that according to Wittgenstein, as his words attest, the fulfillment of the purpose of existence involves the pursuit of the 'absolute': "And the only absolute is, to battle through life toward death, like a fighting, a charging soldier. Everything else is wavering, cowardice, sloth, thus wretchedness."

Yuewen Hu's study examines the problem of event individuation through the lens of Quine's extensionalist ontology, starting from his logical reconstruction of Heraclitus' saying: "No one steps into the same river twice." The study argues that traditional metaphysical approaches struggle to account for diachronic identity — that is, how entities or events remain identical through change — because they tie identity to changing attributes, constituents, or causal descriptions. Drawing on Quine's principles of ontological commitment — namely, his recognition criterion: "to be is to be the value of a bound variable", and his test criterion: "no entity without identity" — the paper proposes that any entity posited by a theory must possess clear and determinate criteria of identity. By interpreting the river as a four-dimensional spatiotemporal continuum composed of temporal stages, the analysis shows that persistence through change can be explained without appealing to stable material composition or qualitative sameness. Instead, identity through time is grounded in the continuity of a spatiotemporal trajectory. Extending this model to event theory, the paper argues

that events can be understood as spatiotemporal regions composed of temporal parts, whose identity depends solely on the continuity of the region they occupy. Thus, two events are identical if and only if they occupy the same region of space-time. This extensionalist framework avoids traditional disputes about intensional criteria — such as causal roles, meanings, or essential properties — and instead establishes a clear standard based on logical and linguistic demarcation of space-time regions. Through Quine’s methodological strategy of semantic ascent, questions regarding event identity are reframed to concern how language logically refers to entities, and in particular, how our theories delineate regions of space-time. The paper concludes that, although Quine did not explicitly develop an ontology of events, his extensionalist framework provides a parsimonious and naturalistic account of event individuation that is consistent with scientific reasoning and offers a logically rigorous alternative to traditional metaphysical approaches.

*Marc Heimann’s* study interprets the operational mechanisms of large language models (LLMs) in light of certain key insights from the theories of language developed by Heidegger and Lacan, while also highlighting the limitations of these models, especially with regard to the emergence of the Event as a radical ‘novelty’. The author argues that Heidegger’s ‘something-as-something’ (*als*) relation — which structures language at a pre-predicative level — shows a close parallel to a certain aspect of how LLMs function, namely, the aspect based on metonymically associative, vector-based token relations. In turn, Lacan’s understanding of metaphor — according to which new meanings are generated through the shifting of signifiers across domains — bears a close parallel to another aspect of how LLMs function, namely, the so-called attention mechanism and re-weighting process therein, which enables LLMs to link together different domains of relational metonymic structures. Supported by examples, the study demonstrates that, since the attentional mechanism serves as the site of metaphorical operation, prompt engineering becomes a form of ‘violent hermeneutics’ that reorganizes the model’s symbolic network by shifting the boundary between the accessible and the inaccessible within a given symbolic configuration, thereby rearranging the model’s syntactic and semantic defaults into an entirely new articulation and even — without any retraining — changing its grammar. This amounts to a ‘weak technical Event’ — that is, as the author argues, an engineered example of the effects of an Event — which must be strictly distinguished from Badiou’s Event proper: The resulting novelty here is merely a new pattern of linkage between already existing elements, a temporary ‘worlding’ under inscription that changes the limits of what can be said at all by the model. This is not an ontological rupture, not a true Event (there is no truth, no subject,

no subtraction from the situation), not something ‘incalculable’ in the strong philosophical sense — the metaphorical force, language itself, lies beyond the boundaries of the model. The study concludes that, due to LLMs’ dependency on metaphorical inscription, the interaction between humans and technology evolves from something logical and machinic into a form of hermeneutic literacy: Poetics, metaphor, and literary practices take on a central role in the technological condition, transforming the way technological systems articulate and reorganize the calculable field of meaning.

### III. The Event: Literary and Cultural-Theoretical Approaches

Csongor Lőrincz’s essay examines the interrelations and tensions between breathing, voice, and language in poetry and their role in poetic performativity. It does so through a dual approach. On the one hand, it outlines possible theoretical thematizations of breathing, also taking into account its strong poetological, cultural, and religious associations (including inspiration and spirit), its historically varying significance, as well as the impact of modern media technologies on the perception of breathing. On the other hand, it raises the question — How can lyric acts be understood as aspects of breathing, or vice versa? — and examines it through an analysis of the poem entitled *Lélegzet* (*Breath*), written by the Hungarian poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922–1991). The study points out that breathing is both a physiological foundation of speech, and at the same time a phenomenon shaped by language and cultural interpretation, functioning as a liminal medium between body and language. It also calls attention to the fact that historically, breathing had a prominent role in oral reading and rhetoric, while silent, internalized reading partially obscured it; that romanticism’s various poetics of breath can be seen as compensations for this partial loss of the function of breathing; and that the diverse forms of modern messaging and storage technologies (recordings, telephone, digital communication, etc.) mark a new form of ‘re-entry’ of breathing’s perception that leads to distinct ‘uses of the body’ (breathing), realizing correlative forms of life. Drawing on Ágnes Nemes Nagy’s poem, the author demonstrates how breathing itself first becomes a genuine linguistic event of prayer (which summons the air as if it were a gift capable of providing both inspiration and the element for its vocalization, exposing the lyrical I on the bodily level of breath); how the poem stages a hybrid relation between human breath and the natural world; how its poetic forms — including pauses, line breaks, and rhythm — mirror the dynamics of breathing and introduce moments of interruption; and ultimately, how breathing becomes a passage from vegetative life to spiritual life, enacting a religiously tinged spiritual-healing renewal, thereby transforming the poem itself into breathing — that is, into a way of writing breath as the very form of lyrical

life. The study concludes that insofar as the act of reading the poem participates in its performative structure, the poem presents breathing as a kairotic event (cf. “*Atemwende*” in Paul Celan) between historical time and a dimension beyond it, institutionalizing the practice of breathe as a kind of counter-signature, an affirmation, a saying yes.

*Hajnalka Halász’s* study interprets Rilke’s *Ninth Duino Elegy* — from the perspective of Derrida’s late writings — as an exemplary poetic preparation for the event of the arrival of the absolute other, departing from standard interpretations of lyric address. It begins with the Derridian claim that a genuine event is singular and unrepeatable, unconditional and therefore cannot be mediated through prior conventions; one can only prepare for it by turning toward the future or the absolute other. The central thesis of the study is that it is precisely the poetic address — the lyric apostrophe, as a ‘turning-toward through turning-away’, in a sense that differs from the meaning generally attributed to it in literary studies — that paradigmatically enacts such a preparation: The apostrophe does not create or mediate the event of the coming of the absolute other (the secret, God), but rather prepares for it as a kind of exposure, an affirming turn toward it, thus keeping the future open to all that may arrive. The author examines Rilke’s *Ninth Duino Elegy* — in which the speaker addresses the Earth — as a pertinent example of this kind of poetic exposure, and argues that, alongside the addresser and the addressee, the third figure of the witness — in contrast to de Man’s position and also differing from that of other interpreters — plays a key role in Rilke’s work. Specifically, the apostrophe is reinterpreted not as a symmetrical dialogue, but as an indirect yet irreversible appeal addressed to the Angel in the *Elegy* — as one who is not timeless transcendence, but a radically inappropriable ‘other within me’ — because it is the Angel who must bear witness to our turning toward the Earth as our testimony to the singular traces of our mortal lives, without guaranteeing their permanence. An examination of Gadamer’s and de Man’s interpretations shows, furthermore, that while the former regards the Angel as confirming — in the very ‘*parousia*’ of the spoken word — the unprovable, yet absolutely certain inner reality of human feeling, the latter points to a structure that systematically excludes any such presence and instead emphasizes the rhetorical emptiness of poetic figures, affirming the Angel’s role as an ‘empty guarantor’ of the irrevocable outer trace of inscription, whose power stems from figural motion. Finally, the reconstruction of Derrida’s pertaining thoughts highlights that, for him, the notion of God refers to an inappropriable other who invisibly countersigns my own, unrepeatable trace (my hand-signature). Thus, the study concludes that — in the absence of a self-identical ‘I’ — the Angel of the *Elegy* is at once our irresolvable, secret interior and our absolute exterior (the

other), and consequently, Rilke's lyric apostrophe functions as both an exposition of the irreversible temporality and finitude of human existence, and a performative preparation for the impossible event of encountering the absolute other.

*Xiaoyue Zhang's* study examines the extent to which the recent revival of Lovecraftian (Cthulhu) themes — as pre-figurations of an 'ultimate event' — in Chinese online literature can be viewed as a cultural response to the immense social impact of the digital and technological transformations taking place in contemporary China. First, it characterizes Lovecraftian literature as depicting a cosmos inhabited by extra-human deities who defy human rationality, evoking unspeakable horror. It then points out that the Chinese Cthulhu tradition diverges from both the original narrative form (insofar as it combines its motifs with popular elements such as time travel and transmigration) and the narrative structure of the broader Chinese online literature (in that it undermines the relevance of rationalist narratives by an imaginative world dispersed by absurdity, chaos, and suffering). To support the study's central argument — that the popularity of this new genre in China reflects social anxieties about rapid technological change, algorithmic governance, and digital surveillance — the author explains that China's recent development has been driven, among others, by its National Strategy for Big Data Development (2015), and the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan (2017), which — though now closely intertwined with national pride — instill in many Chinese citizens a sense of being trapped within opaque technological networks beyond their control. The study interprets such anxieties through the philosophical concept of the 'event', which — as something that disrupts existing linguistic and symbolic frameworks — can be likened to Lovecraftian 'speechlessness' in the face of the unknown, the horror of which here symbolizes people's inability to articulate the overwhelming 'event' of technological transformations. As the author argues, this collapse of the symbolic order reinforces the motif of 'madness', which is central to Lovecraft's works but takes on a new significance in Chinese Cthulhu novels: Instead of representing an exceptional state of psychological disintegration, madness becomes part of everyday digital existence primarily as an adaptive strategy for navigating fragmented realities and hybrid virtual-real worlds, giving rise to the formation of new symbolic orders and an emerging identity in a performative, fractured space. The study concludes that the Chinese revival of Cthulhu-inspired narratives functions as a cultural response to the digital age, exploring new ways of living amid technological uncertainty and a chaotic post-rational world order.

*Simon Angerer's* article examines how, according to Günther Anders — one of television's earliest and philosophically most rigorous theorists — images broadcast on television transform the concept of the event. The author situates Anders' reflections within the historical context of early American television in the 1950s, arguing that Anders' media theory was primarily shaped by his exile experience in the United States. By drawing a comparison with Boorstin's concept of 'pseudo-events' — that is, staged events intended for media coverage — the study points out that, although both thinkers analyzed how television reshapes the production and perception of events, Anders takes a more radical approach, as he focuses on the ontological consequences of broadcast media. According to him, television fundamentally transforms the human way of being (*Seinsweise*) by altering the relationship between people and the world. Broadcast images are delivered into the home as commodities, creating a unilateral relationship between viewer and world: The spectator cannot 'talk back'; he or she is powerless, voiceless, and deprived of freedom; this leads to passive consumption and, through the loss of reciprocity, to an impoverishment of experience and language use. The decisive novelty of televised events is their ontological ambiguity. Broadcast events are neither fully present nor absent: They occur in real time and are therefore not mere representations, yet they lack interactive participation and to that extent are absent. That is why Anders refers to television images as 'phantoms' — entities that are both real and unreal. Unlike Adorno, who highlights the illusory nature and ideological-repressing function of television images, Anders argues that television does not simply distort and repress reality; instead, the broadcast world opens up a new ontological dimension: Due to the real-time nature and unilateralism of television images, they themselves become the 'real world' itself, rendering ideology obsolescent. Thus, events become socially significant primarily in their reproduced form. This leads to one of Anders' key concepts, namely, 'matrix-performance' (*Matrizenleistung*), where originals increasingly adapt to their reproduction. The author argues that, for Anders, the historically new cultural phenomena of media-events render traditional aesthetic categories — such as representation, image, or appearance — obsolete and require new categories for their critical analysis. In conclusion, the article shows that Anders' critique of television is not merely cultural pessimism, but rather, a philosophical rethinking of a new category of events, namely, those mediated realities that fundamentally determine human perception and the structure of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), reshaping them in accordance with the delivered phantom world.

*Charlotte Reihs's* study in media archaeology examines the 'media rupture' triggered by the use of early radio technology as a revolutionary tool during the

German November Revolution of 1918. It focuses on the so-called *Funkerspuk* (Haunted Broadcasting) that was a novel form of participatory media usage utilizing radio technology as a communication system independent from the state — propagating messages to ‘everyone’ for the first time ever, years before public broadcasting officially began — introduced by the revolutionary Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils as a pivotal tool for their communication and mass mobilization during the collapse of the German Empire. The study reconstructs how the Councils occupied the central telegraph bureau in Berlin, appropriated former military radio infrastructure to broadcast their own political messages for actively shaping the course of events, and challenged the state’s monopoly over news distribution by implementing decentralized coordination among councils, creating thereby a new form of real-time political organization. It also reports on the government’s reaction to this autonomous broadcasting by prohibiting unauthorized transmissions and restoring state control. As a result, from 1923 onward, German public broadcasting developed as a centralized and regulated medium focused on entertainment rather than political mobilization. Ultimately, the article shows that *Funkerspuk* was a decisive media rupture that for the first time revealed both the emancipatory possibilities of radio and the state’s determination to control mass communication, and that the suppression of *Funkerspuk* shaped the future structure of German radio by limiting its democratic potential. More generally, the study demonstrates that a fundamental shift in media infrastructure profoundly modifies knowledge production, reorganizes perception and restructures social time and space, giving rise to a concomitant shift in the manner of mediation between the private and public spheres and the spatial and temporal parameters of conducting events.

## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Akin, Zanan (Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5778-780X>

E-mail: [zanan.akin@gmail.com](mailto:zanan.akin@gmail.com)

Angerer, Simon (University of Vienna, Austria)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1034-2129>

E-mail: [simon.angerer@univie.ac.at](mailto:simon.angerer@univie.ac.at)

Arnswald, Ulrich (University of Innsbruck, Austria / University of Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7126-9806>

E-mail: [arnswald@ulrich-arnswald.de](mailto:arnswald@ulrich-arnswald.de)

Grzywacz, Robert (Ignatianum University in Cracow, Poland)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8353-6238>

E-mail: [robert.grzywacz@ignatianum.edu.pl](mailto:robert.grzywacz@ignatianum.edu.pl)

Halász, Hajnalka (Independent Scholar)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9146-805X>

E-mail: [halaszhajnalka@gmail.com](mailto:halaszhajnalka@gmail.com)

Heimann, Marc (Hochschule Niederrhein in Krefeld and Mönchengladbach, Germany)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3757-1790>

E-mail: [marc.heimann@protonmail.com](mailto:marc.heimann@protonmail.com)

Hu, Yuewen (Nankai University in Tianjin, China)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3449-7566>

E-mail: [hu\\_yuewen@163.com](mailto:hu_yuewen@163.com)

Lőrincz, Csongor (Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1582-8107>

E-mail: [csongor.loerincz@staff.hu-berlin.de](mailto:csongor.loerincz@staff.hu-berlin.de)

Lurcza, Zsuzsanna (University of Miskolc, Hungary)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9539-3510>

E-mail: [zsuzsanna.lurcza@uni-miskolc.hu](mailto:zsuzsanna.lurcza@uni-miskolc.hu)

- Makai, Péter (University of Miskolc, Hungary)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5539-6926>  
E-mail: [peter.makai@uni-miskolc.hu](mailto:peter.makai@uni-miskolc.hu)
- Pirkatina, Lasma (Independent Scholar)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6689-3633>  
E-mail: [lasma.pirkatina@inbox.lv](mailto:lasma.pirkatina@inbox.lv)
- Pompeo, Lorenzo (University of Coimbra, Instituto de Estudos Filosóficos IEF, Portugal)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3925-6463>  
E-mail: [lorenzo\\_pompeo@outlook.com](mailto:lorenzo_pompeo@outlook.com)
- Prosdocimo, Marlene (University of Pavia, Italy)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8292-5974>  
E-mail: [marleneprosdocimo@gmail.com](mailto:marleneprosdocimo@gmail.com)
- Prunotto, Pietro (University of Turin, Italy)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8257-5337>  
E-mail: [pietro.prunotto@edu.unito.it](mailto:pietro.prunotto@edu.unito.it)
- Reihs, Charlotte (University of Vienna, Austria)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8063-3974>  
E-mail: [charlotte.reihs@univie.ac.at](mailto:charlotte.reihs@univie.ac.at)
- Royles, Joshua (Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7633-7656>  
E-mail: [jtroyles@mun.ca](mailto:jtroyles@mun.ca)
- Sipos, Andrea (Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6596-0527>  
E-mail: [andrea.b.sipos@gmail.com](mailto:andrea.b.sipos@gmail.com)
- Sverdlikov, Anton (Independent Scholar)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6167-8565>  
E-mail: [anton.sverdlikov@gmail.com](mailto:anton.sverdlikov@gmail.com)
- Tegos, Michalis (University of Ioannina / University of Crete in Rethymno and Heraklion, Greece)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3923-4186>  
E-mail: [michalistegos@yahoo.gr](mailto:michalistegos@yahoo.gr)
- Tóth, Attila Ákos (Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest / St. Athanasius Greek Catholic Theological Institute in Nyíregyháza, Hungary)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9529-410X>  
E-mail: [tothattila942@gmail.com](mailto:tothattila942@gmail.com)

Vincken, Simon (Radboud University in Nijmegen, Netherlands)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4524-7161>

E-mail: [vincken.simon@gmail.com](mailto:vincken.simon@gmail.com)

Wu, Huimin (Nankai University in Tianjin, China)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9016-6347>

E-mail: [2240294066@qq.com](mailto:2240294066@qq.com)

Zhang, Xiaoyue (Central South University in Changsha, China)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4793-0014>

E-mail: [lucinexiaoyue@gmail.com](mailto:lucinexiaoyue@gmail.com)

**I.**  
**DIVINE EVENT: PHILOSOPHICAL AND**  
**THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES**

**Robert Grzywacz**

*Ignatianum University in Cracow, Poland*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8353-6238>

[robert.grzywacz@ignatianum.edu.pl](mailto:robert.grzywacz@ignatianum.edu.pl)

## REVELATION AS EVENT: RICOEURIAN DISCOURSE AND RICHIRIAN AFFECTIVITY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL PREHISTORY\*

**Abstract:** This study compares Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of symbolic and linguistic mediation and Marc Richir's transcendental phenomenology in their distinct approaches to revelation through the act of reading biblical prehistory. For Ricoeur, reading involves the intentional exteriorization of discourse, achieving semantic autonomy by projecting a world of text. This interpretive process enables self-purification from narcissistic illusions. Analyzing *Genesis*, Ricoeur emphasizes creation's foundational but inaugurated character, separate from datable history. Biblical accounts are polyphonic, revealing creation as a fragile, broken order. Richir utilizes a hyperbolic phenomenological reduction to reach a realm anterior to symbolic structures. This primordial phenomenization is connected to non-intentional *phantasia*, fundamentally driven by blind affectivity. Reading constitutes an affective event, employing perceptive *phantasia* to facilitate empathy into characters' non-positional emotional lives. Richir critiques the 'false self' and rejects the traditional interpretation of biblical prehistory. Through Melville, he interprets Ahab's hunt for Leviathan as a tyrannical challenge to creation, demonstrating that Moby Dick embodies the sublime, negative figure of affectivity distorted by tyranny and self-hatred. The *Billy Budd* narrative exposes the inevitable horizon of tyranny underlying the socio-political order. The paper argues that both thinkers seek to liberate selfhood from narcissistic illusions. Ricoeur achieves this through reading as the symbolically mediated event. Richir instead demands an immediate appeal to affectivity.

**Keywords:** Ricoeur, Richir, Melville, discourse, affectivity, revelation, biblical prehistory

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of symbolic mediation and discourse and Marc Richir's transcendental phenomenology, focusing on their distinct interpretations of the event of revelation through biblical prehistory, specifically the opening chapters of *Genesis*. The central aim is to demonstrate that while both thinkers seek to liberate selfhood from narcissistic illusions, they achieve this goal through different means: Ricoeur through the linguistic mediation, and Richir through the appeal to the immediacy of affectivity. Both authors propose intriguing and penetrating interpretations of biblical prehistory, while almost incidentally articulating weighty anthropological conclusions.

## 2. RICOEUR AND REVELATION

Paul Ricoeur is often described as a philosopher of mediation, particularly symbolic and linguistic mediation. In his view, revelation can occur only through mediations, and especially through textual ones. The concept of text is defined fundamentally as "any discourse fixed by writing".<sup>1</sup> Such a definition, in turn, directs us to the question of what discourse is. Ricoeur understands it as a structured event in which someone says something to someone about something.<sup>2</sup> This process involves several essential components of discourse: A speaker, a saying, a said or a sense, a world or reference, established rules, and an address. Thus, discourse itself functions as a text.

With respect to revelation, what is at stake is the 'world' projected by the text.<sup>3</sup> Language, or speech, realizes itself as discourse through an intentional exteriorization. This exteriorization allows the linguistic event to surpass itself and to achieve enduring signification, thereby enabling inscription in writing. When discourse is exteriorized in a written work, its unique style synthesizes the character of the original event with its resulting meaning. Writing is therefore key to the semantic autonomy of the text, allowing the written work to be detached and subsequently reinserted into a new situation through the act of reading.

The function of semantic reference undergoes a profound alteration when discourse becomes text. This alteration occurs because it is no longer possible to point directly to the object being discussed as something belonging to the shared situation of dialogue partners. When discourse is transposed into text, its reference becomes

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, transl. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, transl. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 220; Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 9–10.

<sup>3</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, 94–106.

that of a projected world. Crucially, the suspension or abolition of first-order reference – something that occurs especially in works of fiction and poetry – is the necessary condition for the liberation of a second-order reference. This second-order reference allows the text to reach the world at the fundamental level of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), as defined by Husserl, or at the level of being-in-the-world, in Heidegger's sense.<sup>4</sup>

To interpret a text means to articulate the specific mode of being-in-the-world disclosed in front of that text. The task of interpretation focuses on the unique world-proposition offered by the text — a world into which the reader may step and dwell in order to project one of their most authentic possibilities. Reading functions paradoxically: It appears alternately as an interruption of the flow of action and as a renewed impetus toward action. This duality arises from the dual role of reading as confrontation and connection between the imaginary world of the text and the actual world of the reader.<sup>5</sup>

In this process, the reader undergoes a kind of 'self-irrealization' that corresponds to the irreality of the fictional world they enter. Reading is therefore conceived as an unreal space in which reflection may pause. Yet the reader, whether consciously or unconsciously, incorporates the insights gained from reading into their existing worldview, thereby enhancing its intelligibility.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, reading constitutes a milieu through which the reader passes. The profound confrontation between the world of the text and the world of the reader is simultaneously marked by stasis (a temporary halt) and impetus (an impulse). The ideal type of reading achieves a fusion without confusion of the horizons of expectation belonging to both the text and the reader. This fusion represents the "fragile unity of stasis and impetus"<sup>7</sup> as two essential moments within the process of refiguration. It is suggested that "the more readers become unreal in their reading, the more profound and far-reaching will be the work's influence on social reality".<sup>8</sup>

Ricoeur's theory employs the concept of threefold *mimesis*: The movement from prefiguration to configuration, and finally to refiguration. This threefold *mimesis* is understood as the work of imagination, realized through the interweaving of the intentionalities of history and fiction — namely, the fictionalization of history and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 103–104.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. III., transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 179.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. I., transl. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 71, 76–81.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. III., 179.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

the historicization of fiction.<sup>9</sup> This intertwining of historical and fictional factors, enacted in the act of reading, brings about the narrativization of the reader's identity.<sup>10</sup> The findings hitherto concerning the mimetic process in Ricoeur's view and the act of reading must now be related to a specific group of texts, with due consideration of the possible approaches and modes of reading applicable to them.

Three principal types of reading are explicitly identified, alongside a contemporary methodological approach to Bible. First, historical reading should avoid being burdened with dogmatic prejudices. Secondly, confessional reading is tied to feeling one's membership in a community and a religious tradition. It represents the 'confessional side' of the text. Although serving its own specific objectives, the confessional reading should not remain blissfully ignorant of the historical light cast on the text. Finally, philosophical reading is described as distinct from the reading done for religious community membership, although the activity of reading draws them closer. The philosophical reading of biblical texts must not ignore the confessional side or the findings of historical and philological investigations. The type of reading adopted in what follows corresponds to the last one, speaking in favor of a plural reading method.<sup>11</sup>

At first glance, one might regard biblical hermeneutics as a regional form of hermeneutics in relation to philosophical — and thus general — hermeneutics, implying its subordination to a broader philosophical framework. Theological hermeneutics may initially be viewed as a specialized hermeneutics applied to a particular class of texts, namely the biblical texts. However, theological hermeneutics exhibits such unique characteristics that the relationship gradually reverses, culminating in philosophical hermeneutics becoming subordinated to theological hermeneutics, serving as its instrumental tool.<sup>12</sup> This is the case for several reasons.

In biblical texts, according to Ricoeur, God is named in diverse ways: in narrative, as the subject of a story; in prophecy, as the one who speaks in his own name; in prescription, as the source of imperative command; in wisdom literature, as the source of meaning; and in hymns, as the one invoked in the second person. The word 'God' cannot be reduced to the philosophical concept of 'being'; it conveys more because it presupposes the entire context of narratives, prophecies, laws, wisdom writings, psalms, and so forth. "The referent 'God' is thus intended by the convergence of all these partial discourses. It expresses the circulation of meaning among all the forms

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 180–192.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 245–248.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, transl. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 139–141.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II.*, transl. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 89–90.

of discourse wherein God is named.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it not only serves as the index of the mutual belonging of the original forms of discourse of faith, but also acts as the index of their individual incompleteness.

In confronting the specificity of biblical texts as described above, in the act of reading, the reader may, as a result of refiguration, undergo a peculiar transformation. The reader is called upon to ‘repeat’ the ceaseless oscillation between the withdrawal of the name of God, whose bearer becomes each individual, isolated discourse naming him, and the quest for a center. The unity of God correlated with the withdrawal of his name is mirrored, on the side of the self, by the disappearance of the ego and the stripping away of selfhood while the center remains pursued. This pursuit of a personal center reflects only an ‘imaginative unity’, which is perpetually deferred by the withdrawal of the name. Ultimately, revelation articulates a ‘shattered’ identity — a unity that must always be newly regained.<sup>14</sup>

Crucially, “the self of self-knowledge is not the egotistical and narcissistic ego whose hypocrisy and naivete the hermeneutics of suspicion have denounced, along with its aspects of an ideological superstructure and infantile and neurotic archaism. The self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life, to recall Socrates’ phrase in the *Apology*. And an examined life is, in large part, one purged, one clarified by the cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture.”<sup>15</sup> It thus turns out that the refigurative effect of reading consists, among other things, in the purification of selfhood from narcissistic tendencies.

### 3. RICHIR AND REVELATORY PHENOMENA

The focus now shifts to Marc Richir and his perspective on revelation. Richir employs a hyperbolic phenomenological reduction that extends beyond Husserl’s own reductions. This radical move excludes not only the ontological positing of structures but also intentional and eidetic structures, thereby seeking access to a realm more fundamental than the symbolic and ontological orders. Phenomena originally phenomenize themselves within schematism, which functions as a transcendental matrix for individual phenomena and is understood as an unrepresentable transcendental rhythm.<sup>16</sup> This matrix is conceived as a field of flickering appearances

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<sup>13</sup> Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, 227–228.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Amour et justice* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 73–74.

<sup>15</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. III., 247.

<sup>16</sup> Marc Richir, *Phénomènes, temps et êtres: ontologie et phénoménologie* (Montbonnot / Saint-Martin: Jérôme Millon, 1987), 17–62; Alexander Schnell, *Le sens se faisant: Marc Richir et la refondation de la phénoménologie transcendante* (Bruxelles: Editions Ousia, 2011), 46–63; Staudigl Michael, “Marc Richir i fenomenologia,” *Principia* 70 (2023): 57–64.

that precede their symbolic and linguistic institution. Richir stresses the original inadequacy between phenomenon (as mere phenomenon) and its symbolic institution. An architectonic transposition separates the perpetually unstable phenomenological concretudes from their fixation or positing in being. The schematism in question operates within the primordial and likewise unrepresentable *chôra*. It articulates phenomena in their initial dispersion, condensation, and explosion — phenomena that Richir refers to as mere phenomena deprived of internal consistency. This motion is fundamentally driven by affectivity, which functions as a blind, anonymous motor within a dimension of absolute inwardness.<sup>17</sup>

This primordial register of phenomenalization constitutes the domain of non-intentional *phantasia*, whose significance, for Richir, exceeds that of intentional imagination. *Phantasia* is the most archaic form of phenomenalization. Its transposition into the order of symbolic institution (language) and the domain of ontology only occurs through acts of intentional imagination. The essence of the act of imagining lies in its intentionality toward an object (*Bildsujet*), but the intuitive figuration (*Darstellung*) of that object is not what is directly aimed at. This figuration (as a *Bildobjekt*) assumes a paradoxical role: it is not itself an intentional object (not even an imaginary one), nor is it posited for its own sake. Rather, it mediates a specific position, often described as a quasi-position. Its irreality grants it the status of both nothingness and simulacrum, lacking inherent autonomy.<sup>18</sup>

Figuration is characterized as a ‘perceptive appearance’, which is neither an act of intentional aiming nor the passive reception of an ‘imprint’. By contrast, *phantasia* is, for Richir, intermittent and discontinuous, emerging and vanishing in flashes, and is crucially non-present. Its protean nature makes it non-figurative of intentional objects, meaning it is nebulous and internally mutable. Consequently, *phantasia* is both non-positional (not posited by an ego) and non-intentional in the classical sense. Richir posits that the intentional act of imagination is instituted upon the phenomenological basis of *phantasia* through a kind of immobilization of temporalization in presence. *Phantasia* relates to this specific temporalization in presence, which occurs without an assignable present. Through a momentary halt of this primordial temporalization *phantasia* is transposed into the intentional act of imagining in the guise of ‘perceptive appearance’. When a reader deeply engages with a novelistic narrative, imagination (intuitive figuration) arises only in fleeting and ephemeral moments.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Marc Richir and Sacha Carlson, *L'écart et le rien* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2015), 147–244; Marc Richir, *Le Corps: essai sur l'intériorité* (Paris: Hatier, 1993), 12–15.

<sup>18</sup> Marc Richir, “Imagination et Phantasia chez Husserl,” *Eikasia: Revista de Filosofia* 40 (2011): 15–24.

<sup>19</sup> Marc Richir, “Du rôle de la phantasia au théâtre et dans le roman,” *Littérature* 132 (December 2003): 24–26, 29–33.

In an effective act of reading literature, one has to do with a temporal unfolding of an intrigue among living characters without the necessity of any physical or figurative embodiment. When successful, reading engages far more ‘perceptive’ *phantasia*, allowing the reader to ‘perceive’ a ‘consistency’ or ‘concreteness’ (*Sachlichkeit*) belonging to the character, existing in presence but outside of any assignable present. Any attempt at visual adaptation (like film) is immediately disappointing, as no actor can capture the character’s full complexity.

The core of the reader’s activity lies in achieving empathy (*Einfühlung*) into the concrete life of the characters — their “movements of the soul” or “labyrinths of affectivity”.<sup>20</sup> This experience is non-positional; the reader feels and understands these plays without positing them in reality. The writer’s art, contained in the text, awakens these ‘perceptive’ *phantasiai* in the reader. Richir asserts that the text should contain indeterminacies rather than overly detailed descriptions, because detailed descriptions appeal to imagination, destroying “phenomenological vivacity”.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, ‘perceptive’ *phantasia* opens onto a concreteness whose horizon is reality — not only in the theater but also in literature. This concreteness exists in perpetual transition between ‘pure’ *phantasia* and reality, manifesting in a free play without rules. This explains why, for any given literary character, there are potentially many defensible interpretations.<sup>22</sup>

Richir also voices caution concerning the selfhood, noting that nothing may be more indiscreet with regard to the intimacy of the true self than the ‘stories’ the ‘false self’ constructs in an attempt to impose coherence upon life. This process is deceptive above all because affectivity intervenes in the form of specific affects. These manufactured ‘stories’ — whether seductive or repulsive, happy or unhappy — are invariably indiscreet, precisely because they appear to reveal to the narrator the secret or key to their own personality. Here there arises a dangerous collusion between what is indiscreet and what is false. The primordial element whose secret seems to have been uncovered is in fact a pseudo-primordial entity, whose deception is so cunning that, owing to the cleavage or dissociation at play, the true primordial element seems to have been ‘forgotten’ within it.<sup>23</sup>

In summary, it may be said that for Richir, the text serves as a vehicle for ‘perceptive’ *phantasiai* that awaken ‘life’ in the reader. At the same time, he warns against hasty and premature attempts at systematizing experience, which — driven by narcissistic illusion — take place at the expense of living affectivity.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>23</sup> Marc Richir, “Le tiers indiscret: Ébauche de phénoménologie génétique,” *Archivio di Filosofia* (2007): 169–173.

#### 4. RICOEUR AND THE REVELATORY ASPECTS OF THE BIBLICAL PREHISTORY

Let us now consider how both conceptions of the event of revelation are transposed into the deciphering of the meaning of several key episodes of biblical prehistory, as attested by the opening chapters of Genesis.

Ricoeur, in his reading of biblical prehistory, focuses on the philosophical and hermeneutical implications of the biblical narratives of creation, especially in relation to the history of salvation and the human experience of evil. Following the reading of André LaCocque, Ricoeur accepts that creation belongs to prehistory, the events of which set in motion a dynamism that operates at the very heart of history.<sup>24</sup>

The central hypothesis is that the relation between prehistory and datable history, called the relation of precedence, must be conceived in terms of the intersection of two lines of interpretation. The first stresses the existence of a radical caesura between primordial time and historical time, the impossibility of their chronological coordination. The second emphasizes the inaugural value of the events of the undatable beginnings with respect to the history they initiate. The stories of Gen 2–3 universalize the description of the human condition, transcending the ethnic qualifications of the Jewish people. They function etiologically, explaining the present order of things by their unfolding in primordial time.<sup>25</sup>

Taking first into account the idea of the separation of prehistory from datable history, Ricoeur distinguishes both a formal and a theological aspect of this idea.<sup>26</sup> The first contributes to the overthrow of several historical prejudices concerning creation. First — and here Ricoeur expresses a conviction convergent with Richir's — it turns out that the notion of creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) was unknown prior to the Hellenistic period. Meanwhile, the oldest biblical narrative (Gen 2) describes the creative act by means of a formula denoting shaping, conferring form and coherence. Even the didactic poem contained in Gen 1 speaks of the abyss and darkness as already existing, and God's word creates through successive separations of the elements. The notion of creation out of nothing corresponds to much later speculations, which Leibniz relates to the radical origin of things. Next, the separation of prehistoric from historical time serves to problematize the idea of a single, total creation, which appears only in Gen 1 but not in Gen 2–3. The latter chapters recount the creation of man, animals, woman, and the emergence of evil, that is, multiple beginnings, rather than presenting a homogeneous and unifying

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<sup>24</sup> André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 31–67; Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, 31–67.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–34.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–38.

account. Furthermore, on the formal side, the rendering of prehistory is accomplished polyphonically, through the participation of a plurality of literary forms: a narrative that sequentially and intelligibly orders events, a didactic poem, hymnic forms. This literary polyphony corresponds to a plurality of models of conceiving the dynamism of the beginnings of creation (following C. Westermann): the model of struggle (Psalms), of fabrication (Gen 2–3), of the word calling into existence (Gen 1). And the traces left by the model of struggle in the other accounts once again bear witness to the post-Hellenistic origin of the speculations from which the idea of creation out of nothing arose.

It further appears that the formal idea of separation finds its substantial reflection in Gen 2–3, which Ricoeur reads as the story of a progressive separation, a differentiation of creation from the Creator, culminating in the ‘withdrawal’ of God and the expulsion of human beings from the garden of paradise.<sup>27</sup> The stages of this separation are the following: 1) the status of the nature as external and emancipated in relation to the Creator; 2) the establishment of a boundary (the prohibition) becomes the structural mark of the created order and a constitutive property of human finitude, which enables proximity within distance; 3) the transgression of the prohibition reveals in turn a kind of fracture or fissure present in creation, its inherent fragility, and thus introduces a hermeneutics of suspicion undermining the clause of sincerity and the bond of trust, and signaling a sudden transformation of human desire: “When the limit is suspect as a structure, the desire for unlimitedness flows through the breach thereby opened.”<sup>28</sup> At the continuation of the narrative, the expulsion from the garden acquires the status of a final separation, which brings to an end the proximity within distance that had characterized the condition of creation. Nevertheless, the desire for unlimitedness, the knowledge of good and evil, and discernment as an expression of responsibility for oneself remain a summary of the ambivalence of the human condition and, at the same time, a phantasm in which it reaches its culminating point.

Turning now to the second line of interpretation of the relation of precedence belonging to biblical prehistory, Ricoeur underscores its foundational, inaugural character.<sup>29</sup> Founding events, such as creation, establish a circular relation with subsequent events. Thus a reading carried out under the sign of discontinuity is complemented by a reading that valorizes continuity. Already the episodes narrated in Gen 2–3 may be schematically represented by means of three concentric circles, illustrating the unprecedented emergence of a new reality: the creation of the world, of humanity, and the appearance of destructive evil. The subsequent chapters, Gen 4–

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 38–46.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 46–54.

11, interpreted from this point of view, recount the manifestation of entirely new realities, situations, relations, or institutions. We would then have such events as: the birth of a child, the first fratricide, the foundation of the city, pastoral life, musical instruments, metallurgy, or cult.<sup>30</sup>

Further history — the datable one — will reveal the dissemination of these beginnings, these founding and inaugural events. Relative beginnings, in turn, activate the symbolism of absolute beginnings, establishing a circular relation of semantic reciprocity. Returning to an earlier theme, Ricoeur remarks: “It is never a question of a Creation *ex nihilo*, the beginning is not unique by definition, and a first event cannot be represented by a point on a line. These events have a temporal thickness that calls for the unfolding of a narrative.”<sup>31</sup> In this sense, founding events are endowed with the ‘energy of the beginning’: they not only precede and inaugurate history but also mobilize it in the course of its development. What is more, the beginning itself is spoken of only ‘after the fact’, in the course of this unfolding.<sup>32</sup> Thus the biblical narrator projects the experience lived from the perspective of his contemporaneity back onto its beginnings, an operation that approximates such retrospective procedure to the work of the scientist seeking the genesis of a phenomenon. But he could not accomplish this if he were not already somehow acquainted with the idea of the beginning, which he inherits from a prior transmission, narrating an already given situation and human condition. In this way, the subject undergoes a radical decentering: projecting his own present experience onto beginnings, he becomes the recipient of diverse ways in which those beginnings have already been spoken. Thus the biblical discourse of beginnings has the status of a ‘broken’ discourse.<sup>33</sup>

Recapitulating his meditation on creation and the first chapters of Genesis, Ricoeur first emphasizes the cosmic realism of creation as a certain order.<sup>34</sup> Yet this order, according to Ricoeur, is furthermore characterized, on the one hand, by contingency, and on the other, by fragility. The contingency of creation corrects the idea of an order close to necessity in such a way as to indicate the paradox of the genesis of necessity in contingency: the struggle with chaos, the fabrication analogous to craftsmanship, or the efficacy of the word. Fragility, in turn, points to the existence of a discrepancy or dissonance between the order of creation and the experience of evil. It suggests an internal susceptibility of order to threat, not merely to an external conflict opposed to it. The biblical tree of knowledge ultimately signifies exposure to an alternative, which entails the susceptibility of the created order to disruption and ruin (or salvation). As a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 47–48.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 54, n. 42.

<sup>34</sup> LaCocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, 55–58.

result, the rather archaic model of struggle seems to surreptitiously animate the narrative development of biblical prehistory.

Ricoeur concludes his reflections by returning to the idea of the precedence of prehistory with respect to datable history, and by taking up the distinction between beginning and origin. Apart from some historical translational decisions,<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur evokes a mode of thought proposed by Franz Rosenzweig.<sup>36</sup> This contemporary philosopher offers thinking on the basis of a conceptual framework whose nodal points are creation, revelation, and redemption. The relations among these points he interprets in terms of a profound temporality, irreducible to linear representations of chronology. Creation, revelation, and redemption do not follow upon one another, but are structured in layers. The creative act manifested in the world is an immemorial past which, however elusive, is at the same time a continually renewed beginning. Revelation, by contrast, is the dialogical and regenerating, ever-repeated address to the individual in the present. Redemption, in turn, is the advent of a new reality as an historical magnitude. Creation “always already there”<sup>37</sup> unites both separation from origin and the impossibility of coordination with historical chronology, on the one hand, and the emergence of multiple beginnings inaugurating history — founding events — on the other. The immemorial past allows us to think simultaneously of an origin that reaches us by way of transmission, of a prior word always already spoken and present, and of an origin that recedes from present experience toward an elusive absolute beginning.

## 5. RICHIR ON THE REVELATORY DIMENSION OF THE BIBLICAL MYTHOLOGY

With Richir, the situation is different. First, because he does not devote as extensive a portion of his oeuvre to biblical texts as does Ricoeur. Even the threads of biblical origin present in his thought — which do appear and form the basis of the joint reading proposed here of their revealing content — are generally analyzed by him in a concise and incidental manner, often in the context of another issue. An exception is his book on Herman Melville,<sup>38</sup> in which, through the reading of the central work *Moby Dick* and the author’s literary testament *Billy Budd*, the motifs of biblical prehistory that concern us emerge. However, before letting *Melville: Les assises du monde* serve as our guide, it is worthwhile to briefly recall the broader context of Richir’s biblical references and the significance of the concepts guiding these references.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 61–65.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 65–67.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>38</sup> Marc Richir, *Melville: Les assises du monde* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2013).

Richir turns to the Bible, biblical myths, and Hebrew traditions above all in the context of a critique of premature transition into the register of ontology, an analysis of the symbolic institution of culture and socio-political coexistence, and the opposition of the idea of original guilt to primordial innocence. The first issue connects with the general outlook of Richir's philosophy, which explores areas anterior to symbolic institution, that is, areas in which the dynamic process of phenomenization — the appearing and disappearing of fleeting and evanescent phenomena — and the making of sense are not immobilized by embedding them in a given ontological order and replaced with a set of ontological simulacra. In this context, biblical prehistory, as a bearer of a highly original mode of thinking, functions as the symbolic institution of both monotheism and humanity — the primordial couple with their offspring.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, it carries out the elimination of mythologies — which Richir distinguishes as a broader category from more localized myths — understood as the symbolic institution of divine lineage and the legitimation of the ruler (the despot), while nevertheless preserving the pluralism of mythologies. This is indicated by the traces of the model of struggle in the account of creation already noted by Ricoeur, which Richir also emphasizes, especially in his critique of the notion of creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, Richir's own original interpretation of biblical traditions serves to critique and reject the concept of original guilt, as inherited from Heideggerian and Levinasian thought (the idea of substitution), as well as from the idea of the primordial fall referring to the metaphysical characterization of the human condition, which he fundamentally opposes to his phenomenology. By contrast, his own proposal entails the defense of a more primordial innocence, in the sense of a Nietzschean "innocence of becoming".<sup>41</sup> This concept of original innocence pertains to the innocence of experience: Chaotic, dramatic, or serene,<sup>42</sup> a point vividly illustrated in the pages of the book on Melville.

The book under discussion offers the most comprehensive access to Richir's reading of biblical prehistory. Let us now examine this interpretation, each time beginning from a very concise summary of the fundamental motifs of Melville's two principal works.

The core narrative of *Moby Dick* follows Ishmael, the narrator, who joins a whaling voyage to experience the sea and discover the "ungraspable phantom of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 209, 270–271.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 117, 152, 210.

<sup>41</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, transl. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 299, 402, 416.

<sup>42</sup> Richir and Carlson, *L'écart et le rien*, 22, 49–52.

life”.<sup>43</sup> He ships aboard the Nantucket whaler, the Pequod, a ship adorned with whale trophies and possessing a melancholy air. Ishmael befriends Queequeg, a tattooed pagan harpooner from Rokovoko. The ship is commanded by the monomaniacal Captain Ahab, an old man characterized by volcanic energy who had his leg severed by a very white, famous, and deadly monster named Moby Dick. Ahab’s central motivation is audacious revenge against the White Whale, whom he sees as a “pasteboard mask” concealing an “inscrutable malice” he intends to “strike through”.<sup>44</sup> He nails a gold doubloon to the mast, promising it to the man who first sights Moby Dick. Ahab’s crew, including the mates Starbuck (conscientious but coerced), Stubb (jolly and indifferent), and Flask (pervading mediocrity), are swept up by Ahab’s obsessive monomania. As the voyage progresses, the ship is surrounded by omens and warnings: Ahab shatters his navigational instrument, the quadrant, defying “science”;<sup>45</sup> during a typhoon, lightning illuminates the masts, which Ahab defiantly claims lights the way to the White Whale. Starbuck sees the approaching fate and fears that obeying Ahab means disobeying God. Ahab believes his path is “immutably decreed” by fate.<sup>46</sup> On the third day of the final chase, Moby Dick is sighted. The whale is identified by its pyramidal white hump and wrinkled forehead. Ahab successfully harpoons the whale with a specially forged iron. The White Whale, in its dying fury, attacks and destroys the Pequod. Ahab is caught in the line and dragged to his death. The ship sinks, symbolized by the main-mast and the clinging flag, where Tashtego is dragged down, pulling a screaming sea-hawk with him. Ishmael is pulled towards the vortex of the sinking Pequod. But the vortex fills as he nears its inner circle. Up shoots the coffin-like buoy to which Ishmael clings for nearly twenty-four hours. The Rachel, still searching for its missing whale-boat crew, rescues him.<sup>47</sup>

According to Richir’s main theses regarding Melville’s heritage, *Moby Dick* is considered the condensed quintessence, center, and sun that powerfully radiates upon all of the author’s other works.<sup>48</sup> The biblical references employed in *Moby Dick* center around three interconnected motifs: The tyrannical challenger who commits cosmic blasphemy (Ahab), the unconquered primordial chaos embodied by the sea monster (Leviathan), and the archetypal figure of the solitary outcast and eternal suffering (Ishmael and Job). Although these motifs do not refer exclusively, nor even primarily, to the biblical prehistory known from the Book of Genesis, they undoubtedly provide the most profound testimony to Richir’s engagement with

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<sup>43</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; Billy Budd* (London: Octopus Books Limited, 1984), 26.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 390–391.

<sup>48</sup> Richir, *Melville: Les assises du monde*, 20.

biblical themes. This is not, to be sure, a direct reading of the Bible itself, but rather an inquiry mediated first through Melville's interpretation; nevertheless, it best exemplifies the aforementioned points of convergence between the Belgian philosopher and the tradition of Hebrew thought. Let us now proceed to examine, one by one, the three motifs previously mentioned.

The character of Captain Ahab is immediately placed within a context of religious and political tyranny through his biblical namesake, King Ahab of Israel (1 Kings 16). The biblical King Ahab was tyrannical and idolatrous, a worshiper of Baal, who met a violent end when dogs licked up his blood. Melville uses this name to signify Captain Ahab's tyrannical nature. Richir further suggests that Melville's Captain Ahab has absorbed the magical attributes of the biblical king's wife, Jezebel. Captain Ahab is characterized as a blasphemer. His defiance reaches a climax in the sacrilegious baptism of the harpoon intended for Moby Dick, where he declares: "I do not baptize thee in the name of the Father, but in the name of the Devil."<sup>49</sup> Richir interprets this as a "strange pact",<sup>50</sup> which transforms Ahab into a tragic hero whose destructive will seeks to operate beyond the influence of both gods and demons. Ahab's tyranny is so pervasive that Melville uses his quest to explore the theological-political foundations of the world.

As far as the second motif is concerned, the central object of Ahab's quest, Moby Dick, is identified with the biblical Leviathan. This creature is described in detail in the Book of Job (40, 25ff and 41, 1ff). Leviathan is linked to the primordial forces of creation and chaos. It is indirectly associated with the 'dragons' (*tannînîm*) or sea monsters created on the fifth day in the Book of Genesis (1, 21). These monsters are tied to the biblical Abyss (*tehôm*), which is related to the Mesopotamian goddess Tiamat. Richir highlights that early Jewish tradition (Isaiah, Job, Psalms) records a formidable struggle between the Creator (Yahweh/Jahwe) and the gigantic power of the Abyss, often figured as Leviathan. Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick is thus interpreted as a "terrible and sacrilegious inversion" of God's challenge to Job: "Canst thou catch Leviathan with a hook?"<sup>51</sup> By attempting to hunt the Leviathan, Ahab is essentially trying to "complete the divine creation",<sup>52</sup> thus challenging God's omnipotence. Ahab's ambition is driven by a desire to uncover the deepest foundations of the world. Moby Dick, embodying Leviathan, symbolizes the Sublime and represents the "eternal existence of nameless terrors"<sup>53</sup> that predate Mosaic times. The antediluvian connection is reinforced by the description of Fedallah, Ahab's

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<sup>49</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick; Billy Budd*, 338 — originally in Latin.

<sup>50</sup> Richir, *Melville: Les assises du monde*, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 38–39.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 13, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 49.

Parsee companion, whose ominous presence recalls the ‘first generations’. Richir references ‘non-canonical Rabbis’ who suggested that although Genesis speaks of angels marrying human daughters, “demons also gave themselves to earthly loves”.<sup>54</sup>

The last of the aforementioned motifs pertains to the suffering of humanity and the figure of the solitary outcast. The biblical narrative frames the entire story through two figures: The reader/humanity, symbolized by Job, and the narrator, symbolized by Ishmael. Ishmael is the son of Abraham and Hagar. Richir characterizes him as a figure “without a place to dwell among men”<sup>55</sup> and a “lonely wanderer”,<sup>56</sup> existing suspended between legality and illegality. Crucially, Ishmael is the sole survivor of the Pequod’s catastrophe. This survival casts him in the symbolic role of one of Job’s servants, who must bring the catastrophic news of the destruction of his master’s property. Ishmael is linked to the “eternal pain”<sup>57</sup> of mankind. The figure of Job is omnipresent. Job, with his “miserable fate and perplexity”,<sup>58</sup> symbolizes the reader and all of humanity for whom Melville is writing. The other minor biblical references, Captain Peleg (connected to the division of the earth in Chronicles 1, 19) and Captain Bildad (the moralizing interlocutor from the Book of Job), further anchor the events in a profound, foundational theological framework concerning human existence and suffering.

In synthesis, the biblical foundations of *Moby Dick* revolve around a sacrilegious cosmic struggle: Captain Ahab, driven by tyrannical monomania and an attempt to defy God’s creation, seeks to conquer the primordial monster Leviathan, a challenge explicitly posed by Yahweh to Job. The destruction that follows leaves only Ishmael, the symbolic servant of Job, to bear witness to the eternal and solitary suffering that results from such a challenge. Delving into the deeper symbolic intrigue, Ahab’s frenzied pursuit of the White Whale unconsciously repeats the primordial, cosmic battle between God and the Abyss — figures like Leviathan or Tiamat. Consequently, Ahab’s suffering and his “flame soul”<sup>59</sup> allow him to perceive the enigma at the heart of God, reaching into the oldest layers of humanity’s symbolic archaeology and mythological polytheism. Significantly, *Moby Dick* embodies the sublime. The White Whale is characterized as an unrepresentable and indescribable entity.<sup>60</sup> Richir elaborates that *Moby Dick* acts as a subtle and negative figure of affectivity, which has been tragically transformed into a monster due to the primary, oppressive vision of tyranny:

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 47, 49.

It is as though, in his spiritual quest, Ahab sought to catch the monster of tyranny at the moment of its birth, in order to leave it behind and thereby gain access to the as yet unknown continent (or rather, ocean) of an innocent affectivity — older than God and the gods, for it is still free from the web of tyranny that disfigures it into terrifying monsters. Moby Dick, the White Whale, is thus, in Melville's language, the sublime yet negative figure of affectivity, transmuted by the apprehension of tyranny as something primordial. Once again, Ahab's hatred of the Leviathan — a hatred which, in itself, may already seem monstrous — is not hatred of affectivity as such, but hatred of an affectivity transformed into fate by tyranny; hence, a tyrannical hatred of tyranny, or rather, a hatred of the tyranny that resides in the innermost depths of the self, in order to uproot tyranny. A paradoxical hatred, therefore, and all the more intense insofar as it stands closest to love.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, the most terrifying and spiritually significant symbol is the Whale's whiteness. This whiteness simultaneously serves as the most significant symbol of spiritual matters and an agent intensifying terror. This whiteness is described as the "lack of color" or "color through the absence of God".<sup>62</sup> This symbolic absence creates a "terrible sweetness"<sup>63</sup> and presents an "insurmountable wall".<sup>64</sup> The whiteness of the whale symbolizes philosophical chaos, atheism, and the absence of meaning within the void of the universe. Ultimately, Ahab's downfall is interpreted as the defeat of affectivity. His fatal hatred for Leviathan is actually a tyrannical hatred for the tyranny within himself. Moby Dick, therefore, represents Ahab's double, his deepest self. Because Ahab fails to move beyond this internalized tyranny and hatred, he cannot attain access to "innocent affectivity".<sup>65</sup> As Richir states:

An abyss of affectivity in the process of losing its anchors, endlessly analyzing itself through the manifold traps laid within the endlessly shifting labyrinth of tyranny, which seeks — tyrannically — to surpass itself, to transgress its own limits. The monster that is the Leviathan cannot be wrenched from creation, because it is, ultimately, at the very core of ourselves; and because, within the ancient and immemorial regime of domination — whose decline the thoroughly modern Melville both seeks out and announces — we are incapable of giving form to our affectivity in any way other than through the figure of the monster. To tear the monster entirely out of ourselves would be to tear ourselves from ourselves —

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 50, 52.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 44.

that is to say, to tear the gods — and God himself — from themselves as well. What remains — whiteness — becomes abominable, empty. There can be no tyrannical reversal of tyranny, for the tyrant is himself self-hatred, and it is precisely this hatred that converts affectivity into a monster, and into a monster that cannot be extirpated.<sup>66</sup>

The story of *Moby Dick* thus turns out to be a narrative about the transformations of our affectivity. Let us now cast a glance at the second of Melville's most important works.

The setting of the *Billy Budd* story is the year 1797, when Great Britain was engaged in war with revolutionary France. The narrative centers on the young sailor Billy Budd, a foretopman, who initially served aboard a merchant ship called the 'Rights of Man'. Billy was forcibly impressed into service on a warship named HMS Indomitable. Billy, a presumed foundling, is the "handsome sailor".<sup>67</sup> He is portrayed as extremely engaging, serene, and innocent. He possesses one physical flaw: He is prone to a vocal defect or stutter, which, during moments of strong heart-feeling or tension, can intensify into a convulsed tongue-tie. Billy becomes the object of persecution by Claggart, the ship's master-at-arms, who acts as a chief of police. Claggart attempts to organize a provocation by drawing Billy into preparations for an alleged mutiny. The young sailor, however, disregards the plot. Nonetheless, Claggart proceeds to accuse Billy of being a ringleader before Captain Vere. Captain Vere, who favors Billy and harbors contempt for Claggart, orchestrates a confrontation in his cabin. When summoned to offer his defense, Billy suffers a profound vocal impediment and loses his voice, unable to respond to the false accusations. In this state, the stuttering sailor unexpectedly "shot out"<sup>68</sup> his right arm and struck Claggart, causing the master-at-arms to fall to the deck dead. Billy is placed in custody. Captain Vere swiftly convenes a drum-head court. Under the Captain's insistent pressure, founded on adherence to martial law, the court condemns the handsome sailor to death. Just before his execution, Billy's words wholly unobstructed in the utterance, were these – "God bless Captain Vere!"<sup>69</sup> He was subsequently suspended from the yard-arm. Shortly after this event, Captain Vere died during a skirmish with a French frigate. His final words were reported to have been: "Billy Budd, Billy Budd".<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>67</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick; Billy Budd*, 395–396, 399, and so on.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 441.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 445.

Richir views Herman Melville's final work, *Billy Budd*, as the author's "literary testament",<sup>71</sup> primarily examining the theme of the "impossible foundation"<sup>72</sup> of the world. Specifically, the narrative is interpreted as a reversal of the proto-foundational myth of Cain and Abel (Gen 4, 1–16). In this case, it is a matter of the failed proto-foundation of humanity. This myth reveals the unimaginable "fundamental lie"<sup>73</sup> lying beneath the socio-political order. In this framework, the innocent Billy Budd (analogous to Abel/Hewel) embodies pure, yet silent, affectivity. Conversely, Billy strikes down Claggart (Cain), who represents the tyrant of perversion.

Richir centers his analysis on the figures of Billy Budd and John Claggart, viewing them as embodiment of the archetypal brothers. The name Abel (Hevel) signifies "breath" or "fleeting mist".<sup>74</sup> Abel is characterized as ephemeral, unstable, and possessing nothing, yet he is pure and his offerings are pleasing to God. Billy Budd represents this pristine innocence and is largely ignorant of the notions of good and evil. In the narrative, Billy Budd (Abel) is the one who kills Claggart (Cain).

The name Cain means "acquisition" or "possession".<sup>75</sup> Cain is the sedentary farmer and is interpreted by Richir as the founder, or even 'founding hero', of culture and civilization.<sup>76</sup> Historically, Cain, after his crime, founded the city of Hanok, which means 'foundation'.<sup>77</sup> Richir emphasizes that this foundation of Cain is viewed as a "failed foundation"<sup>78</sup> because it carries the inherent danger of despotism and tyranny. Claggart embodies this tyrannical potential, driven by jealousy and a passion to dominate and appropriate Billy's innocence.

Richir uses the inversion — where Billy Budd/Abel kills Claggart/Cain — to expose the tragic mechanisms underpinning social and political structures. The Law, embodied by Captain Vere — a figure who is neither a despot nor a tyrant, but a representative of the society — is subsequently forced to act. To restore order, especially in the context of war and recent mutinies, the Law is compelled to repeat Cain's original crime. Vere condemns the innocent Billy Budd to execution despite knowing his purity. This forced repetition of the proto-foundational crime — the murder of the innocent — is the critical moment that unveils the deep flaw in the human social-political order. The conclusion for Richir is that this necessity reveals

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<sup>71</sup> Richir, *Melville: Les assises du monde*, 59.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 65.

the inevitable “horizon of tyranny”<sup>79</sup> that underlies human society. The law’s attempt to restore order exposes its own complicity in violence, creating an unresolvable paradox,<sup>80</sup> “a symbolic aporia that is decidedly insoluble”.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, the initial myth provides a concept of humanity as remnants of this failed founding moment. The blood of Abel, which cried out from the earth, contained the blood of his unborn children, who were later substituted by Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. Thus, the history of humanity is a ‘relic’, or a sequence of “substitutes”,<sup>82</sup> who survived the Flood through Noah, a descendant of Seth. *Billy Budd* functions as a “counter-legend” or “counter-myth”<sup>83</sup> which, by inverting the Cain-Abel story, questions whether a foundation based on innocence is even possible and highlights the resulting despair<sup>84</sup> regarding the foundations of the world. Ultimately, the “lost paradise”<sup>85</sup> that Melville attempted to articulate is the primitive and innocent affectivity which, had it prevailed, could have promised a new beginning and the cessation of the era of dominance.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The above inquiry into the discursive (in Ricoeur) and affective (in Richir) character of the event of revelation in relation to biblical prehistory has yielded several conclusions that may be articulated. First, it became apparent that both philosophers are deeply invested in the inner conflict within the human being, a conflict that finds affective expression. Ricoeur developed his reflections on this issue by probing human disproportion, affective fragility, and fallibility.<sup>86</sup> Richir, by contrast, became preoccupied with the phenomenon of splitting (*Spaltung*) in the human being and its pivotal significance for a phenomenological psychopathology.<sup>87</sup> Second, it may be said that, with regard to the conflict in question, Ricoeur unfolds a more affirmative line of thought, whereas Richir presents a more sceptical one. Third, what consistently differentiates the two philosophers is the question of the possibility of human renewal — that is, the resources that might serve such renewal. In Ricoeur, it is precisely the idea of creation in Rosenzweig’s sense that is invoked as one possible

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 64–65.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>86</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man: Philosophy of the Will*, transl. Charles A. Kelbley (Chicago: Regnery, 1965).

<sup>87</sup> Richir and Carlson, *L'écart et le rien*, 234–237; Marc Richir, *Phantasia, Imagination, Affectivité – Phénoménologie et anthropologie phénoménologique* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2004).

conceptualization of such resources,<sup>88</sup> whereas in Richir we encounter instead an emphasis on the failure of any foundation in innocence, the annihilation of the aspect of attractiveness constitutive of the moment of the sublime (Ahab), or the turning of the law against pure innocent affectivity (Billy Budd).

To conclude, one might say that, for both Paul Ricoeur and Marc Richir, the 'revelation' in question fundamentally consists in liberating the selfhood from its narcissistic illusions. However, the paths by which each thinker achieves this liberation differ profoundly. For Ricoeur, the path necessarily involves symbolic and linguistic mediation. For Richir, by contrast, it requires an appeal to the immediacy of affectivity, precisely in order to circumvent and avoid such narcissistic illusions.

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<sup>88</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 441.

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**Lorenzo Pompeo**

University of Coimbra, Instituto de Estudos Filosóficos IEF, Portugal

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3925-6463>

[lorenzo\\_pompeo@outlook.com](mailto:lorenzo_pompeo@outlook.com)

## THE NOTION OF SACRAMENTAL EVENT IN ERIK PETERSON'S ESCHATOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF ST. PAUL'S *EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS*\*

**Abstract:** This article explores Erik Peterson's theological reflections on the concept of the "sacramental event", particularly through his interpretation of St. Paul's *Letters* and the Pauline inspired notion of the new aeon. Firstly, it situates Peterson's engagement with Paul as central to his break with Protestantism and his conversion to Catholicism, emphasizing how Paul's eschatological vision shapes Peterson's critique of political theology. The notion of the new aeon is introduced as a decisive element in Peterson's thought, marking a radical temporal rupture inaugurated by Christ's enthronement, which ends the old cosmos and establishes a new cosmic order. The paper then develops Peterson's distinction between historical time and eschatological time, highlighting his use of the term *Geschehen* to describe the eschatological event as more than a chronological moment, namely, as the emergence of a new quality of time. Central to this theology is the role of baptism, which Peterson understands not merely as a ritual but as the sacramental event that effectuates the believer's passage from the old to the new aeon. This sacramental incorporation "in Christ" is both a present reality and an "eschatological reservation", an anticipation of the future resurrection and full fulfilment. Peterson's critique of Lutheran interpretations of the Gospel is also addressed, where he argues that Paul announces a cosmic victory over original sin rather than private forgiveness. The article furthermore examines Peterson's emphasis on the materiality and concreteness of the sacramental substances and their interaction with the believer's body, contrasting this with modern philosophical tendencies that spiritualize the sacramental meaning. In conclusion, the article situates Peterson's theology of the sacramental event within broader twentieth-century debates, highlighting its paradoxical character as an event where Christ is both revealed and concealed, historically present yet eschatologically awaited, thus offering a profound rethinking of the Christian conception of time and history.

**Keywords:** *sacramental event, Erik Peterson, eschatology, new aeon, Saint Paul of Tarsus*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This essay will examine the meaning of the notion of sacramental event within the interpretation of St. Paul's *Letters* offered by the theologian Erik Peterson. Peterson's reflection can be connected to several currents that have characterized a broad strand of contemporary thought. The notion of event has in fact had a decisive influence on contemporary thought and has also taken on a central role in the rediscovery of the thought of Paul of Tarsus, pursued from diverse philosophical points of view. Let us consider two examples among others. Martin Heidegger interpreted the *parousia* of which the Apostle speaks in the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* as an event.<sup>1</sup> In 1927, Heidegger defined rebirth, a Christian concept of eminently Pauline derivation, as an event that elevates existence to the "new creation" described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17 ("So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come") and in Galatians 6:15 ("For neither does circumcision mean anything, nor does uncircumcision, but only a new creation").<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Alain Badiou, in light of his own conception of the "event-truth" as a radically new beginning that inaugurates a new life beyond the domain of perseverance in being and the finitude of death, interprets Paul's message about the resurrection of Christ as the subject's participation in the event-truth.<sup>3</sup>

The interpretation of Paul's proclamation in light of the notion of event has also significantly influenced twentieth-century theology. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, believed that the New Testament, and within it primarily the Pauline *Epistles* and the *Gospel of John*, proclaimed Jesus Christ as an eschatological event that puts an end to the old world and becomes present again each time. The prolongation of the historical event of Christ throughout history, according to Bultmann, takes the form of a recurring event that challenges us here and now through preaching and faith.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Paul Tillich, in addition to his focus on the Christ event, considered Paul himself, as a missionary, a "revelatory event", and, as a theologian, the interpreter of that revelatory event.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 60. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Phänomenologie und Theologie (1927)," in *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 9. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1997); and for this synthesis of the connection between Badiou's interpretation of Paul and his reflection on the event cf. Erzsébet Kerekes, "The Figure of the Apostle Paul in Contemporary Philosophy," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 14, no. 42 (2015): 41–42.

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie*. 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1964), 180–181.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation — Being and God* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 121.

In none of these cases, however, is a connection between event and sacrament identified, an aspect that makes Peterson's interpretation particularly interesting and distinctive.

## 2. NEWNESS AND EVENT IN PAUL'S *EPISTLES*

In the New Testament and Pauline Greek, the concept of "new" is expressed by two adjectives: νέος and καινός. According to a well-established interpretative tradition, the term νέος indicates newness linked to a more recent event, therefore a chronological newness, something that did not exist until the moment of its appearance. Conversely, καινός acquires the meaning of a reality that is new in kind, characterized by a qualitative difference that sets it apart from what preceded it, a newness that is no longer merely chronological but qualitative, different from what existed before and established as an improvement and overcoming of a condition of oldness.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in the Pauline corpus, this distinction in meaning appears quite nuanced and, while showing a preference for καινός, the Apostle uses νέος as well, with a substantial synonymy. The Pauline semantic field of the idea of newness is, in any case, very varied and significant: Paul speaks of the very idea of newness (καινότης, Rom 6:4 and 7:6), of the concept of renewal (ἀνακαινώσεις, Rom 12:2, Ti 3:5 and 2 Cor 4:16), of the figure of the new man (καινός/νέος ἄνθρωπος, Col 3:10, Eph 2:15 and 4:24), of the fundamental notion of the new covenant (καινή διαθήκη 2 Cor 3:6) and of the idea of a new creation (καινή κτίσις 2 Cor 5:17 and Gal 6:15), a decisive notion in understanding the Christological event. The latter expression appears in the *Letter to the Galatians* and in the *Second Letter to the Corinthians*. In Gal 6:15, the *Letter* states, "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is important, but the new creation (καινή κτίσις)", while in 2 Cor 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away (τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν), behold, it has become new (γέγονεν καινόν)." Numerous, very different, and sometimes conflicting interpretations have been proposed on the idea of new creation. In light of the relevant exegetical data, however, the interpretation according to which the new creation should be considered as an expression with a soteriological meaning in an

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Johannes Behm, "Art. νέος," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932), 899–903; Hans Haarbeck and Friedrich Thiele, "νέος," in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament. Ausgabe mit aktualisierten Literaturangaben*, eds. Lothar Coenen and Klaus Haacker (Witten: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2013), 13–14; Johannes Behm, "Art. καινός," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932), 450–453; Hans Haarbeck, Hans-Gerog Link, and Friedrich Thiele, "καινός," in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, rev. ed., eds. Lothar Coenen and Klaus Haacker (Witten: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2013), 9–12; and Roy Harrisville, "The concept of Newness in the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 74 (1955): 70.

ontological-sacramental sense, closely linked to the rite of baptism, is definitely feasible. This interpretation is also confirmed by Paul's reflection on the concept of newness itself, used by the Apostle in his *Letter to the Romans*. In verse 6:4 of the *Letter*, it is explained that "we were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life (ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς)". Baptism takes place in Christ, as incorporation into his death and resurrection. The particle εἰς makes it clear that Paul is referring here to an event with a concrete, spatial dimension.<sup>7</sup> Although there is much debate as to whether Paul is actually referring to the rite of baptism here, scholars such as Udo Schnelle and Samuli Siikavirta firmly believe that the key event of baptism marks the actual death of the old man and the gift of new life to the believer.<sup>8</sup> The reference to baptism should therefore not be considered as a mere metaphorical or spiritual reference, nor a projection of the "end of time" (*Äonenwende*) into each person's personal *Dasein*,<sup>9</sup> but a tangible and concrete reality that occurs in a unique and real historical event. What happens in baptism, according to Paul, is a sacramental experience of the actual and present death of Jesus by the individual Christian. Baptism means therefore an effective participation in the Christ-event. Since he died and resurrected from the dead, and since the baptized person received full participation in this event of salvation in baptism, the baptized Christian is also removed from the realm of death and sin. Dead to sin, from that moment on he lives for God. Nevertheless, the baptized person remains involved in a cosmic battle, as exemplified by the metaphors of combat and weapons in Romans 6:12–23. The transition to the new, which brings with it the actual death of the old man, is therefore an event that took place sacramentally in baptism, the unique act that follows the decisive event in history, the Paschal event, which occurred once and for all.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, this absolute newness has not yet found its conclusion within the historical process. In fact, believers are also invited to serve in the newness of the spirit and to set out on the path of newness of life, because the old world continues to exist underneath the new order. The baptismal event must be constantly renewed in daily life.<sup>11</sup> Renewal consists in the historical extension of the event that marked a decisive change of life experienced by the recipients through conversion and baptism,

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<sup>7</sup> Udo Schnelle, *Paulus: Leben und Denken*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed. (Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter, 2014), 347.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 346–350; Samuli Siikavirta, *Baptism and Cognition in Romans 6–8: Paul's Ethics beyond "Indicative" and "Imperative"*, WUNT II / 407 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 109–110.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ernst Käsemann, *An die Römer*, 4th rev. ed. (Tübingen Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 155.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bernard Rey, *Créés dans le Christ Jésus: La création nouvelle selon saint Paul*, LD 42 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966), 106.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 111.

thus excluding any continuity between the former life of sin and the present saving reality.<sup>12</sup> In any case, it is not only an individual process, relating to the single soul, but also a cosmic one. “Old man” and “new man”, therefore, do not in themselves anthropologically designate the individual man, yet at the same time they concern persons taken in their singularity. The individual and community aspects are intertwined: every single human being has to be involved in the event of non-existence in Christ, and through this involvement, they merge their entire being into the communal essence of the Church, into the sacramental union between the individual, the community, and God.<sup>13</sup>

With his conception of eschatological reservation and his interpretation of history in the light of the new aeon, Peterson aligns closely with the Pauline exegetical tradition.

### 3. ERIK PETERSON AS AN INTERPRETER OF PAUL

Erik Peterson is best known in the field of political theology for his 1935 work *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*.<sup>14</sup> The presence of Paul also echoes in this work. In the final words of the text, Peterson includes a reference to verse 4:7 of the *Epistle to the Philippians* (“Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”):

Nur auf dem Boden des Judentums oder Heidentums kann es so etwas wie eine »politische Theologie« geben. Doch die christliche Verkündigung von dem dreieinigen Gotte steht jenseits von Judentum und Heidentum, gibt es doch das Geheimnis der Dreieinigkeit nur in der Gottheit selber, aber nicht in der Kreatur. Wie den auch der Friede, den der Christ sucht, von keinem Kaiser gewährt wird, sondern allein ein Geschenk dessen ist, der »höher ist als alle Vernunft«.<sup>15</sup>

Thomas Söding emphasizes that Paul’s influence permeates Peterson’s work, not only his courses dedicated to the Apostle, but also his commentaries on the *Gospel of Luke*, on the *Gospel of John*, and on the *Book of Revelation*. Peterson’s relationship with Paul was evidently profound, revealing an interest in the figure of the Apostle that went beyond religious or academic life. Peterson saw himself in Paul and observed a

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Michael Dübbbers, *Christologie und Existenz im Kolosserbrief: Exegetische und semantische Untersuchungen zur Intention des Kolosserbriefes*, WUNT II / 191 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 296.

<sup>13</sup> Jürg Buchegger, *Erneuerung des Menschen: exegetische Studien zu Paulus*, TANZ 40 (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 2003), 198–199.

<sup>14</sup> Erik Peterson, “Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem,” in *Theologische Traktate*, AS 1 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1994), 23–82.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

series of parallels between the Apostle's life and his own.<sup>16</sup> Paul was in fact a key figure in Peterson's break with Protestantism and in his conversion to Catholicism, as revealed by the theologian himself in a letter to Gerardus van der Leeuw in 1924.<sup>17</sup>

There are many Petersonian reflections woven into Pauline themes. Most prominent among them is his reflection on the new aeon (*neue Äon*), central to his exegesis of both Paul and John. The theological and eschatological view of history — according to which, in the time between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ, two aeons exist and coexist: The old aeon, destined for destruction but still present and insistent with its temptations, and the new aeon, which arose from the resurrection of Christ and into which Christians can already enter through baptism but whose full fulfilment they must await until the end of time — is an essential concept for understanding Peterson's rejection of any political theology developed on the basis of Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Not coincidentally, at various points in his lectures on Paul's letters, Peterson accompanies his exegetical interpretation with reflections on current historical and political events, revealing a perspective that sought to frame exegetical study in a broader context.<sup>19</sup>

Peterson discussed his theology of the aeons for the first time in a lecture given in 1924–1925<sup>20</sup> and then gave it a decisive role in his lectures in subsequent years devoted to the *Letter to the Romans* (1925–1928). During those years, he also gave lectures on the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, collected in the seventh volume of *Ausgewählte Schriften*, alongside with other studies published over the years on various aspects of Pauline exegesis.<sup>21</sup> However, it is in his commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans* that Peterson's interpretation of the new aeon most fully develops in a way that is particularly relevant to a sacramental understanding of the event.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Thomas Söding, "Ein Ausnahme-Exeget: Erik Peterson in der Theologie seiner Zeit," in *Erik Peterson: Die theologische Präsenz eines Outsiders*, ed. Giancarlo Caronello (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012), 185–187.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Erik Peterson, *Theologie und Theologen: Briefwechsel mit Karl Barth u.a., Reflexionen und Erinnerungen*, AS 9 / 2 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2009), 209–210.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson: Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk* (Freiburg / Basel / Wien: Herder, 1992), 794.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Romano Penna, "Erik Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*. Eine kritische Annäherung," in *Erik Peterson: Die theologische Präsenz eines Outsiders*, ed. Giancarlo Caronello, 245–246.

<sup>20</sup> Erik Peterson, "Kosmos und Äon," in *Der erste Brief an die Korinther und Paulus-Studien*, AS 7 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2006), 426–440.

<sup>21</sup> On Peterson's interpretation of the *First Letter to the Corinthians* and, in particular, on Pauline ecclesiology as it emerges in these lectures, cf. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, "'Paulus an die Ekklesia Gottes, die in Korinth ist': Der Kirchenbegriff in Petersons Auslegung des ersten Korintherbriefs," in *Erik Peterson: Die theologische Präsenz eines Outsiders*, ed. Giancarlo Caronello (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012), 259–296.

#### 4. THE NEW AEON AND THE EVENT

Peterson's theology of the aeons emerged from a fundamental concern: To provide Christian theology with a specific conception of time that would allow for an adequate interpretation of the Gospel that goes beyond mere historical time, not to abolish historicity but to think simultaneously about a tension between history and eternity through the dialectic between the old and new aeons.<sup>22</sup> From the first lectures on the first chapter of the *Epistle to the Romans*, therefore, Peterson considers it necessary to define the idea of the new aeon, which becomes a recurring theme throughout his lectures. Commenting on verse Rom 1:3, Peterson writes: "Mit der Thronbesteigung Christi hat natürlich dann auch der alte Äon ein Ende genommen, hat ein neuer Äon begonnen."<sup>23</sup> History is divided between an old passage of time and a new aeon that puts an end to the entire old cosmos following an event that interrupted history. This rupture is brought about by a political act: The *Thronbesteigung Christi*, the enthronement of Christ. With the *Thronbesteigung Christi*, the old aeon ended and a new aeon began. The present aeon is surpassed and transcended by the future aeon, the new one.<sup>24</sup> Christ's ascension to the throne is the final act of victory achieved in the underworld, victory over the old cosmos and over death. This triumphant event completes redemption and marks the beginning of the new aeon, in which the Church also triumphs, through which Christ reigns in the new aeon: "Die Thronbesteigung ist demnach der Abschluß eines in der Unterwelt errungenen Sieges. Mit ihr ist unsere Erlösung abgeschlossen, mit ihr hört die Herrschaftsmöglichkeit des alten Äons auf, mit ihr beginnt der neue Äon, mit ihr auch die Kirche, durch die hindurch Christus in dem neuen Äon herrscht."<sup>25</sup> Peterson begins to outline this theology of the aeons by distancing himself from Luther, revealing that he was already moving away from Lutheran faith and exegesis in those years. The gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) that Paul proclaims already in the opening verse of the *Epistle* ("Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God – εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ –"), according to Peterson, essentially corresponds to the news of Christ's enthronement. What Paul means by the word "Gospel" is

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Barbara Nichtweiß, "Das Neue durch den Abbruch hindurch schauen. Vier Miniaturen zur Einführung in das Denken Erik Petersons," in *Erik Peterson: Die theologische Präsenz eines Outsiders*, ed. Giancarlo Caronello (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2012), 78.

<sup>23</sup> Erik Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*, AS 6 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1997), 12.

<sup>24</sup> For further examination of the concept of "transcendence" (*Transzendierung*) in Peterson's thinking in relation to the idea of the new aeon, cf. Gabino Uríbarri Bilbao, SJ, "Der neue Äon bricht im alten an. Zur Auffassung der eschatologischen Zeit bei Erik Peterson", in *Vom Ende der Zeit: Geschichtstheologie und Eschatologie bei Erik Peterson. Symposium Mainz 2000*, ed. Barbara Nichtweiß (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2001), 193–216, esp. 207–209.

<sup>25</sup> Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 13.

therefore something very different from what “Gospel” means in Luther’s interpretation, according to the theologian. For Luther, the Gospel was linked to the remission of sins, but Peterson points out that Paul mentions this association when he provides a definition of the Gospel. For him, the Gospel is news of Christ’s ascension to the throne, not a “bulletin” on God’s disposition toward men, as he notes with a touch of irony. When Paul speaks of the Gospel, he is not referring to the regulation of private relations between God and man, but to a cosmic-eschatological process (*kosmisch-eschatologische Vorgang*): “Das Evangelium bezieht sich für ihn wirklich noch auf einen kosmisch-eschatologischen Vorgang und nicht auf die Regelung der privaten Beziehungen zwischen Gott und Mensch.”<sup>26</sup> Peterson does not deny that Christ’s crucifixion, his victory in hell, his resurrection, his ascension, and his presence on the throne at the right hand of the Father concern sin, but he interprets this relationship with sin very differently from Luther. In Peterson’s view, for Paul, the εὐαγγέλιον does not concern private, individual sin and its forgiveness, but rather the cosmic sin of Adam and its overcoming through Christ, the new Adam: “Das εὐαγγέλιον bezieht sich eben nicht auf die Einzelsünde und ihre Vergebung, sondern auf die kosmische Sünde Adams und ihre Überwindung durch den neuen Adam.”<sup>27</sup> When Luther argues that original sin is not erased in baptism, but only forgiven, according to Peterson, he not only misunderstands Paul’s cosmological-eschatological conception, but completely ignores the very concept of original sin. Original sin, by its nature, cannot be forgiven, but only erased, and it can only be erased in an eschatological-cosmic event, the one announced by the εὐαγγέλιον:

Gerade das heißt eben den Begriff der Erbsünde völlig verkennen. Die Erbsünde kann ihrem Wesen nach nicht vergeben, sondern immer nur getilgt werden, sie kann nur in einem kosmisch-eschatologischen Geschehen, eben jenem, von dem das εὐαγγέλιον spricht, ausgelöscht werden; aber sie ist nicht in dieser personal-privaten Sphäre präsent, in der es so etwas wie Vergebung der Sünden geben kann. Wenn Gott den Menschen ihre Privatsünden vergeben wollte oder wenn er ihnen in dieser Situation mitteilen wollte, daß er ihnen — trotz ihrer Sünden — freundlich gesinnt sei, wahrhaftig, es hätte nicht dieses Aufwandes bedurft, der Hölle und Himmel in Bewegung gesetzt hat, infolgedessen der Sohn Gottes den Himmel verlassen und am Kreuze sterben mußte, um nach seiner Auferstehung dann den Thron an Gottes Seite einzunehmen!<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 14.

In this passage, as in many others of the same tenor, Peterson uses terminology related to the event in an eschatological sense. The cosmic-eschatological process described by Paul through the notion of the Gospel arises from the event of Christ's resurrection and enthronement, which Peterson defines in the last passage quoted here and also in other parts of the text as an eschatological event, in the text *kosmisch-eschatologischen Geschehen*. These passages highlight a key terminological point. Peterson consistently uses the term *Geschehen* to describe the eschatological event in its full sense, rather than *Ereignis*, which he often uses more generally to refer to historical events or events belonging to the end of history. In fact, Peterson uses *Ereignis* about ten times in his lectures, while *Geschehen* appears almost forty times. By using *Geschehen* to describe the event, the theologian seems to want to express not only a newness whose meaning is manifested on the chronological level, but also the emergence of a new quality of time that points to an eschatological newness.

## 5. SACRAMENT AND EVENT

These clarifications lay the foundation for Peterson's reflection on the sacrament. Christians, Peterson writes, enter into the new aeon through the sacrament of baptism, which extends to all humanity not only the anthropological-existential but also the fully eschatological meaning of the Christ event. It is not, therefore, the constant exercise of the act of faith, nor its continual re-presentation and enactment, that effects the transition from the old to the new aeon. The transition from the old to the new involves a change of status, not just of attitude. The εὐαγγέλιον, the message of Christ's enthronement and the faith that derives from it, are enacted through what Peterson calls "sacramental actualization" (*sakramentale Vollzug*), which passes through the single act of baptism: "Im neuen Äon dagegen das Evangelium, die Botschaft von der Thronbesteigung Christi und der zu dieser Botschaft gehörige Glaube, der nicht durch den beständigen *Vollzug* des Glaubensaktes, sondern vielmehr durch die Taufe, also durch den sakramentalen *Vollzug*, den Übergang aus dem *status* im alten Äon zu dem *status* im neuen Äon erlangt."<sup>29</sup>

The numerous references to baptism lead Peterson to explore the concept of sacrament and another fundamental notion of his thought: The idea of "eschatological reservation" (*eschatologische Vorbehalt*).<sup>30</sup> By eschatological reservation, Peterson

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 94–95.

<sup>30</sup> On the category of eschatological reservation in Peterson's thought cf. Gabino Uríbarri Bilbao, SJ, "La reserva escatológica: Genesi del concetto in Erik Peterson," *PATH* 12 (2013): 278–279; Gabino Uríbarri Bilbao, SJ, "La reserva escatológica: un concepto originario de Erik Peterson (1890–1960)," *Estudios Eclesiásticos. Revista de investigación e información teológica y canónica* 78, no. 304

means present, real participation in an event, the Incarnation, which historically has already taken place, but which at the same time continues to be prolonged in the present through the sacraments and which, precisely through these, projects and draws believers towards the future as they live in a time of waiting for the final fulfilment. It is the condition of the intermediate stage (*Zwischenzustand*) in which Christians find themselves living since the resurrection of Christ, awaiting the future resurrection of the dead. When Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17 speaks of “being in Christ” (ἐν Χριστῷ εἶναι) as the condition of the “new creature”, according to Peterson he is therefore not describing a mystical relationship, but a new sacramental status: The believer is transferred into Christ through baptism. Before, believers were “in the flesh” (ἐν τῇ σαρκί, Rom. 7:5 and 8:3), now they are “in Christ”, so if they are now in Christ, they are no longer in the flesh. No coexistence between the two conditions is possible. One follows the other, according to what Peterson defines as the temporal succession (*Nacheinander*) in the form of the present (*Einst*) and the now (*jetzt*). This rupture between the old life in the flesh and the new life in Christ also explains, according to Peterson, the meaning of the event that leads to the new creation. The perfect transition (*vollkommene Wechsel*) from the old to the new is not experienced in an experience (*Erlebnis*), but in the sacramental event (*sakramentale Geschehen*) that inaugurates entry into the new creation:

Hier gibt es kein Nebeneinander, sondern nur ein Nacheinander: ein Nacheinander in Form des Einst und Jetzt. Deshalb sagt Paulus in auch 2 Kor 5,17: »Ist jemand in Christo, so ist er καινὴ κτίσις (neue Schöpfung). Das Alte ist vergangen.« Das heißt aber: es besteht nicht mehr fort. Dieser vollkommene Wechsel ist nicht in einem Erlebnis, sondern in dem sakramentalen Geschehen gegründet. Wer in Jesus Christus hineingetaucht ist, der ist eben in Christo. Von denen heißt es 6, 11, daß sie Gott leben ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Sie sind jetzt, νῦν, in ihm, von jetzt ab in ihm [...] <sup>31</sup>.

The notion of sacramental event in its eschatological character also manifests the concrete nature of Christian hope. Christians do not hope for abstract eternal beatitude but for “a new heaven and a new earth”, a new man on a new earth, a new κτίσις. The sacrament of baptism therefore also implies the desire for a new body, the body of glory (δόξα, hence Peterson’s expression δόξα-Leibes). However, the eschatological fulfilment of the sacramental event does not concern only the individual Christian who experiences the sacrament, but the human being as a whole,

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(2019): 29–105; and Kurt Anglet, *Der eschatologische Vorbehalt: Eine Denkfigur Erik Petersons* (Paderborn / München / Wien / Zürich: Schöningh, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 226.

as a corpus, as a new humanity summed up in Christ. Eschatology and the resurrection of the dead refer precisely to this reunifying aspect of Christianity. Even the resurrection of Christ itself, in this sense, according to Peterson, should not be considered as an isolated miracle that enters history, because the resurrection of Christ must also be followed by the resurrection of believers. The uniqueness lies in the newness of the eschatology of the resurrection, which initiates the new aeon and binds Christ and believers through their participation in the sacramental event, which, even if repeated for all who are baptized, remains linked to the uniqueness of the resurrected Lord:

Es ist wichtig, daß hier nicht an eine in der Totenauf resurrection sich auswirkende Vollendung des *einzelnen* Christen gedacht ist, sondern die Vollendung trifft immer eine Gesamtheit, ein *corpus*, eine neue Menschheit, die in Christus zusammengefaßt ist, wie die alte Menschheit in Adam zusammengefaßt war. Die ganze Idee einer rein individuellen Seligkeit ist sinnlos, wenn man an die Eschatologie und an die Totenauf resurrection denkt. Die Auferstehung Christi ist auch nicht ein isoliertes, in die Geschichte hineinragendes Wunder. Nein, sie ragt eben nicht in die Geschichte hinein, sondern aus der Geschichte heraus, und sie ist kein isoliertes Wunder, da sie nur ihren Sinn hat unter der Voraussetzung, daß der Auferstehung Christi unsere Leibesauferstehung folgt. Ein und dasselbe neue eschatologische Geschehen, mit dem sich der Eintritt eines neuen Äons ankündet, verbindet Christus mit uns<sup>32</sup>.

Although Peterson also attributes extreme importance to the Eucharist, the primacy of baptism is evident. Baptism is first and foremost the sacrament that most clearly expresses the dynamic of eschatological reserve. Paraphrasing the aforementioned verses from the sixth chapter of the *Epistle to the Romans*, Peterson states that believers died to sin once they died with Christ in baptism, but they have not yet risen with Christ, because they will rise with him in the future. In baptism, we are now “dead”, then we will “rise again”. If the parallelism were extended to the resurrection, baptism would not be a sacrament, but an act with a purely moral effect, similar to those that characterized the celebration of the mysteries. Conversely, according to Peterson, while in the celebration of the mystery a person, taken by a sort of imaginative *μίμησις*, is led to live the fate of the divinity of the cult, experiencing it as a moral force, in the sacrament, as an event, something happens and is accomplished, or rather, God makes something happen and brings it to fulfilment. For this reason and because of this

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 260–261.

concrete expression with which baptism is given, the theologian can speak not only of a sacramental event, but also of a baptismal event (*Taufgeschehen*):

[...] das Sakrament der Taufe so wenig wie übrigens auch das Sakrament des Abendmahls eine reine Mysterienhandlung ist. Gerade *als* Sakrament geht es über den Sinneiner bloßen Mysterienfeier hinaus. Man wird es als geradezu entscheidend für den Begriff des Sakraments halten müssen, daß hier etwas auftritt, was ich den eschatologischen Vorbehalt nennen möchte. Damit meine ich dies, daß hier zum Beispiel in Röm 6,7 der Parallelismus von Tod und Auferstehung in dem Taufgeschehen *nicht* restlos durchgeführt ist: daß wohl gesagt wird, daß wir der Sünde gestorben sind, als wir mit Christus in der Taufe starben, daß aber dann doch daneben nicht gesagt wird, daß wir mit Christus auferstanden sind, sondern daß wir mit Christus auferstehen *werden*. Wäre der Parallelismus im zweiten Gliede durchgeführt, dann wäre die Taufe kein Sakrament, sondern eine Mysterienhandlung mit bloß moralischer Wirkung. Was unterscheidet denn ein Sakrament von der Mysterienfeier? Daß im Sakrament etwas geschieht und vollzogen wird, und zwar von Gott aus geschieht und vollzogen wird, während in der Mysterienfeier nicht in diesem Sinne etwas geschieht und vollzogen wird, sondern der Mensch von sich aus in phantasiemäßiger μίμησις (Mimesis) die Schicksale der Kultgottheit miterlebt und als moralische Kraft erfährt.<sup>33</sup>

As Barbara Nichtweiß points out in her commentary on this text, the sacramental event cannot be experienced independently, unlike what happens during the celebration of the mysteries, and cannot be appropriated, since it can only be defined as accomplished in reference to another act.<sup>34</sup> In the same vein, Roger Mielke points out that Peterson, through his insistence on the concreteness of the sacramental event (which can also be extended to the Eucharist), contrasts the meaning of the materiality of sacramental substances with certain categories of modernity inherited from the Reformation and then transformed until they reached the thinking of authors such as Max Scheler, namely the tendency to eliminate the concept of substance from life and to use in its place some kind of dynamism and personalism or functional concept.<sup>35</sup> The sacramental event, on the other hand, cannot take place without the encounter between the materiality of the sacramental substances and the carnality of a creaturely

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>34</sup> Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson: Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk*, 415.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Erik Peterson, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther und Paulus-Studien*, 273; and Roger Mielke, *Eschatologische Öffentlichkeit: Öffentlichkeit der Kirche und politische Theologie im Werk von Erik Peterson* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 236.

body which, while losing its old age linked to abandonment to the flesh, is made new in its entirety in order to enter a new aeon.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The sacramental interpretation of the event has not been widely embraced by contemporary thought. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, argues that the early Christian understanding of salvation as an eschatological event was misunderstood and reduced to a mere effect, i.e., the forgiveness of sins, which is appropriated through baptism.<sup>36</sup> Turning to philosophical interpretations of Paul, in his *Il tempo che resta* Giorgio Agamben relegates the sacrament to a performative and penitential aspect that strips grace and vitality from human relationships.<sup>37</sup> Peterson, however, offers a compelling alternative perspective, shared by a significant part of Catholic thought in 20th-century Germany, including figures like Heinrich Schlier and Joseph Ratzinger. The Petersonian idea of sacramental event, in its uniqueness as both act and encounter, is inseparably linked to historical events regarded to be real, yet opens itself to human experience and language in a way that reveals a paradoxical structure. The Risen appears in the sacrament, but in appearing, he also withdraws. He is present, but not graspable, seen, but not possessed. This paradox defines the sacrament as a true event: Not merely a symbol or moral imitation, but a gift, a concrete irruption of the new aeon into history. For those who witness this appearance in faith, the sacramental event is the form in which the resurrectional event becomes present, not as a past memory or future promise, but as a new and definitive experience of Christ's self-giving. Therefore, the sacramental event does not simply refer to Christ's resurrection: It participates in it. Its meaning is not detached from the event, but fulfilled in what it brings about: Not just a change of perception, but a change of being. And it is in this event, this gift that both reveals and veils, that the believer is made new, and in which the community of believers lives and moves toward the fullness of an absolute newness.

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<sup>36</sup> Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie*, 59–62.

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**Huimin Wu**

Nankai University in Tianjin, China

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9016-6347>

[2240294066@qq.com](mailto:2240294066@qq.com)

## THE META-EVENT AND ONTOLOGICAL EKSTASIS: THE GENERATIVE LOGIC OF DIVINE DECISION IN SCHELLING'S PHILOSOPHY\*

Abstract: Schelling's philosophy has long been fragmented by the "myth of rupture", with its stages (e.g., Philosophy of Nature, Philosophy of Freedom) deemed disconnected. This study argues for its inherent unity through the triadic "Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis" model rooted in Schelling's "Ungrund" — a primordial unity transcending being and non-being. "Latency" denotes unmanifested potency in the Ungrund; "Contraction" describes potency's self-limitation generating ontological difference; "Ekstasis" refers to domain-specific unfolding and return to unity. The model reenacts unconsciously in nature (magnetism, chemistry) and consciously in history, where "evil" emerges as an "ontological remainder" confirming divine decision. This reinterpretation dispels the rupture myth, supplements contemporary event ontology (Deleuze, Badiou), and revives freedom as "participation in being's generation".

Keywords : Schelling, latency-contraction-ekstasis, Ungrund, divine decision, event ontology

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling occupies a paradoxical position in the history of German Idealism. Sandwiched between Johann Gottlieb Fichte's (1762–1814) subjective idealism and G. W. F. Hegel's (1770–1831) absolute idealism, he was long dismissed as a "transitional figure" — a thinker who oscillated between conflicting systems without achieving the "logical rigor" of his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> Hegel's critique in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* — framing Schelling's thought as a series of "irreconcilable

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<sup>1</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume III: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1896), 542.

ruptures (*Bruch*)” — solidified this narrative in 19th-century scholarship. Yet the 20th century witnessed a “Schelling renaissance”: Martin Heidegger’s 1936 lecture course *Schelling’s Treatise on Human Freedom* rediscovered the ontological depth of the 1809 Freedom Essay; Gilles Deleuze drew on Schelling’s concept of “potencies (*Potenzen*)” to develop his philosophy of difference; and Slavoj Žižek (1949–) invoked the “*Ungrund* (Groundless)” to critique ideological totalitarianism.<sup>2</sup> This revival raises a pressing question: if Schelling’s philosophy is as fragmented as Hegel claimed, why does it continue to inspire contemporary thought?

The answer lies in the “myth of rupture” that has dominated Schelling scholarship. Early interpreters like Richard Kroner (1884–1974) divided Schelling’s work into four disjointed periods, arguing that the “Philosophy of Nature” (1795–1800) and “Late Philosophy of Revelation” (post-1815) addressed unrelated questions — matter’s self-organization versus divine disclosure.<sup>3</sup> Even scholars who challenged this narrative, such as Walter Schulz (1912–2000) in *Die letzte Philosophie Schellings*, failed to provide a concrete conceptual model to unify Schelling’s domains.<sup>4</sup> Dieter Henrich (1927–2022) correctly noted that Schelling’s thought revolves around a “single ontological question”, but he stopped short of explaining how this question unfolds across nature, history, and art.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by reconstructing Schelling’s philosophy through the triadic “Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis” model, rooted in the *Ungrund*. It addresses three core research questions: (1) Does a unified ontological logic underpin Schelling’s early (Nature) and late (Revelation) thought? (2) How does the “divine decision (*Selbstentscheidung*)” — as a meta-event — manifest unconsciously in nature and consciously in history? (3) What supplementary significance does this logic offer to contemporary event ontology (Deleuze, Badiou)?

Compared with previous studies (e.g., Dieter Henrich’s emphasis on a “single ontological question”), the innovation of this study lies in that the “Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis” model provides a concrete conceptual chain that can run through the fields of nature, history, and art — not just an abstract claim of “unity” — making the continuity of Schelling’s philosophy more intuitive and verifiable.

Methodologically, this paper focuses on Schelling’s mature works (1804–1815) — including *Philosophy and Religion* (1804), the 1813/1815 drafts of *The Ages of the World*, and the *Freedom Essay* — to avoid anachronistic readings. It combines close textual analysis with conceptual reconstruction: first, unpacking the *Ungrund* as the

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<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 42.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kroner, *Von Kant bis Hegel* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1921–1924), 390.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Schulz, *Die letzte Philosophie Schellings* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1975), 178.

primordial source of potencies; second, tracing how these potencies unfold as Contraction-Ekstasis in nature and history; third, demonstrating how art and philosophy enable human participation in this divine dynamic.

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows: Chapter 2. critiques the “myth of rupture” and introduces the Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis model. Chapter 3. establishes the ontological foundation by analyzing the *Ungrund*, potencies, and divine contraction. Chapter 4. explores how this model reenacts unconsciously in nature (magnetism, chemistry, biology) and consciously in history (conflict, freedom, evil). Chapter 5. examines human freedom as “participatory imitation” through art and philosophy. Chapter 6. concludes by highlighting the model’s contributions to dispelling the rupture myth, supplementing event ontology, and reviving freedom’s practical significance.

## 2. THE “MYTH OF RUPTURE” IN SCHELLING SCHOLARSHIP AND THE NEED FOR A UNIFIED FRAMEWORK

The reception of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling’s (1775–1854) philosophy has long been dominated by the “myth of rupture”, a narrative originating from G. W. F. Hegel’s (1770–1831) critique in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Hegel argued that Schelling’s thought suffered from an “irreconcilable rupture (*Bruch*)” between its phases, lacking the “logical continuity” of his own *Science of Logic*.<sup>5</sup> This critique has shaped 20th-century scholarship, with most scholars dividing Schelling’s work into four discrete periods: Philosophy of Nature (1795–1800), centered on *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797), which posits “nature as visible spirit (*Natur ist sichtiger Geist*)” and explores the dynamic self-organization of matter;<sup>6</sup> Philosophy of Identity (1801–1804), expounded in *System of the Philosophy of Identity* (1801) that emphasizes the “absolute identity” of spirit (*Geist*) and nature as the ultimate ground of being;<sup>7</sup> Philosophy of Freedom (1809–1815), culminating in *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom* (1809, hereafter *Freedom Essay*) which reframes ontology around the question of “how freedom is possible in the

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<sup>5</sup> Hegel’s critique of Schelling centered on the latter’s “philosophy of identity”, which he deemed “formless” and lacking “logical development”. See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. III, 542.

<sup>6</sup> Schelling’s *Philosophy of Nature* rejects the mechanistic view of nature as “dead matter”, instead framing it as a dynamic, self-organizing system. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 27.

<sup>7</sup> The “absolute identity” refers to the primordial unity of spirit and nature, which Schelling later refines into the “*Ungrund*”. See F. W. J. Schelling, “System of the Philosophy of Identity”, in *Schelling’s Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. F. Marti (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 110–135, 121.

ground of being”;<sup>8</sup> and Late Philosophy of Revelation (post-1815), focused on *Philosophy of Revelation* (1841–1842) that turns to “divine revelation” as the key to resolving the tension between freedom and necessity.<sup>9</sup>

This periodization, however, obscures the core ontological question unifying all Schelling’s works: How does being emerge from itself, and how does freedom take root in this emergence? From the “self-organization of nature” in 1797 to the “eternal past (*ewige Vergangenheit*)” in the 1815 draft of *The Ages of the World*, Schelling’s answer consistently revolves around “divine self-decision (*Selbstentscheidung*)” — a “meta-event” permeating ontology, philosophy of nature, and philosophy of history, rather than a traditional theological “creation narrative”.<sup>10</sup>

Existing scholarship suffers from two critical gaps. First, most studies focus on isolated phases: Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) *Schelling’s Treatise on Human Freedom* (1936) centers on the Freedom Essay but neglects the *Philosophy of Nature*;<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze’s (1925–1995) *Difference and Repetition* (1968) engages with Schelling’s potencies but ignores his late historical thought.<sup>12</sup> Second, while scholars like Dieter Henrich (1927–2022) have criticized the “myth of rupture”, they lack a concrete conceptual model to demonstrate continuity across Schelling’s domains.<sup>13</sup>

To address these gaps, this paper proposes the Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis triadic model as a unified framework. Drawing on Schelling’s mature works (1804–1815), this model defines “Latency (*Latenz*)” as the state of undifferentiated, unmanifested potency tension in the “*Ungrund* (Groundless)” — the primordial source of all being;<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *The Freedom Essay* marks a shift from “identity” to “decision”, framing freedom as the “essence of being”. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutmann (Chicago: Open Court, 1936), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Schelling’s late thought focuses on “revelation” as the means to resolve the tension between the finite and infinite. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Revelation*, trans. J. D. White (London: A&C Black, 1986), 45.

<sup>10</sup> The “meta-event” differs from traditional creation narratives in that it is perpetual, not one-time. See F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, ed. and trans. J. M. Wirth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 78.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger’s analysis of the *Freedom Essay* emphasizes the “ontological difference” between *Grund* and *Existenz* but neglects Schelling’s earlier natural philosophy. See Martin Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze draws on Schelling’s potencies to develop his “philosophy of difference” but ignores the historical dimension of the *Ungrund*. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 48.

<sup>13</sup> Henrich argues that Schelling’s thought is continuous but does not provide a conceptual model to demonstrate this. See Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 289.

<sup>14</sup> The *Ungrund* is not “nothingness” but a dynamic field of latent potencies. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, trans. P. W. Bowie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 62.

“Contraction (*Kontraktion*)” as the self-limitation of potencies to generate ontological difference (*Grund/Existenz*), marking the transition from “potentiality” to “actuality”;<sup>15</sup> and “Ekstasis” as the unfolding of this difference in nature (unconscious) and history (conscious), followed by a return to the original unity of potencies.<sup>16</sup> This model not only proves that Schelling’s early and late thought are differentiated manifestations of the same ontological dynamic but also bridges classical German Idealism and contemporary event ontology. As Heidegger noted, Schelling’s inquiry into freedom touches on “the most fundamental question of Western philosophy: the co-belonging of being and freedom”.<sup>17</sup> By reconstructing this dynamic, this paper aims to show that Schelling’s philosophy is not an “unfinished sketch” but a coherent system.

### 3. ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION: THE *UNGRUND*, POTENCIES, AND DIVINE CONTRACTION

To grasp the “meta-event” nature of divine decision, we must first examine Schelling’s subversion of traditional metaphysics. Traditional metaphysics — from Aristotle’s (384–322 BCE) “first substance” to Descartes’ (1596–1650) “res cogitans” — posits a static “ground of being” (*Grund des Seins*). For Aristotle, “substance” is the unchanging substrate that bears attributes (e.g., “man” as the substrate of “rationality” or “mortality”); its “ground” is a preordained essence that determines all subsequent properties.<sup>18</sup> Descartes similarly anchors being in the “res cogitans” (“thinking thing”), whose existence is self-evident through the cogito (“I think, therefore I am”); the ground of being here is the certainty of subjective consciousness, guaranteed by God’s non-deception.<sup>19</sup>

Schelling rejects this static framework, instead positing the “*Ungrund*” as a primordial unity that transcends the opposition of being and non-being<sup>20</sup> — a concept whose connotation evolves across his works. In *Philosophy and Religion* (1804), the *Ungrund* emphasizes “the original indifference of potencies” (prior to all differentiation); in the 1813 draft of *The Ages of the World*, it integrates the

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<sup>15</sup> Contraction is the key step that transforms latency into actuality. See Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> Ekstasis ensures that being does not remain in static difference but returns to unity. See Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger identifies Schelling’s inquiry into freedom as central to Western philosophy. See Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on Human Freedom*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 1029a, 103.

<sup>19</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Schelling rejects traditional metaphysics’ static “ground of being” in favor of the dynamic *Ungrund*. See Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 58.

dimension of “eternal past (*ewige Vergangenheit*)” and becomes “the generative origin of perpetual becoming”. Crucially, the *Ungrund* is not “nothingness (*Nichts*)” — as critics like Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) mistakenly claimed — but a “dynamic field of latent potencies” that precedes all differentiation, with its core always pointing to “a dynamic ground beyond being and non-being”.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1813 draft of *The Ages of the World*, Schelling describes it as “a centerless flame that longs to burn yet remains unformed” — a metaphor emphasizing its active, not passive, nature. It is the “source of all being” precisely because it is not bound by the “ground/grounded” binary of traditional metaphysics: “The *Ungrund* is not a ground of being, but the possibility for being to emerge.”<sup>22</sup>

This distinction clarifies the “original indifference (*ursprüngliche Indifferenz*)” of the two potencies. Unlike Schlegel’s interpretation of potencies as “pre-existing opposites”, Schelling insists they are complementary modes of the same essence. He uses the analogy of a “unlit flame” to explain: “A flame before ignition contains both heat and light, but not as separate qualities—they exist in a state of indifference, waiting to be actualized.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the first potency (dark drive) and second potency (luminous force) are not rivals but collaborators: the first provides the “rooting impulse” for being to take hold, while the second guides it toward self-manifestation. Schelling emphasizes: “This is not a pre-existing opposition, but two possible modes of existence of the same essence — the silence of tension itself is the first driving force for being to move from Latency to Actuality.”<sup>24</sup>

The term “*Ungrund*” (literally “without ground”) is often misinterpreted as “nothingness” (*Nichts*) or “chaos” (*Chaos*). However, Schelling explicitly defines it in *Philosophy and Religion* (1804) as an “original unity (*ursprüngliche Einheit*)” that “precedes all being and non-being”.<sup>25</sup> This unity is not static but a dynamic field of latent potencies — a “centerless flame that longs to burn yet remains unformed”, as described in the 1813 draft of *The Ages of the World*.<sup>26</sup> It contains all possibilities of being but has not yet unfolded into concrete forms. At the core of this unity lie two potencies (*Potenzen*) in “original indifference (*ursprüngliche Indifferenz*)” — a state of mutual dependence without opposition, analogous to the poles of an unactivated

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>22</sup> W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (1813 Draft), in Schelling: *The Ages of the World*, ed. and trans. J. M. Wirth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>23</sup> Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> The “original unity” of the *Ungrund* precedes all opposition. See Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> The “centerless flame” metaphor captures the *Ungrund*’s dynamic, unformed nature. See Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 65.

magnet.<sup>27</sup> The first potency (*erste Potenz*), the “dark drive (*dunkle Trieb*)”, is an inwardly contracting force providing the “rooting impulse” of being; it is not negative but the primordial condition for being to “take hold”, much like a seed’s roots contracting into soil to grow, anchoring being in the *Ungrund*. The second potency (*zweite Potenz*), the “luminous force (*helle Kraft*)”, is an outwardly ekstatic force driving being toward self-manifestation; it is not an external form but the direction of being’s “appearance”, similar to a seed’s shoot ekstasizing toward light to grow, guiding being into visibility. The *Ungrund* cannot remain in perpetual indifference; the tension between potencies compels a “decision” — divine contraction — that transforms latency into actuality.<sup>28</sup>

“Contraction (*Kontraktion*)” is the hinge of the Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis model. Contrary to interpretations framing it as a “split in the divine essence” (e.g., F. W. J. Schelling’s early critic Friedrich Schlegel), contraction is a self-limitation (*Selbstbegrenzung*) for the sake of manifestation — but this process inherently contains a negative dimension. As Schelling argues in the *Freedom Essay* (1809), when the first potency (dark drive) becomes overly solidified during contraction and fails to be guided toward Ekstasis by the second potency (luminous force), it generates an “unintegrated ontological remainder” — this is the ontological origin of “the possibility of evil” in Schelling’s context. Through “self-concentration”, the *Ungrund*’s latent potencies are transformed into perceivable ontological difference: “The divine essence must contract itself to manifest itself — just as light must be concentrated into a beam to be seen.”<sup>29</sup> This self-limitation generates two inseparable dimensions: “*Grund* (Ground)” and “*Existenz* (Existence)”. *Grund*, the “dark foundation” embodying the first potency, is the incompletely manifested aspect of the divine essence, forming the internal basis for being to “root”; gravity in nature, for instance, is the manifestation of *Grund*, contracting matter into solid entities and enabling motion. *Existenz*, the “luminous manifestation” embodying the second potency, is the divine will’s active decision to step beyond itself, forming the external form of being; light in nature, for example, is the manifestation of *Existenz*, making matter visible and enabling cognition. The relationship between *Grund* and *Existenz* is dialectical: “*Grund* is the internal ground of *Existenz*, and *Existenz* is the external manifestation of *Grund*.”<sup>30</sup> They are not opposites but complementary aspects of the same divine life — analogous to a tree’s roots (*Grund*) and branches (*Existenz*), both

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<sup>27</sup> The “original indifference” of potencies means they are not opposed but complementary. See Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> This argument echoes Schelling’s core view on the driving role of potency tension, as cited earlier (see note 23).

<sup>29</sup> Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 92.

essential to its existence. This dynamic breaks with traditional metaphysics' "substance-attribute" framework: being is not a static "substance with attributes" but a process of mutual generation between *Grund* and *Existenz*.

Divine contraction not only generates ontological difference but also endows the model with temporality. Schelling calls this decision the "eternal past (*ewige Vergangenheit*)" — a concept subverting linear time. Unlike Augustine's (354–430 CE) view of the past as "vanished" or Hegel's view of history as "progress toward a telos", the eternal past is a "perpetually flowing source" that "generates the present and continues to generate within the present".<sup>31</sup> In the 1815 draft of *The Ages of the World*, Schelling explains: "The eternal past is not a static beginning outside time, but the origin of genesis (*Ursprung der Genesis*) — it is the force that makes being become."<sup>32</sup> This means the divine decision is not a "one-time event" (e.g., the "Big Bang" in modern cosmology) but a perpetual process: it lays the foundation for all being while being reshaped by being's evolution. Human history, for example, is not a "sequence of events" but the "eternal past's traumatic return in time" — every historical moment reenacts the original contraction. This dynamism (rooted in the *Ungrund* and divine contraction) is not an abstract ontological principle — it manifests as a concrete generative force in specific domains through Ekstasis. Specifically, this reenactment appears as an unconscious process in nature (via physical, chemical, and biological phenomena) and a conscious process in history (via conflict, freedom, and evil). The following chapter will analyze how the "Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis" model unfolds in these two domains, further verifying the unity of Schelling's thought. This contingency frees being from "logical fate" and grants it "open possibility" — a key insight for contemporary event ontology.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. DOMAIN-SPECIFIC UNFOLDING: CONTRACTION-EKSTASIS IN NATURE AND HISTORY

The divine decision is not an isolated ontological event but a generative force reenacted across domains through Ekstasis. In nature, this reenactment is unconscious, with potencies unfolding as physical, chemical, and biological processes; in history, it is conscious, with potencies manifesting as conflict, freedom, and evil. Both domains are expressions of the same Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic.

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<sup>31</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1961), 263.

<sup>32</sup> The eternal past is the "origin of genesis" — it generates being continuously. See Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 103.

<sup>33</sup> Badiou's "event" draws on Schelling's contingency but neglects the unity of the *Ungrund*. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 12.

Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797) argues that "nature is visible spirit" — its laws are the objectified reenactment of divine Contraction-Ekstasis. From specific natural phenomena, magnetism emerges as the "most primitive expression of ontological difference in nature":<sup>34</sup> the South Pole's "centripetal force" objectifies the first potency (dark drive), contracting the magnetic field inward to form a stable foundation, while the North Pole's "centrifugal force" objectifies the second potency (luminous force), expanding the magnetic field outward to enable interaction with the environment. The magnetic field's unity mirrors the divine essence's transition from Latency to Actuality: "A magnet is a microcosm of the *Ungrund* — it contains the full tension of being in a visible form."<sup>35</sup>

Beyond magnetism, electricity (as an extended interpretation based on Schelling's core proposition) further illustrates the Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic in nature. It should be noted that Schelling himself did not explicitly use electricity to explain potencies in *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797); however, based on his proposition that "nature is the visible manifestation of spirit", the negative pole of an electrical circuit can be seen as embodying the first potency (Contraction): it accumulates electrons through "inward contraction", generating a charge differential that forms the "ground (*Grund*)" of electrical flow. Without this contraction — this concentration of electrons — the circuit would lack the tension needed to produce energy.<sup>36</sup> The positive pole, by contrast, embodies the second potency (Ekstasis): it attracts electrons, prompting them to "transcend" their concentrated state in the negative pole and flow through the circuit. This flow — visible as a spark or current — represents the "existence (*Existenz*)" of electricity: the ground's manifestation as a perceivable phenomenon.<sup>37</sup>

Schelling would note that electricity's duality mirrors the *Ungrund*'s tension: the negative pole's contraction is not "opposed" to the positive pole's ekstasis, but necessary for it. A battery, for instance, ceases to function if either pole is removed — just as being cannot exist without both *Grund* and *Existenz*.

Beyond magnetism, chemistry in Schelling's view is "the dialectic of nature", reenacting Contraction-Ekstasis through combination and decomposition. Combination occurs when elements like oxygen and hydrogen form water — a process of "contractive unity" where elements contract into a new substance (water) with qualities distinct from its components (e.g., liquidity vs. gaseousness), embodying Contraction as the generation of new being from latent potencies.

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<sup>34</sup> Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Faraday, *Experimental Researches in Electricity* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1839), 142.

<sup>37</sup> Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 56.

Decomposition, by contrast, happens when water is electrolyzed, a process of “ekstatic differentiation” where the new substance (water) breaks down into its original components (oxygen and hydrogen), representing Ekstasis as the return of being to its latent state, preparing for future contraction.

In biological life, the Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic grows more complex with the integration of “self-preservation (*Selbsterhaltung*)”. For plants, geotropism (root contraction) manifests the first potency — roots contract into soil to absorb nutrients, anchoring the plant (Contraction) — while phototropism (leaf ekstasis) manifests the second potency — leaves ekstasize toward light to perform photosynthesis, manifesting the plant as a “living organism” (Ekstasis). For animals, instinctive drives (e.g., foraging, reproduction) manifest the first potency, contracting animals into their survival needs (Contraction), and perceptual capacities (e.g., vision, hearing) manifest the second potency, allowing animals to ekstasize beyond themselves and interact with the environment (Ekstasis). Schelling rejects external teleology (e.g., Paley’s “watchmaker God”): “Nature’s purpose is not imposed from outside but emerges from the internal divine decision — it is the slow unfolding of the *Ungrund*’s potencies.”<sup>38</sup>

In biological life, embryonic development enacts the full Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis cycle. The zygote begins in a state of Latency: it contains the organism’s entire genome, but its cells are undifferentiated — representing the “indifference of potencies” in the *Ungrund*.<sup>39</sup> Contraction occurs during gastrulation, when the zygote splits into three germ layers (ectoderm, mesoderm, endoderm); each layer “limits” itself to developing specific tissues (e.g., ectoderm forms skin and nerves), generating ontological difference. This self-limitation is not a “loss” but a “gain”: it allows the embryo to move from “potential life” to “actual life”.<sup>40</sup>

Ekstasis follows as these tissues differentiate into organs (e.g., the heart, brain) that perform specialized functions. The organism, now fully formed, transcends its latent state — but the cycle continues: through reproduction, it passes its genetic potential (Latency) to offspring, who repeat the Contraction-Ekstasis process. This perpetual cycle confirms Schelling’s claim that nature is “visible spirit” — the *Ungrund*’s dynamic made flesh.

When potencies enter the “domain of human freedom”, Contraction-Ekstasis evolves into history’s core rhythm: Contraction manifests as conflict and darkness (war, oppression), Ekstasis as freedom’s transcendence (revolution, moral progress), and “evil” as the necessary remainder of this dynamic. Schelling sharply criticizes

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<sup>38</sup> Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> Caspar Friedrich Wolff, *Theoria Generationis*, trans. Charles T. Druery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 78.

<sup>40</sup> Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 46.

Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* (1837), which reduces history to a "necessary process of rational self-realization".<sup>41</sup> For Hegel, evil is a "temporary instrument of progress" driving reason toward its telos (e.g., the "universal state"), but Schelling rejects this: "History is not a triumphal march of reason but the eternal past's return in time — it is the conscious reenactment of the *Ungrund*'s tension."<sup>42</sup> For Schelling, evil is not an "ethical failure" but an "ontological remainder (*ontologischer Rest*)" — the unintegrated residue of the first potency after divine contraction, like "ashes left after a flame burns": inevitable, but not a "stain" on being. This residue manifests in humans as "egoism (Egoismus)" — the tendency to absolutize the first potency (self-interest) and refuse to ekstasize toward the second (reason, love).

Evil's possibility is precisely what confirms freedom's authenticity. Schelling writes: "Without the choice of evil, goodness becomes forced obedience — not free decision. Light cannot be perceived without shadow; evil is the condition for goodness to manifest."<sup>43</sup> He uses "Judas' betrayal" to illustrate this: Judas' evil is not an "accidental fall" but an "extreme manifestation of the ontological remainder" — he absolutized his egoism, becoming a "negative witness to divine decision".<sup>44</sup> The Contraction-Ekstasis cycle is equally visible in ancient history, such as the conflict between Athens and Sparta in 5th-century BCE Greece. Sparta's social structure embodied Contraction: it centralized power in a military oligarchy, limiting citizenship to a small elite and enslaving the helot population. This "self-limitation" was intended to preserve stability — but it also generated a rigid "ground (*Grund*)" that resisted change.<sup>45</sup> Athens, by contrast, initially enacted Ekstasis: its democratic system expanded political participation beyond the elite, allowing citizens to "transcend" narrow tribal loyalties and engage in collective governance. Yet Athens later descended into Contraction: its imperial ambitions (e.g., the Delian League) led it to impose its will on other city-states, replicating Sparta's rigidity.<sup>46</sup>

The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) was the culmination of this tension: two systems, each trapped in their own contraction, clashed. Plato's *Republic* — written in the war's aftermath — represented an attempt at Ekstasis: it proposed a "philosopher-king" who would transcend tribal and class divisions, reuniting the city-

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<sup>41</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 23.

<sup>42</sup> Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 105.

<sup>43</sup> Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Judas' betrayal is an extreme manifestation of the ontological remainder. See Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 56.

<sup>45</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), 45.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 376e, 38.

state's fragmented ground. Yet this negativity is necessary: "Without Judas' betrayal, there would be no Christ's sacrifice and redemption — evil makes freedom visible."<sup>47</sup>

The 16th-century Protestant Reformation offers another example of historical Contraction-Ekstasis. The medieval Catholic Church embodied Contraction: it centralized religious authority in the papacy and clergy, framing itself as the sole "ground (*Grund*)" of access to God. This hierarchy limited lay believers' direct engagement with scripture, creating a rigid structure that prioritized institutional power over spiritual experience.<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther's (1483–1546) *95 Theses* (1517) enacted Ekstasis: his doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone) rejected the Church's mediating role, arguing that believers could access God directly through faith. This "transcendence" of clerical authority opened new possibilities for religious freedom.<sup>49</sup>

Yet the Reformation soon entered a new phase of Contraction: Protestant denominations (Lutheranism, Calvinism) developed their own rigid doctrines, and conflicts between Catholics and Protestants (e.g., the Thirty Years' War, 1618–1648) became new sources of historical tension. This cycle — contraction leading to conflict, followed by attempted transcendence — confirms Schelling's view that history is "God's autobiography" in perpetual draft.

For Schelling, history is an open cycle of Contraction-Ekstasis: it begins with Contraction (e.g., the oppression of the French Old Regime), transitions to Ekstasis (e.g., the French Revolution's demand for "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*"), and returns to Latency as new conflicts emerge from the ontological remainder, repeating the cycle. Schelling calls history "God's autobiography", and humans its "unfinished chapter:" "Every human decision continues the divine movement from Latency to Actuality — we are co-constitutors of being, not mere spectators."<sup>50</sup>

## 5. HUMAN FREEDOM: PARTICIPATORY IMITATION THROUGH ART AND PHILOSOPHY

Humans are unique in embodying both potencies — the first (natural drives) and the second (rational will) — making us the "nexus (*Schnittstelle*) of nature and spirit" — a "microcosm" containing the full tension of being.<sup>51</sup> Through "participatory imitation (*teilnehmende Nachahmung*)", we become co-constitutors of the divine decision via two paths: art (sensible intuition) and philosophy (intellectual intuition).

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<sup>47</sup> Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam, *In Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin Classics, 1971), 98.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther, *95 Theses*, trans. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), Thesis 27.

<sup>50</sup> Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 115.

<sup>51</sup> Humans embody both potencies, making us the "nexus of nature and spirit". See Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 60.

In *Philosophy of Art* (1802–1803), Schelling argues that “art is the only decipherable cipher (*Chiffre*) of philosophy”.<sup>52</sup> Art — especially “sublime art” (tragedy, epic, symphony) — allows finite humans to intuit the *Ungrund*’s truth. The sublime arises when “the finite encounters the infinite”: in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the conflict between divine law (Antigone’s duty to bury her brother) and human law (Creon’s edict) reenacts the Contraction tension of the *Ungrund*;<sup>53</sup> in Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, the transition from the “Ode to Joy”’s suffering to transcendence reenacts Ekstasis. Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* (1824) deepens this connection between art and the *Ungrund*, particularly in its fourth movement. The movement opens with a “growl” from the double basses and cellos — a low, dissonant melody that embodies Contraction (first potency). This passage mimics the “dark drive” of the *Ungrund*: it is tense, unresolved, and seemingly formless, representing the “ground (*Grund*)” of the symphony’s emotional power.<sup>54</sup> As the movement progresses, the “Ode to Joy” theme emerges — first in the clarinet, then in the full orchestra. This theme is Ekstasis (second potency): it transcends the opening dissonance, transforming tension into triumph. The chorus’s entry — singing “*Freude, schöner Götterfunken* (Joy, beautiful spark of God)” — is the climax of this ekstasis: it makes the *Ungrund*’s “infinite tension” visible in finite sound.<sup>55</sup>

Schelling would argue that this transition — from darkness to light — lets listeners intuit the divine decision: being’s emergence from latency into actuality. Schelling calls artists “second creators”: “Through imagination, they reenact the divine’s generation of being from the *Ungrund*. A work of art is the visible trace of this reenactment.”<sup>56</sup> Michelangelo’s David, for example, embodies both Contraction (marble’s material limits, first potency) and Ekstasis (David’s spiritual power, second potency); by contracting the marble’s constraints, Michelangelo lets David’s freedom “ekstasize”, allowing viewers to touch the infinite within the finite.

Rembrandt van Rijn’s *The Night Watch* (1642) similarly enacts the Contraction-Ekstasis dynamic in painting. The left side of the canvas is dominated by shadow — Contraction (first potency). Here, figures are partially obscured: their faces are dim, their clothing blends into the background, representing the “ground (*Grund*)” of the scene — the unmanifested tension of the militia company preparing for action. This

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<sup>52</sup> Art is the “cipher” that reveals the *Ungrund*’s truth. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, trans. D. W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 32.

<sup>53</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 45–50.

<sup>54</sup> Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125* (score), ed. Jonathan Del Mar (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1996), Movement IV, 192.

<sup>55</sup> Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

shadow is not “empty” but charged with potential: it hints at the figures’ hidden identities and motivations.<sup>57</sup>

The right side of the canvas, by contrast, is illuminated — Ekstasis (second potency). The central figure, Captain Frans Banninck Cocq, stands in bright light, his uniform vivid and his posture confident. This light “transcends” the shadow, making the company’s purpose (defending the city) visible. Rembrandt’s use of *chiaroscuro* — light against dark — mirrors the *Ungrund*’s duality: the shadow (*Grund*) is necessary for the light (*Existenz*) to have meaning. Viewers, in turn, intuit the divine dynamic: being’s movement from hiddenness to revelation.

Philosophy, by contrast, is “rational participation” in the divine decision. Its highest task is to grasp the *Ungrund* through “intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*)” — not to cognize it as an object, but to “reenact” the Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis process through speculation. This is not Hegel’s “closed conceptual system” but a “defense of being’s openness”: by asking “Why does being exist?” or “How is freedom possible?” philosophers return to the divine decision’s original fissure. Schelling emphasizes: “Reason cannot exhaust the *Ungrund*’s mystery, but it can participate in its generation. Tracing the *Ungrund* is like following a river to its source — we may never reach the end, but we understand the logic of being’s flow.”<sup>58</sup> His analysis of “freedom and necessity”, for instance, reenacts the model: necessity is the Contraction of potencies (being’s rooting), freedom is their Ekstasis (being’s manifestation), and together they form the “dynamic unity of being”.

## 6. CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF SCHELLING’S EVENT ONTOLOGY

The Latency-Contraction-Ekstasis model reveals three key contributions of Schelling’s philosophy. First, it dispels the “myth of rupture”: Schelling’s early Philosophy of Nature and late Philosophy of History are not disconnected but differentiated manifestations of the same dynamic, with magnetism in nature and revolution in history both reenacting the *Ungrund*’s tension — proving the unity of his thought.

Second, it supplements contemporary event ontology by addressing unresolved tensions in Gilles Deleuze’s and Alain Badiou’s frameworks. For Deleuze, event ontology revolves around the “priority of difference”<sup>59</sup>: he defines the event as the “unfolding of potencies into actuality” but rejects any transcendent or immanent unity that could ground this differentiation. Instead, Deleuze frames potencies as inherently “disjunctive” — their interaction generates difference without a prior unifying field.

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<sup>57</sup> Anthony Blunt, *Rembrandt* (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 112.

<sup>58</sup> Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 82.

<sup>59</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 48.

This leads to a gap: if potencies are purely differential, how do they cohere into coherent events (e.g., natural processes or historical transformations) rather than chaotic fragmentation? Schelling's model fills this gap with the Latency phase (rooted in the *Ungrund*). The *Ungrund* is not a static "unity" but a "dynamic field of latent potency tension"<sup>60</sup> — a pre-differentiated unity where potencies exist in "original indifference" (not disjunction). For example, Deleuze's account of "potency → actuality" cannot explain why a seed's roots (contraction) and shoots (ekstasis) act in concert; Schelling's Latency phase clarifies this: the seed's genetic potential (Latency) is the *Ungrund*'s potency tension made concrete, ensuring differentiation (Contraction-Ekstasis) remains cohesive.

For Badiou, by contrast, event ontology centers on the "priority of rupture": events are "irruptions of the infinite into the finite" — radical breaks with the existing "state of the situation" (e.g., a scientific discovery or political revolution) that require subjective "fidelity" to become truths. Badiou explicitly rejects "cyclical becoming", framing events as one-time, irreversible ruptures.<sup>61</sup> This creates a dualism: events are either "rupture" or "stasis", with no middle ground of continuous generation. Schelling's model resolves this via the Contraction-Ekstasis cycle. Unlike Badiou's discrete events, Schelling's "meta-event" (divine decision) is a perpetual process: Contraction generates ontological difference (analogous to Badiou's rupture) but does not end in stasis — Ekstasis returns this difference to the *Ungrund*'s unity, preparing for new Contraction. Historical examples illustrate this: the French Revolution (Ekstasis, a rupture with the Old Regime) did not exist in isolation; it emerged from the "ontological remainder" of the Old Regime's Contraction (oppression) and sowed the seeds for new Contraction (post-revolutionary authoritarianism). This cycle supplements Badiou's framework by showing that "rupture" is not an anomaly but part of being's continuous generation — events are both "disruptive" (Contraction) and "integrative" (Ekstasis), not purely one or the other. Deleuze's "priority of difference" neglects the *Ungrund*'s unifying foundation, while Badiou's "priority of rupture" neglects the continuity of becoming; Schelling's model bridges these gaps by affirming difference (Contraction) while preserving unity (Latency/Ekstasis), and framing rupture as part of a perpetual cycle of becoming. It also supports Heidegger's "*Dasein*'s existential decision" (human participation in being) and Levinas' "transcendence of the Other" (freedom's ethical dimension).

Third, it activates freedom's practical significance. Freedom is not abstract "choice" but "participation in the generation of being": every human decision — whether artistic, philosophical, or moral — shapes the *Ungrund*'s unfolding. As

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<sup>60</sup> Schelling, *Philosophy and Religion*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 12.

Schelling writes: “Human freedom is the unfinished chapter of God’s story. Our choices are the final step of the divine movement from Latency to Actuality.”<sup>62</sup>

Schelling’s *The Ages of the World* reminds us: “Eternity is not a static present but an ever-becoming event — the essence of being is freedom in eternal decision.”<sup>63</sup> This insight continues to challenge our understanding of being and freedom, confirming Schelling’s status as a bridge between classical Idealism and contemporary philosophy.

For contemporary society, this insight also provides a response to the dilemma of “alienated freedom”: freedom is not the abstract “choice without constraints” in modern individualism, but the “participation in the generation of being” — whether through artistic creation, philosophical reflection, or moral practice, humans are not passive spectators of existence but co-constitutors of the divine decision. This redefines freedom as a “practical participation in being” rather than an abstract concept, which has important implications for resolving the sense of alienation in the technological age.

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<sup>62</sup> Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 65.

<sup>63</sup> Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 120.

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## **II.**

### **THE EVENT: PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES**

**Marlene Prosdocimo**

University of Pavia, Italy

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8292-5974>

[marleneprosdocimo@gmail.com](mailto:marleneprosdocimo@gmail.com)

## THE EVENT OF THE HOLY: ON THE ESSENCE-TO-COME OF THE IMMEDIATE\*

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the relationship between immediateness, its essence (as the “holy”) and the event, drawing on Heidegger’s *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*.

The article will begin by clarifying why the “immediate” can only be identified with “nature,”<sup>1</sup> which is the “all-mediating mediatedness.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the “immediate” coincides with the “mediatedness” (namely, *mediation*) of mediated beings.

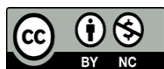
The analysis will then shift to the “holy” understood as the “essence of nature,”<sup>3</sup> so consequently, as the essence of the “immediate”. This will lead to the mode of presence of the holy: According to Heidegger, the holy is indeed “present as what is coming.”<sup>4</sup> The “immediate”, in its essence, is not an “already-been dimension” of the mediated. The holy, therefore, is not an event that has always already occurred, opening space for the emergence of mediated beings: The holy is *given* insofar as it is *to come*.

This does *not* mean that the holy coincides with a future event, or with an impossibility that can never be. “Nature” arises from “chaos”, which corresponds to the “holy” itself.<sup>5</sup> The holy at the heart of the immediate is hence *originary* and has *effectively* begotten nature, being that which is coming.

To grasp this dynamic, the issue of the “poetic word” as the *event* of the holy<sup>6</sup> will be addressed. The poetic word does not refer to something that *has been* or *will be*: A generative dynamic is always ongoing, in which the poetic word corresponds to the *event* of the *essencing* of immediate mediation. This paper will demonstrate how, in the poetic word, “what is coming” has begotten — and continues to beget — the omnipresent immediate (mediation) in its difference from beings.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, event, immediate, holy, poetry

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Marlene Prosdocimo (2026). “The Event of the Holy: On the Essence-to-Come of the Immediate.” In M. Nyíró, Zs. Lurcza, P. Makai (eds.): *EVENT and Its Mediation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literary Studies, and Cultural Theory* (117–125). Miskolc: Miskolc University Press, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. <https://doi.org/10.70832/EVENTanditsmediation.04>

<sup>1</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 84.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See *ibid.*, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, 84–85.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, 81, 98.

The question of the holy in Heidegger is intimately bound up with that of mediation, to the point that in certain respects the two in effect coincide. The holy does not correspond to any specific *region* within Heidegger's ontology, not even to one situated at a fundamental level, nor with any supplementary register of meaning-fulness that might illuminate beings (or anything which gives itself) with a different light — a holy one, indeed. It is therefore neither a ground nor a further determination for what there is.<sup>7</sup>

A well-known passage of the "Letter on 'Humanism'" states: "Only from the truth of being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word 'God' is to signify."<sup>8</sup> This shows how originary the holy is for Heidegger — the "space" of the essence of the holy is drawn directly from the primary truth of being.<sup>9</sup> But this does not mean that there is in fact a hierarchy according to which the holy would constitute some sort of ground for the subsequent levels mentioned in the quotation, not even if conceived in terms of an *Ungrund* or an *Abgrund* (a "shattered" negative ground).

At the same time, "the holy" is one of the "names" for the Heideggerian other beginning of thinking.<sup>10</sup> This might lead one to think that it pertains to the future moment of an eschatological promise, for example, or that in any case it concerns the dimension of the "not-yet" that can at most be anticipated in the present. However, this is not the case. This paper aims to demonstrate why the holy, insofar as it concerns the issue of immediateness, cannot be reduced to a single level forming part of a hypothetical foundational chain or series of events. We will analyze the generative dynamic that it undergoes and initiates, which does not relegate it to either the past or the future. To accomplish this, we will draw on Heidegger's *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry* — more precisely, from his elucidation of *As when on a holiday...*<sup>11</sup> This will allow us to clarify the relationship between immediateness, its essence as the holy,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Not even of what there is *not*, if we consider for instance being and nothingness.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 267.

<sup>9</sup> For a further examination of the relation between the holy and being, also in light of this passage, see Holger Zaborowski, "Heidegger and the Question and the Need of the Holy," in *Heidegger and the Holy*, ed. Richard Capobianco (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 108.

<sup>10</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *On Inception* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2023), 129–130.

<sup>11</sup> The approach taken in addressing the elucidation will not be historical or philological in nature. See for instance Alexis C. Briley, "The Subject of Inversion: Hölderlin's 'Wie wenn am Feiertage...'," *MLN* 128, no. 3 (2013): 485–493, regarding the philological issues in Heidegger's reading of the poem by Hölderlin.

<sup>12</sup> See Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 81.

and the event: These three coordinates will further enter into dialogue with poetry since, according to Heidegger, the “poetic word” is the “event of the holy”.<sup>13</sup>

Let the inquiry now begin by identifying what the “immediate” may correspond to. The immediate cannot rest on distinction or on beings which have certain determinations and properties: The determinateness of a being is grounded in the fact that it possesses certain properties and not others; it is “thus and so”, and not otherwise. This, indeed, entails *distinction* — through which immediateness is sublated or vanishes. This renders such beings mediated, and the immediate, in turn, cannot itself be mediated.<sup>14</sup> According to Heidegger, no *determinate* (therefore mediated) being is actually the immediate.

The immediate cannot be sought among beings. What does not fall under determinations and is not a mediated being turns out to be the *mediatedness* of mediated beings — namely, *mediation*. This “all-mediating mediatedness” is called nature, which is “all-present”.<sup>15</sup> The all-presence (omnipresence) of nature does not correspond to a quantitative presence which results from the sum of present beings, or to an abstraction from those beings (whereby one present being is taken, then successively other ones, and their presence gets abstracted and universalized to everything which is present), and cannot even be evoked or *indicated* by something real.<sup>16</sup>

“As the clearing [*Lichtung*], in her everything can first be present”:<sup>17</sup> nature “renders the mediated possible in its essence”.<sup>18</sup> Nature should therefore be intended in this sense, as the immediate mediation which makes mediated beings possible, and this makes nature the “all-present”.

It may be thought that the immediate is an originary, primary ground that serves as a mere *condition of possibility* for mediated beings. However, this is not entirely true. The immediate nature should not be understood transcendently,<sup>19</sup> or as an unconditional condition. Nature itself has an essence, which emerges as the “holy”.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the “holy” here does not coincide with a property derived from a god, nor with the ground of nature — which would otherwise be mediated. If the

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<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, 81, 98.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, 75, 84.

<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>19</sup> It is not intended, however, to completely dissociate Heidegger from transcendental philosophy. The issue is complex and will not be explored further in this context. See Eric S. Nelson, “Heidegger’s Failure to Overcome Transcendental Philosophy,” in *Transcendental Inquiry: Its History, Methods and Critiques*, eds. Halla Kim and Steven Hoeltzel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40715-9\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40715-9_8)

<sup>20</sup> See Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 82.

holy is the essence of nature, it is consequently the essence of the immediate, since the two are identical.

At this point, one may conceive the holy as a posited origin of the immediate, of nature. In this scenario there would be a *first* origin, the essence of the immediate — namely, the holy — and then nature as the ground for mediated beings. But the relation between these elements does not follow a foundational order or necessity. There is no chain from which beings descend, beginning with the holy, followed by nature, and then that which is mediated. In this chain of grounds or conditions, the links would be present in the same way as mediated beings, thus forming a present, actual chain.

The mode of presence (subsistence) of the holy is indeed specific: As claimed by Heidegger, the holy is “present as what is coming [*Kommendes*].”<sup>21</sup> “Present”, in this context, is not to be understood along the lines of the metaphysics of presence. The point is precisely that the way in which the holy “essences” itself makes it the (non-) being that is *to come*: That is why it is excluded that it constitutes a given or posited origin. If that were the case, it would *already* be *there*, available, as a ground that supports everything that derives from it.

The key to an appropriate interpretation of the holy does not even lie in conceiving it in terms of a groundless ground, or an *Ab-grund* (abyssal foundation). Thus, from this open abyss, the totality could freely emerge without deterministic conditions. The problem, however, is that the abyss would risk being relegated to the bottom of the system, even though it has no ground of its own and does not mechanistically cause the emergence of nature and mediated beings. If one thinks of the abyss or the open as an immediateness that has *already* occurred, then the sense of the holy as “present as what is coming” does not get fully conveyed because it would fail to account for the fact that this essence — the essence of the immediate — bears *futurity*. The “immediate”, in its essence, is not a sort of “already-been dimension” of the mediated — and this leads to the point that the holy cannot be considered an event<sup>22</sup> that has always already occurred, allowing for (or opening the space for) the emergence of mediated beings.

The essence of the immediate is not the “*τί*” of a “*τί ἐστί*”, a “what” or an “idea” that falls within the metaphysical framework (as understood by Heidegger, in whose view metaphysics is derivative and does not penetrate the originary).<sup>23</sup> To avoid being

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>22</sup> The issue of the “holy” as an “event” will be addressed later.

<sup>23</sup> The intention here is not to propose a dichotomy between metaphysics and the originary (of the other beginning of thinking or of the event, for instance). This paper will not, however, address the relation between the two beginnings, nor that between metaphysics and the event. For a discussion of the status of the other beginning of thought, see, e.g., Françoise Dastur, “The Later Heidegger: The Question of the Other Beginning of Thinking,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, eds. François Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

subsumed under that metaphysical configuration, among all the reasons, the *essence* represented by the holy can be conceived as an *event* — that is clearly neither determinable nor mediated. Such event, however, did not open the space in the beginning (*in principio*) for immediateness — of which it is the essence — and, subsequently, for beings. The holy is *given* insofar as it is *to come*.

This does not mean that the holy coincides with a future event, or with an impossibility that simply can never be. *Prima facie*, these two hypotheses might preserve the futurity of the event of the holy, without making it available in the present — or in the actuality of a foundation — while nonetheless allowing it to subsist. Let us now see why, though, these conceptions fail to account for the essence of the immediate.

The holy is not “something” that must come from the future, of which we have only a presentiment (*Ahnung*) in the present. In the first hypothesis, according to which the holy coincides with a future event, we would only be dealing with the absence of the holy. This, however, is not the path to follow, because the aforementioned abyss, instead of being confined to the bottom of totality, would constitute the last link in the chain — a *future* link (which still does not correspond to the structure of the holy-nature relation, as it does not resemble a chain).

In the second hypothesis, on the other hand, according to which the holy is an impossibility that can never be, the holy would never subsist as an actuality. It would be forever “to-come” and never “coming”, because it could actually *never come* — and this would be its mode of essencing (*Wesung*): Not a logical mistake, but rather a way of guaranteeing the constant futurity of the essence of the immediate — a sort of impossible parousia, possible only insofar as it is impossible. However, once again, that would not be correct. We shall now examine why.

Heidegger asserts that “nature” arises from “chaos”, which corresponds to the “holy” itself.<sup>24</sup> More precisely, “nature is [nevertheless] ‘begotten out of holy chaos’”.<sup>25</sup> It is not a primordial confusion: According to Heidegger, “chaos” gets associated to that which is undifferentiated and confused only if it is considered with reference to mediated beings, and therefore grasped in its in-essential aspect (*Unwesen*). More appropriately, thought instead “in terms of nature φύσις[,] chaos remains that gaping out of which the open opens itself, so that it may grant its bounded presence to all differentiations”.<sup>26</sup> This originary openness is, coherently, the holy: Even before the openness, the holy is the *opening* (the gaping) out of which, it has been said, the open (which precedes every different being) opens itself. “Coherently” because the holy is the *opening*, the essence of nature, of the immediate;

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<sup>24</sup> See Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 84–85.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

while the immediateness represented by nature, on the other hand, is the *openness* that precedes every being, “the oldest of every former thing, and always the youngest of subsequent things”.<sup>27</sup> We will return to this last point shortly, which leads to the dismantling of the idea of the aforementioned “chain” (foundational or otherwise); now, however, it must be understood why the fact that nature is begotten by chaos refutes the two hypotheses put forward above regarding the futurity of the event of the holy.

The holy, as shown, lies at the heart of the immediate as its essence. Furthermore, as the holy chaos, it has (already) begotten nature: It is hence originary, and has *effectively* begotten nature, being that “which is coming”. Its way of essencing, which apparently refers only to the future (and therefore to the possibility not actualized in the present, to the non-effectiveness or actuality), instead means that in this opening up the holy has in fact generated something — not in the sense of a “thing”, of an objectified content, of course, but rather as the open. This is why it was argued earlier that the holy is given insofar as it is *Kommendes*: The emphasis is not only on the “insofar as...” as a limitation regarding the essencing, but also on the *given*. It is therefore not a matter of opting for one of the two dimensions often associated with eschatology — the “already” and the “not yet” — and refusing the other, but of keeping them both simultaneously “present”. After all, the temporality referred to here is not that of historical-objective time, or chronologically linear time.

Now that the non-excluding coexistence of the futurity of the holy — as the essence of nature — and its effectiveness (the actual generation of the immediate, of nature) has been understood, let us investigate the ongoing dynamics by connecting what has been established to the issue of poetry.

Heidegger claims that the poetic word is the event (*Ereignis*) of the holy, that it *must* be the holy.<sup>28</sup> The word “event” does not convey that *something* happens in the realm of poetry such as, for example, the manifestation of a supposedly holy dimension through the medium of words. Indeed, the holy is not objectifiable.<sup>29</sup> It is not a content that can be referred to as something that stands against (as a *Gegenstand*), in front of, something else (for example, a poet-subject who would express that content after having grasped or conceptualized it). The holy is not even a super-subject that purely manifests itself. No-thing really occurs within this event: The poetic word does not, therefore, refer to something that has been or will be.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.*, 81, 98.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, 89.

<sup>30</sup> It neither narrates a past in which the gods and the holy were present — contrasting with the absence of the holy in the present — nor does it announce a future of eschatological presence that is now absent. And, as mentioned above, it does not even speak of an initial or ultimate ground.

This paper aims to suggest that the poetic word, as the event of the holy, corresponds to the event of the essencing (*Wesung*) of immediate mediation (nature) — within a generative, self-sustaining dynamic that is always ongoing. Let's unravel this.

Since there is no initial state of isolated immediateness, from which the state of mediated beings would follow, the holy is an event. It is neither a mere presence, nor an *Abgrund* that initiates mediation: In fact, as has been shown, we are not dealing with a chain of grounds that lead to mediated reality, nor with a linear process (for example, of begetting, generation). There is no such chain or process with a punctual beginning. Heidegger, incidentally, does not believe that the “beginning” (in the sense of “ἀρχή”) disappears once a certain process has been initiated. Such beginning does not simply occur at the instant  $t_0$  (as in the example of the surgeon washing his hands before performing an operation in *What Is Philosophy?*):<sup>31</sup> The beginning always “reigns” and “begins”, to evoke the semantic field of “ἀρχή”, “ἄρχειν”, which includes both reigning and beginning.

Therefore, the holy, that from which nature (the immediate) is begotten, can never be found merely at the beginning. Furthermore, since it can only “give” itself as “that which comes”, it *actually* gives itself — without ever giving itself *definitively*. At the same time, the holy has *already* given itself (it has already begotten nature), but it is always yet to come — being “what is coming”. This mode of subsistence of the holy as the essence of nature, of the immediate, can only have an “evenemential” nature. Indeed, the Heideggerian originary *Ereignis* is not an already constituted principle, a form of monism, but rather requires a relation: “Be-ing needs man in order to hold sway; and man belongs to be-ing so that he can accomplish his utmost destiny as Dasein. [...] This *counter-resonance* of *needing* and *belonging* makes up be-ing as enowning [*Ereignis*].”<sup>32</sup> The “structure” of the *Ereignis* presupposes that there does not subsist a hypothetical side that exclusively consists of being — absolute and complete in- and for-itself — from which man (or man as *Dasein*) would issue forth. Neither here does a foundational chain occur: Both being and man correspond to the other within the movement of *needing* and of *belonging*. It is possible to propose an analogy between this structure and the originary opening of chaos (namely, the holy) that begets nature (the openness). Chaos constitutes the opening from whose movement nature (which belongs to it) is generated; yet it is also futural — just as being needs man in the *Ereignis* and is therefore not definitively given “before” man occurs. Consequently, the holy as the essence of nature is an *event*.

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<sup>31</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 81.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 177.

Furthermore, the poetic word is the event of the holy because the word here is not the *power* of a subject. The poet does not “possess” or “use” language: “It is not we who have language; rather, language has us, in a certain way.”<sup>33</sup> It is language which “has” the poet, and this relation of correspondence is precisely the *Ereignis*.

In its essencing, the holy does not symmetrically oppose presence, for example being absent in the present — and perhaps being present in an unspecified future. In coming, it always generates nature: Therefore, the dynamic which is being described here is “generative”. It sustains itself because it is continuous, never fully actualized, never motionless, hence the holy is to-come. Furthermore, since nature is the immediate, it is not a mediated being that gets begotten by something else: This means that it cannot be considered as an object that comes into being once and for all, or that has to be maintained at most in its properties. Mediation subsists continuously in its immediateness; it admits of neither “before” nor “after”.<sup>34</sup>

Besides, nature (the immediate) is “the oldest of every former thing, and always the youngest of subsequent things”.<sup>35</sup> Addressing explicitly Hölderlin’s poem, Heidegger then states: “By awakening, nature’s coming, as what is most futural, comes out of the oldest of what has been, which never ages because it is each time the youngest.”<sup>36</sup> When the immediate essences itself, it comes out of the holy (chaos), which, being nature’s essence, is the most originary level (as analyzed above, not as an isolated, first level or ground). Once nature (the immediate) awakes, it remains futural even if it is the youngest of subsequent things: So, the process of generating nature always goes on — because in so far as nature makes the *mediated* possible in its essence (as mentioned above), this dynamic is the one that also makes mediated beings possible. Therefore, the begetting does not involve nature (the immediate) alone. The immediate is the mediation of the mediated, and thus, when it is generated, the mediated gets also generated (otherwise, immediateness or the holy would appear as an isolated, objectified state, and not all-present)<sup>37</sup> — of course, preserving the

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine”* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 24.

<sup>34</sup> On the relationship between nature and temporality, see André Schuwer, “Nature and the Holy: On Heidegger’s Interpretation of Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘Wie wenn am Feiertage’,” *Research in Phenomenology* 7 (1977), 229.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 85.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> This *could* allow a possibility for man, as a mediated being, to *access* the essence of the immediate — that is, the holy. In so far as the notion of a foundational chain has been excluded, man would no longer be forced to engage solely with mediated beings, being separated by an insurmountable distance from immediateness. Certainly, it remains to be considered *whether* an immediate relation between the immediate and man as mediated is possible, and *how*.

difference between the immediate and the mediated, and without ignoring the other causes or similar factors necessary for the generation of the mediated.

In the poetic word (namely, in the event of the holy), “what is coming” has begotten — and continues to beget — the omnipresent immediate (mediation) in its difference from mediated beings. This dynamic does not take the form of a chain, but rather, of a sort of circular, simultaneous process that keeps together the dimensions of the “already-” and the “not-yet-”.

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**Anton Sverdlikov**

*Independent Scholar*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6167-8565>

[anton.sverdlikov@gmail.com](mailto:anton.sverdlikov@gmail.com)

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL METAPHYSICS OF EVENTS\*

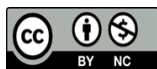
**Abstract:** This paper advances a realist interpretation of the late Heidegger's philosophy of being as event. My central claim is that Heidegger's understanding of the event of openness undergoes a decisive transformation in the 1930s and thereafter: What was originally conceived as an existential structure of *Dasein* (the event of transcendence) becomes progressively de-anthropocentrized. The event of unconcealment is no longer confined to human existence but is instead approached as a universal, even cosmological, occurrence — something that takes place with beings themselves, independently of their relation to human beings. In this respect, I argue, Heidegger's discourse of the event can be understood as a distinctive form of metaphysics: not a metaphysics of presence, but a metaphysics of the event.

While this event-metaphysics already carries a realist inclination, it remains weakened in Heidegger by his continuing insistence on the indispensability of *Dasein* for the event. Drawing on Eugen Fink's cosmological reworking of Heidegger's later thought, I argue that this commitment is not necessary and that Heidegger's conception of the event can instead be interpreted in a radically realist manner. In Fink's cosmological perspective, the event assumes the character of a fully subject-independent occurrence.

Building on these developments, I propose a systematic generalization that, I argue, possesses systematic significance in its own right and can be pursued independently of Heideggerian or phenomenological scholarship. I conclude by sketching two possible directions for such a metaphysics: A speculative, monistic conception of the event as singular reality, and an empiricist conception of reality as a plurality of finite events of appearing. Both approaches, I contend, provide resources for integrating phenomenological insights into ongoing debates in contemporary theoretical philosophy.

**Keywords:** *Heidegger, Fink, phenomenological metaphysics, metaphysics of events, phenomenological realism*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the *event* occupies a special place in twentieth-century European philosophy. A number of influential thinkers have constructed their original philosophical projects around this notion, employing it as a way of formulating alternatives to the traditions they sought to critique. Thus, for Alain Badiou, the event designates a rupture in ontology that opens the space for new regimes of truth;<sup>1</sup> for Gilles Deleuze, it signifies the pure, immanent becoming that underlies his critique of representational thinking.<sup>2</sup> For Heidegger, finally, the event assumes a decisive role in the project of articulating a non-metaphysical mode of thought.<sup>3</sup> Within post-Heideggerian phenomenology, the notion of the event comes to mark the essence of the phenomenon once phenomenology is reconceived as the overcoming of traditional onto-theology.<sup>4</sup>

This singular, almost exclusive status makes it difficult to undertake a systematic investigation of the category of the event without at the same time restricting it to a particular author and to the specific problems that orient his thought. And yet such an investigation seems indispensable from the perspective of theoretical philosophy. In particular, any systematic philosophical account of the event is required to clarify the status of the event itself, and it must do so by responding to questions such as: Is the event to be regarded primarily as a concept of metaphysics, of ethics, of the philosophy of history, or of theology? Is it an essentially anthropological concept, one that describes human existence and experience, or can one speak of events independently of human beings altogether? Do events occur in nature, or only within the horizon of human practice? What, finally, is the ontological status of events themselves? And what contribution do the approaches of the major authors of so-called “continental philosophy” — each in their own way elaborating discourses of the event — make to the broader project of a systematic philosophy of the event?

The aim of this paper is to prepare the ground for such a systematic study by offering a reinterpretation, articulated in a more neutral and systematic vocabulary, of one of the most influential philosophies of the event in the twentieth century — a philosophy that is, however, at the same time particularly resistant to attempts at such neutral interpretation: Namely, the later Heidegger’s philosophy of being as event. More precisely, I will address a tension characteristic of Heidegger’s later thought, a

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<sup>1</sup> See Alain Badiou, *L’être et l’événement* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1988), 199 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 9 ff., 122 ff.

<sup>3</sup> See, primarily, Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007), 24 ff.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Yusuke Ikeda, “L’événementialité du phénomène selon ‘Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich’,” *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 6 (2015): 177–202.

tension that can be described as oscillating between a *transcendentalist* — or, more broadly, *correlationist* — account of the event, and a *human-independent, realist* or *cosmological* account. One could argue that this very tension marks the whole of Heidegger's late thinking of being. On the one hand, the turn toward the discourse of being as event is typically interpreted as an attempt to think being from a less anthropocentric perspective — that is, to approach being as the truth of being itself rather than as the sense of being in relation to *Dasein*.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, even in his later writings Heidegger repeatedly insists upon the indispensable role of the human being in the occurrence of being which, as Heidegger formulates it, “needs humans in order to occur essentially”.<sup>6</sup> The de-anthropocentrization of Heidegger's discourse of being as event therefore proceeds in a peculiar and paradoxical way: It cannot culminate in a complete autonomization of the event with respect to the human, but must continually restrain itself and acknowledge that the event — although not constituted or projected by the human — nonetheless remains dependent upon it.

This tension has given rise to ongoing discussion in the secondary literature. The majority of commentators argue that the most faithful Heideggerian interpretation should preserve the circular, correlative structure of the event, without reducing it either to being (*Sein*) on its own or to human being (*Dasein*).<sup>7</sup> Yet outside the strict confines of Heidegger scholarship, the problem takes on a somewhat different form. For philosophers who seek to develop a philosophy of the event on the basis of Heidegger's conception, but without being strictly bound by it, a natural question arises: Can the framework of the event be applied to a world without human beings? For instance, can the concept of the event serve as a framework for thematizing nature, or is it necessarily limited to the lifeworld of human existence? While the prevailing tendency is toward the latter view — treating the event as a purely correlative structure, as the occurrence of sense that is inconceivable apart from the human<sup>8</sup> — there also exist a smaller number of readings that move in a more realist direction.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Seminare* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1986), 344 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: Of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 198.

<sup>7</sup> For a canonical example of an orthodox interpretation of Heidegger's problematic of the event, see Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, *Wege ins Ereignis: Zu Heideggers “Beiträge zur Philosophie”* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: a Paradigm Shift* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 234 ff.; and Alexander Schnell, “*Ereignis* et *Da-sein* dans les *Beiträge zur Philosophie*,” in *Lire les Beiträage zur Philosophie de Heidegger*, edited by Alexander Schnell (Paris: Hermann, 2017), 159–178.

<sup>9</sup> Prominent examples of realist interpretations of Heidegger's conception of the event in contemporary scholarly literature include James Bahoh, *Heidegger's Ontology of Events* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh

This paper aligns itself with those latter approaches. Its aim is to explore the possibility of a deliberately realist, metaphysical interpretation of Heidegger's discourse of the event. I ground this reading in certain motives already present in Heidegger's own being-historical treatises, motives which, as I will argue, can be understood in a realist sense, and in the radicalization of these very motives in Eugen Fink's cosmological account of the event. On this basis, I argue that the late Heidegger's philosophy of being as event gives rise to what may be called a *realist event-metaphysics* — not in Heidegger's critical sense of “metaphysics” as onto-theology,<sup>10</sup> but rather in the more classical and, so to speak, more neutral sense of a discourse of what there is. Such a metaphysics, I suggest, represents a systematic philosophical project in its own right, one that therefore should not be confined exclusively to the limits of Heidegger scholarship. This metaphysics, as I will attempt to show, should be understood as an essentially *phenomenological* metaphysics, precisely because the event in Heidegger is intrinsically related to the problematic of phenomenality, or the question of appearing as such.

My goal in this paper will not be, however, to provide a full and systematic outline of this possible metaphysics, which would in any case exceed the limits of a single study, but rather to demonstrate that the event-problematics of the later Heidegger at least in principle allows for such a metaphysical interpretation. At the same time, it must be emphasized that the purpose of this paper is not to deliver a historically or textually faithful reconstruction of Heidegger's thought in all its details. Instead, my approach will be deliberately interpretative, attempting to read Heidegger's texts not only immanently, as is usually the rule in the history of philosophy, but in a more general and openly systematic perspective. For this reason, I will deliberately adopt what can be called a heterodox strategy. This means that I will not hesitate to employ a vocabulary that is overtly non-Heideggerian — speaking, for instance, of realist metaphysics, or of the “mode of being of being” (*Seinsart des Seins*), and so forth. Such expressions, while foreign to Heidegger's own formulations, are nonetheless, I contend, helpful in clarifying what is at stake when one attempts to approach his philosophy in a more explicitly systematic way.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, I argue that eventfulness can be understood as a “mode of being of being” (*Seinsart des Seins*) for Heidegger, and I reconstruct the existential account of the event in his early thought. In the second section, I examine the metaphysical and realist motives that emerge in Heidegger's later event-thinking. The third section is devoted to the

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University Press, 2020), and Richard Capobianco, *Heidegger's Way of Being* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 63 ff.

radicalization of these motives in Eugen Fink's cosmological reworking of Heidegger's problematic. Finally, in the concluding fourth section, I outline a project of a phenomenological metaphysics of events, which can be understood as a systematic generalization of both Heidegger's and Fink's philosophies of the event.

## 2. EXISTENTIAL CONCEPTION OF THE EVENT IN EARLY HEIDEGGER

In Heidegger's writings, two key terms carry an "eventful" connotation and can, at least in principle, be translated into English as *event*: *Ereignis* and *Geschehen*. Heidegger himself repeatedly insists that *Ereignis* should not be understood in its ordinary German sense of "event" or "happening", but rather from its etymological root *-eigen*, corresponding to the English root "proper",<sup>11</sup> so that *Ereignis* may be rendered as "appropriation" or "enowning".<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, most contemporary English translations of Heidegger's works simply render *Ereignis* as "event".<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the term *Geschehen* — which Heidegger also employs frequently, though in a less systematic and thematic manner — corresponds more closely to the English word "occurrence". A crucial feature of Heidegger's philosophy of the event, as will become clear in what follows, is that these two terms — *Ereignis* (as another name for Heidegger's being<sup>14</sup>) and *Geschehen* — are intrinsically interrelated and, so to speak, mutually descriptive. *Ereignis*, as appropriation, is inherently eventful — that is, it is something that occurs — and conversely, the only genuine occurrence is that of *Ereignis*, of appropriation itself. In this paper, however, I will use the term *event* primarily to designate what Heidegger calls *Geschehen* — specifically, *Seinsgeschehen* — rather than *Ereignis*. As for the latter term, I will not attempt a systematic interpretation here, but will take it as more or less synonymous with the concept of being in Heidegger's later thought — what he himself refers to as *beyng* (*Seyn*).<sup>15</sup>

What exactly does *Geschehen* mean in Heidegger? Speaking in very general terms, it can be understood as the way in which there is being (*Sein*), or, more provocatively, as the "way of being of being" (*Seinsweise des Seins*).<sup>16</sup> If one recalls that one of the central features of Heidegger's concept of "being" is the openness or

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, 45; and Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 26. See also Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: a Paradigm Shift*, 232–238.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this issue, see Bahoh, *Heidegger's Ontology of Events*, 10 f.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> See Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Das Ereignis* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2009), 16.

<sup>16</sup> The formula "*Sein des Seins*", however non-Heideggerian it may sound, appears in Heidegger himself; see Heidegger, *Seminare*, 373.

unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*) of beings,<sup>17</sup> then *Geschehen*, or event, designates the manner in which such unconcealment is, or takes place.

Already in his early writings Heidegger describes the openness of beings as an event (*Geschehen*). Thus, for example, in *On the Essence of Ground*, Heidegger argues that the openness of beings — referred to in this text as “entry into world” — “is something what ‘happens’ (*geschieht*) ‘with’ beings.”<sup>18</sup> What Heidegger understands by world here is not the physical world as the sum of material things in space and time, but rather the “medium” or “field” of the appearance of beings.<sup>19</sup> Yet “appearance” here must be understood from an essentially existential standpoint, namely, as the *accessibility* of beings for the human being, or *Dasein*. This accessibility is taken by Heidegger as something inherent to human existence, such that he determines this existence as *being-in-the-world*.<sup>20</sup> That is, human being exists in such a way that other beings are disclosed to it by virtue of the very essence of its existence. For that reason, the world as a field of appearance is understood by Heidegger as an existential of *Dasein* — that is, as a determination of its existence.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, one can argue, the openness is for the early Heidegger not an inherent feature of beings as beings, but exists — or rather, occurs — only to the extent that the human being exists. The latter constitutes the openness in what Heidegger calls *transcendence*.<sup>22</sup> And since openness as world is dependent on the existence of the human being, the occurrence of openness is likewise grounded in existence. For that reason, eventfulness as the way of being of openness is in effect understood not so much as a feature of openness itself but as a feature of existence: It is existence that is, properly speaking, eventful, and only through its eventfulness does openness also take on an eventful character.

Therefore, one can argue, in this early conception the occurrence of openness is identified directly with the fact of the existence of the human being, or *Dasein*: “such occurrence [that is, occurrence of the openness of beings – A.S.] is the existing of *Dasein*, which as existing transcends [...] And only if [...] transcendence occurs, i.e., only if beings having the character of being-in-the-world irrupt into beings, is there the possibility of beings manifesting themselves.”<sup>23</sup> That is, beings are open because there is a human being who understands them as beings. In other words, the event in which beings are disclosed as such is nothing other than

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<sup>17</sup> See Heidegger, *Das Ereignis*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 123.

<sup>19</sup> See Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 120 f.

<sup>20</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967), 52 ff.

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> See Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 106 ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

the very event of human existence: “with the fact of Da-sein, such surpassing [that is, realization of transcendence – A.S.] is there.”<sup>24</sup>

### 3. REALIST AND METAPHYSICAL MOTIVES IN THE EVENT-THINKING OF LATER HEIDEGGER

The core argument of this paper is that Heidegger’s understanding of the event of openness — the fact that beings are revealed as beings — changes decisively in the second phase of his thought. More precisely, I propose to interpret his development in the 1930s and thereafter as a *de-anthropocentrization* of his earlier existential conception of the event, such that the event of openness — now thematically designated by Heidegger as *unconcealment* — becomes detached from human existence. Heidegger still describes the realization of unconcealment as an event; however, this event is no longer identified with the existence of a particular *Dasein*. In other words, unconcealment is no longer conceived as something that occurs within an individual existence but rather as something that occurs *with beings themselves*. It is no longer primarily understood as the accessibility of beings to human existence but as the unconcealment of beings themselves, immanent to their very being.<sup>25</sup> That is, beings are disclosed not insofar as they are perceived by human beings but insofar as they exist as beings. Accordingly, the event of unconcealment does not consist in the appearance of beings to a particular human being, but, to use Heidegger’s own formulation, in the fact that there are “beings at all, and not rather Nothing”.<sup>26</sup> The event thus takes on a more “*universal*” — one might even say *cosmological* — meaning.

The event in this universal or cosmological sense still requires human participation, but such participation is itself radically reinterpreted. It is no longer conceived as the constitution of a sphere of accessibility of beings for the human being (what the early Heidegger referred to as world), but rather as an “accomplishment” of the occurrence of being which, as Heidegger explicitly emphasizes, is already in some sense there prior to the activity of the human being.<sup>27</sup> With respect to the existential conception of the event of transcendence in the early Heidegger, one could therefore argue that in his later thought he comes to regard this event not as something occurring within each individual existence but as an over-individual event encompassing somehow *all* individual existences. The reality of this event is no longer restricted to the reality of an individual existence, but it remains one and the same for all its participants. The

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>25</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 112.

<sup>26</sup> Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 289.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, 239.

universality of this event finds one of its clearest expressions in Heidegger's conception of the History of being (*Seinsgeschichte*), where he describes singular epochal events of unconcealment of beings as a whole.<sup>28</sup> These events do not depend on individual existence but are the same for all human beings who participate in them.

Another domain where this de-subjectivization, or de-anthropocentrization, of the event becomes particularly evident is Heidegger's account of the Fourfold (*Geviert*). Here, the unconcealment of an individual thing is described as the gathering of four elements — earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. Each thing appears as what it is only insofar as it “gathers to itself in its own way earth and sky, divinities and mortals”.<sup>29</sup> In this account, unconcealment is no longer primarily approached from the perspective of human beings but from that of the Fourfold itself: The decisive point is not that things appear to humans, but that in the appearance of things the interplay of these four principles is enacted.

In this sense, one can argue that the focus shifts: From openness as existentially tied to the human being in the early Heidegger, to the occurrence of openness — now described as unconcealment — as such in the later Heidegger. For this reason, the central thesis of Heidegger's “being-historical thinking (*seinsgeschichtliches Denken*)”,<sup>30</sup> as he names his later philosophy in distinction from classical metaphysics, consists in asserting the reality of the event of unconcealment as *the only true reality*.<sup>31</sup> He describes this as the “essential occurrence of beyng [*Wesung des Seyns*]”: “The full essential occurrence of beyng in the truth of the event allows the recognition that beyng and only beyng is and that beings are not.”<sup>32</sup>

This thesis — what Heidegger himself calls “the Be-ing-Historical ‘Saying’”<sup>33</sup> — takes the form of a classical metaphysical thesis, insofar as it *posits* something as real, as ‘that which is.’ Yet with respect to its content it is explicitly non-metaphysical, since what is posited here is not a being, but the occurrence of the unconcealment of beings, which Heidegger repeatedly stresses is radically distinct from beings. Traditionally, in describing the relation between being as unconcealment and beings as that which is unconcealed, Heidegger argues that beings (*Seiende*) are what there is, whereas being

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<sup>28</sup> See Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 13 f.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 151.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 51.

<sup>31</sup> The use of the notion ‘reality’ for the designation of Heideggerian being may seem problematic because of its origin in Aristotelian and medieval metaphysics that Heidegger seeks to overcome. Here, however, this notion is used deliberately with the aim to highlight the paradoxical character of Heidegger's thesis that *being itself is* — see Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: Of the Event*, 372. If one understands ‘reality’ as a general designation of ‘that which is’, then Heidegger's thesis can be seen as positing being as the only true reality.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, 63.

(*Sein*) is not — otherwise, it would not be different from beings. In this fragment Heidegger, however, proceeds in a radically different way: He ascribes reality not to beings but to being itself. One could therefore argue that this thesis indeed constitutes a kind of metaphysical gesture, but of a very peculiar kind — not as a metaphysics of beings, which Heidegger seeks to overcome, but as a metaphysics of the event which should be distinguished from beings. This provides an important insight into the form of Heidegger's overcoming of metaphysics. Unlike deconstruction, where the aim is to avoid the metaphysical gesture of metaphysical positing altogether, or transcendental philosophy, which refrains from metaphysical positing and instead explicates conditions of its possibility, Heidegger's critique of metaphysics retains the gesture of positing but radically shifts its object: What is posited as real is not beings but the event of their unconcealment. This shift allows us to specify more precisely the systematic status of the notion of being (*Sein*) in Heidegger. Being is not the foundation of beings, nor a transcendental condition of their accessibility; it is what there is, where "is" must itself be understood not in terms of presence but in terms of event.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that in saying that being is and beings are not, Heidegger is not simply negating the reality of beings, nor is he suggesting that they are in some way non-real, illusory, or merely apparent. Rather, his thesis must be understood as a rejection not of the factual reality of beings but of their metaphysical autonomy, their supposed "self-sufficiency" as independent entities. In other words, when Heidegger claims that only being is while beings are not, what he is asserting is that beings are always already implicated in, or "involved" with, something that is not itself a being. That is, beings do not stand alone as self-grounding presences; they are instead to be regarded as "moments" of a more encompassing and more originary occurrence which cannot be adequately described in terms of beings or in terms of presence. This more complex picture includes both beings and that which is not a being, which Heidegger conceives as the event of unconcealment of beings. In this regard, the thesis that only being (i.e., only unconcealment of beings) is, while beings are not, entails that beings should be regarded not autonomously, but as moments of the event of their unconcealment. In this context, as Heidegger argues, the proposition "beings are" should be read as "*beings belong within the essential occurrence of beyng (Seyn)*".<sup>34</sup>

Hence, one can see that the problematic of the eventfulness of openness in the later Heidegger differs significantly from the earlier existential conception. One could say that eventfulness is no longer understood primarily as a feature of human existence but rather as a feature of openness itself. In other words, the relation between eventful openness and existence is now in effect reversed: While in the early

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<sup>34</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: Of the Event*, 212.

Heidegger both eventfulness and openness were interpreted in terms of existence — that is, as features of the existence of *Dasein*, which is both eventful and transcendent — in the later Heidegger the occurrence of the openness of beings is no longer restricted to the existence of an individual human being, but instead precedes it. In this sense, one could argue that Heidegger's later understanding of the eventfulness of the openness of beings acquires a much more explicitly metaphysical character. Eventfulness is now taken as a determination of the very way of being of openness itself — of how openness 'is' — and not as a determination of human existence. The eventful openness of beings, accordingly, should be understood as a form of 'reality', which must be distinguished from the reality of beings. From this perspective, the core gesture of the later Heidegger can be described as an expansion of the very scope of the notion of 'reality': Reality is no longer restricted to beings but is extended to include the non-being event of the unconcealment of beings. This entails a radical denial of the autonomy of beings: Beings, including the human being, are to be understood as moments or parts of the event of their unconcealment.

This gesture may justifiably be described as metaphysical, since it consists in specifying the notion of reality which is reinterpreted in an eventful sense. Moreover, since this event now possesses a certain autonomy with respect to individual human existence, one can say that Heidegger's later thought bears a certain realist bias. This bias, however, is weakened in Heidegger himself by his continued insistence on the dependence of the event on the human being.

Such dependence, however, does not seem to be necessarily implied by the very notion of eventful openness. Rather, it appears to have been retained by Heidegger as a residue of his earlier existential conception of openness. From a broader systematic perspective, openness as such — understood as the unconcealment of beings themselves, and not as the accessibility of beings for human perception — does not in principle need to be conceptualized as human-dependent. In this regard, before moving to a systematic generalization of the metaphysical implications of Heidegger's event-thinking, it is instructive to turn to the example of Eugen Fink's cosmological reworking of the problem of the event. His philosophy can indeed be seen as a radicalization of the metaphysical and realist motives already present in Heidegger's later thought, and for precisely this reason Fink proves particularly important for the problematic pursued in the present paper.

#### **4. FINK AND THE RADICAL DE-SUBJECTIVIZATION OF PHENOMENALITY**

The central topic of Eugen Fink's philosophical project, developed from the late 1940s onward, is the problem of the world understood as a non-ontological totality of intraworldly beings — a totality that he seeks to conceptualize as irreducible to the

beings themselves. What is particularly important in the context of this paper is that, in order to elaborate such an original cosmological discourse, Fink appropriates Heidegger's notion of openness,<sup>35</sup> along with a number of related Heideggerian concepts — *Lichtung*,<sup>36</sup> *Zeit-Raum*<sup>37</sup> — and reinterprets them in a rigorously subject-independent, realist manner, while nevertheless retaining the radically eventful character that is already manifest in Heidegger's own usage.

Without delving into the detailed historical complexities of Fink's development, his approach can be outlined in broad strokes as follows. First, he introduces the notion of a *cosmological difference*,<sup>38</sup> which is meant to stand as an analogue to Heidegger's ontological difference. By *cosmological difference*, Fink understands the distinction between intrawordly beings, or things, on the one hand, and the world as the totality within which all particular beings exist, on the other. While all individual beings are essentially intrawordly — that is, they exist in the world — the world itself is not an individuated being or thing. Yet, Fink insists, the world is not a merely speculative abstraction: It is real, though its mode of reality differs essentially from that of intrawordly beings.

Secondly, Fink conceives of the world in a genuinely phenomenological — indeed, post-phenomenological — sense, since his account of phenomenality differs radically from the canonical correlationist accounts of Husserl and the early Heidegger. In this cosmological project, he undertakes to distinguish his notion of the world as a non-ontotheological totality of all that is from classical concepts of totality, such as the sum of beings, the aggregate of things, or an organized whole of parts.<sup>39</sup> For Fink, the world should not be regarded as a totality of presence but rather as a *totality of appearance* — as that in which the “coming-to-appearance (*Zum-Vorschein-kommen*)”<sup>40</sup> of things takes place.<sup>41</sup> Things, accordingly, are essentially appearing things, phenomena: their being is not to be conceived as stable presence but as a movement in which they manifest themselves as what they are. In this regard, Fink argues that “self-showing belongs as an essential moment to the being of beings”.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, in sharp contrast to Heidegger, Fink insists explicitly on the subject-independence of the world as openness of beings. Whereas Heidegger —

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<sup>35</sup> See Eugen Fink, *Zur ontologischen Frühgeschichte von Raum-Zeit-Bewegung* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1957), 171 ff.

<sup>36</sup> See *ibid.*, 191.

<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.*, 141.

<sup>38</sup> See Eugen Fink, *Welt und Endlichkeit* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990), 16 ff.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, 12 ff.

<sup>40</sup> Eugen Fink, *Sein, Wahrheit, Welt: Vor-Fragen zum Problem des Phänomen-Begriffs* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958), 112.

<sup>41</sup> See Fink, *Zur ontologischen Frühgeschichte von Raum-Zeit-Bewegung*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

despite his efforts at de-subjectivization — never completely abandons the idea that unconcealment requires the participation of human existence in order to occur, Fink maintains that the world, understood as the unconcealment of beings, both precedes and exceeds human being. To articulate this point, he distinguishes between an existential interpretation of openness, which confines its reality to that of the human being,<sup>43</sup> and a cosmological interpretation, which conceives openness as a fully human-independent occurrence.<sup>44</sup> The human being still participates in this occurrence, but this participation is no longer constitutive: Rather, human being *takes up* openness<sup>45</sup> which is always already there independently of human participation.

This explicitly realist interpretation of the openness of beings is inseparable from Fink's equally realist understanding of phenomenality. As was shown above, phenomenality is for Fink an inherent feature of things themselves: Each particular being, insofar as it is what it is,<sup>46</sup> is an appearing being, a phenomenon. And this is not because it appears to a subject, but because it appears *in the world*. The very act of appearing is in turn, in Fink's terms, nothing other than a "pure event".<sup>47</sup> Thus, the de-subjectivization of openness and of the appearance of beings entails for Fink also a *de-subjectivization of the event itself*. The event is no longer to be regarded as dependent on subjectivity but as a completely subject-independent feature of appearances as such.

In contrast to Heidegger — whose discourse of the event remains suspended between correlationist and realist tendencies — Fink advances toward a consistent cosmological interpretation of both event and openness. In this sense, his philosophy provides a crucial resource for the argument of the present paper: If Heidegger's later thought makes possible, but does not fully realize, a realist metaphysics of the event, then Fink carries out a decisive step toward its systematic articulation, detaching the eventful character of openness once and for all from its dependence on human existence. In the following, concluding section, I will briefly outline some perspectives for event-thinking that are opened up by these realist developments.

## 5. TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL METAPHYSICS OF EVENTS

Having discussed the realist motives in the event-thinking of Heidegger and Fink, we can now return to the question posed in the introduction: How can these authors contribute to the broader problematic of the philosophy of the event?

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<sup>43</sup> See Fink, *Welt und Endlichkeit*, 154.

<sup>44</sup> See *ibid.*, 88.

<sup>45</sup> See *ibid.*, 183.

<sup>46</sup> See Fink, *Zur ontologischen Frühgeschichte von Raum-Zeit-Bewegung*, 98.

<sup>47</sup> Fink, *Sein, Wahrheit, Welt: Vor-Fragen zum Problem des Phänomen-Begriffs*, 129.

First, one can argue that in both thinkers we encounter an explicitly *metaphysical* conception of the event. This conception must be distinguished, on the one hand, from the classical metaphysics of presence and, on the other, from its *correlationist* critique in *transcendental phenomenology*, both Husserlian and post-Husserlian.<sup>48</sup> As has been shown, the event is not a thing or a being, not something that is present, but rather something that occurs. At the same time, the event is not understood as the transcendental ground of beings or of their experience. Its systematic role in Heidegger and Fink is not transcendental but metaphysical: The event is described as *what there is*, as the ultimate form of reality, of which the reality described by classical metaphysics — namely, the reality of beings — is only a particular moment.

This metaphysical conception of the event can, I suggest, be further developed in two distinct directions, which one might very roughly designate as *speculative* and *empiricist*.

From the speculative perspective, the realism of the event aligns naturally with a monistic tendency present in both Heidegger and Fink. In their writings, the event is conceived as a *singular, unique* reality — either as the event of unconcealment or as the event of the world. From this standpoint, one can argue that the metaphysics of the event exhibits a certain affinity with the speculative metaphysics of the One, as it is elaborated in Neoplatonism, Spinoza, or German Idealism. Within this perspective, the relation between the event and beings resembles the relation between the One and the many: The singular event is conceived as radically distinct from the multiplicity of beings and as their truth, since all particular beings are essentially non-autonomous and must be understood as moments of the event itself. Thus, adopting this speculative perspective, Heidegger's and Fink's philosophy of eventful openness can be read as a contemporary reactualization of the discourse of the One.<sup>49</sup>

Yet another possibility is to pursue a more *empiricist* perspective on the event. While both Heidegger and Fink display a marked tendency toward speculative hypostatization of the event as numerically one and singular reality, their thought also contains resources for a more moderate alternative. Specifically, the realist account

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<sup>48</sup> For a detailed account of the position of phenomenological transcendentalism, see, for example, Alexander Schnell, *Seinsschwingungen: Zur Frage nach dem Sein in der transzendentalen Phänomenologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> For more details on parallels between the late Heidegger and Neoplatonism, see primarily Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Hénologie, Ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001). See also Jussi Backman, *Complicated Presence: Heidegger and the Postmetaphysical Unity of Being* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), for an interpretation of Heidegger's later philosophy as a non-ontotheological thought of the One. For more details on parallels with German Idealism, see Anton Sverdlikov, *Metaphysik des absoluten Geschehens: Eine systematische Interpretation des Zusammenhangs der Geschichtlichkeit, des Denkens und der 'Realität' bei Heidegger und Hegel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming in 2026).

of phenomenality — which already emerges in Heidegger but is articulated more clearly in Fink — can be used to develop not a speculative metaphysics of the one singular event (analogous to the One or the Absolute of speculative philosophies), but a phenomenological metaphysics of *finite*, multiple events, or of things as events.

In this view, the very coming-to-appearance or the self-manifestation of things should be taken as inherent to their being. On this basis, one could construct a systematic metaphysics in which reality consists not of objects or substance-like entities but of events of appearing. Such a realist phenomenological metaphysics of events would represent an original alternative to the current projects of phenomenological metaphysics,<sup>50</sup> which typically attempt to articulate a phenomenologically grounded, non-ontotheological metaphysics while still remaining within a framework of transcendental phenomenology. For this reason, these projects remain fundamentally experience-based, or correlationist. By contrast, the metaphysical project proposed here adopts an explicitly realist stance: The events of coming-to-appearance, posited as basic metaphysical entities, are not dependent on experience or subjectivity but exist — or more precisely, occur — independently of them.

This realist event-metaphysics thus holds the potential to contribute both to current debates about realism in contemporary continental philosophy and to more general discussions within systematic metaphysics, including projects of analytic metaphysics and scientifically informed metaphysics.<sup>51</sup> A more systematic exploration of these two alternatives — speculative and empiricist — as well as the question of their possible articulation, must, however, remain a task for future work.

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<sup>50</sup> See primarily László Tengelyi, *Welt und Unendlichkeit: Zum Problem phänomenologischer Metaphysik* (Freiburg i. Br./München: Karl Alber, 2015), and Alexander Schnell, *Die phänomenologische Metaphysik Marc Richìrs* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> In particular, the empiricist perspective on the phenomenological metaphysics of events can contribute to ongoing debates on phenomenological approaches to physics. For more on this topic, see Harald A. Wiltsche and Philipp Berghofer, *Phenomenological Approaches to Physics* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

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**Pietro Prunotto**

*University of Turin, Italy*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8257-5337>

[pietro.prunotto@edu.unito.it](mailto:pietro.prunotto@edu.unito.it)

## RETHINKING *PHÝSIS* AND *TÉCHNE*: TOWARD A TECHNICAL ONTOLOGY OF THE EVENT\*

**Abstract:** This paper traces a set of connections between Martin Heidegger and Bernard Stiegler around the conceptual nexus of event and technology. It proceeds in three steps. First, it examines what is at stake in these themes within Heidegger's thought, showing how the notion of the event represents the culmination of his effort to move beyond metaphysical foundations. Second, it highlights certain critical elements in Heidegger's treatment of the relation between *τέχνη* and *φύσις*, which risk constraining his account of technicity within residual metaphysical structures. Finally, drawing on Aristotle's notion of the "accidental cause", the paper outlines the space for a singularity that can be described as the technical event. This is further clarified through Stiegler's concept of the "invention of the human", which theorizes the co-emergence of human being and technology. In this way, the paper argues that Stiegler both fulfils and develops beyond Heidegger's project of rethinking the relation between human being, technology, and event.

**Keywords:** *Heidegger, Stiegler, Aristotle, event, technics*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century was marked by the radicality with which philosophical thought confronted itself, questioning its own status of validity and truth, as well as its claim to engage with reality in a depth arguably unprecedented. Among the figures who made it possible to characterize the century in this way, Martin Heidegger is arguably the first to be mentioned. While *Being and Time* had already provoked a genuine philosophical upheaval — whose effects remain clearly visible in contemporary

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thought — it was only with the later publication of his second great work devoted to the concept of the event<sup>1</sup> that the definitive scope and depth of his thinking could be fully appreciated.

From its emergence, the concept of the event has not only enabled a deeper understanding of Heidegger's thought,<sup>2</sup> but has also fostered the development of this orientation beyond Heidegger's own formulations. In doing so, it has opened a space of dialogue among different philosophical perspectives<sup>3</sup> and revealed the richness of the concept itself. Given the considerable body of scholarship on this topic, the present article takes a different, parallel direction. Its aim is to show how certain aspects make it possible to speak of a technical event, thereby underscoring the crucial importance of thinking the correlation between technics and event. To this end, I will begin with Heidegger's thought, highlighting some central elements — well established in existing studies — that are directly relevant to the argument developed here. I will then point to certain critical issues concerning the relation between τέχνη and φύσις as taken up by Heidegger from Aristotle, which prevent a fully affirmative account of the connection between technicity and event. Finally, through Aristotle it becomes possible to lay the foundations for a relation between event and technics that moves beyond the metaphysical residues still present in Heidegger, residues for example described by Don Ihde as “romantic”.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, by drawing on Aristotle's notion of the “quasi-cause”, introduced in the chapters following those discussed by Heidegger,<sup>5</sup> I will show the opening of a space that can be described as the technical event. To give content to this formal structure, I will turn to Bernard Stiegler's concept of the “invention of the human”.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012). On this regard, see Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger's Poietic Writings: From Contributions to Philosophy to The Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> On this regard, numerous examples could be provided; let us consider at least the following: François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); Claude Romano, *Event and Time*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Claude Romano, *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Don Ihde, *Heidegger's Technologies: Postphenomenological Perspectives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), chap. III, “Deromanticizing Heidegger”, 74–91. On this topic, see also Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence and Concept of Physis in Aristotle's *Physics* B, I,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 183–230.

The content of this structure will form the conclusion of the inquiry, allowing us to show that it is precisely through this Stieglerian concept that Heidegger's objectives are fully achieved in rethinking the relation between human being, technics, and event.

## 2. HEIDEGGER AND THE EVENT

Based on what has been said so far, it may seem superfluous to stress that turning to Heidegger is unavoidable when addressing the question of the event. Nevertheless, certain elements must be established to proceed. In brief, the event for Heidegger represents the *coherent outcome* of his entire philosophical trajectory: it is his attempt to leap away from onto-theology,<sup>6</sup> that is, from the metaphysical framework that thinks in terms of ultimate foundation and culminates in the technical domain. At the outset, it should be noted that the event — the event of appropriation — is defined by Heidegger as “the guiding word of my thinking since 1936”,<sup>7</sup> and that it designates the space, the *Spiel-Raum*, in which the epochs of the history of Being unfold. The event is the consistent result of his thinking precisely because if Being is no longer to be understood as the cause or foundation of beings, then *Being is the event of their coming into presence*: the temporal and manifestative unfolding of their being. To think Being and the appearing of beings in terms of this dynamic is to renounce thinking in categories of domination, ultimate foundation, or substance. The coming into presence of beings is a dynamic irreducible to the being posited as an object before a subject — as Heidegger repeatedly emphasized with reference to the German verb *Vor-stellen*. For this reason, the dynamic of coming into Being is not something subject to domination and thus can no longer be framed in terms of presence, substance, and necessity — that is, in the terms proper to the metaphysical tradition. In the broad panorama of Western thought that Heidegger sketches beginning from the event, technology occupies a position of particular importance, one that, as is well known, also confers upon it an ambiguous — indeed, *maximally ambiguous* — status. In the famous *Question Concerning Technology*, technology appears as the danger in which what saves can also be discerned. The connection between ontology and technology in Heidegger is by no means new. One might even argue that from the very beginning the theme of technology is constantly intertwined, in an increasingly

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<sup>6</sup> As is well known, this does not entail abandoning the fundamental questions of metaphysics altogether, but rather, transforming them in light of the problem of ontotheology. Of course, Heidegger's position represents only one proposal within a much broader and more diverse spectrum of thinkers. On this point, see Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event, and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2014), in particular Part 2, 138–289.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 241.

stratified and complex fashion, with the ontological question, to the point that it could be regarded as a veritable touchstone for the development of his entire thought. Consider, for example, the role of the tool, which is central throughout *Being and Time*. Already in this text Heidegger explicitly warned that without a thematic treatment of the tool, the phenomenon of world would be lost, thereby setting the ontological analysis on a false track that would relapse into the paradigm of presence.<sup>8</sup> After all, the centrality of technology does not appear suddenly in *Being and Time*; rather, it is already present in numerous earlier texts. The significance of technology is evident in Heidegger's early writings, particularly in works such as the so-called *Natorp Bericht*<sup>9</sup> and the lecture course on *Plato's Sophist*.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, one can clearly see how Heidegger's engagement with Aristotle's philosophy — an author on whom we will focus shortly — leads him to consider τέχνη as one of the fundamental modes of ἀληθεύειν.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of technology becomes even more pronounced with the introduction of the question of the event, where the connection between the destiny of Being and technology becomes all the more evident. In the later Heidegger this relation is to be thought through the notions of *Machenschaft*<sup>12</sup> and *Gestell*. The term

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), §43.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenological Interpretations in Connection with Aristotle: An Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation", in *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*, ed. John van Buren (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 111–145.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> These very brief references serve only insofar as they prepare the background for showing how the significance of technology has always been of fundamental importance throughout Heidegger's path of thought. Although the present article does not aim at a rigorous reconstruction of this aspect — a task that is by now no longer necessary — it is nonetheless worth considering one final text, as further confirmation of this crucial importance. What is referred to here is Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). In this text, particularly in *Being and Thinking* (part three of chapter four), Heidegger offers a profound interrogation of the status of technology in relation to the human and Being. The reference shifts from Aristotle to the first stasimon of "Antigone", in *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), (vv. 332–375) 76–78, with its famous definition of the human as τὸ δεινότερον. While a full discussion lies beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting certain affinities and differences with what will later be referred to as the technical ontology of the event.

<sup>12</sup> A comprehensive treatment of the question of *Machenschaft* would require reading it in connection with the thought of Ernst Jünger, a decisive interlocutor for Heidegger's later theses on technology and one too often neglected. As it is not possible to address this issue in the present context, reference may be made to Daniel Morat, *Von der Tat zur Gelassenheit: Konservatives Denken bei Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger und Friedrich Georg Jünger 1920–1960* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007).

*Machenschaft* concerns a central aspect of Heidegger's treatment of technology in his later work. With this term Heidegger refers to the reduction of reality to technical domination, whereby reality is flattened into the possibility of technical *Machen* ("making" or "doing"). In this sense, the term encompasses a wide range of attitudes grounded in this common root, just as the term *Gestell* signifies the gathering (indicated by the German prefix *Ge-*) of the attitudes inherent in *Stellen* (for instance, *Bestellen*, *Vorstellen*), which reduce beings to what is *gestellt* — that is, posited and grounded by an orientation that seeks the ultimate foundation of beings and thus their complete controllability. According to what these two concepts indicate, within the domain of *Machenschaft* or *Gestell* every being is reduced to a mere *positum*, to a *Bestand* that can be dominated and calculated through the presupposition of a subjectivity fully in command of the instruments it employs.

From what has been indicated so far, it follows that a different understanding of technology — or, more precisely, of its ontological status — would make it possible, *ex negativo*, to no longer regard it as that which enables the unchallenged domination of the human being, since the human would in turn amount to nothing more than *Bestand*, on a par with, if not worse than, the other beings around it. Yet the importance of rethinking technology is not limited to this. On the contrary, it also allows one, *ex positivo*, to point toward the direction of the leap (*Sprung*) into a thinking of the event. It thus becomes clear that technology itself can assume the status of a "threshold" for the non-metaphysical thinking that Heidegger seeks, hence the statement in *Zeit und Sein* that technology is "the Janus-face between the history of metaphysics and the event."<sup>13</sup> The role of technology, always central for Heidegger, assumes in his later thought — that is, in the thinking of the event — an even more essential significance precisely by virtue of this ambiguity. As just noted, it is a *genuine threshold*, an amphibious space capable both of propelling thought beyond metaphysics and of condemning it to technical rationalization. This *liminal and amphibious character of technology* becomes increasingly evident for Heidegger, to the point that he eventually describes it as "a prelude to what is called the event of appropriation"<sup>14</sup> and, finally, as the "photographic negative"<sup>15</sup> of the event.

To fully develop these fundamental insights from Heidegger, technology must be thought within a dynamic of co-belonging (*Zusammengehörigkeit*), without the necessity of any definitive reference to a stable foundation. In other words, the

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Principle of Identity", in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 36–37.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars: Le Thor 1966, 1968, 1969, Zähringen 1973*, trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 60.

proximity between technology and event requires us to think a space of meaning in which the human being is always already constituted, thereby effecting, as it were, a de-transcendentalization of the framework of *Being and Time*. For our purposes, to de-transcendentalize means to pursue the genesis of transcendental itself, whether it be subjectivity or the pairs linked to it — such as a priori/a posteriori, condition/conditioned, transcendental/empirical — as evidenced by Heidegger's increasing recourse to a lexicon of institution (*Stiftung*).<sup>16</sup>

In this respect, what Heidegger calls the “instrumental definition of technology”<sup>17</sup> is insufficient for these purposes. This is because it merely *presupposes* what it ought to explain, namely the nexus that binds together technology, event, and the human. What matters here is that there are two possible ways of conceiving this nexus. The first corresponds to the limitations of the instrumental definition: it treats the terms of the nexus as substantial elements, already constituted, whose connection must then be reconstructed only in a secondary manner. In this case, the relation is not genuinely constitutive; arising only afterward, it remains external to the phenomenon under analysis. By contrast, the second way, exemplified by Heidegger's own approach, is to analyze the phenomenon as something “unitary”,<sup>18</sup> thereby placing at the center the *constitutive character of the relation with respect to its elements*. According to the first approach, the human being would be understood as already fully formed at the moment of engaging with tools, which would thus be nothing more than means. In this way, the relational character — *Zusammengehörigkeit* — is lost, whereas it is precisely in light of this co-belonging that the renewed role of technology must be thought.

### 3. THE HEIDEGGERIAN ‘PATHOS’

Although Heidegger established some fundamental elements for rethinking these questions, his position on technology risks remaining, in certain respects, *indebted to a metaphysical framework*. Derrida is the thinker who, more than any other, has made this critical point with particular clarity:

Heidegger [...] perhaps remains, at a certain moment, tempted by a certain relegation of the technical to a secondary position in relation to a pretechnical originariness or a *phýsis*. [...] Here, a presence, a present, or a presentifiable essence, a being as presence of *phýsis*, would perhaps reconstitute itself, not simply before any technics in the modern sense, but before any *tekhne*. Even if

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<sup>16</sup> For example, see Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–57.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 78.

*tekhnē* belongs to the movement of truth, there would be, in *phýsis*, something like a truth that would not be *tekhnē*.<sup>19</sup>

As Derrida himself observes, this is undeniably a problem within Heidegger's text and concerns what we have already referred to as a "metaphysical residue", namely what Ihde characterizes as romanticism and what Derrida here seeks to identify as a "'pathos' which, despite so many denials on this subject, remains antitechnological, originaristic, even ecologicistic".<sup>20</sup> The aim of this section will be to examine this critical point more closely, in order eventually to arrive at a redefinition of the status of technology.

Derrida's observation is helpful for testing the difficulties involved in connecting the question of the event with that of technology. This connection appears justified when employed as a guiding thread for criticizing the metaphysical-instrumental conception of technology. Yet a closer examination of Derrida's doubt allows us to show that even when Heidegger positively thematizes the relation between technology and event, he is not free from a certain "temptation". This consists in linking the event not so much with technology as with φύσις, thereby reinstating the *classical metaphysical schema that opposes the technical to the natural, granting ontological primacy to the latter*. Indeed, this doubt can be reinforced, if not confirmed, when one considers the conclusion of *The Question Concerning Technology*.

There, despite the well-known statement concerning its ambiguity, technology seems reduced to what "threatens revealing".<sup>21</sup> For if anything in it may be seen as *das Rettende*, it is rather art, with which the text concludes. On this point, I do not find convincing the objection that in the concept of τέχνη one can rediscover the unity of these two notions. The final page of the text seems instead to move in the *opposite direction*—precisely the direction of Derrida's doubt: the value of art does not lie in showing, through what the Greeks already understood as τέχνη, the possibility that technology may have a positive relation to Being. On the contrary, the value of art would reside in the fact that, although close to technology, it is in reality "fundamentally different".<sup>22</sup> Thus, despite the centrality of technology in Heidegger — a centrality that coincides with the ontological question — it nonetheless risks assuming only a negative connotation, stripped moreover of the unity that the Greek concept of τέχνη could have offered it. This would entail the loss of the greatest insight we have identified, namely the amphibious and liminal nature of technology.

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 133.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 35.

Yet, in pursuing Derrida's doubt more closely, it becomes clear that Heidegger ultimately falls back into one of the most deep-seated oppositions of metaphysical thought, namely that between τέχνη and φύσις. What concerns us here is to show that for Heidegger the "more primally [*anfänglicher*] granted revealing"<sup>23</sup> is precisely φύσις. To this end, we will refer to his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* B, 1, where he underscores the impossibility of bringing τέχνη and φύσις into proximity, affirming instead the ontological superiority of the latter — and in a manner far more radical than Aristotle himself, who employs analogy in order to treat both.

This superiority derives from the fact that φύσις, as already in Aristotle,<sup>24</sup> is that whose cause lies *within itself and is internal to it* (ἐν ἑαυτῷ)<sup>25</sup> — as opposed to the other causes (δι' ἄλλας αἰτίας),<sup>26</sup> those bound to *exteriority and accidentality*, which encompass the domain of technics. This difference, at once modal and ontological, is already exemplified by Aristotle, who, following Antiphon, notes that the substance of the bed is the wood, not the form it assumes as the result of ποίησις. For our purposes, it is important to note that Heidegger's strategy is to radicalize still further the divide that Aristotle had already opened between these two concepts, showing in particular how φύσις is "vast expanse of the unfathomable essence of a mode of being that is denied to all τέχνη because τέχνη renounces any claim to knowing and grounding *truth* as such".<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it is precisely in connection with this discussion that one of Heidegger's main trajectories emerges: namely, the attempt to think φύσις, through the Presocratics, as the very site of the event beyond any analogy with technical production — beyond, as one might say today, any auto-poietic<sup>28</sup> conception of nature.

However, little of this trajectory remains for thinking technology, and even less for considering its relation to the event. Yet what the event ought to compel us to think, first of all, is an intertwining of what is proper and what is improper — in this case, of the substantial and the accidental. One may then ask why Heidegger chooses to comment precisely on this passage of the *Physics*, aiming to exclude every kind of relation, even analogical, between φύσις and τέχνη, and instead asserting, in one of the most unmistakably metaphysical gestures, the ontological superiority of the former. In other words, why emphasize the superiority of φύσις as the domain *par*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>24</sup> See also Aristotle, "Metaphysics", *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), Δ4, 1014b16 ff., 63–64.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, "Physics", in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 315–447, B1, 192b13, 329.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 192b8–9.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, "On the Essence and Concept of Physis in Aristotle's *Physics* B, I," 198.

<sup>28</sup> Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980), 77ff.

*excellence* of what is proper and internal, when it is precisely the *opposition between proper and improper, internal and external*, that constitutes one of the most powerful metaphysical matrices used to reduce technology to mere exteriority? In this sense, one might say that Heidegger, on the one hand, goes beyond Aristotle — by showing his unavoidable dependence on the metaphysical framework — yet, on the other hand, follows him along the path of the temptation mentioned above. In doing so, Heidegger intensifies Aristotle's conception of φύσις as superior in rank to τέχνη,<sup>29</sup> thereby reinforcing the distance between the sphere of what is proper and has its cause within itself, and the secondariness of human production. Put briefly, Heidegger asserts even more strongly than Aristotle a certain ontological verticality that is not only modal but also axiological: for him, the problem of modern technology is precisely this *revolt of the ontological order*, that is, of the accidental against the necessary. In this way, of the ambiguity of technology nothing would remain except the idea of domination and violence, which once again can be traced back to Aristotle,<sup>30</sup> who describes it as an external cause of a movement contrary to nature, that is, as something improper and accidental.

#### 4. ACCIDENTAL CAUSE: THE INVENTION OF THE HUMAN

At this point, the question must be asked: is it possible to reread the relation between φύσις and τέχνη in such a way as to give full weight to that between technology, the human, and the event? After all, to regard technology as violence imposed upon nature — the domain of δίκη —<sup>31</sup> is necessary only if φύσις is understood as the site of what is most proper, of that which has its cause ἐν ἑαυτῷ. Indeed, this may seem unavoidable if we follow Heidegger's commentary. Yet I believe it is now necessary to proceed without him. Let us note, first, that what is said in B, 1 is not Aristotle's final word: nature is not fully explicable through substantial causes and thus is not entirely the object of science.<sup>32</sup>

To rediscover the path that leads from φύσις back to the event and its connection with technology, we must consider the subsequent chapters. In B, 4–6, Aristotle discusses the *accidental causes*, namely those “κατὰ συμβεβηκός”.<sup>33</sup> In this regard,

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<sup>29</sup> Camilo Vega González, “Aristotle's Definition of Phýsis in *Physics* B 1,” *Philosophy Study* 12 (2013): 337–343.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see Aristotle, “Generation of Animals”, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), E8, 788b20ff., 1217–1218.

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, chap. IV, §3.

<sup>32</sup> It may be observed, in passing, that what Heidegger takes as the basis for asserting the superiority of φύσις is precisely that which, for Aristotle, is the object of the highest degree of scientific knowledge — namely, that which ultimately falls back into the metaphysics of presence.

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, B5, 196b28, 336.

and for the purposes of the present article, it is important to note from the outset that the Greek verb συμβαίνω, “to happen” or “to occur”, may be taken as a partially acceptable translation of Heidegger’s *Ereignis*. These causes, for Aristotle, are τύχη, fortune, and αὐτόματον, chance. It is not necessary here to examine these two causes in detail<sup>34</sup> (though much could be said about αὐτόματον and its resonance with both technical automatism and autonomy). What matters instead is to point to the space, within φύσις, of these “pseudo-causes”. They are so defined because they designate something *constitutively non-objectifiable*, that is, something accidental, non-present and therefore excluded from the possibility of becoming the object of science.<sup>35</sup> The space of these “pseudo-causes” within φύσις is, as I will argue with the help of Stiegler, the space of a technical event.

Turning to Stiegler<sup>36</sup> is necessary because, as a student of Derrida,<sup>37</sup> he seeks to formulate a positive position out of Derrida’s critiques of Heidegger.<sup>38</sup> In *Technics and Time, I*, for example, we see this attempt developed within a paleo-anthropological yet fully philosophical perspective. It is in this context that Stiegler introduces the

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<sup>34</sup> On this regard, see John Dudley, *Aristotle’s Concept of Chance: Accidents, Cause, Necessity, and Determinism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, E1, 1025b3 ff., 84–85.

<sup>36</sup> For a more analytical discussion of his thought, I refer to Benoît Dillet and Alain Jugnon, eds., *Technologiques: La Pharmacie de Bernard Stiegler* (Paris: Éditions Lignes, 2013); Christina Howells and Gerald Moore, eds., *Stiegler and Technics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Noel Fitzpatrick, Néill O’Dwyer, and Michael O’Hara, eds., *Aesthetics, Digital Studies, and Bernard Stiegler*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Regarding the relationship between Stiegler and Derrida, see Bernard Stiegler, “Derrida and Technology: Fidelity at the Limits of Deconstruction and the Prosthesis of Faith,” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 238–271; Bernard Stiegler, “La peau de chagrin: ou L’accident franco-européen de la philosophie d’après Jacques Derrida,” *Rue Descartes*, n. 52 (May 2006): 109. For an analytical discussion of these aspects, see Ian James, *The Technique of Thought. Nancy, Laruelle, Malabou, and Stiegler after Naturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Anne Alombert, “From Derrida’s Deconstruction to Stiegler’s Organology: Thinking after Postmodernity,” *Derrida Today* 13, no. 1 (2020): 33–47, <https://doi.org/10.3366/drt.2020.0218>; Francesco Vitale, “Making the Différance: Between Derrida and Stiegler,” *Derrida Today* 13, no. 1 (2020): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.3366/drt.2020.0216>; Pietro Prunotto, “Metamorphosis of Deconstruction: Life, Death, and Technics in Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler”, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 81, no. 1–2 (2025): 557–582, [https://doi.org/10.17990/RPF/2025\\_81\\_1\\_0557](https://doi.org/10.17990/RPF/2025_81_1_0557).

<sup>38</sup> As should now be clear, my concern here is not to reconstruct each author based on what is explicitly contained in their texts, but rather to draw on them in order to address the questions at stake in my own inquiry. Consequently, for a reconstruction more closely tied to the texts themselves, I refer to Tracy Colony, “A Matter of Time: Stiegler on Heidegger and Being Technological”, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 41, no. 2 (2010): 117–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2010.11006706>; Ian James, “Bernard Stiegler and the Time of Technics”, *Cultural Politics* 6, no. 2 (2010): 207–226, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174310X12672016548360>.

expression “invention of the human”,<sup>39</sup> which he employs to theorize the correlative emergence of the human and the technical — an emergence that I will interpret as the technical event.

The question posed by Stiegler’s text is the following: in this expression, *who invents what*? Is it the human who invents the tool, or is it the reverse? In the first case, we fall back into the instrumental perspective criticized by Heidegger, since *we would be presupposing precisely what we ought to explain*. In the second, we would collapse into an *Object-Oriented Ontology*,<sup>40</sup> leaving little room for the question of the human. We are thus confronted either with the domination of nature by the human, or with a form of naturalism in which the relation the human weaves with its world would be no different from that of an animal with its environment. With Stiegler, however, it becomes possible to continue Heidegger’s concerns while avoiding both horns of the dilemma: the invention of the human is the event of the emergence of the human as a *reciprocal co-determination between human and tool*. In this circularity, the “who” and the “what” of this ποίησις continually exchange places: the human works upon matter, just as matter works upon the human — following the theories already advanced by Leroi-Gourhan.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, what this circularity allows us to recover is Heidegger’s approach that grants primacy to relation rather than to terms conceived as substantial or atomic. This technical circularity thus indicates the reciprocal constitution of subject and object, as well as their subsequent complication, since it raises the question of whether the “who” should be identified with the human and the “what” with the tool, pointing instead to the possibility of a radical circularity between these functions and positions.

The invention of the human is an accidental cause: it leads neither to something necessary nor to something that occurs, as Aristotle says, ὥς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ.<sup>42</sup> It is a pseudo-cause, if we still wish to use that word, but it would be better defined as an event, a “*singulare tantum*”<sup>43</sup> for which no foundation or essence can be given and which, consequently, cannot provide a universal definition of what the human or

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<sup>39</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, I: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), Part I, §3.

<sup>40</sup> Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), vol. 2 “Memory and Rhythms,” chaps. 7–8, 219–257. Leroi-Gourhan’s significance — owing to his perspective linking anthropogenesis with technogenesis — surpasses that of Derrida in this context, as evidenced by the publication of several articles dedicated to his work. See Bernard Stiegler, “Leroi-Gourhan, part maudite de l’anthropologie,” *Les nouvelles de l’archéologie* 48/49 (1992): 23–30; and Bernard Stiegler, “Leroi-Gourhan: l’inorganique organisé”, *Les cahiers de médiologie* 2, n. 6 (1998): 187–194.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, B5, 196b11, 335.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, *The Principle of Identity*, 36.

technology is. It is fully συμβεβηκός, that is, the event that institutes them in their reciprocal co-belonging.

That we are only apparently far from the initial questions is shown by Heidegger himself, as further evidence that the meaning of a text — or even more so, the corpus of an author — can never be entirely coherent with itself, that is, never wholly totalizable within a single interpretation, not even the one the author gives of his own work. In *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, Heidegger returns to the relation between φύσις and τέχνη, affirming that the latter is “wholly other [*das ganz Andere*] than φύσις”.<sup>44</sup> It might seem that we are simply repeating what has already been said; yet here Heidegger adds that this wholly other “yet belong [...] to φύσις in the most essential way [*am wesentlichsten zugehört*]”.<sup>45</sup> By bringing together two entirely opposed concepts — alterity and propriety — this statement obliges us to think the invention of the human: an event that opens an internal difference within φύσις, one that refers back to no science, that is, to no substance, as Aristotle would say. Extending Heidegger with Stiegler, we can thus think this space positively as a limit to the definition of φύσις as that which has its cause ἐν ἑαυτῷ, traversing it from within and exposing it to exteriority. On the one hand, what appears after this event still belongs to φύσις (the bed decays insofar as it is wood, and we ourselves insofar as we are flesh); yet this is already something different both from φύσις and from the anthropological definition of technology. What has been said above concerns not the presupposition of the human, but its genesis, which thus becomes *fully anthropogenetic precisely insofar as it is also a technogenesis*. Nor is this limited to the instrumental definition if, with it, we once again follow a well-known passage from Aristotle, who states that “from art [τέχνη] are produced all those things whose form [εἶδος] is present in the soul of the maker”.<sup>46</sup>

Stiegler allows us to move beyond this traditional schema, which Zimmerman situates within Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics as “productionist metaphysics”.<sup>47</sup> Unlike in Aristotle’s account, the invention of the human as the co-production of human and tool must be rigorously understood as a “paradox”.<sup>48</sup> This is because, in this event, there is no ψυχή that pre-exists the constitution of the technical object, and vice versa: there is no interiority that, already formed, turns outward in order to shape it; rather, interior and exterior are constituted in their reciprocal referral, within a

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<sup>44</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected “Problems” of “Logic”*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 155.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z7, 1032b, 97. Translation is mine – P.P.

<sup>47</sup> Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Stiegler, *Technics and Time, I: The Fault of Epimetheus*, 138.

*chiasmic structure* that both connects and disjoins inside and outside, organic and inorganic, life and technology. Of this, just as with the *es gibt*, we can only assess the result, without being able to trace it back to any foundation — for it is the accidental character of a pseudo-cause, something that, occurring within φύσις, has opened it to its *ganz Andere*, technology.

In the case of the “invention of the human”, one cannot speak of a pre-given essence, neither of the tool nor of the human, but only of their correlated genesis. This suspends a metaphysical logic of subject and predicate, replacing it with what we might call a *technical middle voice*.<sup>49</sup> a co-constitution between human and technology without recourse to substance or foundation, but also, another possible interpretation of middle voice, the condition for the *reflexivity* necessary to produce tools. This technical middle voice, like the differential structure of *différance*,<sup>50</sup> makes it possible to indicate the common *Wesung* of oppositions such as essence and existence, matter and form, condition and conditioned.

From this trajectory, I would argue, one can remain faithful to Heidegger’s theoretical demands while at the same time overcoming certain of his limitations. What Stiegler develops here is precisely the idea of rethinking the existential analytic of *Dasein*<sup>51</sup> based on an *originary technicity* that is never fully mastered, yet which is precisely what determines access to Being. This is articulated in the form of a historical–technical process: an ongoing negotiation between memory, event, and archive.

In sum, the technical event — what Stiegler names the “invention of the human” — realizes Heidegger’s attempt to think Being as event, while freeing it from the metaphysical residue of the opposition between φύσις and τέχνη. Human and technology emerge together, in a singularity that institutes both history and meaning.

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<sup>49</sup> On the importance of the middle voice see Miklós Nyíró, “Art, Truth, Event: Positioning the Non-representationalist Paradigms of Pragmatic Naturalism and Philosophical Hermeneutics”, *Pragmatism Today: The Journal of the Central European Pragmatist Forum* 6, no. 1 (2015): 89–119.

<sup>50</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Différance”, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–28.

<sup>51</sup> Pietro Prunotto, “Ermes dopo Prometeo: la ‘quasi analitica esistenziale’ di Bernard Stiegler”, *Trópos. Rivista di ermeneutica e critica filosofica* 16, no. 1 (2024): 137–153, <https://doi.org/10.13135/2036-542X/11057>.

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**Simon Vincken**

Radboud University in Nijmegen, Netherlands

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4524-7161>

[vincken.simon@gmail.com](mailto:vincken.simon@gmail.com)

## “THINKING THE IMPOSSIBLE”: THE EVENT AS A POST-HEIDEGGERIAN DIVIDE IN FRENCH PHILOSOPHY\*

**Abstract:** This paper argues that the concept of the Event in post-1960 French philosophy constitutes a dual reaction to Heidegger’s legacy, particularly concerning the problem of “thinking the impossible”. For Heidegger, the limits of thought are tied to the limits of being, raising the question of whether that which transcends being can be thought at all. Drawing on Garry Gutting’s *Thinking the Impossible*, the paper examines a key divide between two forms of skepticism: absolute and relative.

Absolute skeptics — such as Levinas, Derrida, and Marion — argue that certain aspects of reality remain fundamentally beyond conceptual grasp. Their Event is an irreducible rupture: Levinas’s ethical encounter, Derrida’s *différance*, and Marion’s saturated phenomenon all resist conceptual containment. Relative skeptics — like Deleuze and Badiou — treat the Event as conceptually challenging but not unthinkable. For them, Events prompt revisions of our frameworks: Deleuze’s ontological difference and Badiou’s evental rupture can be integrated within philosophical systems.

The paper further explores Claude Romano’s position as a potential third path. Rejecting both ineffability and formal abstraction, Romano presents the Event as a lived transformation that reshapes the subject’s temporal and spatial experience.

By situating these divergent approaches within the legacy of Heidegger, the paper reveals a deeper tension in post-Heideggerian thought: whether the impossible must remain conceptually inaccessible or can be rendered thinkable through renewed frameworks. In doing so, it clarifies the stakes of the Event as a philosophical concept and its role in mapping the fractures within contemporary thought.

**Keywords:** *event, Heidegger, Deleuze, Badiou, Marion*

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Simon Vincken (2026). “Thinking the Impossible”: The Event as a Post-Heideggerian Divide in French Philosophy.” In M. Nyíró, Zs. Lurczá, P. Makai (eds.): *EVENT and Its Mediation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literary Studies, and Cultural Theory* (159–169). Miskolc: Miskolc University Press, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. <https://doi.org/10.70832/EVENTanditsMediation.07>

In 2011, Garry Gutting published *Thinking the Impossible*, an introduction to post-war French philosophy in which he discusses its main thinkers.<sup>1</sup> However, in the final chapter — bearing the same title — Gutting makes a particularly intriguing move. He summarizes the entire tradition of contemporary French philosophy as an effort to engage in what he calls “thinking the impossible”.<sup>2</sup> From there, he introduces a distinction between two camps: “absolute skeptics” and “relative skeptics”.<sup>3</sup> This classification is interesting for three reasons. First, it is not immediately clear what Gutting means by “thinking the impossible”. Second, the philosophers he uses to substantiate this distinction — Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, and Michel Foucault as relative skeptics, and Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion as absolute skeptics — are all philosophers who have written extensively on the topic of the Event. And third, the term “skeptics” itself is not one typically associated with contemporary continental philosophy. It therefore seems worthwhile to review Gutting’s classification. This paper will proceed in three steps. First, it will examine what Gutting means by “thinking the impossible” and his distinction between absolute and relative skepticism. Second, it will test whether this framework holds when applied to the philosophy of the Event. Third, it will assess whether Gutting’s division is exhaustive or whether alternative positions can be taken.

Let’s begin by considering what exactly Gutting says. According to him, French philosophy since 1960 has “a fundamental concern with thinking what is conceptually impossible”.<sup>4</sup> French postwar philosophy, according to Gutting, is characterized by a profound fascination with what appears to be beyond the limits of human thought — whether in terms of ontology, ethics, or politics. While philosophy as a whole always challenges the limits of thought, what distinguishes contemporary French philosophy is its particular fascination with what *cannot* be thought. This does not mean merely speculating about abstract impossibilities, but rather confronting concepts, events, or experiences that resist full conceptualization yet demand philosophical engagement. Gutting emphasizes that for thinkers like Derrida, Badiou, and Deleuze, the impossible is not a simple negation of thought but a productive site of philosophical inquiry — where contradictions, paradoxes, and aporias reveal deeper structures of reality. According to Gutting, this attitude towards conceptual limits is a key difference between French — and more broadly: continental — philosophy and the approach of the analytic tradition.<sup>5</sup> Analytic philosophy, he

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 184–87.

suggests, works under the assumption that anything meaningful must ultimately be expressible within a coherent conceptual framework — problems arise from conceptual confusion, and philosophical progress is made by clarifying concepts and resolving ambiguities. By contrast, French philosophy actively engages with what seems conceptually irresolvable or paradoxical, treating these impossibilities not as errors to be corrected but as fundamental features of thought that reveal deeper truths about being, language, and experience. While analytic philosophy tends to work within established logical and linguistic constraints, postwar French philosophy often seeks to stretch, subvert, or even abandon these constraints in order to engage with what resists formalization.<sup>6</sup>

This leads us directly to Martin Heidegger's — and to some extent Immanuel Kant's — influence on French post-war philosophy. Heidegger's proclamation of the end of metaphysics implied that any attempt to conceive the ultimate ground of being is destined to fail, as the limits of thought are inseparable from the limits of being itself.<sup>7</sup> This raises the fundamental question of whether that which transcends being can be thought at all. Through his critique of metaphysics, Heidegger not only questioned the possibility of thinking the impossible but also suggested that it may remain entirely beyond human comprehension. Post-1960 French philosophy develops its own responses in this very context. According to Gutting, much of the French philosophical tradition over the past half-century can be understood as an engagement with this legacy.<sup>8</sup> He then proceeds to make his distinction between the two types of skepticism within this tradition. Here, he states, there is a “fundamental division [...] between *absolute skeptics* about conceivability [...] who hold that there are ineliminable conceptual impossibilities (which cannot be thought by any concepts), and *relative skeptics* [...] who claim only that there are conceptual impossibilities for any given set of concepts (but that new concepts can be developed to eliminate the impossibilities)”.<sup>9</sup> So, the relative skeptics acknowledge the limits of thought but believe in strategies to bypass these limits — whether through conceptual invention, political intervention, or artistic creation. The absolute skeptics, on the other hand, see these limits as insurmountable, turning instead to the ethical and the aporetic as sites of philosophical engagement. This distinction, then, is crucial. Whereas figures like Deleuze, Badiou, and Foucault remain committed to finding new ways to think beyond apparent impasses — through ontology, mathematics, or power structures — thinkers like Levinas, Derrida, and Marion insist on the absoluteness of certain thresholds, particularly in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 185–187.

<sup>7</sup> See for example: Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 2010), 307–326.

<sup>8</sup> See for Gutting's interpretation of this influence: Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*, 50–66.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 184.

relation to ethics, alterity, and the divine.<sup>10</sup> Relative skeptics overcome the limits of thought by treating impossibilities as challenges rather than absolute barriers. They view the history of philosophy as a continual process of conceptual reinvention, where new frameworks, languages, and methodologies allow thought to expand beyond what was previously deemed unthinkable. Deleuze, for instance, introduces ontological innovation by reconceiving difference and becoming, while Badiou employs set theory to rethink being and event.<sup>11</sup> Foucault, on the other hand, deconstructs the epistemic conditions that structure knowledge and power, revealing new ways to conceive historical transformation.<sup>12</sup> In each case, the impossible is not rejected but actively met, leading to new forms of philosophical intervention that reshape the landscape of thought itself. Absolute skeptics, by contrast, do not attempt to overcome conceptual limits but instead work within them, exploring the very nature of their inaccessibility.<sup>13</sup> For thinkers like Levinas, Derrida, and Marion, the impossible is not something to be eliminated but rather something that defines the limits of human thought and ethics. Levinas, for example, treats the encounter with the Other as an experience that exceeds comprehension, irreducible to conceptual capture.<sup>14</sup> Derrida's notion of *différance* exposes the inherent deferral of meaning, showing that presence and total understanding are always beyond reach. Marion's theology radicalizes this further, proposing that certain phenomena — such as divine revelation — manifest themselves precisely through their resistance to conceptual capture.<sup>15</sup> For these philosophers, impossibility is not an obstacle to be overcome but a horizon that continuously disrupts and reorients philosophical inquiry.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, Gutting connects this distinction to two distinct ways of responding to Hegelian thought.<sup>17</sup> Foucault famously remarked that the task of 20th-century philosophy is to deal with Hegel's legacy, and Gutting interprets this, at least in part, through the lens of his division between relative and absolute skepticism.<sup>18</sup> The relative skeptics align with a reinterpretation of Hegel's dialectical process, where contradictions and conceptual limits are not seen as absolute impassés but as opportunities for transformation.<sup>19</sup> Hegelian dialectics operates by engaging

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>11</sup> See for Deleuze: Ibid., 128–132. And for Badiou: Ibid., 165–183.

<sup>12</sup> See for Foucault: Ibid., 140–147.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>14</sup> See for Levinas: Ibid., 117–128.

<sup>15</sup> See for both Derrida and Marion: Ibid., 151–164.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 185.

contradictions and resolving them at a higher conceptual level — what Hegel calls *Aufhebung* (sublation). Thinkers like Deleuze, Badiou, and Foucault take up this legacy in their own ways. Deleuze radicalizes the dialectic by replacing it with a philosophy of pure difference, rejecting Hegel's synthesis in favor of continuous conceptual reinvention.<sup>20</sup> Badiou reinterprets Hegelian negation through set theory, positing the Event as a rupture that generates new forms of thought. Foucault, while less directly Hegelian, sees history as a discontinuous process where new discursive formations emerge by breaking away from dominant epistemes. For these thinkers, *thinking the impossible* means finding conceptual innovations that allow philosophy to move beyond its apparent dead ends. The absolute skeptics, on the other hand, reject the Hegelian model of dialectical resolution, emphasizing instead the irreducibility of certain limits.<sup>21</sup> Rather than overcoming contradictions through conceptual progress, they remain within them, revealing their inescapability. Levinas, for example, resists Hegel's totalizing logic by insisting that ethical responsibility to the Other cannot be subsumed under a larger conceptual framework. Derrida, too, disrupts Hegelian synthesis through *différance*, exposing the ways in which meaning remains forever deferred, resisting closure. Marion extends this rejection of totality into theology, where divine presence is understood as an irreducible givenness that remains beyond the grasp of conceptual thought. For these thinkers, *thinking the impossible* does not mean resolving paradoxes but recognizing them as fundamental to thought itself, forcing philosophy to deal with what necessarily escapes comprehension.<sup>22</sup>

Now, we can apply Gutting's distinction to the philosophy of the Event, beginning with relative skepticism. For this, Deleuze and Badiou will serve as key examples. The concept of the Event in Deleuze's thought has multiple meanings, but here we can focus on its role in his *Logic of Sense*.<sup>23</sup> At the core of Deleuze's philosophy is an effort to think the virtual — a realm that underlies and exceeds the actual.<sup>24</sup> To reach the virtual, we must counter-actualize the actual, breaking free from conventional modes of thought based on identity, representation, and stability. This requires a more creative way of thinking, one that deterritorializes fixed structures

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 185–186.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, trans. Constantin Boundas and Charles Stivale (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015). For a comprehensive overview of the many meanings of the Event in Deleuze, see: Clayton Crockett, *Deleuze beyond Badiou: Ontology, Multiplicity, and Event* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 75–100.

<sup>24</sup> For a good introduction, see: Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Or, alternatively: Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (New York, NY: Verso, 2006).

and opens up new possibilities. One way to do this is through concept creation. Concepts allow us to move beyond the actual, pushing thought beyond its given limits. However, language itself, as a medium of representation, poses a problem. This is where Deleuze introduces his logic of sense, in which the Event plays a crucial role. An Event, in this sense, occurs when language creates something new — when it does not merely describe but actively generates reality. A classic example is the performative utterance: if someone enters a bank and shouts, “This is a holdup!”, the phrase itself brings about a new situation. This epiphenomenal effect shows how language can disrupt the actual and open access to the virtual.<sup>25</sup> In this way, Deleuze’s Event aligns precisely with Gutting’s characterization of him as a relative skeptic. The Event marks the moment where conceptual limitations are transcended, allowing thought to break through to something radically new.

Despite the many differences between Deleuze and Badiou, Gutting’s distinction places them in the same camp. Both thinkers reject the end of metaphysics, refusing to accept that thought has reached its limits. While Deleuze seeks to expand thought through the creative power of the Event, Badiou approaches it from a different framework — one that insists on the possibility of new truths beyond established conceptual constraints. For Badiou, philosophy must be grounded in what he calls truth procedures, which emerge through ruptures in established structures of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> At the core of his ontology, developed in *Being and Event*, is a commitment to mathematics, specifically set theory, as the foundation for thinking about being. He argues that being is pure multiplicity, irreducible to a single, unified structure. However, within any given situation, what exists is organized through representation — a process that assigns identities and structures to what otherwise remains an indeterminate multiplicity. This process of representation, which he terms the state of the situation, functions by gathering elements into collections, stabilizing what is otherwise radically heterogeneous. The Event, for Badiou, is what disrupts this representational order. It is something that occurs outside the logic of the situation, something that cannot be predicted or fully accounted for within existing structures. An Event forces a rupture, forcing thought to reconfigure its understanding of reality. However, an Event only truly exists if it is followed by a truth procedure — a process through which a subject remains faithful to the Event by reworking the situation in its aftermath. Truth, in this sense, is not a correspondence between thought and reality but an active process of fidelity that reorganizes what counts as

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<sup>25</sup> See for this reading of the Event in Deleuze: Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 140–153. The hold-up example does not come from Deleuze himself, but can be traced back to Austin’s work on performative utterances. Example taken from: May, *Gilles Deleuze*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> For a good introduction, see: Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

thinkable and possible.<sup>27</sup> This places Badiou firmly in the camp of relative skepticism, as Gutting describes it. Like Deleuze, he does not accept that certain conceptual impossibilities are absolute. Instead, he believes that the limits of thought are contingent on representation — they exist within a given structure, but an Event reveals new possibilities beyond those limits. By engaging with the Event and remaining faithful to it, philosophy can extend the realm of truth, breaking through the apparent impossibilities imposed by the existing order.

Let's now turn to the absolute skeptics, those who, rather than seeking to overcome conceptual limits, emphasize the inescapability of certain boundaries and the necessity of engaging with what remains beyond thought. Levinas and Marion can serve as exemplary thinkers. In Levinas's work, the Event is not an ontological rupture in the sense of Deleuze or Badiou, but rather an ethical encounter that fundamentally exceeds conceptualization. The Event, for Levinas, is the face-to-face encounter with "the Other", an encounter that disrupts the self's autonomy and calls it into responsibility. Unlike Deleuze and Badiou, who see the Event as a means of expanding thought, Levinas sees it as something that escapes thought — an intrusion of radical alterity that cannot be assimilated into existing conceptual structures. This Event is not an occurrence within being but a transcendence of being itself. The face of the Other presents an irreducible demand — an ethical imperative that cannot be contained within any philosophical system or representational framework. Levinas explicitly critiques the Hegelian totality, arguing that traditional metaphysics seeks to absorb alterity into the same, whereas the ethical Event resists such reduction. It is an Event precisely because it shatters the economy of knowledge and power, revealing an absolute ethical responsibility that precedes and exceeds all comprehension. Thus, for Levinas, the Event is not about creating new concepts (as in Deleuze) or revealing new truths (as in Badiou), but about bearing witness to what thought can never fully grasp — the infinite responsibility to the Other.<sup>28</sup> This situates him clearly within Gutting's category of absolute skepticism, as he insists that certain limits — especially the ethical relation — cannot be overcome, only recognized and responded to.

This is even more clear in the work of Marion. The Event has many meanings in his thought, but here we can focus on the Event as an example of the "saturated phenomenon" — a phenomenon that exceeds the capacity of human intuition and conceptual grasp.<sup>29</sup> For Marion, a saturated phenomenon is one that overwhelms the

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<sup>27</sup> This reading of the Event in Badiou is entirely based on: Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York, NY: Continuum, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> For Levinas' reading of the Event, see: Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> For an instructive overview of the different meanings of the Event in the thought of Marion, see: Kadir Filiz, *Event and Subjectivity: The Question of Phenomenology in Claude Romano and Jean-Luc Marion*

structures of representation and understanding, flooding consciousness with more meaning than it can process. Unlike ordinary phenomena, which are structured by the subject's intentional acts (as in Husserlian phenomenology), saturated phenomena impose themselves on thought, disrupting its ability to categorize or control them. The Event, in this sense, is something that arrives undemanded, not as an extension of what is already thinkable but as a rupture that transcends conceptualization altogether. A prime example of this is revelation, particularly in a theological sense. The divine does not appear as an object to be analyzed but as an overwhelming givenness, exceeding all conditions of knowledge. Similarly, love, the encounter with the Other, or even an artwork can manifest themselves as Events that impose themselves with an intensity beyond comprehension. These experiences cannot be reduced to a conceptual framework but must be endured and responded to in their irreducible excess.<sup>30</sup> This places Marion like Levinas within Gutting's absolute skepticism: rather than trying to overcome the limits of thought, he embraces the idea that certain realities — especially those related to the divine, love, or the Other — are fundamentally ungraspable. The Event, for Marion, is not something to be understood but something that overwhelms, making us recognize the limits of human cognition and representation.

From this, it becomes clear that Gutting's distinction between relative and absolute skepticism is indeed valid when applied to the concept of the Event. Deleuze and Badiou, as relative skeptics, treat the Event as a means to expand thought beyond conceptual limitations, either by creating new concepts (Deleuze) or by forcing a rupture in the structure of knowledge that opens the space for new truths (Badiou). In contrast, Levinas and Marion, as absolute skeptics, emphasize that the Event is irreducible to conceptualization — for Levinas, it is the ethical demand that resists assimilation, and for Marion, it is the overwhelming givenness of the saturated phenomenon that surpasses thought's ability to grasp it. Moreover, this distinction proves to be an important conceptual tool because it allows us to relate the Event to both the Hegelian and Heideggerian contexts. Read in light of the Hegelian tradition, the Event is either an extension of dialectical overcoming — where the limits of thought are transcended through conceptual or ontological innovation (relative skepticism) — or a break with Hegel's totalizing system, claiming an irreducible excess that cannot be sublated into a higher unity (absolute skepticism). In the Heideggerian context, the Event can be seen as a response to the end of metaphysics. For the relative skeptics, the Event functions as a way to reintroduce the possibility of new truths, challenging the

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(Leiden: Brill, 2024), 29–62. <http://doi.org/10.1163/9789004689541> For an overall introduction to the thinking of Marion, see: Christina Gschwandter, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> This interpretation of the Event in Marion can be found in: Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002).

Heideggerian notion that metaphysics has exhausted itself. Meanwhile, for the absolute skeptics, the Event affirms Heidegger's claim that being withdraws from full comprehension, reinforcing the idea that certain experiences — whether ethical, theological, or existential — remain beyond conceptual grasp. Hence, there is clear philosophical validity in Gutting's distinction, as it not only clarifies differing approaches to the Event but also opens new avenues for understanding how contemporary philosophy negotiates the legacy of Hegel and Heidegger.

As a concluding remark, there are two critiques one can formulate on Gutting's distinction. The first one — which is a rather superficial remark — concerns the term “skeptics”, which does not fully capture the philosophical positions he is referring to, even though the distinction itself remains valid. The word skeptic traditionally implies a stance of doubt or suspension of judgment, yet neither Deleuze and Badiou nor Levinas and Marion engage in skepticism in this sense. Rather than doubting the possibility of thought, relative skeptics actively push beyond its limits, while absolute skeptics engage deeply with the impossibility of overcoming them. Second, there is an interesting middle path between the two positions, which becomes evident when we reconsider the concept of the Event itself. This perspective is particularly well-articulated in the thought of Claude Romano.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Deleuze and Badiou, who see the Event as something that either ruptures established knowledge or opens up a new ontological realm, or Levinas and Marion, who view the Event as an encounter with radical alterity beyond comprehension, Romano offers a more phenomenological understanding of the Event — one that integrates elements of both perspectives. For Romano, particularly in *L'événement et le monde*, the Event is neither simply a break that generates new concepts nor an intrusion of the unthinkable.<sup>32</sup> Instead, he presents the Event as something that reconfigures the subject's relationship to the world, marking a transformation of meaning rather than an absolute rupture or an ungraspable excess. Romano shifts the focus from the ontological status of the Event (as in Badiou and Deleuze) or its ethical/theological implications (as in Levinas and Marion) to its experiential and existential structure. The Event, for him, is something that happens to a subject in such a way that it fundamentally changes their orientation toward the world. This perspective offers a middle path between Gutting's categories: it does not assume that the limits of thought can always be surpassed through conceptual reinvention, nor does it treat them as insurmountable. Instead, the Event, in Romano's view, reshapes what can be thought and experienced without necessarily breaking with thought altogether or exceeding it completely. It is not simply an

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<sup>31</sup> See for an Romano's phenomenological reading of the Event: Filiz, *Event and Subjectivity*, 84–142.

<sup>32</sup> See: Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009).

emergence of new concepts (as in Deleuze and Badiou), nor a confrontation with the unspeakable (as in Levinas and Marion), but rather a lived transformation — a shift in the subject's relation to meaning, time, and experience itself. Thus, while Gutting's distinction remains useful, Romano's approach suggests a more nuanced understanding of the Event — one that navigates between conceptual expansion and irreducible limitation. This perspective highlights the possibility that the Event is neither wholly within nor wholly beyond thought, but instead functions at the threshold, constantly reconfiguring the very structure through which we engage with the world. At the same time, Romano makes clear that Gutting's distinction primarily concerns the conceptualization and interpretation of the Event. What it leaves aside, however, is a prior dimension: the occurrence of the Event itself and the lived experience through which it is first encountered. Romano shows that the Event is not merely an object of philosophical classification but, before anything else, a transformation that is experienced and only later subjected to interpretation.

Exploring this in full is beyond the scope of this paper, but it at least offers an interesting path for further investigation — one that navigates between the poles of Gutting's distinction and deepens our understanding of the Event. This middle path not only challenges the binary of relative and absolute skepticism but also suggests a more dynamic interplay between conceptual innovation and the recognition of limits. Ultimately, it provides a direction for future research that can build on Gutting's conceptual framework, which remains an intriguing lens for reading postwar French philosophy.

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**Michalis Tegos**

University of Ioannina / University of Crete in Rethymno and Heraklion, Greece

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3923-4186>

[michalistegos@yahoo.gr](mailto:michalistegos@yahoo.gr)

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE EVENT: ONTOLOGY AND HISTORY\*

**Abstract:** Heidegger's *Ereignis* is riddled with ambiguity. On the one hand, *Ereignis* is the event of appropriation, the retrieval of *Dasein*'s own proper, or Being; on the other hand, it is to be thought as a rupture and transformative break, the unconcealment or essencing of the truth of Being. The event is the name for the primordial co-belonging of the ontological and the historical, of the plunging of Being in Time, the last chapter in the History of Being. In this paper I argue that Badiou's thinking of the event aims to address the tension, inherent in Heidegger's project, between the *ontological* and the *historical*. First and foremost, (a) Badiou constructs a mathematical ontology, based on set-theory, which thinks of any situation in terms of its presentation, in the conjuncture of the void and the infinite. Secondly, (b) strictly speaking, ontology, which deals with the presentation and representation of multiplicities in a situation, according to a count as one, accounts for normal multiplicities, barring in essence the abnormality and disequilibrium between presentation and representation that constitutes an abnormal multiple, or, what Badiou calls an evental site. Thus, the event is barred from ontology, unforeseen from within the situation, which unfolds according to its laws of presentation. Differently put, from the point of view of Being, the event is not; *of the event ontology can say nothing*. Thirdly and most importantly, (c) the event is neither an all-embracing totality of possibility or sense, nor a scriptural or linguistic effect. The event — far from being a name for Being itself, or the primordial co-belonging of Being and time — is an exception to Being, such that it is unforeseen from within the laws of possibility of any given world. The event is thus barred from ontology, but it is also subtracted from History.

**Keywords:** *event, ontology, history, Heidegger, Badiou*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

After Heidegger, the concept of the event occupies a central position in Contemporary French Thought. In this paper, I briefly present the tension surrounding the event in the work of the late Heidegger and how Badiou's thinking seeks to surpass and respond to

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the problems posed by Heidegger's critique of Western Metaphysics. The 'other beginning', presented by Heidegger as a thinking of the event, is still entangled in the remnants of the ontological difference. Accordingly, the tension between Being and beings, which defines much of Heidegger's early project, is reconfigured in terms of Event and events. More specifically, it shall be shown that through its appropriation by Badiou, which attempts to clarify the tension — inherent in Heidegger's project — between the ontological and the historical, the event may provide for what Heidegger considered to be a new beginning for thought.<sup>1</sup>

The event is used as a term by Heidegger as early as 1927, where it is linked with the immediacy of experience in the context of phenomenology, but it is in truth after the so called 'turn' and on the way to overcoming the thought of ontological difference that it acquires in his thinking something which indicates towards a new beginning. The event is thought of as the co-belonging of Being and Time, as the 'and' between Being and Time. Plunging ontology in history and history in ontology, the event is thought of as the last epochal configuration in the History of Being. Thus, the event is neither ontological nor ontic, neither subjective nor objective. It is neither substance, nor structure, nor subject; it is neither internal nor external, neither the result of will, action, or passion, of the mixture of bodies, nor their cause. Rather, the tension between the ontological and the ontical is reconfigured in terms of the ontological and the historical, between the Event and events.

## 2. THE EVENT AS A NEW BEGINNING FOR THOUGHT

But what are the conditions if the event is to be considered as '*a new beginning for thought?*' If we are to inquire, in the manner of Heidegger, into the nature of thought after the closure of Western metaphysics, what would constitute another beginning? If the 'first beginning', tracing back to the Greeks, is related to a thinking of *arche*, ground, tied to the principle of sufficient reason, then the 'other beginning' must be thought of as a leap away from the ground, into groundlessness, the abyss — of unreason and contingency. If the first beginning is concerned with the question of Being and beings, then the other beginning is on the way to think the truth of Being,

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas for Heidegger the event is the very uncovering of a primordial co-belonging of Being and Time, a gathering that makes all separation and difference possible, the latest iterations of the event attach a rapturous and transformative quality to the evental surging and procedure. Notable examples would be Claude Romano, *L'Événement et le Temps* (Paris: PUF, 2012), and *L'événement et le Monde* (Paris: PUF, 1998); François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy* (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2014). While van der Heiden presents a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (Heidegger, Romano) and a speculative approach (Badiou, Meillassoux), we may add several thinkers in between, like Agamben, Nancy, Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and Deleuze.

its eventual occurrence, away from the ground, as groundless, unreason, contingent, that is, to think Being *as* event.

For Heidegger this is the difference between *Andenken* and *Vordenken*, whereby a decision prepares the way to think the event. Yet this decision does not enact the event, only decides on an anticipatory resoluteness, the destiny/destining (*Geschick*) of a historical (*Geschichtlich*) *Dasein* or a people, which prepares its arrival. The thought of the other beginning, or a new beginning for thought, then, requires the closure or exhaustion of Western metaphysics, traversing the history of *arche*, if only to liberate itself from the metaphysics of presence, the epochal, historical configurations of Being, or ontotheology. The other beginning is, accordingly, a thinking which has not yet arrived and which requires a different comportment towards Being, truth, and event. Being essentially occurs as the event. The essential occurrence of Being and this other beginning is the way into the truth of Being as event.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the thinking of the event aims to be a thought beyond the ontological difference. This would mean that the event is to be thought neither as Being, nor as a being. The event is neither ontological, nor ontical. Yet, as Being needs beings to unconceal itself, so does the Event rely on singular things, beings and events — to “shelter the truth of Beyng”.<sup>3</sup> The event is neither ontological, nor historical — neither ever present, Being, nor accident and empirical singularity. Rather, the event is, for Heidegger, the co-donation, co-belonging and reciprocal appropriation of Being and time, ontology and history. In Heidegger’s late project of plunging Being into time and time into Being, the event is thought of as the co-belonging of Being and time, the event is the essencing of the truth of Being. The event is the last epochal configuration in the history of Being, whereby Being is reconfigured as event.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Of the Event,” in *Contributions to Philosophy: Of the Event*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and D. Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 26: “Thinking of Beyng as event is inceptual thinking.” See also 141–149, for the relation between the Event and inceptual thinking; 139–145, for the transition from the “first” to the “other beginning”; 180–190, for the “leap” to inceptual thinking as preparation, and inceptual thinking as leap. See also, Martin Heidegger, *Hölderins Hymne “Andenken,”* in Gesamtausgabe, vol. 52 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982). For more on the relation between *Geschick*, *Schicksaal* and *Geschichte*, Sending or Destining, Destiny and History and for a discussion on *Ereignis* as appropriative event, as a letting be present, advent to presence which occurs in destiny, as a giving which at the same time holds back and withdraws and the vocabulary of sending, between Heidegger and Derrida, see Marco Antonio Nunez Canto, “Sending, Event and Catastrophe. The correspondence between Heidegger and Derrida,” *Thémata Revista de Filosofia* 63 (2021): 339–358.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origins of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. J. Young and K. Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32. See further down for a discussion of the fourfold with regards to the ontological difference.

The other beginning would liberate thinking from the ontotheological reign of the One, of necessity and reason; it would be a leap from the ground, away from sufficient reason, into the abyss. The event names the suspension of sufficient reason and the primacy of contingency for ontology, for an ‘ontology after ontotheology’.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally the event is situated outside of thought.<sup>5</sup> The event is posited as the outside, hazard, pure *alea* — what cannot be thought but only either prepared as destinal decision (Heidegger) or discerned in its post evental traces (Badiou).

As we shall see, much of the literature surveyed, which adheres to and takes part in what may be called the philosophy of the event, succumbs to this tension, facing a *double temptation*, effect, or rather symptom, of the confusion of the singular, the indistinguishability of the event in the ontological and the historical sense. This temptation is to either *ontologize* or *historicize* the event; to absolutize or relativize, dogmatize or empiricize it; either turn the event into the structure of Being itself, or slide the event into everydayness, phenomenal experience or at best some experience of rare and transformative value. Beyond that banality there is a third choice, namely, to think, with and against Heidegger, the singularity of the event — disconnected from ontology and subtracted from history — that is to say, in its exception.

Hence, what I shall hereafter call the ‘tension of the singular’ is a confusion between the ontological and the historical, appearing in the form of ontological and ontical events, passing freely from one to the other, with often catastrophic results for both ontology and the Philosophy of History.<sup>6</sup> In other words, beginning with Heidegger, the event is riddled with confusion, absorbed in ontology, steeped in historicity.<sup>7</sup> Thus the argument of the present paper is that if the event is to be a new beginning for thought, it must be disentangled from the tension — inherent in Heidegger’s destining of the concept to French thought — between the ontological and the historical.

Thinking the event thus requires not simply to begin to think free from sufficient reason or ground, in the abyss. The event is a thinking liberated from subjectivity, subjectivism, volition, decision.<sup>8</sup> Yet all subjectivity, fidelity, truth, relies on and begins its trajectory from an event. In addition, the event has to be thought as neither

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<sup>4</sup> See Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology*, 135–136, 145–156.

<sup>5</sup> See François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> The event may be the event of Being, or writing (for Derrida), or sense (for Deleuze), Cantorian set-theory (for Badiou), and at the same time it may stand for the *Beerputzpakt*, May 68, or the first live-televised Iraq war.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger talks about Historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) in *Being and Time* §72–77, while the later Heidegger speaks of Historicity or Destiny (*Geschichte, Geshick*), not as a series of happenings (*Historie*), but as a sending and destining of Being. See Heidegger, “Of the Event,” 7, 388–399.

<sup>8</sup> See François Raffoul, *Thinking the Event*, 3, 72, 93. As Raffoul argues, the event is free from causality, necessity, possibility, and subjectivity: improbable, uncalculable — the event must surprise.

*dogmatic*, nor *empirical*; neither *essence*, nor *accident*; neither *substance*, nor *subject*; neither *transcendent*, nor *immanent*; neither *subjective*, nor *objective*; neither *destinal*, nor *arrivant*; but *exceptional*; in exception to Being, in excess over any situation, will, calculation, or machination. In short, the event must be freed from the double bind of ontology and history, as the bind between Being and time, freed from the shadow of the ontological difference — between Being and beings — and reconfigured in terms of Event and events; between the event in the ontological sense and events in the historical sense, or mere facts, happenings no matter how rare. The difference between the Event and events is not a matter of degree, or intensity.

If the event is to be considered as a new beginning for thought — a thinking beyond the difference between Being and beings, beyond the ontological difference, which Heidegger himself understood to be metaphysical — it must be disentangled from the tension and the abyss in which Heidegger concealed it, between ontology and history. If the thought of the event is to be a thinking beyond the ontological difference, the obscure relation and reduplication between the Event and events must be reconfigured. Thus, also, the event must be neither *ontological*, nor *historical*. In other words, *if Being is not a being, the Event is not an event*.

The omission of several thinkers of theological or messianic conceptions of the event is part of a strategic decision or a conscious error. For, it is also one of the arguments of this project that if the event is to be regarded as a new beginning for thought, then it must not only be freed from causality, probability, reason, and subjectivity, but also from its messianic or theological dimension. The event cannot be an absolute destiny or arrival. In other words, the event cannot be a name for the absolute. As it is liberated from the bounds and the grounds of traditional metaphysics — the ontotheology of meaning — of presence and the subject, so it must be liberated from theological thinking. This not only means that the event is to be thought of as exception and hazardous encounter, excluded from the principle of sufficient reason, from the God-principle of the philosophers, but also from the last God of the poets, for which Heidegger pleads the return in his poetic thinking. Rather, it entails unbinding the thought of the infinite from its traditional theological and metaphysical connotation and association with the one; and to reallocate its truth to the unfounded and the void, the rupture with Being and its laws of presentation.

For, the recovery of a novel, philosophical and not theological conception of the infinite has been one of the great stakes of 20th and 21st century thought. If, for Heidegger the event is essentially an uncovering of finitude, of the primordial and co-originary belonging of Being and Time, for Badiou the event is the appearing of infinity, the beginning of a truth procedure, which is the ‘being-there of eternity’. It is with the hazardous supplementation of any situation by an evental multiple, which exceeds and surpasses the count-as-one, that the infinite work of subjective fidelity

— work of a laborious subject — begins, thereby producing, locally and temporally, a finite fragment of an infinite and eternal truth. Thus, the task to think the event as a new beginning for thought coincides with the project of an *ontology after ontotheology*, or, in the words of Badiou, a *metaphysics without metaphysics*.<sup>9</sup>

But, of the event, can it be only said that it is not? If so, how does this conception differ from all previous negative theology? As a new beginning with regards to the history of Western metaphysics, the event is not to be subdued to the metaphysics of presence, but neither is it to be given up to the sacralization of absence, a hypostatization of the nothing and the romantic, nihilistic exaltation of finitude and the cult of death. For, if the event is to be subtracted from presence, it must also be subtracted from absence — not a *Deus absconditus* — in retreat, for that would turn the event into an absolute arrivant or destinal, i.e., into a name for the absolute.<sup>10</sup>

Of the event; Heidegger gives us only silence, sibyllic and obscure remarks, concealing the event in that ‘wholly other song of Beyng’.<sup>11</sup> If the event is to be a new beginning for thought, it must be uncovered from the dark abyss of Heidegger’s other beginning — precisely because the event is the thought of another beginning, neither ontological nor ontical, historical, or temporal. If the first beginning is occupied with and by the ground, *arche*, unity, necessity, and reason, then a thinking of the event requires a leap away from the ground, into the abyss, or rather, into the void — where no sound or clamor is ever possible. But this void is, as Badiou suggests, the other name of being.<sup>12</sup> To which, the supernumeral and incalculable of the event adds, as we shall see, a hazardous supplement.

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<sup>9</sup> See Alain Badiou, “Metaphysics and the critique of Metaphysics,” trans. A. Toscano, *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2000), 174–190. Badiou’s task is to describe being-qua-being in terms of situations, sets, parts, inclusion and belonging, presentation and representation in the count-as-one; and the event as *trans-being*, what is not being-qua-being, fixed on no ontological category, errant excess over the count, hazardous supplementation of the name as intervention and deductive fidelity; a theory of the subject configured as trace of the event and finite fragment of an eternal truth. See also van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology*, vii, 9, 26, 263–264.

<sup>10</sup> See Heidegger, “Of the Event,” 321–330, on the event with regards to the “absconding” and the “advent” of the gods. This subtraction from presence/absence is also in a sense what Deleuze aims at with the *virtual*, Derrida with the concept of *différance*, or Badiou with the *indiscernible* and the dialectic of forcing, as well as with the later concepts of the *inexistent* and the *transcendental* of a world and the general topology of intensities.

<sup>11</sup> One could connect this silence, the comportment towards the event, to the silence the poet Paul Celan encountered on the part of Heidegger, when confronted with the horrors of his catastrophic political decisions and allegiances. See Alain Badiou, *Manifeste pour la Philosophie* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1989), 68.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Badiou, *L’Être et l’Événement* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1988), 72.

### 3. BEYOND THE ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

The concept of the event can be found in Heidegger's work as early as 1927. In the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, the event names the immediacy of presence in experience, linked with corporeality and the situation in which one finds oneself always immediately engaged. In a second phase (1936–39), the event seems as an attempt to bridge a schism in Heidegger's own thought, opened wide through in *Being and Time* and leading up to the famous 'turn'.

In Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy*, the event names the relation between the ontological and the historical, in a way that is obviously problematic and symptomatic of the aforementioned tension surrounding the singular.<sup>13</sup> It is well known that Heidegger at the time connects his thinking of the event to a form of idealized national socialism, the preparation of a decision and of a people. However, one may argue that the concept of the event, as a double movement of appropriation and expropriation (*Ereignis-Enteignis*), is already on the way of overcoming the thinking of the ontological difference, of the difference between Being and beings, which is still bound, as Heidegger admits, to the metaphysics of presence. Accordingly, the thought of the ontological and the historical is reconfigured in terms of the relation between the Event and events. The Event, as primordial, is posited as foundation and condition of the possibility of events: as the co-originary belonging of Being and Time, as the 'and' of *Dasein* and truth, as 'essencing and truth of Being'. Being essentially occurs as the Event.<sup>14</sup> The Event requires events in order to uncover itself, in the manner in which Being requires beings. This double, equivocal appropriation, Heidegger tells us, is the Event. Essentially, it is Being which eventually occurs.<sup>15</sup> In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger writes that in the Event, Being and humans are led to their own proper (or property/propriety).<sup>16</sup> Being, as Event, is in need of beings in order to occur. Conversely, beings do not need Being in the same way. For Heidegger, beings may well 'be' and remain within the neglect and abandonment of Being, what he calls the errancy and forgetfulness of the oblivion of covering of Being.<sup>17</sup>

The event is essentially that which renders possible the difference between Being and beings. It is the rift that unites in a clearing the opposites in a strife, in their common ontological ground, in the co-originary of *Dasein* and the Event.<sup>18</sup> However,

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<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, "Of the Event," 49, 69–81.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 12, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Stambaugh (New York / London: Harper & Row, 2002), 28, 36–38.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, "Of the Event," 26.

<sup>18</sup> See also Heidegger, "The Origins of the Work of Art," 32.

this ground is not a foundation, we are not within a logic of ground (foundation, ratio, cause). The event is not a cause and foundation of beings, but groundless, unfounded and unfounding, ecstatic, or, as Heidegger calls it, the abyss (*Abgrund*); a logic of the abyss, of freedom as the abysmal, unfounded and unfounding foundation of existence. The Event is, in essence, an uncovering of finitude. It is the point of a co-existence or co-donation of an equiprimordial unity and rift. As equivocal appropriation, the event is the end of possibilities and the possibility of the end, the horizon of an opening which makes it possible to speak of the difference between Being and beings. This is also what constitutes a problem in the parts where Heidegger speaks of death as having this double structure of difference and event. Whence the popular misreading, associated with the anthropological reading of *Being and Time*, which Heidegger sought to debunk with the “Letter on Humanism”, about whether death can constitute an event at all.<sup>19</sup> It is already apparent that if it is so, this is because it shares the structure of something like an archi-event, an event whose structure is shared by all events, an event which makes the difference between Event and events possible in the first place.<sup>20</sup> The event is first the event of appropriation, *enowning* — the appropriation of *Dasein*’s own abysmal groundless ground.<sup>21</sup>

Already then in Heidegger the event carries this double significance, a tension which runs also through the epigones. Even though Heidegger advises against the rendering of *Ereignis* as event, emphasizing the appropriating, visual and conceiving

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<sup>19</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. and trans. W. McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> For a reading that delves into the ontological and the historical dimensions of the concept of the event in Heidegger, see James Bahoh, *Heidegger’s Ontology of Events* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 56–95, 131–152. See Carol Jean White, *Time and Death: Heidegger’s Analysis of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2015) xx–xxxii, 19, 63–84, for a contrast between death as an event in the ontical sense, the end of one’s life, demise, and in an ontological sense, which is more about the death of a worldview, akin to an epistemic shift. The event as appropriation is for Heidegger profoundly linked to language (see Heidegger, “Of the Event,” 401), and the appropriation of the poetic voice through the encounter with the foreign language, as with Hölderlin’s encounter with the Greek language of Sophoclean tragedy. Interestingly, Romano conceives of the event in an analogous way, as event of events, horizon of sense and opening of a new world, but conversely to his reading of Heidegger, in which death and the existential analytic structure the eventality of everydayness, for Romano it is birth which forms the archi-event which creates the world of sense for what he calls the *advénant*. See Claude Romano, *L’événement et le Monde*, 26–33, 106. See also van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology*, 186–197.

<sup>21</sup> See also in Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (London: Harper & Row, 1972): “What determines both, time and Being, in their own, that is, in their belonging together, we shall call: *Ereignis*, the event of appropriation.” The rendering of *Ereignis* as *enowning* in the translation of Heidegger’s “Vom Ereignis” by Emad and Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) attempts to keep the linguistic link between ‘to own’ or ‘appropriate’ (*Eigen*), as in authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*), as well as ‘to see with one’s eye’ (*Auge*), and *Ereignis*.

operational metaphors which are mobilized, the event is: (a) On the one hand, a transformative rupture in the history of Western metaphysics, the opening of thought to the possibility of the new, the re-appropriation of the ontological ground from which existence has been alienated — in the withdrawal and absorption of the Event, of difference in the like and the same, in finitude. Thus, surging from within the breakdown of the meaning of each world, the Event names something like the truth of Being, even though it is a truth in turmoil or in transit between two worlds. Additionally, (b) revealing itself in the aforementioned primordial proximity, belonging, or co-originary unity, it is Being itself which reveals itself as Event. Being itself is, in its essence or co-propriety, Event. Being, as Event, determines itself as pure *difference*. Finally, (c) the Event, as pure difference, reveals itself as the truth of Being, the coming to itself of the fulfilment of a destinal belonging. Abandoned by Beyng, the Event is obscured in the nihilism of the planetary reign of technology, enframing (*Gestell*) the world in an eternal repetition of the same, in the Event and as the Event is hidden, what Heidegger fatefully calls, the “last God”.<sup>22</sup>

Arguably then, the event is neither ontological nor ontical, but neither is there any tension between ontology and history, as Heidegger’s effort already in *Being and Time* consists in plunging ontology into time, or history and the introjection of time into ontology. Being is no longer eternal and forgotten eternally, but temporality and temporization. Moreover, the later Heidegger explicitly undertakes the project of a History of Being.

And yet, of the event and from the event (*Vom Ereignis*), no logical or mathematical proposition can be said; of the event and from the event there is silence. The event is a silent implosion of meaning, uncovering of primordial proximity and co-belonging of Being and time. The event as primordial is what makes the ontological difference possible in the first place, however, this primordiality or equiprimordiality is not itself temporal. The new beginning for thought is not a principle (an *arche* or ground, for that would situate us squarely once again within the tradition of Western metaphysics), nor a beginning in time. Rather, it points to the simultaneity of Being and beings in the event, the event as the co-primordial belonging of Being and beings. Of Being and time, the event is posited as the ‘*and*’. The event is the temporal-spatial simultaneity of Beyng and beings; historical beings coming into the open, appropriating their own proper — the sheltering of Being in beings or historical entities, as a relation between truth and singular happenings.

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<sup>22</sup> Heidegger, “Of the Event,” 21, 45–65, 76, 321–330. This is, however, not the God of faith, nor the God-principle of metaphysics, but the last God of the poets, as Badiou claims, in retreat and awaiting for their arrival. See Alain Badiou, *Court Traité d’Ontologie Transitoire* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1998), 18–19.

Being needs beings to reveal itself in the opening, clearing of truth. But beings do not need Being, they can be in the abandonment by being — in machination. Being is not a being, the Event is not an event. The Event needs events to be uncovered, but events do not need the Event.

The ontological difference and beyond; *Ereignis*, Heidegger claimed to have been thinking for most of his life.<sup>23</sup> *Ereignis* is not event, but rather the event of appropriation, the event of world, the event of difference. *Ereignis* is enowning, appropriation, appropriating event, the uncovering, unconcealment of meaning, but also a rupture with previous meaning and world, change of worldview. Heidegger's thought is all the more moving into thinking the singularity of the Event and the relation between Being and singular beings — things; between the Event and historical events. Here, the privileged example to understand the singularity of Being in relation to singular things, would probably be works of art, singular beings, sheltering the truth of Being. In several late texts the event is attempted to be thought beyond the ontological difference. But a new kind of difference arises; one between Being and being/beings; which Heidegger reconfigures in terms of the fourfold — between world, earth, mortals, and gods.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. 'OF THE EVENT ONTOLOGY CAN SAY NOTHING'

Badiou's concept of the event draws on multiple sources and is mobilized in response to the above iterations and appropriations of the event. As noted, Badiou's approach is speculative, rather than phenomenological or hermeneutical. But his speculative

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<sup>23</sup> See Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Pathmarks*, ed. and trans. W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 240. "For, since 1936, 'event' [*Ereignis*] has been the leading word of my thinking."

<sup>24</sup> See Heidegger, "Of the Event," 99–110. The event is obscured in machination, technical calculating thought (*Machenschaft*) and its framework (*Gestell*); the symptom of the forgetting of Being and focusing on beings, a logic of domination and utility, turning the world, nature, truth, and humans into standing reserve. *Dasein* is no longer attuned to Being. The contemporary configuration posits Being as nothing; flatly equating ontology and history. This culmination of Western metaphysics in the nihilism of technique and in a disastrous philosophy of history, whereby the subject, as nihilism of will, coordinates the objectification of nature and destruction of the earth, modern science and totalitarian state. Thus, the late Heidegger proposes a poetics of the event, one of desubjectification and desobjectification, unbounding subject and object in their primordial word of *poein*. For further exploration of a thinking of the event beyond the ontological difference one may look into Heidegger's later work which conceptualizes a new kind of difference, between Being and being/beings, in terms of the fourfold. See for example Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*; *What is a Thing?*; *The Question concerning Technology* (1954); *The event* (1941–1942); *Four Notebooks*. To which extent Heidegger manages to disentangle the thread between the ontological and the historical, of which the event represents the co-originary bind in the poetic word, must remain the topic of further investigations.

metaphysics, or ‘metaphysics without metaphysics’, does not aim at a rehabilitation of the classical categories of subject and truth as foundations. Subject and truth are divided and united by the evanescent and hazardous encounter with an event. The event is, in other words, an exception to Being, disassociated from the one, thought of as hazardous supplement to any situation.

First and foremost, (a) Badiou constructs a mathematical ontology, based on set-theory, which thinks of any situation in terms of their presentation, in the conjuncture of the void and the infinite.<sup>25</sup> Thus, already Badiou thinks of Being at a distance from Heidegger, for whom mathematical presentation of the idea is the very beginning of the forgetfulness and oblivion of Being. ‘Mathematics is ontology’ is for Badiou a fundamental philosophical proposition which in *Being and Event* is posited as an axiom. On the one hand, this is to be understood as not being a mathematical proposition, but one which expounds and utilizes mathematics as a recourse for philosophy. Yet it is not the vertical appropriation of mathematics for philosophical use, which Badiou would call the “little style”, but the letting of mathematical reasoning implode the philosophical discourse from the inside, for mathematics, being a truth procedure, like art, politics, and love, thinks. This is what Badiou calls the “grand style”.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, by positing ‘mathematics is ontology’ and ‘the one is not’ at the start of the endeavor, the entirety of *Being and Event* may be seen as an exemplar of deductive fidelity to the axiom posited. In this sense does not Badiou’s argument present a certain suture to the truth procedure of mathematics, a privileged relation of philosophy to one of its conditions, science? The axioms are never revisited, to be dialectically challenged in the manner that the *eleghos* requires, as Plato presents the conflict between dialectics and mathematics in his *Republic*. Can we not say that conversely to Heidegger, who sutures philosophy to the poetic condition as the ‘abode of the word of the event’, Badiou sutures his philosophy to mathematics?<sup>27</sup> Yet for Badiou dialectics and mathematics are not opposed in this manner, similarly to thinkers like Lautman, Cavailles, and others. Nor is mathematics the apogee of calculative thinking and machination, the site of the forgetfulness of Being and the nihilist reign of technique. If Badiou brings the mathematical — as a figure of

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<sup>25</sup> Burhanuddin Baki, *Badiou’s Being and Event and the Mathematics of Set-Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, trans. and ed. Ray Brassier and A. Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004), 3–20.

<sup>27</sup> See the helpful discussion in van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology*, 103–109. Moreover, as van der Heiden notes, this conception of the relation between mathematics and dialectics constitutes a paradoxical and renegade Platonism which Plato himself would not recognize. Yet Badiou is well aware of this, see for example the confrontation between dialectics and mathematics in Badiou’s rendering of Plato’s *Republic*, Alain Badiou, *La République de Platon* (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

deductive fidelity to an axiomatic decision — to resolve the aporias of the dialectic, which is in his view, laden by its predisposition with totality and the one, this is because, as he argues already in *Theory of the Subject*, mathematics is what sharpens the dialectician barber's blade.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, (b) strictly speaking, ontology, which deals with the presentation and representation of multiplicities in a situation, according to a count as one, accounts for normal multiplicities, barring in essence the abnormality and disequilibrium between presentation and representation that constitutes an abnormal multiple or an evental site, which is, as Badiou writes, on the edges of the void.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the event is barred from ontology, unforeseen from within the situation, which unfolds according to its laws of presentation. Differently put, the event is not; *of the event ontology can say nothing*.<sup>30</sup> If anything that can be said of Being can be put in the language of set-theory, of the event there can be no *matheme* which will be mathematical. The event does not belong to what is being-qua-being. It is, rather, what Badiou calls elsewhere *trans-being*.<sup>31</sup> The event is thought of as errant excess over the count, ultra-one, and the hazardous supplementation of an intervention; in the juncture of the void and an excess.

Thirdly and most importantly, (c) the event is neither an all-embracing totality of possibility, sense, nor a scriptural or linguistic effect. The event — far from being a name for Being itself, or the primordial co-belonging of Being and time — is an exception to Being, such that it is unforeseen from within the laws of possibility of a given world. The event is thus barred from ontology, but it is also subtracted from History. From the point of view of the event, "History" as a totality of possibility and the linear representation of a narrative, "does not exist".<sup>32</sup> It is rather the interdiction of the event from the count-as-one of the multiple which constitutes this multiple as natural, as opposed to historical, abnormal multiples.

In other words, *of the event there is neither a being, nor a history*. The event is neither ontological, nor historical. Whereas we cannot survey Badiou's thinking of history within the confines of this article, we can simply say, as a general comment, that the subtraction of the event from history does not indicate towards an absence of historical thinking from Badiou's part.<sup>33</sup> In fact, being no history of the event, but

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<sup>28</sup> Alain Badiou, *Théorie du Sujet* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1982), 226.

<sup>29</sup> Badiou, *L'Être et l'Événement*, 195.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>31</sup> Badiou, *Court Traité*, 55–59.

<sup>32</sup> Badiou, *Théorie du Sujet*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> See also Alberto Toscano, "Emblems and cuts: Philosophy in and against History," *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* (2008), 18–35, for a discussion of this thesis as well as the relation of Badiou's philosophy to History. Badiou's position changes on the subject; from the position of *Theory of the Subject*, where 'History does not exist', to the dialectic of nature and history

escargots of periodization, what is attempted is a thinking of history which would free the event from the historical narrative (of events), the one of teleology and subjectivity, count and state of power. In the end, Badiou's subtraction of the event from history is rather the liberation of historical thinking from the one, an evental history, a history of multiplicities, of their multiple evental sites decomposing and producing truths. In this sense one may argue that Badiou's thought follows Althusser in thinking a 'history without a subject'.

But does Badiou succeed in thinking the event beyond ontotheology, or does he absolutize the event? There is no 'event of events',<sup>34</sup> any more than there is an idea of ideas in his Platonism of the multiple. For this would be the very crown of sense, or religion. By disassociating the event from Being and the One, by positing the exception to the principle of sufficient reason, Badiou escapes ontotheology, but at the risk of making the event a trace of subjectivity.<sup>35</sup> Yet it is the other way around. It is in decision, naming, and fidelity to the truth procedure that the subject is formed and incorporated into a body. The subject is the trace of the event, the event is not the product of the subject's will, passion, or action.

On the other hand, does this self-containing set not turn the event into a paradoxical existence, both presupposition of itself and of the subject's fidelity; a vanishing cause and the result at the same time? Like the ego in Fichte or the human in Sartre, this opens the way to the absolute — being both presupposition and end result, *causa-sui*. Yet, this absolute is neither omnipresent nor defused, neither immanent, nor transcendent, but exceptional. There are only bodies and languages, as Badiou affirms in *Logics of Worlds*.<sup>36</sup> This arrangement pertains to the domain of finitude, inert being and everydayness, animal humanism, being towards death, calculating thought of democratic materialism. Except, that there are truths. Borne out of a hazardous, evental and evanescent encounter, truths are woven to infinity by

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in *Being and Event*, the relation between philosophy and its conditions where events in the singular and historical sense occur, to *Logics of Worlds* and the concept of appearing, to *Immanence of Truths* and the historicity/eternity of works of truth.

<sup>34</sup> As for example in the aforementioned readings of Romano and Heidegger.

<sup>35</sup> See van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology*, 157–158. This touches on the issue of the link between the event and truth, for which both Heidegger and Badiou have been criticized by Nancy. For Nancy, this constitutive self-evidence of the event and its link to truth is part of ontotheology, reinstating the event in a metaphysics of presence. For Heidegger, it is the hint (*Wink*) of the event, the time of the event is the time of advent, the event is that which is to come. For Badiou, though there are shifts in his position, the event has to have taken place. The event is known by its traces, traces of a vanishing encounter. It cannot be presented in the situation but does affect the post-evental situation. In the context of *Logics of Worlds*, the event cannot not appear in the world but does change the structure of appearance of this world.

<sup>36</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes. L'Être et l'Événement II*. (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2006), 13.

the laborious work of a faithful subject, as deductive subjective fidelity in the form of a subjective (post-evental) body or body of work.

The interdiction of the event from ontology and the subtraction of the event from history does not mean, then, that the event is barred from philosophy altogether, or outside of thought; that nothing can be said of the event. Philosophy is the general theory of being and of the event, insofar as they are tied in their exceptional interruption, by truths.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it is from the event, always on the edges of the void, that a truth procedure begins, in the form of a throw of the dice, always locally and situated, and yet extending towards infinity and universality.<sup>38</sup> The subject, being the effect of such a procedure and born out of such a chance encounter, as arduous fidelity to the consequences of an exceptional break, is the finite fragment of an infinite and eternal truth.<sup>39</sup> The event is thus not the originary unity expressed in and as the ‘and’ between Being and Time. Rather, it is the ‘and’, between Being and the Event, finite presentation and infinite truth, which incarnates itself, rarely and exceptionally, as subject.

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<sup>37</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Petit Manuel d'Inesthétique*. Paris: Seuil, 1998, 45–46.

<sup>38</sup> See Badiou, *L'Être et l'Événement*, méditation 31.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, méditations 24, 35–37.

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**Zanan Akin**

Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5778-780X>

[zanan.akin@gmail.com](mailto:zanan.akin@gmail.com)

## INDIFFERENCE AND EVENT. HEIDEGGER, BADIOU, AND THE CRISIS OF HISTORICAL TIME\*

**Abstract:** How can we think the link between Heidegger's *Ereignis* and Badiou's *événement*, i.e., the link between event as *à-venir* and event as *er-äugen*? This paper suggests tracing this link back to a diagnosis of modernity shared by Heidegger and Badiou, namely, the *indifference* which is to be thought as the result of an all-encompassing equivalence of anything with anything else. Consequently, the event is revealed as a figure of 'rupture with indifference'. This conception has crucial temporal implications. An event as a break with indifference implies that in the mere presence of the 'now' that equates any moment to any other, there is no 'present'. A present can only be created in a withdrawal from mere presence, and as such the present in modernity is absent. This idea seems to be challenged by François Hartog's term 'presentism'. According to Hartog, the present, far from being absent, is today omnipresent and it fabricates its own past and future. This omnipresence of the present suspends historical time altogether. Considering that the event as a rupture with indifference departs from a lack of present rather than an omnipresent present, the following question arises: How does the event as a rupture with indifference relate to presentism?

**Keywords:** Badiou, Heidegger, Hartog, indifference, presentism

[...] geworfen im Wurf ist der Mensch ein *Übergang*,  
Übergang als Grundwesen des Geschehens.  
Der Mensch ist Geschichte, oder besser, die Geschichte ist der Mensch.  
[...] Im Übergang *entrückt* und daher *wesenhaft >abwesend<*.

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<https://doi.org/10.70832/EVENTanditsMediation.09>

Abwesend im grundsätzlichen Sinne — nicht und nie vorhanden,  
sondern abwesend, indem *cer weg-west*  
in die *Gewesenheit* und in die *Zukunft*, ab-wesend und nie vorhanden, aber  
in der Ab-wesenheit *existent*. *Versetzt* ins Mögliche,  
muß er ständig *versehensein* des Wirklichen.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION. THE LACKING PRESENT IN THE OMNIPRESENCE OF THE PRESENT

How can we proclaim ourselves as our own contemporaries? This seemingly simple yet strange question contains a complexity. For, as Badiou remarks in the seminar *Images of the Present Times*, in order to be our own contemporary, we must “first determine, whether there is a present”.<sup>2</sup> For only a present into which we could incorporate could split the otherwise immediate correlation between our sensuous-certainty of being *this* ‘I’ that always finds itself in *this* now, which nevertheless remains the same in every moment.<sup>3</sup>

Our question is then the following: is there a present today that can break with the immediacy of this strange eternity, with ‘*this* now’? Given that the entire circulation of commodities, trends, and innovations promises today nothing but to put the world at our constant disposal and to be absorbed in exclusive, never-before-seen lived-experiences, it seems, indeed, that *this* now, in which we are absorbed, is never ending.

Regarding this feature of ‘never ending now’, the French historian François Hartog confronts us with a striking claim. According to Hartog, the trouble of our day is not that the present is absent but rather that it is ‘omnipresent’. Events are constantly produced and consumed to the point that, “the present, in the very moment of its occurrence, seeks to view itself as already history, already past”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 29/30, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 531. The English translation of the passage is as follows: “Thus thrown in this throw, man is a *transition*, transition as the fundamental essence of occurrence. Man is history, or better, history is man. [...] Man is *enraptured* in this transition and therefore essentially ‘*absent*’. Absent in a fundamental sense — never simply at hand, but absent in his essence, in his *essentially being away*, removed into *essential having been* and *future* — essentially absencing and never at hand, yet *existent* in his essential absence. *Transposed* into the possible, he must constantly *be mistaken* concerning what is actual.” Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 365–366.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, *Images of the Present Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 141.

<sup>3</sup> For this correlation in the sensuous-certainty between ‘I’ and ‘now’, see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York / Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 62–64.

<sup>4</sup> François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 114.

Indeed, since the rise of the social media as the main determiner of the global agenda, are we not one-upping almost every day a ‘historical moment’ that is supposed to be considered a breaking point by future generations, but which we forget the next moment? Precisely this strange phenomenon brings us to the confusing spontaneity of opposites today. On the one hand, we feel that we cannot keep up with the accelerating pace of technological progress, as well as the rapid shift in the ‘world’s’ agenda and its trends. At the same time, however, this speed is accompanied by the strange feeling that nothing is actually happening in our present.

Precisely this is implied in Hartog’s claim: On the one hand, the distance between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation “has been stretched to a breaking point” resulting in a “crisis of historical time”,<sup>5</sup> on the other hand, however, there is a strange sense of an “immobile present”<sup>6</sup> that “daily ‘fabricates’ the past and the future it requires”.<sup>7</sup> The metaphor Hartog uses to describe these ardent oppositions is remarkable: “an immense stretch of water restlessly rippling”.<sup>8</sup> Does this restless rippling not come to the fore emblematically on treadmills in fitness studios today, where we keep ourselves in constant movement without moving in any direction? Overall, this contradictory experience of time today, that is “looking both backwards and forwards, but without ever *leaving* this present that we have made into the limits of our world” is what Hartog designates as “presentism”.<sup>9</sup>

For Hartog, presentism results from the longing for the future, which “decrees that the viewpoint of the future shall prevail”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, presentism must be seen as a waste product of a worn-out futurism and an exhausted idea of progress. Presentism involves both the longing for the future and the inability to leave the present, or to put it more drastically: it is constantly leaving the present and finding again nothing but the present itself.

Applying Hartog’s claim to Badiou’s remark, we are confronted with the following puzzle: We cannot become our own contemporaries today since we cannot leave ‘this’ present. In other words, there is no present today because of the omnipresence of the present. Does there not seem to be a contradiction here? We can simply accept that we are committing a simple ‘logical’ error and violate the law of non-contradiction, or we can realize that two opposites interweave here and explore a speculative situation.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18, 203.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 107.

This paper pleads for the latter and invites its reader to delve into a speculative investigation on the question of ‘the present’ in all its three senses: ‘Present’ as that which *objectively* exists in front of us (*Vorhandenheit*), present as the ek-static experience of being there (*Anwesenheit*), and lastly present as a category of historical time which withdraws from any ‘presence’ understood in both former senses (*Gegenwart*). The objective is to explore how the concomitant accuracy of both propositions, namely, ‘there is no present’, and ‘the present is omnipresent’, is not a logical fallacy, but rather, a dialectics *par excellence* of a relation relating to itself. I suggest that Badiou’s and Heidegger’s conceptions of event can unfold the speculative concomitancy of the absence and presence of the present, which lies hidden in Hartog’s diagnosis of presentism. Such a conception of event can shed a quite different light on the crisis of historical time, in which we find ourselves according to Hartog.

Essentially, I contend that Heidegger and Badiou share a common diagnosis on modernity. I call this diagnosis ‘indifference’, which we can regard as the culmination of the principle of substitutability in modernity. Substitutability grounds simply in the equal validity of any difference. The idea of culmination can be understood preliminarily as follows: If, increasingly, anything equals anything else in modernity, then the very notion of difference becomes ‘indifferent’. This diagnosis has a solid temporal dimension that can explain the strange experience of our oxymoronic ‘accelerated immobility’. No matter how dizzyingly fast each moment passes over to the next, providing something new and never-before-seen in the ever-changing presence of images, today each moment is somehow equal to every other moment.<sup>11</sup> In fact, indifference points to the constant repetition of ‘now’ in each *different* moment as a raw: ‘Now’, ‘now’, ‘now’. I propose to think the event, in the cases of both thinkers, against the backdrop of the ‘indifference’ of the immediate moment that is closed upon itself.

In doing so, we reveal that, for both Heidegger and Badiou, the event signifies a rupture with indifference. In ontological terms, the event is a rupture with beings as equally valid representations of count-as-one. In political and economic terms, it is a rupture with the circulation of equivalent languages, bodies, and opinions. In temporal terms, it is with the repetition of the indifferent series of ‘now’.

Finally, this conception of the event can reveal a speculative element in Hartog’s ‘presentism’, which we can define as the consummation of the present by itself. This can be achieved if we understand that the present is not merely presence (neither *Vorhandenheit*, nor *Anwesenheit*), but rather, withdrawal from presence.<sup>12</sup> If the omnipresence of the present concerns circulating images, then the present can be revealed as an eventful exception: a dis-imaging and de-presencing withdrawal from

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<sup>11</sup> On the indifference of equal ‘moments’ see Badiou, *Images of the Present Times*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

the circulation of present things-at-hand. In doing so, we can grasp not only how the omnipresence of the present can abolish the present but also find a stronghold of Hartog's *presentism*. Hartog pushes us to engage with the critical question of the conception of the event as a rupture with indifference. Given that the *future* plays a decisive role in both Badiou's and Heidegger's conceptions of event, and that every prevailing future ends up in the deadlock of the present closed upon itself according to Hartog, it is important to discuss whether there is an implicit 'presentist' tendency in the conception of the event as a rupture with indifference.

To achieve our objective, we must delve into the ontological and temporal relationship between indifference and event. Let us begin with Heidegger.

## 2. HEIDEGGER'S *EREIGNIS*: THE EVENT OF APPROPRIATION AS THE TRUTH OF BEING

In Heidegger, *Ereignis* is a "being-historical" concept.<sup>13</sup> Regarding that for Heidegger the history of Being<sup>14</sup> is a history of its forgetting, *Ereignis* constitutes a strange turning point in this history. Strange, as it signifies the farthest point of abandonment by Being and Being's total withdrawal from beings. *Ereignis* refers to the hint (*Wink*) that this extreme form of forgetfulness of Being gives to disclose the appropriation of man and Being.<sup>15</sup> In fact the 'hint' relates to the original meaning of the German word *Ereignis*, which can be traced back to the verb *er-äugen*. This verb contains the 'eye' (*Auge*). In this sense, *er-äugen* points to a different kind of seeing, a catching sight of something that appropriates what is caught sight of.<sup>16</sup> *Ereignis* is a *singulare tantum*,<sup>17</sup> which means that it does not denote just any happening or any event, but rather, *the* unique event of the appropriation of man and Being.<sup>18</sup>

Insofar as Heidegger's event is about the retreat from the metaphysical ground of beings and the experience of the clearing concealment of Being, it should also be conceived as the event of the truth of Being. Being regarded historically, we have a

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<sup>13</sup> On the role of *Ereignis* in the "history of being" see Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy. (Of the Event)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 179–180.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the paper, I write Being (*Sein*) with a capital 'B' to distinguish it from 'beings' (*Seiende*). I also dispense with Heidegger's terminological shifts from *Being and Time* to *Contributions to Philosophy* such as the spelling of 'being' (*Sein*) as 'beyng' (*Seyn*): a term that Heidegger explicitly uses to distinguish his new attempt from the metaphysical thinking of Being as 'beingness'. On this point, see Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 344.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 11, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann), 41.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (New York / Evanston / London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), 36.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

circularity here: *Being*, *Event*, and *Truth* all denote the same, namely, the event of the appropriation of man and Being such that we cannot anymore think of man without taking Being into account; nor can we think of Being without taking man into account. However, we must note that behind Heidegger's Being-historical account on *Ereignis*, there is a metaphysical diagnosis of modernity that is at the heart of our objective. I will thus briefly discuss this diagnosis to prepare for the later demonstration of the fundamental relationship between Heidegger's *Ereignis* and Badiou's *événement*.

### 3. EQUAL VALIDITY AND INDIFFERENCE

The implicit diagnosis underlying Heidegger's concept of *Ereignis* can be simply called *Gleich-Gültigkeit*. The reason I use this German word here, and even hyphenate it, has to do with the peculiarity of this word, which is that it is a speculative word in the Hegelian sense.<sup>19</sup> *Gleich-Gültigkeit* has a double meaning. Taken literally, it denotes what is of equal value, or more precisely: *equal validity*. In its everyday use, however, *Gleichgültigkeit* simply means *indifference*. The important point here is to understand how according to Heidegger these two meanings of the same word relate to each other, that is, how equal validity belongs together with indifference.

According to Heidegger's well-known extravagance, we could trace this relation of belonging back as far as Plato. However, let us limit ourselves to the outbreak of modernity and focus on a turning point that Heidegger considers an 'original sin': Descartes' cogito.<sup>20</sup> Simply put, Heidegger's point is that the forgetfulness of Being manifests itself in a very specific way in Descartes. With him an era of the 'being-history' begins culminating in the determinateness of being as beingness *qua* objecthood in Hegel's absolute idealism.<sup>21</sup> The subject *qua* 'I' becomes with Descartes the locus of presentation and beings become objects of the unifying subject.<sup>22</sup> What we must see in this move is that Being is reduced to beingness, where the I, itself an object, decides the objecthood of its objects as beings and represents itself in its representation of objects.<sup>23</sup> Already here, we can anticipate the movement toward the principle of *equal validity*: in becoming objects of the representing subject *qua* I, beings become commensurable and gradually substitutable. Metaphysically speaking, the objectification of the world by the representing subject signifies the principle of equal validity, insofar as the validity

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<sup>19</sup> On "speculative words" see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University, 2010), 12.

<sup>20</sup> See Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 134.

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, 166, 297.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*, 155.

<sup>23</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche II*, Gesamtausgabe, 6.2., ed. Brigitte Schilbach (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), 123.

(*Gültigkeit*) itself is the principle of objectivity. In short, (equal) validity is the triumphant principle of modern subjectivity.

Heidegger regards the conception of reason in German Idealism, which produces its own concepts, as the culmination of the forgetfulness of Being in modernity.

Once beings become equally valid productions of reason *qua* the absolute subject, the concept of truth culminates in “correctness (*Richtigkeit*) of absolute certainty”.<sup>24</sup> From that moment forward, the entire course of modernity is marked by nothing but what Heidegger calls ‘machination’ (*Machenschaft*), that is “constant presence; ποίησις [‘making’] – τέχων [‘know-how’]”, which grounds the modern faith that “everything ‘can be made’ if only the ‘will’ to it is summoned up”.<sup>25</sup>

The culmination of objectification of beings is achieved in ‘the constant replaceability of the equivalent by the equivalent’. This underlies the shift from the equal validity of everything to indifference of the *thing* in the age of positionality (*Ge-Stell*), which Heidegger subsumes under the equivocality of the word *das Gleich-Giltige*.<sup>26</sup>

The hint of event occurs in the moment when the ‘subjectivity’ behind the production of ‘objects’ is extinguished, i.e., when the subjectivity becomes indifferent in the face of equally valid positionality of things. What the event hints at is a double indifference. On the one hand, beings are all equally valid and thus indifferent, on the other hand, Being itself is indifferent in that it abandons beings.

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<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 159.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 85–86. This ‘maxim’ appears almost 50 years after Heidegger’s *Beiträge* (1936) in one of the most famous movies of the 20th century, in *Back to the Future* (1985). This is, indeed, what the time traveler Marty ‘gives as advice’ to his insecure and shy father in 1955, namely that ‘you can accomplish anything, if you put your mind to it’. A somewhat more derogatory form of it is probably Nike’s advertisement slogan: ‘Just do it!’

<sup>26</sup> In order to manifest the speculative spirit in the belonging together of indifference and equal validity, a passage from the original lecture *Ge-Stell* seems to me crucial. This passage pushes the possibilities of the German language to its extremes. Thus, even the great translation of Andrew Mitchell remains helpless here as it is impossible to reflect the play between ‘equal validity’ and ‘indifference’ in English. Therefore, I share first the original for the reader who can read in German and then Andrew Mitchell’s translation: “Das ständig auswechselbare Gleiche gilt in allem Beständigen gleich. Das Gleich-Giltige in allem Beständigen sichert diesem die Beständigkeit durch die auf der Stelle bestellbare Ersetzbarkeit. Der Bestand besteht aus dem Bestellen des Ge-Stells. Im Bestand steht alles im Gleich-Giltigen.” Martin Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 79. ed. Petra Jaeger (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 44. And here is Mitchell’s translation: “A constantly exchangeable equivalence holds equally in everything constant. The equivalence of value in everything constant secures for this its constancy through a replaceability that is orderable and in place. The standing reserve consists of the requisitioning of positionality. In the standing reserve everything stands in equal value.” Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 44.

Heidegger's *Ereignis* can only be understood against the backdrop of this double indifference in modernity. It is the culmination of the principle of equal validity of beings, which results in the utmost indifference and senselessness. This culmination, however, is at the same time a hint to Being in its complete retreat. This is how we can understand Heidegger, when he, relying on Nietzsche, declares "the plight of the lack of a sense of plight" to be the highest plight.<sup>27</sup> This is the strange ecstatic effect of the indifference, which through an oxymoronic 'abundant void' silently points to that which is different from itself — that is, to the "radical experience of the essential occurrence of [...] *beyng* as *the event* [...] in its self-concealing".<sup>28</sup>

The remarkable point about the absolute equal validity of beings and the indifference of Being is the following: What is not indifferent cannot be regarded as a being. If indifference is the epochal appearance of the equal validity of all beings without any exception, then the exception to indifference cannot reside in beings no matter how different they are represented, but in the indifference of *beyng*. In other words, the evental dimension of the indifference of beings lies in the silent hint to *beyng* (*Seyn*)<sup>29</sup> that this indifference points us to. Forgetfulness is an evental appearance of Being to which modern man in the age of machination is the most 'indifferent'. Only this indifference, however, reveals that Being itself is indifferent to the principle of equal validity. In other words, the event of appropriation is the only difference that can withdraw from indifference, insofar as the evental indifference discloses that Being lacks any form of validity, i.e., objectivity. We should now delve into a strange split in Heidegger's talk of 'withdrawal' that will bring us to the temporal core of *Ereignis*.

#### 4. THE TEMPORALITY OF THE EVENT: THE LEAP INTO THE ABYSS AND THE WITHDRAWAL FROM BEINGS

The double meaning of indifference relates very much to two different ways of thinking withdrawal. On the one hand, Being is withdrawn from beings; in other words, Being is indifferent and beings are abandoned. This is the factual, or passive withdrawal, that is, withdrawal of Being to which the 'future ones' (*die Künftigen*) are exposed to. However, on the other hand, we can regard this withdrawal as the abyss of the ground of beings which is the resonating (*Anklang*) of the event of appropriation. Therefore, leaping into this abyss can reveal the active sense of

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<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 85.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> As explicated above, 'beyng', in a reference to Heidegger's decision to use the old German spelling 'Seyn' in *Contributions to Philosophy*, is the new manner of writing 'Being' to "indicate that being is here no longer thought metaphysically". See *ibid.*, 344.

withdrawal: Leaping into the abyss of the withdrawal of Being means ‘withdrawing’ from the absorbedness of beings to the “domain of stillness”,<sup>30</sup> i.e., to the truth of Being. For Heidegger, this is an eventual withdrawal into the truth of Being: The decision,<sup>31</sup> without which there is nothing but indifference.<sup>32</sup> Precisely this decision is the breaking point with indifference. In radical distinction from all calculated, machinational and thus indifferent lived-experiences to which, according to Heidegger, all experiences are reduced in modernity, this abysmal leap is a true experience “that could [...] set humans beyond themselves into an untrodden domain”.<sup>33</sup> Thus, we can sum up the epochal dimension of Heidegger’s event with the following passage from *Contributions*:

Event always means event as ap-propriation, de-cision, en-counter, un-settling, withdrawal, simplicity, uniqueness, solitude. The unity of this essential occurrence is non-objective and can be known only in that thinking which must venture the unusual — not as the peculiarity of something odd, but as the necessity of that which is most inconspicuous and in which are opened up the abyssal ground of the ground-lessness of the gods and the grounding condition of humans and in which, furthermore, something is assigned to beyng that metaphysics could never know, namely, *Da-sein*.<sup>34</sup>

The leap into the abyss has a clear temporal reference that remains implicit but is crucial to the understanding the event as a break with indifference in Heidegger. We should render this temporal reference explicit.

From *Being and Time* onwards, Heidegger never ceases to assert that Being is time. Thus, the forgetfulness of Being, or Being’s withdrawal refers in fact to an original forgetfulness of time. Here, time surely does not denote the mechanical representation of measured time-space. Rather, it denotes human finitude, which is necessarily forgotten in average everydayness. In this state, time is experienced as a mere continuum of measured time-space; all moments are divided into quantitatively equal time-spaces. It is important to note that the shift of the equal validity of beings to the indifference of Being is a phenomenon related to the loss of the sense of time, and thus, of finitude. Only timelessness — that is, unrestrictedness, detachedness or in

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>31</sup> With *de-cision*, Heidegger does not mean here the “judgement and choice of human beings”, but rather, “a division [*Scheidung*] in the aforementioned togetherness of Being, unconcealment [...]” Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2000), 116.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 371.

short: the *absoluteness* of Being — can render beings equally valid and substitutable. Thus, Heidegger relates the forgetfulness of time to Hegel's absolute reason, which brings about a regime of indifferent infinity. Therefore, a dislocating leap into the abyss means for him nothing but the disclosure of finitude.<sup>35</sup> In other words, for Heidegger, a rupture with indifference can only mean a disclosure of the 'meaning' of being, which lies in nothing but in the 'sense' of time, which is rooted in finitude.

If modern times are marked by a timeless infinity of eternal 'now', then the present must be thought of as an exceptional experience of the ek-stasis of being-there, that is a disclosure (*Erschließen*) of the finitude in the "site of the moment".<sup>36</sup> In the openness of beings in which we are absorbed, time appears as an endless succession of 'now' between beings that we have *not yet* taken care of and beings that we *no longer* take care of.<sup>37</sup>

The emergence of the present marks a change in our attitude toward time, whereby "Da-sein as temporality temporalizes a mode of behavior that is related in *such* a way to time that it takes account of it".<sup>38</sup> When we take time into account, we notice something paradoxical that explains why temporality is, for Heidegger "the *ekstatikon* par excellence".<sup>39</sup> Time is ecstatic, because it is in itself outside of itself. Thus, timeliness is the closest yet precisely because of this immediate proximity, the farthest from us to disclose. Therefore, taking time into account requires interrupting our absorption in beings, that is, withdrawing from them. This interruption is the abysmal ground of true temporalization. As such, it is the condition of any inceptive thinking and true historical deeds are carried out only by the 'few' as 'founders' in poetry, architecture, arts, and politics.<sup>40</sup>

This temporalization occurs through a break with the indifferent 'now' and underlies Heidegger's distinction between history (*Geschichte*) and historiography (*Historie*). History is evental, as the word *Geschichte* — deriving from the word happening (*das Geschehen*) — already designates. History is a "revelatory process that puts us at risk".<sup>41</sup> Therefore, only the history, or the historical deed, can be regarded as inceptive, insofar as it bridges the beginning to the future. Historiography, on the other hand, is merely an exploration of the past from the present perspective.

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Seminare (Übungen) 1937/1938 und 1941/42*. Gesamtausgabe, vol. 88, ed. Alfred Denker (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2008), 35.

<sup>36</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 323.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 345–346.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>40</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy. Selected "Problems" of "Logic"* (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 128, 181.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Here, we can relate Heidegger's striking remark about historiography to Hartog's 'presentism'. The problem with the 'present perspective' in historiography is that "it could also be that a present is as frozen as the past, and that the standards of a present are merely bad residues of a past no longer understood".<sup>42</sup> Thus, we can conclude that the arbitrary substitutability of 'present perspectives' marks historiography, whereas history is the realm of beginnings that breaks with any given perspective. If so, cannot we also say that history is about 'creating a new present'? It seems that we are in the optimal moment to pass over to Badiou's conception of the event.

## **5. BADIOU AND THE SPECULATIVE CAPACITY OF *INDIFFÉRENCE***

The link between Badiou's conception of the event and Heidegger's diagnosis of indifference dates back to Badiou's 1986–1987 Heidegger seminar. This link plays a decisive role in the formation of his speculative thought strategy in *Being and Event*. In the systematic unity of this major work, however, the speculative role of breaking with indifference remains in the background. It is only after 2015, following the publication of the mentioned seminar, that we can retrospectively recognize Badiou's hint at this confrontation in the foreword to the English edition of *Being and Event* in 2006. There, Badiou concedes that "situations are nothing more [...] than pure indifferent multiplicities" but he also adds that "truths are certainly indifferent to differences" if they exist.<sup>44</sup> The two 'indifferences' do not denote the same here. In the following, I open up this subtle difference between these two forms of indifference by referring back to Badiou's confrontation with Heidegger, which begins in his Heidegger Seminar in 1986 and culminates in a quite peculiar way in *Images of the Present Times* in 2001.

## **6. *COUNT-AS-ONE* AS THE VANISHING TERM BETWEEN EQUIVALENCE AND INDIFFERENCE**

The systemic trace of Badiou's link to Heidegger's diagnosis of *Gleich-Gültigkeit* in its double meaning (equal validity turning into indifference) can be found in the structure of what Badiou calls *count-as-one*.<sup>45</sup> Counting-as-one sheerly denotes that any difference which is sealed by a structure gains, as a term, an equal validity of being a clearly defined 'legal' entity. This means that the term is recognized but only at the cost of a de-singularization. In other words, any element counted as one in a situation, no matter how diverse and unique its inner properties may be, cannot

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>44</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London / New York: Continuum, 2006), XII.

<sup>45</sup> See *ibid.*, 23–30.

‘count’ more or less than any other term in the situation, as the term ‘count-as-one’ itself indicates.

In Badiou’s ontological terminology, an event is related to the interruption of this ‘counting’, that is, the exception to the structure of the count-as-one. In order to understand the exception, we must first roughly grasp the ‘rule’. In any consistent situation there are two instances of counting: The structure that seals the belonging of an element to situation, and the metastructure that secures its inclusion.<sup>46</sup> Without going into detail, let us apply this concept to a social situation, such as of a nation state, to better understand it. If it were about me as an individual, the first counting would recognize that I exist in the social situation of Germany, that I am registered under a certain name and reside somewhere, and so on. The second counting would ensure that all my properties with which I interact in society can be traced back to my registered identity. If both apply, then I can speak of being a “normal term”<sup>47</sup> of this social situation. All normal terms carry the double seal of legality, which secures their equal validity. This legal seal renders the infinite inner differentiation of every normal term compatible with the necessity of maintaining the consistency of the ‘social bond’, i.e., the prevention of its “un-bounding”.<sup>48</sup> In other words, this way all normal terms can enjoy being uniquely different, without constituting any danger to the consistency of the situation.

Through the role of the singleton ‘{ }’ in Badiou’s ontology, we can perfectly understand the dialectic of equal validity and indifference in recognized differences that are counted as one. A singleton, which signifies a subset in set theory, gives a multiplicity “the seal of the one in the structuring immediacy of the situation”.<sup>49</sup> As individuals, we are in fact subsets of ourselves in social situations. This means that we do not count in the situation as “the proper name of an infinite multiple” that we *are* but as “an indifferent figure of unicity” as what we *count*.<sup>50</sup> Strikingly, this simply means that in a social situation ‘the state’ is not concerned with proper names, that is, with individuals but with names put in a singleton, i.e., with {individuals}. This means that only as subsets of ourselves can we have a validity in the situation. However, this also implies that every infinite multiple becomes commensurable, when put in a singleton and counted-as-one. Consider two erratic proper names, such as Elon Musk and Donald Trump. Even these two figures of ‘hubris’ in our present can be tamed and become commensurable, if put in a singleton. As multiples in

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<sup>46</sup> See *ibid.*, 84; 96.

<sup>47</sup> A normal term in Badiou’s ontological language means simply a term which is both presented and represented in the situation. In basic mathematical expression, it denotes that a term is both included by the situation and an element of it. See *ibid.*, 99.

<sup>48</sup> For the relation between the state, the social bond, and “un-bounding” see *ibid.*, 107–108.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

themselves they are infinitely different; however, as {Elon Musk} and {Donald Trump} they are equally valid legal persons, just like any other legal person in the United States. This implies that their differences in age, wealth, and their political position, are indifferent.

Put together, this means that no matter how different multiplicities may be, as ‘normal terms’ they all carry the seal of the structure.<sup>51</sup> As such, they cannot constitute any exception to the structure. In this precise structural sense, we must conclude that all equally valid terms are indifferent.

## **7. AN INDIFFERENCE WHICH IS INDIFFERENT TO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DIFFERENCE AND INDIFFERENCE**

As this brief review of Badiou’s ontological terminology already reveals, his system resonates with Heidegger’s diagnosis of indifference.

In his Heidegger seminar, Badiou articulates this resonance as a confrontation oscillating between a fundamental agreement and a fundamental disagreement. He explicitly agrees with Heidegger’s emphasis on singularity, which places the category of event at the center of philosophy.<sup>52</sup> However, he notes that, for Heidegger, indifference always refers to a ‘lack’ of difference, with which he disagrees.<sup>53</sup> If indifference is conceived as a lack of difference, as Heidegger does according to Badiou, it always remains in the interiority of (a racial, national, or whatever kind of) difference, which is implicitly longed for.<sup>54</sup> Badiou claims, however, that there is another way of thinking indifference: as a diagonal to the opposition between difference and indifference.<sup>55</sup> This is the strong, or active sense of the indifference that we should unfold.

According to his dialectical maxim “one divides into two”,<sup>56</sup> Badiou dialecticizes hierarchical and indifferent *difference* and introduces an eventual indifference into this

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<sup>51</sup> What I call here a bit metaphorically the ‘seal of a metastructure’ is in fact developed by Badiou in *The Immanence of Truths*. There he determines this ‘seal’ as “a principal ultra filter”, which “as though [it] had a sort of permanent root system enabling its flowering, however extensive it might be, to remain attached to the One underlying it”. This is another beautiful analogy explaining the metastructure that ‘roots’ every difference in the seal of count-as-one which in-differentiates the internal diversity of any term that belongs to the situation. See Alain Badiou, *The Immanence of Truths* (London / New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 298.

<sup>52</sup> Alain Badiou, *Le Séminaire Heidegger. L’être 3 – Figure du retrait 1986–1987* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>56</sup> “One divides into two” is the ‘true’ law of dialectics that should be preferred to “two fuses into one”. This is a maxim that Badiou traces back to Lacan, in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London / New York: Continuum, 2009), 14, 113.

relationship of opposition. Badiou's *indifférence* is basically indifferent to the very distinction between difference and indifference. This implies that the loss of indifference must not necessarily lead to a repressive difference with a claim to superiority over all other differences. It rather implies a loss of validity. Only a term with clearly determined differential features can be valid in a situation. A *term* that loses its hitherto differential features is, strictly speaking, no longer a term. Being unbounded from the structure it can be regarded, somewhat paradoxically, as a powerless power that a truth procedure can generate. A post-evental multiple that withdraws from its hitherto representation is powerless, as it lacks validity. However, the power of indifference can potentially produce a universal effect equivalent to the 'global situation' and force the situation to be altered as a whole.<sup>57</sup>

It is important to understand the quality of this withdrawal. Similar to Heidegger's active withdrawal, Badiou's withdrawal must be thought of as a leap into an unknown, which creates an indiscernible split between the hitherto representation of a term and the immanent change that it undergoes. This immanent change marks the beginning of a procedure of fidelity. A procedure of fidelity means joining to an indiscernible new composition of a multiple, without being able to derive any direct meaning from it — except from a call, which is "keep going! [*continuer!*]"<sup>58</sup> Thus, for Badiou, the loss of indifference contains a paradox: if a term in a situation breaks with indifference, it does not do so in a way that causes it to lose its validity willingly and knowingly. This loss of validity is not discernable. The alteration to which a term is subjected in the event of an encounter is an immanent one. In other words, the term is still counted but *as what* it is counted no longer corresponds to the newly emerging composition of the multiple. We can call such a term indifferent in the strong sense, as it immanently withdraws from its representation and becomes anonymous. The immanence must be underlined here: only from the perspective of the intervention, is there a break.<sup>59</sup> Seen from the site of the situation, there is no break.<sup>60</sup> This means that the loss of validity, i.e., the loss of indifference can only be 'decided' from the site of the event, that is, from the fidelity procedure itself. However, what we stated above applies also here: the state (of the situation) is not concerned with the infinite potentiality of the multiples — or to speak with Nietzsche, with the question who someone can *become*, but with what they *are*, that is, with the counted term in a

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<sup>57</sup> Three terms are central here, "forcing" and "Generic Extension" in *Being and Event*, and wandering "non-principal ultra filters" in *The Immanence of Truths*. For "Forcing", see Badiou, *Being and Event*, 401; Generic extension: 378–381; for the "power of a divergence of heterogeneous multiplicities" that can become equivalent to the global situation, see Badiou, *The Immanence of the Truths*, 302.

<sup>58</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London / New York: Verso, 2001), 54.

<sup>59</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 207.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

singleton. This means in other words that counting does not concern what something or someone *will have been*, but only its representation as what it *is considered to be*.<sup>61</sup>

We can infer that Badiou's event follows a path which we must call subtractive. Why subtraction? Because Badiou is convinced that every *difference* as *difference* in a given situation falls under the law of count-as-one, that is, it remains subordinate to the principle of equal validity. This is why Badiou asserts that pure difference falls under the norm of indifference, for the law of counting is nothing but indifference.<sup>62</sup>

This means that no 'addition' of difference to the situation can form a heterogeneity or constitute an exception to the structure. To better understand the centrality of subtraction, consider the structure of indifference *par excellence*, the circulation of the *general equivalent*, i.e., money. According to Badiou, it is the indifferentiative capacity of capitalist circulation, and not 'technology', that underlies the structural indifference of substitutability in the development of modernity.<sup>63</sup> Through the mediation of the general equivalent, the equal and the non-equal circulate as equals *qua* exchange values differing only in quantity. Circulation is then a repetitive process of homogenization. Thus, any heterogenous quality, included in the circulation, becomes a commensurable 'difference' and cannot constitute an exception to the 'law' of the structure, which is indifference. Therefore, the only possible exception to the overall structure of indifferent differences is subtraction, or withdrawal from circulation. Seen from this perspective, indifferent in the strong sense of the word is a term which cannot be counted or integrated into circulation and thus cannot attain any validity or 'value'.

## 8. THE LOSS OF INDIFFERENCE AND THE QUESTION OF REPETITION

Even though there is a disagreement about the underlying cause of 'indifference', Badiou affirms Heidegger's assertion that all thinking is conditioned by a break away from or loss<sup>64</sup> of indifference. In Badiou's view, too, philosophy can only be put back into the open space of its conditions<sup>65</sup> if it is preceded by a rupture with indifference in one of its conditions, that is, if there is either an 'encounter' in science, politics,

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<sup>61</sup> Badiou, *Le Séminaire Heidegger*, 234–235.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 62; Badiou, *Images of the Present Times*, 286.

<sup>64</sup> At this point, Badiou speaks specifically of the 'loss' of indifference because his entire interpretation is based on a single passage in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where Heidegger says the following: "In the poetry of the poet and in the thinking of the thinker, there is always so much world space to spare that each and everything — a tree, a mountain, a house, the call of a bird — completely loses its indifference and familiarity." Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* 28.

<sup>65</sup> Badiou, *Images of the Present Times*, 280.

art, or love<sup>66</sup> that can break with the repetition of the structure. One can only break with the repetition, i.e., with a certain representation of something (i.e., that which is counted as one by a structure), when an encounter occurs.<sup>67</sup> However, such an encounter cannot restore or bring back anything that has been ‘lost’. Thus, unlike for Heidegger, this means for Badiou that a break with the repetitive, i.e., with the previous representation of something, cannot retrieve or take back (*wieder-holen*) a difference.<sup>68</sup> Here, we arrive at the heart of our considerations on Badiou’s conception of event as a rupture with indifference: The temporal dimension of the event that will finally lead us to the question of the ‘present’.

## 9. THE QUESTION OF THE PRESENT IN THE BREAK WITH INDIFFERENCE

In the previous section, we saw that for Heidegger the temporal regime of indifference is the eternal ‘now’ and the present is an exception to this timeless now as a site of decision. Similarly, for Badiou, the temporal effect of indifference is the dissolution of the present. This is why, for example, in *Logics of Worlds* the adjective ‘evental’ always precedes ‘present’, since a present is the “set of consequences of the evental trace”.<sup>69</sup> This means first that a (true) present is not given in the “transcendental of a world”.<sup>70</sup> Second, we can grasp a present only as a result of an evental rupture with indifference. In *Images of the Present Times*, this rupture is explained in terms of what Badiou calls ‘fivefold indifference’ in the active sense of the word, whereby something breaks free from the given structure of the immobile ‘now’ and makes a present possible. This includes the indifference to numbers as a criterion; indifference to the established regime of the possible; indifference to

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<sup>66</sup> Badiou, *Le Seminaire Heidegger*, 235.

<sup>67</sup> One would have to say: Yes, representation is repetitive. We can trace this ontologically back to the fact that, in order to reduce the ‘gap’ between presentation and representation to a minimum, the constitution of the situation must count all terms repetitively. To understand this in a non-ontological way, it would suffice to think that as ‘{individuals}’ we repeat the representation of our person through each and every everyday action in which we interact with institutions that are guaranteed by the state; every time we vote, get married, open a bank account, sign a contract, and so on and so forth.

<sup>68</sup> The German verb *wieder-holen* means both to repeat and to retrieve. In a passage in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where Heidegger speaks of *wieder-holen* in the context of the “inception of our historical-spiritual Dasein, in order to transform it into the other inception”, he plays with both meanings. So, *wieder-holen* is about a repetition to retrieve greatness by generating a difference: the other inception. In fact, it is striking here that this is not far off from Deleuze’s repetition of the difference. See Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 41.

<sup>69</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (London / New York: Continuum, 2009), 52.

<sup>70</sup> “Transcendental of a world” refers to a term in *Logics of Worlds* that sets “the degree or intensity of the differences (or identities) of what comes to appear in a world”. See *ibid.*, 234.

particularities; indifference to the antinomy between tolerant vs. authoritarian, and finally, indifference to anything that separates repetition and projection.<sup>71</sup>

## **10. THE STRENGTH OF A STRUCTURE: THE COUNTEREFFECT OF ALLOWING EXCEPTIONS**

In this fivefold indifference, the last one needs the most explanation. For in its utmost complexity, it touches on the heart of the temporal dimension of an ‘evental’ present. Let us thus shortly elaborate on what Badiou means by the indifference to any separation between ‘repetition’ and ‘projection’.

Let us begin by opening up what projection and repetition denote in this specific framework. Taken in themselves, both repetition and projection are figures of alienation of the present. As Badiou notes, the present “can be devoured by the past, but it may also be devoured by the future”.<sup>72</sup> The figure corresponding to the former is a repetition, and the latter is a projection. Accordingly, “the alienation of the present by the past is the figure of repetition; the alienation of the present by the future is projection”.<sup>73</sup> Here, we should delve deeper into Badiou’s refined dialectical determinations on repetition to be well prepared to understand the evental ‘torsion’<sup>74</sup> of repetition by a projection which only can create a true present.

Badiou remarks that what we often attribute “as strength to the structure [is] its insistence, its capacity for repetition”.<sup>75</sup> However, he notes that we overlook the fact that a structure demonstrates its strength in the face of exceptions and not “just with respect to its continuity, or preservation”.<sup>76</sup> How are we to understand this? The strength of the structure is revealed in its ability to maintain itself by allowing exceptions.<sup>77</sup> In other words, its strength does not lie in avoiding deviations, but in

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<sup>71</sup> Badiou, *Images of the Present Times*, 150.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>74</sup> Torsion is in fact a concept belonging to the context of the *Theory of the Subject*. Although Badiou’s thought strategy remains somewhat intact, namely, to think the exception creating intervention which alters given laws without being discerned as such. Torsion interrupts the repetition of a given structure — see Badiou, *Theory of Subject*, 150. However, quite Deleuzian in effect, torsion itself is nothing but repetition, namely, the “repetition of difference”, which alters the initial rule — ibid., 122.

<sup>75</sup> Badiou, *Images of the Present Times*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> With regard to the occurrence of novelty, Badiou distinguishes between *natural* and *historical* ontological situations. The ‘new’ occurs only in historical situations. This means that there is nothing new in nature. In natural situations presentation and representation always coincide, so that a multiplicity that belongs to the situation is also included. However, it gets more complicated, when it comes to historical situations. For if we can say that there is the *new* in history, it is because in historical situations presentation and representation never overlap. Insofar as what distinguishes the

reintegrating any possible exception to itself. Thus, “what is important in an order [...], is the countereffect, not the effect”.<sup>78</sup> By this, Badiou means that the secret to an order’s strength lies in its ability to absorb the exception, or to put it vulgar: The point is to repeat the structure by a trivializing inclusion of the exception and not merely prohibit its possible emergence. This trivialization means actually an ‘indifferentiation’, just as our technological ‘innovations’ repeat the structure in the guise of a constant *never-seen-before*. A structure proves itself to be successful if it can repeat itself in its exception by homogenizing any possible point of heterogeneity. The constant circulation of things, information, and bodies fulfills exactly the duty of this corrective inclusion, or the homogenizing diversification. The true present, however, is evental in that its character consists of a “break with what is merely circulation or communication”, which for Badiou are in fact the same thing.<sup>79</sup>

## 11. THE PRESENT AS A TORSION OF REPETITION BY PROJECTION

We are now ready to interpret Badiou’s following statement as the crucial component of a break with indifference: “The present is the torsion of repetition by projection, the creative incorporation of the past into the projection of the future.”<sup>80</sup>

Here, I propose that we think of the ‘torsion of repetition’ as the creation of a paradoxical *ek-static* gap that bridges a historical gap. As paradox as it may seem, what I am talking about is precisely a gap filling gap: it is a gap opened in the repetitive structure of time that fills the gap between the past and the future.

The constant circulation of equally valid differences conceals the repetition of the indifferent row of now, like ‘now, now, now’ in the guise of constant change. The torsion of the repetition by the projection first creates an immanent gap in this row that interrupts the continuum of the endless production of ‘now’. A present is created through the trace of an indiscernible difference that brings the possibility of a new world into existence. In other words, the same gap that is opened within the temporal structure is the one that potentially can fill the historical gap between the past and the future by bridging them. This is then what the torsion of repetition by a future

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historical situation from the natural situation is the non-correspondence between presentation and representation, history can be thought of as an ‘omnipresence of singularity’. One could therefore say that the abnormal in a historical situation is, in a strict sense, the normal. The function of ‘the state of situation’ in the ontological sense can be then understood as follows: Repeating the counting operation in order to correct the constantly occurring abnormal and de-singularize any term. See Badiou, *Being and Event*, 173–174.

<sup>78</sup> Badiou, *Images of the Present Times*, 26.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 149, 288.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 171.

projection implies: The creation of “the possibility of a new world, like the possibility that the world might be a different world from that of the false present”.<sup>81</sup>

## **12. THE EVENT AND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN INSIGHT AND WHAT IT CATCHES SIGHT OF**

Here, Badiou’s reference to Heidegger’s event can help us to delve deeper into his idea of the torsion of repetition. In *Images of the Present Times*, Badiou discusses the relationship between the present and the event in Heidegger. He notes that, for Heidegger, the present depends on a ‘new way of seeing things’ that is capable of dislocating our relation to the world as it *is*. Badiou appreciates the metaphor when Heidegger speaks of a possibility “of a [different] insight into that which is”.<sup>82</sup> Affirmatively, he notes that “when something happens there is a new sort of blurring between the insight and what is caught sight of”.<sup>83</sup> For Badiou, this means that when our vision is altered, “not only insight is new but also what this new insight catches sight of”.<sup>84</sup> This insight lies in fact at the core of the idea of the torsion of the repetition by the projection. Indeed, when something happens and we see things ‘differently’ — as in an amorous encounter or at the beginning of a strike, etc. — it is because “there is this ‘differently’” that makes us see differently.<sup>85</sup> To put it in another way, evental here is that the newness of our vision and the difference in what we see become indistinguishable. Is this not precisely how Heidegger thinks the appropriation [*er-eignen*] in the event, or a consigning appropriation in that the new consignment of the seeing and what is seen makes it impossible to treat the seeing and what is seen separately? Indeed, at this point Badiou comes closer than ever before to Heidegger’s understanding of the event as it becomes clearly manifest in the following passage:

In innovation, there is an interplay between insight and what is caught sight of. Basically, what can be called an ‘event’ is broadly this phenomenon. An event is also the fact that, in innovation, an indiscernibility develops between insight and what is caught sight of. Except that Heidegger claims that this indiscernibility between insight and what is caught sight of was previously lost — i.e., the clearing of the open — and hasn’t yet returned. It’s no longer here, and it’s not yet here.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

As we finally approach the end of our considerations, it remains to ask how all this relates to presentism: How does the ‘event’ as a break with indifference relate to the crisis of historical time?

### **13. CONCLUSION: IS THE EVENT AN EXCEPTION TO THE PRESENTIST PRESENT?**

According to Hartog, the crisis of historical time relates to the gap that is “the distance between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation [that] has been stretched to its limit, to a breaking point”.<sup>87</sup> The speculative point of the crisis of historical time lies in this gap. Taking the metaphor of stretching seriously, we must ask: What is the result of an over-stretching if it is about a bond between the past and future that renders them intelligible? Hartog sounds clear at first: The suspension of historical time. However, as we have shown, historical time is also suspended where we cannot create any temporal gap — any ‘abyss’ to leap into, to speak with Heidegger.

This shows us that a non-presentist present — that is, a present that can be thought as the torsion of the past by the future — creates a gap in the presentist structure of time, which can only bridge the gap between the ‘space of experience’ and the ‘horizon of expectation’. In other words, presentism, as much as it seems to emerge in the case of a gap, must in fact be seen at the same time as the symptom of a dissolution of any possibility of a gap in the repetitive immobility of the present, that is, in the “unending now”.<sup>88</sup> This becomes manifest also in Hartog’s assertion that the present today fabricates both its past and future. Precisely in these terms, we can regard Badiou’s and Heidegger’s conception of the event as a break with this indifferent fabrication as a withdrawal from the omnipresent presence of the present. This withdrawal from omnipresence can create a gap and generate a present, which is not *prae-sent* in the Latin meaning of the word, namely, before us, or a present-at-hand.

It remains only to speculate that Hartog would probably disagree with this reading. It seems to me very likely that he would point out the emphasis of the ‘future’ both in Heidegger and Badiou. Indeed, Heidegger’s *Contributions*, which we can regard as his second *magnum opus*, is devoted to nothing but the preparation of the other inception. Thus, the whole work is addressed to the ‘Future ones’ (*die Künftigen*). As for Badiou, in one of his recent publications, he notes that “poetry is the possibility

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<sup>87</sup> Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 119. Note that the terms “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation” as well as the concept of “historical time” all refer to Reinhart Koselleck’s “conceptual history”. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantic of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 263–268.

<sup>88</sup> Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, XV.

of thinking what will come”.<sup>89</sup> In other words, for Badiou, the event is poetizing the future. What it ‘poetizes’ is *a* truth.<sup>90</sup> Overall, it is, indeed, a trait shared by many post-Heideggerian French thinkers — Badiou included — to give a precedence to ‘that which will have been’, i.e., to the *future anterior*, or to *à-venir*, that is, ‘what is to-come’ from which the French word *événement* derives.

Regarding the future in general and the future anterior in particular, Hartog has a striking point, though. He talks about a drive, namely “the drive to make of every future a future anterior”.<sup>91</sup> Hartog describes this drive as the tendency of the present to turn “back on itself in order to anticipate how it will be regarded when it is completely past, as though it wanted to ‘foresee’ the past, to turn itself into a past before it has even fully emerged as present”.<sup>92</sup> However, he adds that “this retrospective vision never steps outside the closed circle of its own domain, the present”.<sup>93</sup> In short, Hartog sees the *future anterior* as a presentist instrument. This is the reason why an overemphasis on the future in the conception of the event as a break with the indifference, both in Heidegger and Badiou, would probably displease Hartog. Seen from Hartog’s perspective, in the conception of event, a somewhat futurist residue remains, even if it is sublime. It is a remnant of a phase namely the 20th century which according to Hartog has begun futurist and ended presentist.

However, if presentism should be understood as being stuck in an in-between, where the future is inaccessible and the past no longer applies, we must reject the underlying premise behind this idea. Perhaps the trouble of our present does not lie in the fact that we are in an odd in-between period determined by things that are no longer and things that are not yet. Perhaps, the trouble lies rather in our assumptions about this ‘in-between’, as if being ‘in-between’ itself were not the basic trait of being historical, in the sense of not being natural. Is the mode of our thrownness not, just as Hegel’s absolute, with us all along? Can the assumption of being in a temporary ‘in-between’ be itself a projection that posits as if in within the immanence of certain phases of the modern history, there were a clear vision of the past and a foreseeable future? Is this narration not possible only in retrospect, in *après coup*? What we thus need today is first and foremost to open a gap in this narrative of the gap. This could perhaps truly be what can interrupt, that is, create a gap in the present’s fabrication of its own past and future that can paradoxically fill the historical gap in pure indifference to this gap.

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<sup>89</sup> Alain Badiou, *Alain Badiou par Alain Badiou* (Paris: PUF, 2021), 92.

<sup>90</sup> According to Badiou’s ‘ontology of multiplicities’, every multiplicity of multiplicities is without one. Therefore, one cannot speak of truth, but only of truths in the plural, which nevertheless have no less of a universal effect.

<sup>91</sup> Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 114.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

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**Joshua Royles**

Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7633-7656>

[jtroyles@mun.ca](mailto:jtroyles@mun.ca)

## TUMULTUOUS UNIVOCITY: BADIOU'S MISREADING OF BEING AND THE EVENT IN DELEUZE\*

**Abstract:** Badiou argues that Deleuze fails to liberate the concept of difference by re-inscribing the multiple into the totality of the One. This suppression of difference is supposedly carried out at the expense of the radical uniqueness of the event, which, according to Badiou, has no immediate connection to being. I investigate how Badiou reaches this conclusion and then establish his interpretation of being and the event. For Badiou, being is a *void*; therefore, the event is a radical beginning or *rupture* entirely disconnected from being. Deleuze, on the contrary, maintains a deep connection between being and the event. Furthermore, he claims that being is *univocal* — said with one singular voice — even though it is always spoken with an endless number of diverse tones and timbres. Hence, for Deleuze, the event is a *repetition* of being, a clamorous oscillation between the repetition of the same and of difference.

Next, I demonstrate how Badiou's interpretation of Deleuze goes awry. While Badiou rightly describes Deleuze's account of being as univocal, he misconceives Deleuze's concepts of being and the event that are *at once* singular and multiple. Because the event simultaneously expresses singularity and multiplicity, the difference separating them is never sterilized or suppressed. Instead, it is through this very difference that they are produced and merge into one ontological plane. Deleuze's concept of the Body without Organs allows for these different forces to occupy the same surface without silencing the clamour of being. The Body without Organs is irreparably cracked, though still one substance. Its two sides or attributes are held together through an irresolvable tension. Nonetheless, the different layers of being share the same lens. Therefore, Deleuze's concept of being is not a repetition of the same that levels down difference but a repetition of the event that continually produces it anew.

**Keywords:** *being, Body without Organs, difference, event, univocity*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, Alain Badiou argues that Gilles Deleuze does not liberate the concept of difference from the repetition of the same, as is commonly understood in the literature, but rather re-inscribes the multiple into an oppressive totality of the One. This suppression of difference, he alleges, is carried out at the expense of the event's radical uniqueness which, according to Badiou, has *no relation* to identical being. In this article I will first investigate how Badiou reaches such a controversial conclusion on Deleuze, then establish what his interpretation of being and the event are in relation to Deleuze. We find that Badiou, contrary to Deleuze, conceives of being as a *void*. Thus, the event can only take place as a radical beginning or *rupture* completely disconnected from any continuity of being.

Deleuze, on the other hand, maintains a deep connection between being and the event, since for him being is univocal — that is, said in one and the same voice, even though it is spoken with an unlimited number of diverse tones and timbres. Hence, for Deleuze, the event is a repetition of being — a repetition of the same and of difference.

Next, I will demonstrate how Badiou's interpretation of Deleuze is a misreading. In one sense Badiou is correct, for he accurately describes Deleuze's account of being as *univocal*. Being, according to Deleuze, is in fact said with one and the same voice. However, Badiou's conclusion as to what this univocal being means is imprecise. He misconceives Deleuze's concepts of being and the event that are both singular and multiple — a *multiplicity* — at once a repetition and a unique instantiation. Since the event involves the expression of both forces simultaneously, the difference separating them is never subsumed under identical being, for Deleuze. Instead, it is in and through this difference that they come together as one occupying the same plane of being. The connection of being, and between beings, thus emerges out of separation and difference in Deleuze's work, not despite it. I will employ Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Body without Organs to demonstrate how these radically different forces occupy the same single plane without silencing the differential clamour of the many. Being, though one substance for Deleuze, has a fractured or, as Abraham Greenstine puts it, kaleidoscopic lens.<sup>1</sup> The Body without Organs — namely, substance — is cracked at its foundations since it has two sides or attributes that are engaged in an irresolvable tension, the plane of consistency and strata. The former attribute is submersed in the infinite possibilities of the virtual, while the latter is encased in the actuality of form. Nonetheless, these different parts of being share in the same lens, thus do not partition the commonness of being even though they are

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Jacob Greenstine, "Diverging Ways: On the Trajectories of Ontology in Parmenides, Aristotle, and Deleuze," in *Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics*, ed. Ryan J. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 202–223.

formally shattered. Therefore, Deleuze's conception of being is not a repetition of the same that levels down difference, as Badiou maintains, but a repetition of the event continually producing it anew.

## 2. BEING AND EVENT IN BADIOU AND DELEUZE

Badiou makes a highly controversial claim in *The Clamor of Being* that goes against the current of Deleuze's usual reception: according to him, Deleuze is not a liberator pushing the limits of desire, freeing up what a body can do, nor is he the embodiment of the rebellious spirit of 68', but rather an enemy to such cause, a purveyor of sterile repetitions bereft of difference. "This 'purified automaton'", Badiou insists, "is certainly much closer to the Deleuzian norm than were the bearded militants of 1968, bearing the standard of their gross desire".<sup>2</sup>

Instead, Badiou maintains that "Deleuze's fundamental problem is most certainly not to liberate the multiple, but to submit thinking to a renewed concept of the One".<sup>3</sup> However, this concept, univocal being, that Deleuze employs is not this static image but a dynamic one; it is tumultuous and rife with problems and dramas. This fact can be seen in the final passage of Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* from which Badiou takes the title of his book. Here Deleuze sings of being: "A single and same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all the drops, a single *clamor* of Being for all beings."<sup>4</sup> Badiou in his criticism of this passage, however, focuses on the oneness of being, its entire vast ocean, which in turn makes him lose sight of the radically unique event occurring among singular beings — the production of difference in the thousand-voiced drops of water. If he bothered to acknowledge the shadowy double lurking around every corner of Deleuze's work — the counter-actual — Badiou would then realize that there is in fact a clamor to be found at the heart of Deleuze's concept of being — that is, a constant, real, and dynamic tension between being and the event. This tension is not superficial or in spite of the event's uniqueness, as Badiou alleges, but precisely because they are enveloped in a single, yet multiplicitous, substance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 304 (emphasis mine – J.R.).

<sup>5</sup> Badiou's accusations and tone against Deleuze admittedly soften over time. This can be seen in "The Event According to Deleuze" section in *Logic of Worlds* where he posits a more conciliatory relationship between their diverging philosophies. Badiou admits here that Deleuze is in fact the "bard of divergent becomings and disjunctive syntheses". However, he "nonetheless conclude[s] that by restricting the thinking of change to the vital simplicity of the One, even if this involves the (classical) precaution of thinking the One as a power of differentiation [...] Deleuze cannot really manage to

Badiou's disdain for univocal and positive being, and preference for discontinuity, the negative, and void, leads him to this skewed conclusion. However, Deleuze's being is not any less accommodating of difference or problematic just because it is said with a single — *not same* — voice. This misconception stems from Badiou's own understanding of the "relationship" between being and event, namely, one where there can be *no possible relationship*. As Bartlett et al. explain, "for Badiou, event and being are irreducible to each other and *irreconcilable*. They have no immediate relation; which is to say, their relation is void."<sup>6</sup> Since the event in Badiou begins (and ends) with complete fracture, a site of rupture with no connection to previous or future events, it is no wonder that he holds animosity towards Deleuze for attempting to traverse this gap. The site of the event in Badiou is so singular that "none of its elements are represented. They are, such that they belong to the site but not the situation, void."<sup>7</sup>

For Deleuze, the event is rather a repetition, of the same and difference. Yet this generation of the event out of repetition does not make it any less singular. An example of this can be found in the festival. Here we see the two types of repetition collide. There is a mechanical repetition of planning and custom — *the repetition of the same*. For the festival happens on this day and time every year like clockwork. In this regard, it is predictable, uniform, and a mere cycle marked on a calendar. However, there is another deeper and stronger underlying force at play, one that is neither boring, stable, nor predictable — *the repetition of difference*. This involves a spectacular letting go, a living in the present moment, taking part in something unique, a singular event that, while there will be other festivals in its name, could never be replicated. Hence the "apparent paradox of festivals, they repeat an 'unrepeatable'. They do not add a second and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the 'nth' power."<sup>8</sup> If the original event occurs with enough force, Deleuze argues, it sends forth reverberating shockwaves, creating other unique and singular waves in its wake. This second impulse animates the first, causing the event to reoccur. Although this repetition is always with a difference because one can never recover that original moment once past. Hence, we would not repeat the festival if it were *the same* each time, year after year. Even if it contained the same tradition, agenda, and people, there would always be different

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account for the *transcendental* change of worlds. It remains impossible to subsume such a change under the sign of Life, whether it is renamed as Power, Élan or Immanence. It is necessary to think discontinuity *as such*, a discontinuity that cannot be reduced to any creative univocity." Alain Badiou, *Logic of Worlds: Being and Event II* (London: Continuum, 2009), 362.

<sup>6</sup> A. J. Bartlett, Justin Clemens, and Jon Roffe, *Lacan, Deleuze, Badiou* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 146.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 1.

variations involved. For Deleuze, the holiday does not just represent or remember the original event, but rather the original event commemorates the holiday each time. Thus, "it is not Federation Day which commemorates or represents the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation days".<sup>9</sup>

Live concerts are another example of this phenomenon: the music performed at these events could never be the same each time; for it is wildly different from the studio recording which remains entombed, eternally the same. Each note will never happen exactly the same, for a slightly different timing or force is applied. Deleuze makes this point clear, contrary to Badiou's assertion: for "no two grains of dust are absolutely identical, no two hands have the same distinctive points, no two typewriters have the same strike, no two revolvers score their bullets in the same manner".<sup>10</sup> Therefore, according to Deleuze, no two events can ever be identical. Events are not sterile automatons, but radically singular occurrences, never to be duplicated.

Yet, this does not mean, as Badiou concludes, that events are entirely ruptured and disconnected from their past and future — that is, rooted in a pure present; rather, as Bartlett et al. maintain, "all events are co-implicated for Deleuze, and that as a result the actualization of any one event expresses them all".<sup>11</sup> Such actualization, though, would not be able to express all events at once without what Deleuze calls a *counter-actualization*. This is a shadowy, virtual link between all the previous events that have come to pass and those to come on the plane of consistency. There is indeed a rupture or wound involved in events, as Deleuze maintains, "the eternal truth of the event is grasped only if the event is also inscribed in the flesh. But each time we must double this painful actualization by a counter-actualization which limits, moves, and transfigures it."<sup>12</sup> Counter-actualization, then, is the suture of the evental rupture; however, it is not a restricting bandage. It does not smother difference and future possibilities, as Badiou claims, since it gives "to the crack the chance of flying over its own *incorporeal* surface area, without stopping at the bursting within each body; it is, finally, to give us the chance to *go farther than we would have believed possible*. To the extent that the pure event is each time imprisoned in its actualization, *counter-actualization liberates it, always for other times*."<sup>13</sup> Counter-actualization, therefore, "is why there are no private or collective events", rather, "everything is

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>11</sup> Bartlett, Clemens, and Roffe, *Lacan, Deleuze, Badiou*, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 182.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 182 (emphasis mine – J.R.).

singular, and thus both collective and private, particular and general”.<sup>14</sup> New events cannot simply spring up out of the void, as Badiou would have it; rather, the novel surfaces from out of an impersonal fog.

This fog, though impersonal, is not, as Badiou would have it, an “empty place”, a “purified automaton”, monotonous — that is, lacking novelty.<sup>15</sup> On Badiou’s account, Deleuze allegedly engages not in the repetition of difference but in the very act of representation, *the repetition of the same*, he claims to denounce in this counter-actualized web of virtual connections. It is supposedly a method of aristocratic thinking where “every presented element is immediately represented in terms of its parts”.<sup>16</sup> To avoid domination by the totalizing state, Badiou argues, the event must occur *without any precursor*. It must arise from “absolute beginnings”.<sup>17</sup> Badiou ignores here, however, the importance or authenticity of the tension between act and counter-act, being and event, matter and form in Deleuze. He asserts that whenever Deleuze employs these sets of pairs, this is only a “superficial tension” made to establish the One at the expense of the many.<sup>18</sup> “For it is by the experimentation with as many nominal doublets as is necessary that the verification, under constraint, of the absolute unity of sense is wrought.”<sup>19</sup> However, this assertion is unfaithful to the textual evidence that is littered with the employment of meaningful and *real* doubles — including Deleuze’s coupling with Félix Guattari. Deleuze’s successful collaboration with Guattari is proof he took difference and multiplicity seriously, “that each of us is already several”.<sup>20</sup> For this wildly successful pairing could not have worked if Deleuze was in fact the totalizing, single-minded thinker Badiou alleges. Thus, their coupling was not superficial but embedded in the very core of Deleuze’s thought. And it is through this collaboration that the concept of the Body without Organs emerges.

### 3. DELEUZE AND GUATTARI’S BODY WITHOUT ORGANS

For Deleuze and Guattari, “the Body without Organs is not a dead body”, as Badiou maintains, “but a living body all the more alive and teeming once it has blown apart the organism and its organization”.<sup>21</sup> Hence the Body without Organs resists the organism’s totalizing pressures for all its parts to work solely towards the functioning

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>15</sup> Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, 11, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Bartlett, Clemens, and Roffe, *Lacan, Deleuze, Badiou*, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia II* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30.

of the whole. Being, for Deleuze, does not inflict these pressures, contra Badiou, but rather alleviates them. Indeed, "the Body without Organs is in fact produced as a whole, but a whole *alongside the parts* — a whole that does not unify or totalize them".<sup>22</sup> So, in one sense Badiou is correct, for Deleuze's substance *is* univocal. It moves towards the virtual, the immanent plane of consistency where all substances coagulate and flow together as one. However, his assumption that the simplicity of Being sacrifices the manifold differences between beings and their events is misplaced. For Deleuze's explanation of substance is both singular and teeming with differences, what he calls a *multiplicity*, which is something outside the usual dyad of the one and the many. It is one generated through the many. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, substance is "not a problem of the One and the Multiple but of a fusional *multiplicity* that effectively goes beyond the one and the multiple. A *formal* multiplicity of substantial attributes that, as such, constitutes ontological unity of substance."<sup>23</sup> Jon Roffe supports this assertion, since, for Deleuze, "multiplicity overthrows the entirety of the one-many dyad", which is "a point that *The Clamor of Being* never registers".<sup>24</sup>

The Body without Organs is one substance with multiple opposing attributes: the plane of consistency and stratification, corresponding to being and the event. The plane of consistency is virtual potentiality and desire. In this attribute, the totality of all separate substances collide. Here, "the Body without Organs is permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles".<sup>25</sup> Stratification, on the contrary, prevents such flowing together, encasing this fluidity. Strata thus are the source of individual beings. Since one attribute of substance is submersed in the virtual, while the other is entangled with the actual, being is inherently unravelling, pulled in opposite directions, fractured and split asunder. So, Deleuze's substance is just as problematic, ruptured, and multiplicitous as Badiou's event. However, just because being is in tension does not mean it is thereby void, lacking all connection between events; rather, substance is a simple unity between complex parts, and this tension is precisely what weaves its parts together into a whole. Hence Deleuze's concept of the Body without Organs shows how the lens of being is kaleidoscopic, fractured by its different events, while still enveloped in one common, intact lens.

In contrast to Aristotle, for whom desire moves towards the actual, the movement of desire for Deleuze travels instead towards the virtual, the immanent plane of

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<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 326 (emphasis mine – J.R.).

<sup>23</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 154.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Roffe, *Badiou's Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 11.

<sup>25</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 40.

consistency where all substances flow together into one conglomerate substance. While Aristotle advocates for the concrete actuality of form as an end, Deleuze champions the raw productive power, malleability, and potency of matter. Where Aristotle seeks to pin down being by diving into its stable and identical essences and causes (what Barnes calls “the fundamental furniture of the world”) — especially efficient and final causes — Deleuze instead takes Heraclitus’ lead by tracing flows and fluctuations of becoming, lines of flight escaping any finality.<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that actuality is cast aside by Deleuze, on the contrary, the effort of becoming active is for him the only ethical task. However, contra Aristotle, actuality, for Deleuze, never surpasses its full potential, and there is no final cause or unmoved mover to speak of, let alone the efficient causality of a single particular mover (the identical, ready-made subject). For Deleuze, there are only “aberrant movements”, to use David Lapoujade’s term, desire without end, “the Body Without Organs”.<sup>27</sup> While such substance involves absolute activity, intensity, and connection, it also serves as a counter-actual *limit*: for, as Deleuze says, “you never reach the Body Without Organs, you can’t reach it, you are forever attaining it”.<sup>28</sup>

Deleuze presents this concept of “*becoming active*”, as opposed to *being active*, in his first work, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, and develops it further in another early book on Spinoza, *Expressionism in Philosophy*. Deleuze explains in these texts that becoming active does not mark an end to the initial passivity of matter because too much activity, excessive amounts of form, can also “stifle becomings”.<sup>29</sup> Deleuze’s emphasis on action is focused on the *movement* of becoming, the between or *intermezzo* of nothingness and being, passivity and activity, beginning and completion — not the final cause or goal of the action.<sup>30</sup> The process of becoming therefore keeps on churning since there is an indivisible remainder of passivity that can never be entirely activated. The cracks of passivity cannot be fully mended by the means of activity because further action would then be impossible without this opening of potentiality, and there must be a certain level of passivity in order to still be *receptive* to the sensations and feelings that compel action. Any final act is doomed

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Barnes, “Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 98.

<sup>27</sup> David Lapoujade, *Aberrant Movements: The Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2017), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150.

<sup>29</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 138.

<sup>30</sup> Becoming active, merging with the energy of being, the Body without Organs, thus mitigates Badiou’s charges of totalization, because the pursuit is left radically open, as Derrida puts it, something “possible, to what *remains to come* and has as yet neither day nor figure.” Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 4 (emphasis mine – J.R.).

from the start since, as Deleuze puts it, “the mind cannot be activated by the principles of nature without remaining passive”.<sup>31</sup> This unavoidable residue of passivity, an indivisible remainder, causes the machine of substance (and especially its finite modes) to always malfunction before ever hitting full stride.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari return to the issue of becoming active and the necessary retention of passivity. It is no coincidence that their concept of substance, “The Body without Organs” — the most active and joyous state imaginable — takes the form of an egg:

The BwO is the egg. But the egg is not regressive; on the contrary, it is perfectly contemporary, you always carry it with you as your own milieu of experimentation, your associated milieu. The egg is a milieu of pure intensity, spatium not extension, Zero intensity as principle of production. [...] [T]he egg always designates this intensive reality, which is not undifferentiated, but is where things and organs are distinguished solely by gradients, migrations, zones of proximity. The egg is the BwO. The BwO is not “before” the organism; it is adjacent to it and is continually in the process of constituting itself.<sup>32</sup>

Substance, for Deleuze, is thus never fully formed or decided in advance, which therein lies its power and possibility. Its organs are never fixed in place, which makes a smoother surface for an even greater passage of flows and continuity. Deleuze first mentions the concept of the Body without Organs directly in *The Logic of Sense*. Here he describes substance as a “liquid principle capable of binding all of the morsels together, and of surrounding such a breaking apart in the full depth of a body (finally) without organs”.<sup>33</sup> The concept takes up a more central role in his first collaboration with Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*. Again, an emphasis is placed here on fluidity and flux. The Body without Organs, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is “a pure fluid in a free state, flowing without interruption, streaming over the full surface of the body”.<sup>34</sup> One side of the assemblage constructs the Body without Organs, coagulating the heterogeneous parts, the other releases them to homogeneously glide across it in every direction, joining virtually through an abstract machine with all the other distinct Body without Organs on one infinitely uncoiling and recoiling plane of consistency. From the perspective of this attribute, the totality of all separate substances collide, “they are

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<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 26.

<sup>32</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 164.

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 216.

<sup>34</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 8.

sewn up, cooled down, and tied together [by a] great abstract machine”.<sup>35</sup> Stratification, on the contrary, prevents such flowing together; like Aristotle's form, it coagulates and encases the fluidity of matter. Although, for Deleuze, strata are the source of individuality and subjectivity — not matter. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, “strata are Layers, Belts. They consist of giving form to matters, of imprisoning intensities or locking singularities.”<sup>36</sup> Consequently, too much stratification blocks the continuous and free flow of matter. Contra Aristotle, actuality can hinder potential, matter need not always desire form. Form can prevent linking up with all the other substances on the plane of consistency, which, for Deleuze, is desire's true aim. Thus, the virtual is not some derivative mode of existence; rather, for Deleuze, it “must be defined as strictly a part of the real object as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it plunged as though into an objective dimension”.<sup>37</sup>

The Body without Organs, for Deleuze and Guattari, *is* desire, the endless desire to lose oneself in the totality of substance. This desubjectification or “deterritorialization” is a method of becoming active. However, Deleuze and Guattari warn that to accelerate too quickly, fully reaching the limit of activity, only leads instead to collapses, cancerous mutations, and death.<sup>38</sup> They warn that:

you have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn. [...] You don't reach the BwO, and the plane of consistency by wildly destratifying. [...] This is because the BwO is always swinging between the surfaces that stratify it and the plane that sets it free. If you free it with too violent of an action, if you blow apart the strata without taking precautions, then instead of drawing the plane, you will be killed, plunged into a blackhole, or even dragged toward catastrophe. Staying stratified — organized, signified, subjected — is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them back down on us heavier than ever.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 158.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 209.

<sup>38</sup> Lapoujade shares a similar concern, questioning: “Isn't there a real danger inherent in aberrant movements? If at each step we are obliged to push to the limits of what we are capable of, don't we risk being carried beyond those limits? How do aberrant movements not become part of a process of self-destruction?” Lapoujade, *Aberrant Movements*, 34. The solution offered by Deleuze is caution, calm, patience. Never go full force; always hold something back in virtuality; that is, “*gently* tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency. It is only there that the BwO reveals itself for what it is: connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 161 (emphasis mine – J.R.).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 160–161.

Deleuze knows this all too well from personal experience: he suffered an 8-year-long collapse after publishing his first book, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*. Deleuze characterized this sterile, silent period as “a hole in my life”.<sup>40</sup> However, it is not the case that nothing was happening inside this blackhole, Deleuze assures, for passivity itself involves a peculiar kind of activity. He speculates that “maybe it’s in these holes that movement takes place. Because the real question is how to make a move [to become active], how to get through the wall, so you don’t keep banging your head against it.”<sup>41</sup> So, Deleuze and Guattari instead advise to use a “very fine file” rather than a sledgehammer when becoming active since too much activity done too quickly without caution could lead to further breakdowns and collapses.<sup>42</sup> They caution the art of partial dosages, spurts of activity, packets of form, rather than exorbitant overdoses. Through this method, Deleuze eventually broke through his breakdown with a flurry of activity, doing so sustainably, at a measured pace, knowing just how easy it would be to fall back into the hole.

In *Difference and Repetition* — one of the first few publications after Deleuze pulled himself out of the self-described blackhole — he explains that the self is “larval,” cracked, composed of thousands of passive syntheses of habits that both cover over and crawl with differences. “Selves are larval subjects”, Deleuze declares, and “the world of passive syntheses constitutes the system of the self, under conditions *yet to be determined*, but it is the system of a *dissolved self*”.<sup>43</sup> Subjectivity is larval because it is always caught somewhere in *between* (at least) two states: the self is found at the threshold of passivity and activity — in fact, it is this very threshold. This passive aspect of the Deleuzian self does not render it impotent, effete, incapable of enacting events (loving, creating art, and engaging in science and politics) as in Badiou’s reading.<sup>44</sup> For Deleuze, this virtuality is the very source of its power because there are certain torsions and movements that only an embryo can withstand. A so-called “fully developed” subject would be obliterated under such high levels of intensity and pressure since it would not be pliable enough and could not come undone, unformed as needed. The larval subject’s body, the “fractured I”, can thus exercise a capacity to be affected in an infinite number of ways, despite, or

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<sup>40</sup> Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 138.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 160.

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 78 (emphasis mine – J.R.).

<sup>44</sup> Deleuze would in fact concur with Badiou’s characterization of the subject: for Badiou, “A subject *is manifested locally*. It is solely supported by a generic procedure. Therefore, *stricto sensu*, there is no subject save the artistic, amorous, scientific or political.” Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2012), 17. This theory mirrors Deleuze’s statement that “there is no theoretical subject [...] there is only a practical subject”. Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, 104.

rather because of, its remaining passivity.<sup>45</sup> The key to treating the shattered self is thus to *become* active, not to *be* active, shifting the focus from the end of action to action itself as an end. The subject, Deleuze explains, is *processual*, it “becomes more and more active and less and less passive. It was passive in the beginning, it is active in the end. This confirms the idea that subjectivity is in fact a *process*.”<sup>46</sup> Importantly, Deleuze does not say in this passage “no longer passive”, but “*less* passive”. There are still residuals left behind from the initial passive state no matter how active we become, no matter how plugged in we are to the universal substance.

So, Badiou's criticisms miss their mark: there is always an opening in Deleuze's univocal being, an Outside, a crack on its surface for the unique event to pass through, occur and reoccur. It is on this surface of the Body without Organs that we “sleep, live our waking lives, fight — fight and are fought — seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats: on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love.”<sup>47</sup> From this depiction, it is abundantly clear that Deleuze's understanding of being is not sterile or robotic, but engenders variation and difference — the eventual ruptures of love, the dramas and struggles of political beings — no less than Badiou's interpretation. His assumption that the simplicity of Being in Deleuze sacrifices the manifold differences between beings in a totalizing, suppressing manner is misplaced. The univocal substance of the Body without Organs is not a catatonic, difference suppressing blob, as Badiou would have it; nor is it the repetition of the same, but is rather teeming with life, producing variation and difference through repetition. Nonetheless, the Body without Organs is still *one* substance, voice, and assemblage, despite its multitudinous echoes and pitches travelling in opposite directions. Badiou wrongly thinks that because the interplay between the one and the many sprawls across a single surface, the Body without Organs, the opposition between these forces is resolved along with their differences. However, Deleuze is not advocating for a reconciliation of opposites; on the contrary, for an expansion and intensification of them. If anything, this re-conception of substance is more tolerant of difference precisely due to its fluidity and mobility. Therefore, univocity of being does not mean, as Badiou misunderstood, that the tension and difference at the heart of substance is resolved; instead, the disjointure of its different attributes not only persists but is precisely what makes them one substance in the first place.

#### 4. SCOTUS' FORMAL DISTINCTION AND DELEUZE'S UNIVOCAL SUBSTANCE

Deleuze and Guattari use the analogy of a lobster to describe substance, which has one body immanently connecting two very distinct claws: the strata capturing flows

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<sup>45</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 259.

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, 112.

<sup>47</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150.

of matter and the freedom of the plane of consistency allowing them to pass into each other.<sup>48</sup> The two opposing claws do not make the lobster more than one entity, nor does it exclude the difference between the left and the right claw. There is a unity in and because of their difference. Deleuze and Guattari explain this inseparable pair, the double bind of attributes, as Spinoza's lobster God of substance: this *one* creature, the Body without Organs, has *two* distinct claws. The right pincer of strata organizes the molecular into molar compounds of form, while the left, the plane of consistency, de-stratifies and fluctuates as molecular matter. However, though wildly differentiated, the two articulations of being occur in one and the same fluid motion: "the Body without Organs is itself the plane of consistency, which becomes compact or thickens at the level of strata", so, "there is a communication between these two lines and planes; that each take nourishment from the other, borrow from the other".<sup>49</sup>

Deleuze's lobster God of the Body without Organs is modelled on Spinoza's monstrous single substance. Substance, according to Spinoza, is one, with at least two attributes (that we know of, thought and extension) and an infinity of finite modes — a tumultuous and difference affirming univocity.<sup>50</sup> As Nathan Widder attests, the modes "are not subsumed by substance but instead are univocal in form with substance while being distinct in essence by virtue of their power".<sup>51</sup> However, this formal distinction does not mean it is 'as if' they are one; the distinction between attributes (and the modes that express them) is *real* even though it is formal. There is thus a real "univocity between substance, its attributes, and its modes".<sup>52</sup> In this coexistence of substance and its attributes, "*all* attributes express the essence of substance; *each* attribute expresses an essence of substance".<sup>53</sup> The "all" and the "each" are formally distinct but express the same substance through infinitely varying attributes. The attributes, Deleuze explains, "are infinite forms of being, unlimited, ultimate, irreducible formal reasons; these forms are common to God whose essence they constitute, and to the modes which in their own essence imply

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 40, 423.

<sup>50</sup> Deleuze, of course, like with all of his "monstrous creations", takes liberties with his use of Spinoza's substance. The most noticeable of which is his re-prioritization of finite modes over identical substance. As he confesses in his comprehensive book on Spinoza, "What interested me most in Spinoza wasn't his Substance, but the composition of finite modes. I consider this one of the most original aspects of my book. That is: the hope of making substance turn on finite modes, or at least of seeing in substance a *plane of immanence* in which finite modes operate." Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 11.

<sup>51</sup> Nathan Widder, "The Univocity of Substance and the Formal Distinction of Attributes: the Role of Duns Scotus in Deleuze's Reading of Spinoza," *Parrhesia* 33 (2020): 152.

<sup>52</sup> Widder, "The Univocity of Substance," 152.

<sup>53</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 50.

them”.<sup>54</sup> The attributes of substance express God, but in turn, God expresses them; therefore, there is one simple voice to these two distinct modes of being, God as *natura naturans* expressing all of the attributes, and each attribute of nature, *natura naturata*, a re-expression of the original. Therefore, Badiou was incorrect to assume that univocity of being suppresses difference in beings, as there are infinite ways to express the same substance. As Deleuze asserts, “There is no superiority, no eminence of substance over the attributes, nor of one attribute over another. Each attribute ‘expresses’ a certain essence.”<sup>55</sup> Immanence of being is established because “all the essences, distinct in the attributes, are as one in substance, to which they are related by the attributes”.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, substance is simultaneously univocal and expressed in many ways. As Greenstine puts it, “the self-sameness of being is not despite the differences between beings but is, rather, on account of them”.<sup>57</sup> Hence Deleuze’s *Body without Organs* shows how the lens of being can be kaleidoscopic, fractured by different events (attributes) and subjects (finite modes), while still being part of one common, intact lens (substance).

Badiou misses this fact because he attempts to view univocal substance through the castrated lens of Lacanian dualism, fixating on the single-bodied lobster while ignoring its doubly articulated pincers, the difference produced through the unity of one substance. Badiou significantly ignores the ample evidence of Deleuze’s generation of difference through repetition and obsession with the double.

In Deleuze, being is said only once while still holding dynamism and affirming difference because its attributes are *formally* distinct. Deleuze employs Scotus’ formal distinction to support this claim. Being and the event are held in common while still maintaining different formal senses. According to Nathan Widder “this commonness is not an identity, it does not reduce the diversity of differences it encompasses”.<sup>58</sup> Instead, Scotus understands individual difference as something *positive* through the formal distinction between the commonality of being and the *haecceity* or “thisness” of the individual. What is common in being “*is predicated in the same sense* as everything that is”, but “it is not in the same modality”, which is what individuates, and this modification of attributes does not alter the commonality of being.<sup>59</sup> Being as common includes everything as things, while the *haecceity* denotes it as *this* specific thing. Together “they compose the individual without really

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>55</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 51.

<sup>56</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza*, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Greenstine, “Diverging Ways,” 203.

<sup>58</sup> Widder, “The Univocity of Substance,” 158.

<sup>59</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 63.

being distinct, since they form a single reality”.<sup>60</sup> The distinction between them is *formal* — that is, virtual — without being any less real. For “their distinction is not merely conceptual”, fictitious simulacrum as Badiou portrays, “since they are not products of the mind but the real foundation of the mind’s abstractions”.<sup>61</sup> Because “formal distinction is a difference internal to the thing that does not render the thing composite. The infinity of each attribute entails that none can be considered a potential that is actualized by another.”<sup>62</sup> Being is thus one because it is formally many — a multiplicity. As Deleuze puts it, in Scotus, there are “two orders, that of formal reason and that of being, with the plurality in one perfectly according to the simplicity of the other”.<sup>63</sup> Hence through an application of Scotus’ formal distinction, we can see how the lens of being in Deleuze can be fractured by events while still being part of one common, intact plane. Badiou was therefore incorrect: the unity of being in Deleuze does not suppress its diversity, and the uniqueness of the event does not mean being is and can only be void and unrelated to the event. As Widder attests, the modes “are not subsumed by substance but instead are univocal in form with substance while being distinct in essence by virtue of their power”.<sup>64</sup> The voice of being is one, but its tone is not flat or tired. There are fluctuations in being, it is tumultuous, but this does not mean it is partitioned or segregated. Consequently, Deleuze’s substance is univocal and expressed in a multitude of different ways.

Being, for Aristotle, due to its abundance of different senses, is said in many ways.<sup>65</sup> However, in Deleuze being is said only once while still being dynamic and difference affirming because of the formally distinct attributes. Greenstine explains it thusly, “being”, for Deleuze, “is said in a single voice: being is universal, univocal. Of course there are still differences among beings, but these differences never divvy up being itself.”<sup>66</sup> He contrasts this with Aristotle’s claim that “being cannot be a genus”, concluding that their ontologies ultimately take divergent paths.<sup>67</sup> I contend, however, that their ways intersect despite the many differences between them, and that Aristotle, like Deleuze, is a univocal thinker. As Roffe observes, “for Scotus, it is Aristotle who is the first thinker of univocity”.<sup>68</sup> He claims that Scotus masterfully

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<sup>60</sup> Widder, “The Univocity of Substance,” 162.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Widder, “The Univocity of Substance,” 152.

<sup>65</sup> Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 2001), 1026b3, 779.

<sup>66</sup> Greenstine, “Diverging Ways,” 213.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>68</sup> Roffe, *Badiou’s Deleuze*, 12.

maneuvers around Aristotle's being cannot be a genus issue because "the various genres or primary senses in which being is said (substance, modality, time, etc.) are said *equally*".<sup>69</sup> They are held in *common* while still maintaining different formal senses.<sup>70</sup> This is "not because of any equivocation, but because it [being] has a greater commonness and univocation than the commonness of genus".<sup>71</sup> This explains how substance is not just a composite for Aristotle, even though it involves the constant conjunction of form and matter. Therefore, the fact that being is said in many ways in Aristotle does not disprove its univocity. Scotus makes this point clear when he says:

All genera, species, individuals, and the essential parts of genera, and the Uncreated Being all include "being" quidditatively. All the ultimate differences are included essentially in some of these. All the attributes of "being" are virtually included in "being" and in those which come under "being".<sup>72</sup>

Thus, being is one precisely because it is formally — that is, virtually — many. Hence through the lens of Scotus' formal distinction, the ontologies of Aristotle and Deleuze project one and the same voice with many different reverberations.

## 5. CONTRA BADIOU AND ŽIŽEK

Slavoj Žižek asserts in *Organs without Bodies* that Deleuze, in his collaboration with Félix Guattari, collapses the surface-depths distinction from his early work, thus resolves the tension of opposing forces into a single immanent plane of the Body without Organs.<sup>73</sup> Both his and Badiou's objections stem from their alliance with Lacanian psychoanalysis, where such an alleged fusion is considered impossible due to the indivisible remainder of the Real running amuck in the depths, constantly thwarting every attempt to construct stable surfaces. Thus, the animosity each thinker holds towards Guattari is unsurprising given his detraction from the teachings of Lacan put in practice at the *La Borde* clinic. Hence why Badiou fails to mention Deleuze's collaboration with Guattari in *The Clamor of Being*, and Žižek discredits its significance, considering it a cheap way out of the surface-depths problem.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> There is no priority or hierarchy between the many senses of being, as Scotus asserts, "it is not easy to discern any order among the attributes of 'being'" and that there is a "primacy of commonness and virtuality". John Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings: A Selection* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 4, 8.

<sup>71</sup> John Duns Scotus, "Lectura 1, d," in *The Basic Quidditative Metaphysics of Duns Scotus as Seen in His Primo Principio*, ed. R. P. Prentice (Rome: Antonianum, 1970), 54.

<sup>72</sup> Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.

However, the issue with this dismissal of Guattari is that his contribution was essential to Deleuze's overall project, not accidental or supplemental. Deleuze himself readily admits this in his revised preface to *Difference and Repetition*: "All that I have done since is connected to this book, including what I wrote with Guattari."<sup>74</sup> Therefore, Badiou's silence on Guattari and Žižek's claim that Deleuze should have remained within the scope of his earlier work explains why both entirely misunderstand Deleuze's project. For each ignores the importance of the double; they see that being is said univocally and cry foul, without listening for its second articulation, Guattari.

If Badiou had bothered to acknowledge the second articulation of Guattari, he would then have realized that the molar and molecular are still in constant tension despite belonging to a single substance, as "one is supple, more molecular, and merely ordered; the other is more rigid, molar and organized".<sup>75</sup> As Deleuze himself confirms, "the thinker of the surfaces is married or thinks about the problem of the couple".<sup>76</sup> Therefore, their coupling was not something superficial but embedded in the very core of Deleuze's thought from the outset, as he himself admitted. So, Badiou's assessment of Deleuze as despotic is incorrect. He could not have maintained this position if he factored in the open collaboration with Guattari; his silence on this development was not logistical, as he claimed, but tactical.

Žižek likewise employs willful ignorance in his critique of Deleuze for joining forces with Guattari, which he claims resulted in a retreat from the surface-depth problem of Deleuze's early work. Žižek assumes that a blockage in the effort to resolve this tension caused Deleuze's cowardly turn to Guattari; but, as we have demonstrated, the work with Guattari flowed naturally from what came before. Nonetheless, Žižek asserts that "*Anti-Oedipus*, arguably Deleuze's worst book, is the result of escaping the full confrontation of a deadlock via a simplified 'flat solution'".<sup>77</sup> The literature surrounding this debate suggests otherwise, however. Świątkowski claims that Žižek's treatment of this issue is superficial, "the differentiations between the schizophrenia of the depths and the phantasm of the surface are actually also present in the later work".<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Smith claims that difference remains intact in the molar-molecular distinction, which can be directly

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<sup>74</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 44.

<sup>76</sup> Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 251.

<sup>77</sup> Žižek, *Organs without Bodies*, 20.

<sup>78</sup> Piotrek Świątkowski, *Deleuze and Desire: Analysis of the Logic of Sense* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 232.

mapped onto the surface and depths.<sup>79</sup> Both cases against Žižek are accurate. His characterization of an inexplicable break between the early and later collaborative works is certainly an embellishment if not, outright falsification. Since tracing the development of these concepts demonstrated the clear and logical progression from the surface-depths distinction to the Body without Organs. Furthermore, the molar-molecular distinction unfolding on the Body without Organs is teeming with drama, movement, difference and tension, despite being spoken by a single voice. Although we must be cautious for it is not an exact replication of the surface and depths, as this would fall back into Lacanian dualism. For:

There is no question of establishing a dualist opposition between the two types of multiplicities, molecular machines and molar machines; that would be no better than the dualism between the One and the multiple. There are only multiplicities of multiplicities forming a single assemblage, operating in the same assemblage: packs in masses and masses in packs.<sup>80</sup>

The inadequacy of Badiou's and Žižek's interpretation of Deleuze was demonstrated by appealing to their inability to think outside of Lacan's dualistic framework and recognize Guattari's contribution as anything more than a regression. The attempt to apply the concepts of the Body without Organs and the molar-molecular distinction to the sets of the one and the many, in the case of Badiou, and the surface and the depths by Žižek, consequently missed Deleuze's and Guattari's entire project, which takes place outside of this rigid dichotomy, resituating it on one and the same plane. However, this does not result in the cessation of the tension between opposites — as proven by the unending oscillation between the molar and the molecular — or that the difference of the many are violently swallowed by the One, which was the contrary effect of the Body without Organs resisting all totalization of the whole. Rather, that the one is doubly articulated; it generates different attributes in and through its unity. In order to establish this double-bind, Guattari was not a scapegoat for Deleuze, as Žižek wrongfully claimed, but essential and anticipated throughout his entire project. The seeds were virtually sown even before the historical coupling took place.

In *Difference and Repetition*, the surface and depths, though distinct, are said with one single and same voice. However, in *The Logic of Sense*, this distinction becomes more about the surface and its effects. In the collaborate work, starting with *Anti-Oedipus*, this redeployment of the depths into the surface continues and intensifies: the problem shifts to the Body without Organs and its populations of molar and

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<sup>79</sup> Daniel W. Smith, "From the Surface to the Depths," in *A Deleuzian Century?*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 92.

<sup>80</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 35.

molecular machines. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari further expanded upon these concepts. Here there is no longer a fixed or positional distinction: the molecular plane of consistency and the molar strata sprawl across the same substance, the Body without Organs. However, this univocity of the Body without Organs does not entail, as Badiou and Žižek misunderstood, abandoning the tension between the molar and molecular. Instead, the difference between these two attributes not only survives but is precisely what makes them one fluid substance.

## 6. CONCLUSION

We investigated Badiou's charges against Deleuze that his concept of univocal being annuls the unique singularity of the event. We found Badiou's argument lacking, acquitting Deleuze. According to Badiou, the rift between being and the event is evidence that being is a void, discontinuous, fractured, and thus events are unconnected, singular, ruptures. While he was right to categorize Deleuze as a univocal thinker, he was wrong to conclude that being, for Deleuze, was any less fractured or problematic. Deleuze's description of the event involves the repetition of the same and of difference, actualization and counter-actualization. As seen in his concept of the Body Without Organs where substance is both singular and problematic, with two sides pulling in opposite directions. However, it is precisely this rift between formally distinct attributes that connects being and event and produces difference. Deleuze's response to Badiou gives us hope that in a world splintered by recent events, connection and relationships can always be re-established.

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**Andrea Sipos**

*Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6596-0527>

[andrea.b.sipos@gmail.com](mailto:andrea.b.sipos@gmail.com)

## THE EVENT AND THE PROBLEM OF TIME-CONSCIOUSNESS\*

**Abstract:** The event comes about suddenly and unpredictably, changing everything in our life; afterwards nothing will ever be the same. The time of its arrival can hardly be determined: Once we become aware of the metamorphosis, it has already happened. Although the event opens up a new future for us, it appears as a kind of past, therefore the meaning of the event is only accessible from its own posterity. The event seems to be quite a unique phenomenon with a rather complex temporality. What is the reason for that? In order to reply, we have to look at the different layers of its ‘constitution’. If it is true that first we grasp the sense of the event at the level of pure affects (spontaneous understanding) and only then can we find out its meaning through reason (reflection, cognition, interpretation), we have to draw the consequences with regard to time-consciousness in general. Naturally, we use words and expressions (such as metaphors) related to time, space, and movement in order to depict the quality (affectivity, intensity, direction) of our experiences. However, is it legitimate to link the description of phenomena with the dimension of time? This problem has been present since the foundation of phenomenology. Although Husserl puts the world time into brackets, he does not suspend the ‘existence’ of time as such, hence the notion of time is presupposed, so it is the horizon of time including its continuity and linear movement. I will argue that in the sphere of primordial impressions simply there is no time, as the lived experiences of originally affective nature are not temporal but have intensity. Consequently, to apprehend the temporality of the event, we can say at most that its genesis takes place in an affective ‘time’, which by contrast is not at all temporal.

**Keywords:** *phenomenology, event, temporality, time-consciousness, affectivity*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, we are going to explore a specific problem in phenomenology, notably the temporality of the event occurring in our personal life. The phenomenological description of the relationship between event and time presents inherent difficulties, and as we will see, this matter expands and embraces the problem of time-consciousness in general. Although many attempts have already been made to capture and describe the temporality of the event, within the framework of this study we primarily rely on the ideas of Henri Maldiney, Claude Romano, and László Tengelyi. The aforementioned philosophers approach the issue from different angles, such as psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, and phenomenology, hence comparing their thoughts promises to be an exciting endeavour in itself.

What kind of events are we talking about? Within the framework of the so-called evential hermeneutics, Romano examines events that occur in our own lives, such as a decision, a meeting, a serious illness, or grief, but one can also mention birth and death, suffering, and trauma. The event comes about suddenly and unpredictably, it completely disrupts our lives and radically transforms the previously established meaning of the world. In the event, our own ipseity is at stake, in other words, our unique and unrepeatable self is put at risk. In the event, not only some, but all the existential possibilities are reorganized through which we understand our own existence.<sup>1</sup> According to Romano, human beings are inherently exposed to events, moreover, this vulnerability is the first and foremost characteristic of human existence. This is what the concept of the *advenant* expresses: *Advenant* is one with whom anything can happen during its life journey or rather its hermeneutical adventure, who understands itself and the world in the light of events, and who inevitably changes as a consequence of these happenings. Throughout our lives, we encounter numerous events that bring irreversible changes, which cannot be predicted, and therefore one cannot prepare for their arrival. Tengelyi says that through a destinal event, a new meaning unfolds for us that has never been experienced before, which not only disrupts our prior expectations but also creates a radically new beginning in our life-history.<sup>2</sup> The event causes a real crisis situation, in which our self-identity is shaken; this is the moment of alienation from or the split within oneself, which requires the subsequent re-establishment of our self-interpretation.<sup>3</sup> It may also happen that an event breaks into our lives in a dramatic manner and transforms our world completely that we are unable to accept. Such an experience is the trauma. Maldiney analyses the extreme forms of the event, more

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Romano, *L'événement et le monde* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 44.

<sup>2</sup> László Tengelyi, *Élettörténet és sorseseemény* (Budapest: Atlantisz Kiadó, 1998), 38.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

precisely the psychotic disorders (schizophrenia, mania, and melancholy) in which the entire human existence falls into crisis and collapses. He maintains that the event is an impossibility, or rather a possibility that surpasses all other possibilities (*transpossible*), yet the fundamental existential characteristic of humans is being inherently open to the event, that is, having the ability to assume a possibility that arises beyond possibilities (*transpassible*) and to transform due to this experience.<sup>4</sup> However, the event of psychosis means such a profound metamorphosis of existence that it cannot be integrated into the life-history, moreover, it prevents the possibility of experiencing any subsequent events.<sup>5</sup> One thing is certain: With the occurrence of the event, everything is irrevocably transformed and nothing will ever be as before.

## 2. TEMPORALITY OF THE EVENT

The event has a rather unusual temporality. We often cannot determine the time when it happened as the event has already occurred by the time we realize we have experienced it, and the change it brings can only become clear to us retrospectively.<sup>6</sup> Therefore Romano says that the event is not dateable, it does not arise in time, but rather opens a new time in our lives. What is more, it is the event that temporalizes the time. Surpassing the present of its manifestation, it actually does not occur in the present, but opens up an entirely new future for us, which, however, only appears as a kind of past because the real meaning of the event is only accessible from its own posterity.<sup>7</sup> Tengelyi formulates it similarly: The event reveals a future to us that actually has never been present, since the event is something we cannot plan or foresee. In fact, the event confronts us with the reality itself, which, to quote Levinas, “precedes and surprises the possible”.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, its meaning arises from a past that has never been present, as the destinal event is preceded by numerous ‘shreds of sense’, which already foreshadowed its arrival in the form of ‘premonitions’. However, our actual expectations usually override these premonitions, so we only realize later that they had already appeared earlier and communicated something to us, meaning that we can only grasp these ‘shreds of sense’ retrospectively through their ‘aftershocks’.<sup>9</sup> The destinal event, as the manifestation of self-initiated meaning, therefore does not fit into the line of advancing time, but occurs outside the horizon that connects our past experiences with the future expectations; it takes place in a

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Maldiney, *Penser l'homme et la folie* (Grenoble: Millon, 2007), 61, 105, 213, 228, 235.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 91, 96.

<sup>6</sup> Romano, *L'événement et le monde*, 60–65.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 66–69.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être, au-delà de l'essence* (Dordrecht / Boston / London: Kluwer, 1990), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Tengelyi, *Élettörténet és sorseseemény*, 201–203.

present that has never been future.<sup>10</sup> It always marks a new beginning, which ‘has its own time’; moreover, the constitution of the unified time of our life-history is built upon the plurality of the own times of these significant events.<sup>11</sup> After studying the psychotic disorders, Maldiney concludes that patients are affected in their entire existence. Notably, in the event of psychosis, the existence collapses and the temporality simply becomes dislocated, so the disorder also manifests itself in the fundamental dimension of existence, in temporality.<sup>12</sup> For example, the melancholic is stuck in a past that is rooted in an old and irreversible present; hence, its temporality is determined by a present derived from a past that is alien to living time, a past beyond time, which does not point towards any future.<sup>13</sup> For the melancholic, time essentially comes to a halt, it no longer temporalizes, or rather the flow of time is replaced by a kind of standing-water-like constancy symbolized by the repeated complaint.<sup>14</sup>

In short: The appearance of the event does not fit into a timeline, moreover it turns upside down the way we consider the progression of time itself. These statements all prove that the event is a peculiar phenomenon, hence the philosophers seem to be obliged to forge complex, somewhat paradox expressions in order to be able to describe the temporality of the event. What is the reason for that? Is there any other way to clarify the connection between event and time that is without contradictions? In fact yes; however, for this we need to have a closer look at how actually we perceive the event.

### 3. UNDERSTANDING THE EVENT

The temporality of the event is closely related to the way we get to the meaning of this phenomenon. Moreover, it is actually not the temporality of the event, but the process of understanding itself that has an ambiguous nature: Everything has already changed irrevocably when we realize what happened to us and we learn that from now on nothing will be the same as before. At first glance, this statement suggests that understanding is characterized by both a sort of anteriority and posteriority; yet it is not entirely accurate.

The event signals the emergence of a surprisingly new life situation, so when it arrives, we do not even understand exactly what is happening to us. With its manifestation, our old world completely loses its meaning, instead, a new world opens up for us, which rises out of incomprehensibility. The event is a phenomenon

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 200, 208.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 195–196.

<sup>12</sup> Maldiney, *Penser l’homme et la folie*, 69, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 47–50.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 16, 43.

that can only be understood according to its own sense, which becomes the starting point for all further interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Such an occurrence is absolutely uncontrollable, so we cannot constitute its meaning; we can only strive to appropriate the newly revealed possibilities. Romano stresses that in this respect, comprehension primarily does not denote a reflective-cognitive act, but rather indicates the basic attitude towards the world. It is an understanding prior to language and conceptualization. Therefore, we first grasp the meaning of the event (what happened to us) at a pre-reflective level, and only afterwards can we interpret and elaborate this meaning more concretely.<sup>16</sup> According to Tengelyi, experiencing an event means that an entirely new and alien sense breaks into the consciousness, which puts us into a crisis and shakes the seemingly solid sense of ourselves. Similar to Romano, he notes that a destinal event is an absolutely spontaneous sense formation (*Sinnbildung*), which emerges ‘of itself’, beyond our control, so it cannot be the result of the process of sense-bestowal (*Sinngebung*) of an intentional consciousness.<sup>17</sup> We cannot freely attribute meaning to the events, all we can do is to discover and grasp the spontaneously formed new sense through concepts.<sup>18</sup> Therefore Tengelyi separates life-history from self-identity: The former is a “wild region of spontaneous sense formation”,<sup>19</sup> while the latter is the field where the struggle for the fixation of our own sense takes place. Hence, the true foundation of our life-history is not actually the narratives we produce about ourselves, but precisely these destinal events, whose sense arises secretly, somewhere “behind consciousness”.<sup>20</sup> This means that first we have an impression that is still not formulated conceptually, not expressed through words, and only in a second step can we try to fix this sense and turn it into concrete meaning by sewing it into our life-history with the help of narration, thereby giving them a clearer and more permanent form through concepts.<sup>21</sup> Although Tengelyi does not explicitly apply the pre-reflective and reflective distinction, nonetheless such duality seems to characterize the experiencing and understanding of the event. Maldiney from his side affirms that in the first place, it is through feeling, empathy, and attunement that we grasp the meaning of the world and ourselves, consequently we can say that the sense of the event as well. It is already at the level of the primordial impressions where we directly feel the metamorphosis of our existence in the world (*être-au-monde*); this meaning does not unveil itself through the mediation of signs,

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<sup>15</sup> Romano, *L'événement et le monde*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>17</sup> Tengelyi, *Élettörténet és sorseseemény*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>20</sup> László Tengelyi, *Tapasztalat és kifejezés* (Budapest: Atlantisz Kiadó, 2007), 28–29, 68, 70–71.

<sup>21</sup> Tengelyi, *Élettörténet és sorseseemény*, 38, 42.

nor does it arise merely from the constitutive activity of an intentional consciousness, but rather, it appears at a pre-objective level.<sup>22</sup> Perception (*sentir*) is also feeling (*ressentir*) he says, since the perceiver, while perceiving, does not only sense the object itself but he somehow feels himself too, thus he experiences the world and his own self simultaneously. Existence, indeed, has an affective dimension (*dimension pathique*), through which the manner of experience is expressed, and in which the style of openness to the world is also reflected. What the analysis of psychotic disorders uncovers is exactly the decisive role of the affective tone of experiences, see for instance the case of Suzan Urban.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, following Maldiney's phenomenological analysis, we can come to a similar conclusion as in the cases of Romano and Tengelyi, notably that the event is first of all understood at a non-intentional, pre-reflective level, which means that we grasp its sense directly and spontaneously, before any reflective objectification and interpretation.

Based on the above, we can say that although the meaning of the event is initially incomprehensible to us, nonetheless we clearly take note of its arrival. Even in the extreme forms of events (trauma, psychosis), where the experience itself is so overwhelming that it is not at all sure that we can express what has fallen out on us and embed such an experience into our life-history, in other words, where the reflective-narrative understanding and processing of the event may not be accomplished, or only becomes possible over time (for example after following a lengthy therapy), we nevertheless immediately and clearly become aware of the fact that we lived an event, the world has changed for us, the flow of our life has been disrupted, or our existence has entered a crisis.

This implies that in reality, it is due to the inherent mechanism of understanding that the event's temporality appears to be so unusual, giving rise to the cumbersome and paradox descriptions by which our thinkers try to define it: "a future that has never been present", "a past that has never been present", "a present that has never been future", "a past rooted in an old and irreversible present", "a present that is alien to living time", "a past beyond time, which does not point towards any future", "the time that comes to a halt and no longer temporalizes", or "the flow of time replaced by a kind of standing-water-like constancy", etc. However, the appearance of the event is not connected to time as such, so it cannot be considered and described through the dimension of time, instead, its strange temporality should be explained by the different levels of comprehension or 'layers of constitution' so to speak. Instead of the duality of anteriority and posteriority, it is actually the two-phase

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<sup>22</sup> Maldiney, *Penser l'homme et la folie*, 90–91, 196–198.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 202. Ludwig Binswanger, *Le cas Suzanne Urban. Étude sur la schizophrénie* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1957).

process of understanding that has to be highlighted here: The first stage is the level of primary comprehension, which is the dimension of affective impressions, the second stage is the level of secondary understanding, which is associated with reflexivity, thinking, language, and interpretation. Yet, should not we say that the way we understand things has to do with the very “structure” of consciousness itself?

#### **4. MODALITIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND TIME**

We could admit that originally consciousness has two basic functionalities, an affective and a reflective mode. We refer to the primordial register of experience as affective perception, through this function we are able to perceive the continuously flowing impressions; this includes sensations, feelings, emotions, and dispositions. The reflective functionality is by which we are capable of thinking, this is the mode that mobilizes language, hence clearer meanings and concepts are formed at this level. The affective mode is the primary functionality of consciousness, which always precedes the reflective one. However, these modalities operate simultaneously and alongside each other, they switch from one to the other almost imperceptibly depending on what captures our attention in a given moment. I can remain in one mode, while I almost completely exclude the other, or one mode becomes dominant and oppresses the other function. Let's take some examples from our daily life. If I am in pain, I can hardly focus on anything else because this intense affective feeling captures all my attention. I am unable to think or work, and even another activity, such as listening to music, may not help to deviate my attention from the pain. In such a state, the affective impact is so strong that it makes almost any other activity impossible, especially those for which I use the reflective mode. Therefore, no matter how strongly I try to concentrate on reading a book for instance, thereby keeping myself in the reflective mode of consciousness with my will, I cannot eliminate the pain, as this powerful feeling constantly disrupts me.

Now let's imagine a more pleasant situation: When we are reading a good book or talking to a friend, our consciousness is maximally focused in a reflective manner on what we are reading or on the conversation, while simultaneously our affective attention decreases to a minimum. In such situations, we can almost completely exclude all external and internal perceptions: We hardly even notice that others are chatting in the background, or that someone has walked away behind our back, but we can also forget about our hunger or tiredness. Moreover, even if we do perceive these effects, we can still try to suppress them for a while, yet only until a certain point, when the affective function will overtake the reflective one and our attention will naturally turn towards our sensations and feelings.

Something similar happens with time itself: In the affective mode, we do not realise how time passes because we do not perceive time at all. The same applies to situations when we are in a deep reflective mode. The truth is that in most cases, we have no awareness of time, as it falls outside our field of attention. More precisely, we only realize the progression of time when we specifically focus on it, for example, when we look at our watch. Nevertheless, there is one major difference between the two modes of consciousness when it comes to the perception of time. Only the reflective functionality enables us to translate various impressions into thoughts, or in other words, to form concrete meanings of these pure 'shreds of sense', and only in this mode can we observe and describe things, that is, to grasp and examine our experiences as objects. As a consequence, we can only perceive that time is passing if we switch to this mode, what is more, the concept of time itself is also formed in the reflective sphere. By contrast, in the affective sphere simply there is no time, as primordial experiences (impressions) of originally affective nature are not temporal, they rather have intensity.

Nonetheless, we are used to expressing the quality of our experiences (their affective tone, intensity, direction) by concepts and expressions (metaphors) related to time, but also movement, and space. During a pleasant activity (reading, conversation), it usually seems to us that time runs more quickly, while in unpleasant circumstances (pain), time barely wants to move forward. The interesting thing about such statements is not that we feel the progression of time differently compared to its real pace, or that we perceive the objective time subjectively, if this distinction is appropriate at all, but that we take the concept of time for granted. The reason for this is the following: Impressions emerge in the affective sphere, yet the affective conception is almost immediately followed by the reflective grasping (or at least there is an attempt to capture the 'multifarious shreds of sense'), it is understandable that the interpretive activity of the reflective mode steps in and tries to govern the process of understanding, and by its very nature, it introduces concepts such as time into the interpretation, thereby 'smuggling' temporality into the originally 'timeless' affective experience. Although, for example in the state of pain, it is not time that passes more slowly, but the feeling itself is intense and unbearable. It is true that we can measure pain also with the time it takes, however, someone who is actually in pain knows neither space nor time, this person only 'knows' that she or he feels unwell. Therefore, it is not incorrect to say 'how time flies' when we are immersed in a joyful activity, or 'time hardly passes', 'time seems to stand still' when we are in an unpleasant situation or we are suffering, but we must acknowledge that these statements are formulated in the reflective register, and that it is the understanding and interpretive activity of this mode of consciousness that, according to its own operating principle (objectification, external viewpoint or third-person perspective,

mobilization of concepts, etc.) projects time onto an affective experience. In a reflective attitude, we already step outside our own experience and observe it as an object, as if we were watching a film about ourselves, where the frames follow one another in order, each having its own duration, and where it becomes possible to determine how long an affective episode lasted.

Another exclusive characteristic of the reflective function of consciousness is intentionality. Any kind of objects arise exclusively at this level, which also means that consciousness can only decompose the being-in-the-world (*être-au-monde*) into subject and object, or separate immanence and transcendence when it shifts into its reflective mode, exactly because in the latter we inevitably switch to a third-person point of view. When we engage in a philosophical reflection or discussion, naturally we apply the reflective mode of our consciousness. Since adopting the phenomenological attitude is the result of a reflective act (perform the reductions), and since the description of phenomena also happens with the involvement of reflective consciousness (formulate concepts, fix the meaning through language), it is not surprising that we still shift into an objectifying, third-person perspective even when we would like to gain access to the ‘things themselves’ as they are given to consciousness by examining things that are revealed to us directly in the first-person singular experience. This, however, has an impact on how we approach the question of time.

## 5. THE ORIGINS OF TIME-CONSCIOUSNESS

We have seen that philosophers apply various notions related to time, such as ‘past’, ‘present’, ‘future’, ‘moment’, ‘before’, ‘after’, etc., in order to grasp the temporality of the event. Yet, there is an underlying assumption behind this, namely that time ‘exists’ and it is in motion, it flows in a linear and irreversible manner. A crucial question arises here: From what perspective can we make such a statement about time? The answer is that only from an external viewpoint, from a third-person perspective, which is the characteristic of the reflective mode of consciousness.

If we think about it, this problem has been present since the commencement of the phenomenological movement. Husserl openly adopts a reflective position when he begins to examine the phenomenon of time in his lectures of 1904/05. The matter for him is to study the layers of constitution with the clear aim to set the foundation of objective time in subjective time, in the same way as he strives to prove that any kind of objectivity is rooted in subjectivity.<sup>24</sup> In order to achieve his goal, he follows strict methodological steps and performs an *epoché*, so he puts the objective world time into parenthesis, yet he does not suspend the premise regarding the “existence” of

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<sup>24</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893–1917)* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 10.

time itself. As a consequence, the notion of time is presumed and pre-given by default since the very beginning of his quest. Husserl thinks in the dimension of time, he uses the notion of time (explicitly and implicitly) for constructing fundamental phenomenological terms, such as 'subjective time', 'internal time-consciousness', 'living present', 'original temporal field', 'phase of consciousness', 'momentary presence', 'retention', 'protention', but even in his later texts, the 'timelessness of absolute consciousness' or the 'pre-time' and 'pre-temporal consciousness' etc. The key idea behind this is the following: According to Husserl, the passage of time is not something we imagine or represent, but is fundamentally perceived, which requires a consciousness (internal time-consciousness) that can integrate successive experiential moments into a single process. Individual perceptions always fit into a time horizon, so when we perceive something, we are inherently able to perceive the temporal extent of things as well.<sup>25</sup> Thus, there is no wonder that 'time' becomes the central and indispensable (unavoidable) concept of phenomenology. Unavoidably we think in time, we presume the horizon of time, thereby making temporality an unshakable foundational theme of phenomenology. Consequently, time and temporality are fundamentally given, are self-evident not only in the 'natural attitude' but also in the 'phenomenological attitude'. A second consequence is that all other philosophers after Husserl inherit this presumption without questioning it. The problem only arises when we encounter special phenomena, like the event, which manifests itself with a rather strange temporality: Philosophers inevitably face difficulties when trying to grasp the connection between the event and time, as the paradox and cumbersome expressions demonstrate it.

Contrary to Husserl's theory, yet in line with Marc Richir's philosophy, we could also argue that the phenomenon of time is nothing else but a "symbolically instituted sense"<sup>26</sup> that is culturally passed on through generations, which implies that we are 'unconsciously' aware of its meaning: We just 'know' that time 'exists', that time passes, and that human time is finite. Such 'knowledge' or the 'sense' of time most probably emerged in an intersubjective context (through the intersubjective experience of changes that occur in nature) and had subsequently been fixed. Nonetheless, it is precisely this deep-rooted 'ancient awareness' of time that constitutes the obstacle to examining our experiences (especially the affective aspects of the living experience) irrespective of time, that is, from a purely phenomenological perspective, by putting all the symbolic contents into brackets that are projected onto them, thereby capturing the sense as it arises, the "phenomenon as nothing-but-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 64–69.

<sup>26</sup> Marc Richir, *Phénomènes Temps et Êtres. Phénoménologie et institution symbolique* (Grenoble: Million, 1987).

phenomenon”<sup>27</sup> before any kind of reflective objectification. Husserl confronts this problem when he, in order to avoid the danger of infinite regress, sets the foundation for all temporality (both the objective and the subjective levels of time-consciousness) back to the non-temporal self-constituting consciousness of inner time or absolute consciousness. He asserts that absolute time-consciousness does not take place in time but is timeless, and for this reason we must say that time itself does not arise in time.<sup>28</sup> In this way, however, Husserl is unable to resolve the paradox thus formed, as although he performs the *epoché* of objective time (he excludes all assumptions, statements, and beliefs related to objective time), he does not suspend the concept of time itself, which means that he does not question the existence of time (*seiende Zeit*), he rather takes it as absolutely given.<sup>29</sup> This can be explained by our theory that Husserl cannot step outside the framework of reflective conscious activity. Intentionality inherently presupposes a relation between consciousness and its object, which implies that the distance-creating, objectifying reflective attitude manifests itself even at the pre-reflective, pre-phenomenal level of the self-constitution of absolute time-consciousness. Could we say that all these difficulties derive from the fact that Husserl attempts to conceptualize the pre-reflective, non-intentional, non-objectifying modality of consciousness following the model of reflective acts, in other words, to grasp and describe the primary and essentially affective experience from a secondary reflective perspective? Indeed, saying that absolute time-consciousness appears strangely ‘timeless’ in terms of its constitution and ‘atemporal’ with regard to its flow sounds particularly contradictory. Nevertheless, is it possible that Husserl comes to such conclusions because his reasoning is based on incorrect implicit assumptions, namely, that time ‘exists’ and that any phenomenon can only be described by taking into account the dimension of time? The same applies to the observations of Tengelyi, Romano, and Maldiney regarding the temporality of events; they take the existence of time for granted and try to grasp something fundamentally non-temporal using concepts of temporality, which leads to rather strange and paradoxical expressions as discussed above.

## 6. SINGULARITY AND AFFECTIVE “TIME”

In order to avoid the contradictory formulations when describing the event’s temporality, we have to redefine the event and subjectivity. According to the definition of Romano, the event puts into play my unsubstitutable selfhood, it befalls me in person and is assigned first hand only to me, not to anyone else. We could also say that the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 13–17.

<sup>28</sup> Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (1893–1917), 112.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

event “provokes solipsism”,<sup>30</sup> since it appears as my own inalienable experience, in the event nothing less is at stake than my own existence. This means that in terms of its appearance, the event is not merely subjective, but radically subjective. Contrary to the philosophers referred above, I believe that the event is not a neutral phenomenon, its unique sense cannot be constituted in an intersubjective way. The reason behind its exceptional manifestation is precisely its personal nature. In fact, event and selfhood (*ipseité*) are not merely “closely interconnected concepts” as Tengelyi affirms,<sup>31</sup> but they mutually presuppose each other: On the one hand, we understand ourselves in the light of the events that occur in our life; on the other hand, the event simply cannot manifest itself without ipseity. Moreover, as Romano formulates it, in the event the *advenant* literally becomes a “stranger to oneself”, encounters “oneself as another”, in other words, I become radically and irreversibly different from who I was.<sup>32</sup> Tengelyi talks about the “split of the self”, given that the event shakes up the sense of our identity that has been established, as a result of which we directly “come into conflict with ourselves”.<sup>33</sup> Maldiney also says that in the event we confront our “absolute otherness”, and in extreme cases, existence not only transforms but genuinely “alienates itself from itself”, hence, when looking in the mirror, it “sees something other than itself”.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the concept of the event itself cannot be interpreted independently, that is, separately from the subject it concerns, because the true meaning of the event is not the metamorphosis of the world as context, but it signals a radical change or rupture in the self-interpretation of a concrete and singular subject. From now on, however, the main question is no longer the phenomenality of the event, but rather our task becomes to explore the ‘constitution of the self’, to uncover what kind of phenomenon the self is, in other words, how the meaning of our own self (ipseity) is constituted and revealed to us and how we can access it.

The meaning of the event is always unique, as Tengelyi and Romano acknowledge it, moreover, both philosophers consider this singularity as primarily that characteristic of the phenomenon, which subsequently determines the singularity of the subject.<sup>35</sup> Yet, in my view, uniqueness should be assigned to the subject who experiences the event, otherwise we cannot explain why a given phenomenon appears to us as a ‘personal’ or ‘destinal’ event. Consequently, we will call the concrete and always unique subject as *singularity*.

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<sup>30</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 376–381.

<sup>31</sup> Tengelyi, *Élettörténet és sorseseemény*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Romano, *L'événement et le monde*, 210–211.

<sup>33</sup> Tengelyi, *Élettörténet és sorseseemény*, 43, 199–200.

<sup>34</sup> Maldiney, *Penser l'homme et la folie*, 54–55, 279.

<sup>35</sup> Tengelyi, *Élettörténet és sorseseemény*, 46–48; Romano, *L'événement et le monde*, 125–126, 158–160.

Singularity is a strictly phenomenological concept that refers to the unique meaning of the self that emerges as a result of a passively unfolding process of sense formation and sedimentation. Here we are dealing with an infinitely complex meaning that is formed through our experiences, and which settles down, condenses, and solidifies in layers even before conceptualisation, in a pre-reflective manner, without ever taking on a final, definitive form once and for all. Singularity functions like an ‘embodied’ and ‘four-dimensional’ prism that refracts light in a unique way: The light is the impulse coming from the world, and my singularity, ‘myself’, that is, the current form of the infinitely dense meaning is the prism. Any sense emerges and passes through the singularity, the concrete and individual subject of the experience, and only therefore can it take up a unique meaning, as the “saturated phenomena” or “paradox phenomena”<sup>36</sup> demonstrate it, for instance the ever-changing meaning of the Vinteuil sonata for Swann in the novel of Proust.<sup>37</sup> Singularity, on the one hand, manifests itself as a kind of phenomenon for itself, and on the other hand, it constitutes the ego-pole or subject of all its experiences. Yet, the singularity is not a simple phenomenon, nor is it a ‘paradox phenomenon’, but not even a “hyper-phenomenon”,<sup>38</sup> rather, it is a genuine *enigma*: An inscrutable dense meaning that is formed spontaneously and invisibly, that can never be fully illuminated reflectively, yet it is always experienced and felt. As a subject, it denotes a uniquely individual subjectivity, which is not identical with the methodological subjectivity, the transcendental and sense-constituting ego, nor can it be regarded as some kind of empty consciousness, as a mere recipient of the phenomena, like the *adonné* in Marion’s philosophy or the *advenant* in Romano’s eventual hermeneutics; instead, it denotes a real ‘existence’, a radically personal ‘being-in-the-world’. Singularity is a subjectivity deprived of all activity, as it cannot arbitrarily control the sense-formation or its sedimentation, yet passively it still participates in the emergence of meaning, like a prism that participates in the refraction of light.

The structure of singularity shows a very complex organization. We are affected by numerous impressions, which we primarily experience in an affective manner and only in a second step can we try to grasp reflectively. Some of these impressions spontaneously settle down and get stored in various memory layers (affective-physical, cognitive). This process is completely uncontrollable: It is impossible to determine when, what, and essentially why something gets ‘imprinted’ in my singularity, which consequently is continually being built and shaped, and as a result of this accumulation, it solidifies into a kind of crystal-like prism. As a consequence,

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<sup>36</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, 366–370.

<sup>37</sup> Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2006).

the event is nothing else but the experience of a deep structural transformation of my singularity. It marks a break in the process of self-understanding, or rather, in the constitution of our 'sense of self'. The event of psychosis means a real rupture, a complete collapse of existence, because singularity, no matter how resistant it is, like real crystals, suffers such a degree of rupture that it shatters into shards and it becomes almost impossible to reassemble them again. Even a less dramatic experience can have an effect on us 'years later', or maybe 'for a lifetime', because it has been integrated into the singularity altering its structure and leaving an indelible mark in it. We have countless experiences that we 'preserve' even though we do not specifically remember them; it can happen that only through a 'new' experience do we realize that these experiences 'still' live within us, when the sedimented meanings 'at some point' suddenly resurface 'again' and exert an effect 'once more' on us and on our actions. We carry such integrated experiences with us 'over time', as singularity — our selfhood — is composed of meanings, mostly in the form of non-conceptualized affective impressions, that have 'once' been fixed in a completely spontaneous and unique way. However, as the resurgence or the withdrawal, as well as the intensification or the weakening of the impact of affective aspects of the experiences impregnated in the singularity happen in an absolutely unpredictable manner, therefore we can at most say about these 'occurrences' that they take place in a totally elastic and volatile affective 'time'. On an affective level, I do not 'know' about time, I can only feel: In fact I always feel something, often many things at once, in some way, with some intensity. In short, original impressions are simply not tied to time, but have an affective intensity. In the same way, the event, which signifies in reality a deep change in our singularity, does not occur in time, rather we should say that its original manifestation takes place in an affective register, which is not at all temporal. Hence we should not wonder that when the event is grasped reflectively, it displays a peculiar temporality. Let's underline that in the case of the event, it is not time that is irreversible, it is not temporality that gets twisted, but a quality shift happens in the self, in the very structure of the singularity, and this metamorphosis is what is undeniable and unalterable.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In this article we explored the temporality of the event occurring in our personal lives. We have seen that when trying to determine the time of its manifestation, philosophers face difficulties. This issue seems to be closely linked to the problem of time-consciousness in general, a problem that originates from the early thoughts of Husserl on the lived experience of time. It is true that at the moment we encounter an event, we do not even understand its meaning, it is only after it arrived that we realize what has

happened to us, that everything had already changed and nothing will be the same as before. Yet, it is not about any anteriority or posteriority, the difficulty is not linked to the temporality of the event but to its phenomenality and understanding, thus ultimately it has to do with the modalities of consciousness. In fact, the exceptional character of the event primarily stems from its close, even inseparable relationship with the concrete and singular subject that experiences it, which necessitates the redefinition of both event and subjectivity. The event does not signify the emergence of a new sense, but an immanent change in meaning, a rupture of our self-interpretation, more precisely, a radical and deep transformation in the structure of our singularity. The singularity is formed through the spontaneous and uncontrollable sedimentation and integration of our experiences. This process takes place in an elastic and volatile affective 'time' which, however, is not temporal but is linked to quality and intensity. Accordingly, the event, redefined as the alteration in the singularity, also happens in this non-temporal, affective dimension. Primarily, we experience things in an affective manner, and only in a second move can we try to reflect on them by conceptualizing and formulating thoughts. By the reflective function of our consciousness, we are capable of distancing, objectifying, and to look at things from a third-person perspective, thereby separating subject and object. Moreover, all concepts, including the concept of time itself, are born in this register, hence it is only the reflective modality that projects time on the originally non-temporal, affective impressions, when it tries to grasp their meaning. Nonetheless, if we still insist on describing paradoxical phenomena, like the event, according to the dimension of time, we not only arrive at contradictory statements, but most importantly, we conceal the true nature of the sense-formation of singularity that happens, we can say at most, in an affective 'time'.

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**Attila Ákos Tóth**

*Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest / St. Athanasius Greek Catholic Theological Institute  
in Nyíregyháza, Hungary*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9529-410X>

[tothattila942@gmail.com](mailto:tothattila942@gmail.com)

## MORAL IDENTITY AS EVENT AND RUPTURE\*

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**Abstract:** Classical ethical thought often conceives the moral subject as autonomous and rational, a self-sufficient agent guided by reason. Emmanuel Levinas and, in a related way, Bernhard Waldenfels challenge this image. For them, moral identity is not a stable possession but an event that interrupts and unsettles the subject's prior self-understanding.

At the heart of this reorientation lies responsibility — something not chosen but imposed. Responsibility precedes reflection, arriving as a demand that defines identity before the subject can consciously assume it. Moral identity, in this sense, is not secured but disrupted, marked by an encounter that obliges a response.

For Levinas, this rupture occurs in the event-like appearance of the Other's face. The face is not a sign to be interpreted but the immediate message: "Do not kill me!" It resists reduction to an object within my horizon and commands me irreversibly. My identity is nothing other than the duty to answer this appeal.

Waldenfels, by contrast, situates the genesis of moral identity in the experience of the alien. The alien cannot be domesticated into familiar categories; it interrupts my world unexpectedly and demands a response I cannot fully prepare. Yet every answer remains incomplete, haunted by what escapes assimilation. Moral identity, for him, is a continual process of responding to what exceeds me, an identity constituted through rupture and never closed.

Despite their different emphases, Levinas and Waldenfels converge on a decisive point: the moral subject is not grounded in autonomy or stability but in exposure to what arrives from beyond. Ethics is not the gradual cultivation of a sovereign self but the ongoing constitution of identity through disruptive events — whether the command of the Other or the intrusion of the alien.

**Keywords:** *ethics, subjectivity, Levinas, Waldenfels, rupture*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of philosophy, ethical thought has often begun from a reassuring image: the subject of moral action is a figure of stability.<sup>1</sup> The moral agent appears as someone capable of reflecting on possible courses of action, discerning the right one, and then executing it with rational control. This figure, stable and self-possessed, stands at the center of classical accounts of ethics. The dream of ethics in the tradition could be this, that morality grants us an inner equilibrium, a reliable selfhood, a sense that the good life is possible because we can ground it in ourselves.

Consider Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* remains a cornerstone of moral philosophy. At first, the ethical subject he describes is indeed wavering: a young person unsure of how to act, easily misled by passions, caught in uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> Yet the very point of cultivating the virtues is to overcome this instability.<sup>3</sup> Through repetition and practice, through habituation and correction, the subject slowly becomes more stable. Virtue becomes a habit, and habit, in turn, produces character.<sup>4</sup> The virtuous person eventually chooses rightly without hesitation, almost as if by instinct — but an instinct painstakingly built over years of training. Here, ethics culminates in a kind of moral second nature.<sup>5</sup>

Now contrast this with Kant, a key figure of modern ethics. His framework is different — rational legislation rather than habituation — but the orientation remains similar. For Kant, the human subject may be tempted by inclinations and self-interest, but it remains capable of recognizing the moral law. This law does not command because of outcomes or utility; it obligates for its own sake.<sup>6</sup> And the subject, in acknowledging this law, achieves a form of inner autonomy, rising above inclination

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 204–225; 239–263.

<sup>2</sup> “Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.” Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, rev. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), II. 1, 1103a24–26, 27.

<sup>3</sup> “Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.” Ibid., II. 1, 1103b1–2, 27.

<sup>4</sup> “By doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust; and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly.” Ibid., II. 6, 1106b36–1107a2, 35.

<sup>5</sup> “And thus the virtue acquired by habit is said to be a second nature. Hence the Philosopher says in *Ethics* II that ‘habits acquired by operation are like a second nature’.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1912), q. 63, a. 2., 820.

<sup>6</sup> “Duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the law.” Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), AA. IV, 400.

to act from duty. The Kantian agent, like the Aristotelian, is one who gains stability: the stability of reason disciplining desire, the stability of freedom aligning itself with universal law.<sup>7</sup>

What unites these two otherwise divergent traditions is the conviction that morality rests on consolidation. Whether through the exercise of virtue or the legislation of reason, the moral subject progressively stills the turbulence of life. Ethics here is the cultivation of inner calm, a stability or order over fluctuation, the building of a character that endures. Moral identity, in this picture, is nothing other than the steady solidification of the self.

But can this really capture what it means to be ethical? Does the moral life truly unfold as a smooth line from instability toward inner equilibrium? Does responsibility reduce to a process of self-mastery, as if ethics were simply another form of self-improvement? Or is something more dramatic, more destabilizing involved? Perhaps morality is not a slow consolidation but an interruption, not the stillness of mastery but the shock of being summoned.

This is the guiding question of the present essay. I argue that moral identity cannot be reduced to a static possession or a linear development. Ethical selfhood does not grow necessarily like a tree that slowly takes root. It is not secured only through rational deliberation, nor is it just a predictable outcome of disciplined training. Rather, it arises in events — sudden, unforeseeable, and foundational events. These are not moments we plan for, nor achievements we can claim. They are events that break in upon the ordinary order of life, events that interrupt continuity, events that cannot be foreseen or forced.

To use a stronger word: ethics originates in rupture. The moral subject is not the calm legislator of meaning, but the one who is called, even wounded, by what exceeds him or her. In the pages that follow, I will call this the *founding event* — an event that does not build on our capacities but unsettles them, an event that constitutes the self by demanding a response it cannot refuse. If the classical picture of ethics is grounded in stability, the alternative sees its ground in the event. My paper contends that moral identity is constituted mostly not in stability but in rupture, drawing on Levinas's ethics of the face and Waldenfels' responsive ethics.

## 2. CRITICAL PROBLEMS OF THE STABLE MORAL SUBJECT

The image of the stable moral subject has long exerted its appeal, but the very features that made it reassuring also expose its limits. Here I would like to mention three difficulties that reveal why it cannot remain the absolute foundation of ethical thought.

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<sup>7</sup> “Autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself, independently of any property of the objects of volition.” Ibid., AA. IV, 431.

The first problem is, that the image of the stable moral subject has always depended on an abstraction. It imagines a person who deliberates calmly, considers alternatives, and executes the right choice. So, this model rests on the assumption that ethical life begins and originates with the reflective judgement that is described, for example by Aristotle as the *phronesis*, the practical wisdom. “It is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sort of things conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general.”<sup>8</sup> The wise man is, and becomes such by serenity, reflectivity and by the possession of himself. But is that really our everyday life experience? Do we live the ethically significant moments as places where we should remain “just wisely observer”? I would definitely say that the ethical experience differs from this picture. The moment of responsibility does not arrive as an opportunity for deliberation but as an interruption, it arrives as a cry, a face, anger or fear, a sudden event that throws me radically off my balance. If we imagine the beginning of moral life as an ordered reflection, we are just partial, we forget its disquieting character, the fact that disturbance is the very structure, meaning, and origin of ethical life. I am not saying, that deliberation is useless. Clearly, reflection plays an important role in sustaining responsibility. It becomes difficult if we think that this abstract figure of the rational agent is its very first moment and ground, and we do not know what to do with our lived experience of disturbance. So, if we want an ethics that responds to that way, how life is actually lived, the abstraction must be set aside. Stability is what remains as the sediment of the fact that we respond, as an image and state caused by earlier disruptions.

A second difficulty would be the preference for universality over singularity. At this point Kant certainly should be mentioned. “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”<sup>9</sup> In the Kantian ethics the demand is not tied to a particular situation, event, experience, but it is tested by universality. It is not only the situation, that is universalized, but also the subject itself. He gains stability by situating himself within a universal reason. The system of Kant certainly has a very strong and impressive insight, but misses an important point, which is the origin. Responsibility does not arrive as an abstract maxim, but as an experience of something new, strange, uncertain, that calls me — experiences, that Kant would like to exclude from the ethical sphere of life, when he writes, “since reason, in deriving laws from the supreme principle of practical reason, if it is not to borrow anything from experience, must exclude every empirical

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, VI. 1, 1139a25–31, 146.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, AA. IV, 421.

condition entirely...”<sup>10</sup> It is assumed, that the singular cases draw their meaning from general rules, but in our experience it is something different. The universal rule derives its urgency from singular encounters.

The third problem that I would like to mention is the denial of vulnerability. The stable subject is seen as autonomous, self-possessed, who is capable of disciplining desire and securing his inner harmony — he is powerful and self-secure. But in an ethically significant situation we do not experience ourself as absolute sovereign, but as exposed, and vulnerable subjects. Emmanuel Levinas formulates it clearly: “subjectivity is exposure to the other”,<sup>11</sup> it is subsequent to my ethical responsibility; it is formed from this last one. According to Levinas, there is no myself — properly spoken — before that responsibility. And responsibility before my own stability means exposure, means fragility and vulnerability, it means that I am structurally subordinated.

### 3. EMMANUEL LEVINAS – THE EVENT OF THE FACE

To understand what it means to ground ethics not in stability but in disruption, not in autonomy but in exposure, let us turn to Emmanuel Levinas. The twentieth-century French philosopher of Lithuanian–Jewish origin is perhaps the most decisive voice in rethinking the foundations of ethics. His project is radical, since it wants to dislodge the rational, autonomous subject that has dominated western philosophy from its sovereign place, also at the center of moral theory.<sup>12</sup>

Levinas begins with a critique of phenomenology as he inherited it. In Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity, as well as in Heidegger’s analysis of being-in-the-world, the subject remains the point of origin. The whole world is disclosed in their views in relation to the self. The other persons are also recognized only in relation to the horizon of my own intentional life. The problem that Levinas makes clear in each case is that for these thinkers the only truly real basis, the most original one, is and can only be my subjectivity. Others, and everything appear only in its light.<sup>13</sup>

Levinas tries instead to reverse this perspective. For him, the decisive center of moral life does not lie within me. It comes from beyond me, from the encounter with the Other. The self is no longer sovereign but vulnerable, no longer autonomous but

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., AA. IV, 400.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1991), 117.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Adrian Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: North-western University Press, 1997), 114–118.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 33–40; 44–48.

heteronomous. Moral identity is not self-grounded but constituted in an event that ruptures the closed circle of selfhood and confronts me with a demand I did not choose.

This event is the face of the Other that arrives to me as an epiphany.<sup>14</sup> It is important not to misunderstand Levinas. The face is not simply the visible countenance, not the material surface of perception. It is not reducible to eyes, mouth, or skin. It is not an object among others that I might grasp, categorize, or interpret. The face is something else than merely an object: it resists reduction, refuses assimilation, exceeds representation. “The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched — for in visual or tactical sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content.”<sup>15</sup>

The face, then, is not a bearer of meaning but meaning itself. It speaks — not in words, not in signs that can be decoded, but in its very presence. And what it says is singular: “you shall not commit murder.”<sup>16</sup> This is not a metaphorical command but the most concrete imperative. The Other, by appearing, already prohibits violence, already demands that I respond with responsibility.

What matters here is that this imperative is not the result of my reasoning. It is not a norm that can be generalized, nor a principle I could deduce from autonomy. It arrives as a rupture, an event of interruption. It comes unbidden, without preparation, outside all systems. It breaks continuity and undoes the sovereignty of the self. The obligation it imposes is prior to freedom, prior to decision, prior even to intentionality itself.<sup>17</sup>

The consequence is a radical rethinking of subjectivity. The self is not first a subject who then assumes moral obligations. It is, rather, that I am a subject because I have already been claimed. Levinas insists: “To be I is to be responsible. To be I is to be hostage.”<sup>18</sup> Responsibility is not a later addition to my identity; it is the very structure of identity itself. We could replace here the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” by a new formula: “I am because I am responsible.”

The ethical event of the face, therefore, is not an external episode added to an already existing self. It is the founding event in which subjectivity itself is constituted. The self emerges not by thinking, not by choosing, but by being summoned — by being addressed by an Other who cannot be absorbed into my categories. Ethics here

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 99–127.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

is not secondary but primary. It is not a branch of philosophy; it is the condition of subjectivity itself.<sup>19</sup>

This encounter is always unpredictable. It cannot be scheduled, planned, or contained. It arrives suddenly, as a disturbance that unsettles comprehension. And the response it demands is infinite. I can never fully answer, never balance the scales. I can only respond again and again, without end. Responsibility here is not a task that can be completed, but a burden that defines me.

Seen in this light, moral identity is no longer a narrative of growth or a set of stable virtues. It is not the outcome of mastery but the exposure to what masters me. It is the ceaseless obligation that begins in the event of the Other. In Levinas's radical reorientation, the moral subject is not the source of meaning but its hostage, called into responsibility by an event that it did not anticipate and cannot escape. Ethics, in this vision, is not something I do. It is something that happens to me. It is the event that constitutes me from the outside.

#### 4. BERNHARD WALDENFELS: THE EVENT OF THE ALIEN

If Levinas confronts us with the event of the face, Bernhard Waldenfels broadens the horizon of disruption. He also resists the idea of a stable moral subject who acts simply by applying universal rules. For him as well, ethics does not begin with autonomy. But while Levinas focuses on the commanding presence of the Other person, Waldenfels directs us toward something broader, more diffuse, and more unsettling, that is the alien. "Dealing with the alien thus acquires a genuine ethical and political dimension, just as, conversely, ethics and politics cannot be conceived without reference to the foreign."<sup>20</sup>

What is the alien? It is not simply another individual, though it may appear in another. Nor is it just what is unusual or strange in an everyday sense. The alien, as Waldenfels defines it, is whatever resists being integrated into my horizon of meaning. It is what I cannot domesticate into my categories, what unsettles the order of my lived world. The alien is the element that remains foreign, the surplus that slips away, the interruption that I cannot grasp completely.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Ethics is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy." Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.

<sup>20</sup> "Der Umgang mit dem fremden erhält von daher eine genuine ethische und politische Dimension, so wie umgekehrt die Ethik und Politik ohne den Bezug auf Fremdes nicht zu denken sind." Bernhard Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden I*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 110. Translation is mine – A.T.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 16–50.

Encountering the alien is not like discovering a hidden truth. It is not the fruit of more careful analysis or deeper knowledge. It is instead the interruption of my ordinary experience, the breakdown of my interpretive frameworks, the sudden exposure of being addressed by something beyond me. As Waldenfels puts it, “The alien, which leads us outside ourselves and makes us transgress the boundaries of the respective order, cannot be something we bring about on our own initiative. It can only be conceived as a pathos that befalls us.”<sup>22</sup> Ethics, then, does not rest on my decision, but on the event of being overtaken by what is alien.

This intrusion does not follow a pattern, but it arrives without warning, without justification, without reason. I am overtaken by it, before I even know how to react. I am not autonomous anymore, because my identity is not the origin of action but the effect of being addressed.

So, if we try to systematize ethics into the universally codified set of rules, we just miss the point. The very structure of responsivity is, that it cannot be prepared in advance. If we are questioned, we must create a new response each time in every singular situation. Responsibility is not general, but it includes someone or something in its particularity and individuality.

This is what Waldenfels means by *Antwortethik*, or the responsive ethics. We should constantly answer, because our answer is never finished once and for all. There is always something — the alien — that exceeds it.

Therefore, we can draw some conclusions regarding moral identity. The ethical self should not be described as a stable possession, that already has the consequent answers for every ethical challenge. Nor is it something, that grows in a straight line. Instead, it is continually reshaped, disturbed and reconfigured, and is always searching for new answers, because it is called into question by strange events. The alien interrupts again and again continually, so that the moral subject is a site of repeated disruption.

It is also clear, that if we try to assimilate the alien, to use some solutions and answers from the past, because the alien seems to be similar to those passed events, we surely destroy it. Its ethical force lies precisely in the irreducibility, in the fact that it cannot be contained.

Here Waldenfels challenges not only the image of the stable moral subject but also the hope that ethics could ever be complete. Yet this does not lessen our responsibility, or the significance of ethics, quite the opposite, it deepens it, because if ethics is not a

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<sup>22</sup> “Fremdes, das uns außer uns selbst geraten und die Grenzen der jeweiligen Ordnung überschreiten läßt, kann nichts sein, was wir selbsttätig herbeiführen. Es ist nur zu denken als ein Pathos, das uns widerfährt.” Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 131. Translation is mine – A.T.

collection of already prepared answers, solutions that work, but the readiness to remain unsettled, to be addressed, to remain open for the alien, then it requires a very different level of responsibility in every ethically significant situation.

## **5. RECONFIGURING MORAL SUBJECTIVITY**

Having followed Levinas and Waldenfels separately, the question now would be, what happens if we read them together. Their emphases seem to be partly divergent. Levinas points to the Other's face as the decisive site of the ethical event. The face speaks to us in the language of command. Waldenfels, however, emphasizes the alien as disruption, stressing the unfinished and questioning quality of our response. But beneath these differences lies a deeper agreement. Both are insisting on the importance of the event. The moral subject is not given in advance, facing as such different ethical challenges, but it is formed and reformed through the challenging events of alterity.

For Levinas, the structure is an imperative one. The Other appears not as a neutral presence but as a command that cannot be ignored. "You shall not commit murder."<sup>23</sup> This is an order, not an exchange between equals, not a dialogue. The relation is asymmetrical from the very beginning. I do not constitute the Other, but I am constituted by the event and experience of the Other, by being called into responsibility.

Waldenfels approaches from another angle. The alien is not necessarily personal, and does not give a law. It can appear and just be there as a silence, a gesture, a disturbance that unsettles my prior order. It resists every assimilation into categories that are already familiar to us. "What appeals to us in the alien is not what we already know, but what remains out of reach."<sup>24</sup> The ethical force of the alien lies in its very excess, in the way it escapes comprehension. I do not receive a law to follow, but I am caught in a situation where I am faced with the necessity of a formulation and constant reformulation of my response.

I would not like to exaggerate the contrast: Levinas as the philosopher of command, Waldenfels as the philosopher of questioning. Both show that the origin of ethics cannot be reduced to rational deliberation, nor seen as merely a conceptual system. Both describe ethics as something that comes unbidden, as an event that interrupts and, more importantly, displaces the self. Responsibility, is not chosen but imposed from beyond.

This means that subjectivity itself must be reconceived. In both, the self is not the foundation of meaning but the site where meaning arrives and unsettles. Moral

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<sup>23</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

<sup>24</sup> "Das, was uns im Fremden anspricht, ist nicht das, was wir schon kennen, sondern das, was uns entzogen bleibt." Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden*, 41. Translation is mine – A.T.

identity is not some possession, by which we have to face ethical challenges, but is something continually reshaped by interruptions. The decisive question should be: What kind of event calls me into an ethical being, and how can I remain open to what I cannot master?

Levinas pushes this into the language of substitution: "...it is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation."<sup>25</sup> The self exists by standing in for the Other, bearing responsibility in its place. Waldenfels, in turn, insists that responsibility is haunted by what cannot be resolved. "Every answer remains haunted by the question it cannot suppress."<sup>26</sup> Taken together, these insights reconfigure subjectivity as fractured, heteronomous, and never completely finished.

Here emerges a dynamic conception of moral identity. At its origin, we do not find some stable subject, with his possession of virtues, or some rational coherence of his autonomy, but first of all the exposure, and the open-ended, unfinished, vulnerable subject, in its formation process. The moral self is not built once and for all, but rather, it is reconstituted in every encounter with alterity.

So, this is not ethics as a system, but ethics firstly as a rupture. The ethical behavior is not something initiated from within, but something that happens from without. It interrupts our imagined continuity, unsettles our self-possession, and makes us responsible.

## **6. RECONCILIATION**

But after all, what remains of the classical accounts? If they cannot stand as the origin of ethics, does that mean that it is totally worthless? I would certainly not agree. Their descriptions, though not about the first moment of morality, may still capture what comes after.

Take again Aristotle's idea of virtue as a second nature. "It is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself... about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general."<sup>27</sup> Virtue becomes a habit, character becomes firm, and the good life appears as something steady. But what if we read this not as the genesis of morality but as its sedimentation? On such a view, the original ethical moment is not the apprentice's training, but the encounter with alterity, the appeal, that unsettles. Habituation would then be the way the ethical event leaves its trace in daily life.

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<sup>25</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> "Jede Antwort bleibt von der Frage heimgesucht, die sie nicht los wird." Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 46. Translation is mine – A.T.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.1, 1139a25–31, 146.

Seen in this light, virtue is not the origin of responsibility but its continuation. Habituation becomes the labor of memory: it ensures that the shock of the event does not fade too quickly, that the wound does not close before it has transformed me. The steadiness of character is no longer an autonomous possession but a fragile memorial, the trace left by earlier interruptions, carried forward so that later ones may find me more responsive.

This perspective does not trivialize Aristotle or Kant. On the contrary, it grants their insights a different dignity. The cultivation of character, the discipline of habits, the pursuit of rational consistency — these are not the sources of ethics, but they help sustain it. Without them, the event might be forgotten; its shock may be dulled by time. With them, the subject remains prepared, not by securing itself in autonomy but by carrying within itself the echo of what has already exceeded it.

Thus, the gap between virtue and rupture is surely not absolute. “To be I is to be responsible before having assumed responsibility.”<sup>28</sup> Second nature is not the foundation of ethics, but it is how responsibility takes root in finite human life. Ethics originates in exposure, but it endures through discipline. The classical dream of stability is not false, but incomplete: stability is real, yet it comes after the fact, as the congealed form of earlier disruptions.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Bernhard Waldenfels invite us to rethink moral identity at its roots. Both turn against the classical image that morality is the work of stabilizing the subject, cultivating equilibrium, or gradually mastering oneself through reason and virtue. Instead, they point to a different origin: ethics begins not from sovereignty but from disturbance, from what breaks into continuity and obliges me to respond.

Levinas places this origin in the encounter with the face. The Other does not appear as an object among objects but as a presence that commands. The imperative “you shall not commit murder” is not derived from reason, nor is it chosen. It arrives as an intrusion that cannot be assimilated.

Waldenfels speaks instead of the alien that is not reducible to a norm or a clear command. The alien is a disturbance of sense, a rupture in meaning that escapes every domestication. It calls me, not through law, but through the question itself, that I cannot fully resolve, that always exceeds me.

In spite of their differences, both converge on a decisive reorientation: responsibility precedes freedom. Subjectivity itself is not the foundation of ethics but its effect. I am

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<sup>28</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 114.

not the sovereign originator but a responder, always at the second place. Whether in the commanding presence of the Other's face or in the unsettling intrusion of the alien, the self is constituted through encounters of alterity that he cannot control.

The consequence is, that moral identity cannot be described only as coherence, stability, or linear growth. It is not the product of virtue or the reward of autonomy. The true origin of ethics is the exposure, the openness to events that I cannot master, because my answers are never final or complete. We may therefore summarize, that ethics is mostly not a system but an event. It does not unfold as the steady progress of an autonomous subject, but as the repeated rupture of alterity. Levinas names this substitution, for Waldenfels it is haunting, but both point to a similar structure. Subjectivity is constituted not in mastery but in exposure. The value of their theories today lies not only in their critique of the stable subject, on a theoretical level, but in showing how fragility and exposure — as phenomena of our everyday life — can themselves be sources of ethical depth.

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**Péter Makai**

*University of Miskolc, Hungary*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5539-6926>

[peter.makai@uni-miskolc.hu](mailto:peter.makai@uni-miskolc.hu)

## RESPONSIBILITY AND EVENT. AN EVENT-ONTOLOGICAL OUTLINE\*

**Abstract:** The study examines the ontological and moral-philosophical interrelations between event and responsibility. It undertakes to develop an event-ontological approach in which being, event, and process are not sharply distinguished from one another, but rather interpenetrate — *perichoretically* — as mutually enfolded elements. The event is not a rupture in the rigid order of substances, but a process interwoven with the fabric of being, giving rise to the dynamism and metamorphosis of ontological structures. The acts and events that determine the structure and horizon of human existence are of decisive significance; some of these reach us in the form of acts performed by others. The second main thesis of the study is that the person's being is not a static given, but an ontic possibility that becomes actualized in the contingencies of encounter and of taking responsibility. Its medium is the field of influence referred to as the *proximity field*, and its form is the so-called *alternal responsibility* — one that stands neither on the ground of abstract duty (Kant) nor on that of radical otherness (Lévinas), and is grounded not merely in consequences or norms, but in the concrete and addressing presence of the second person, the 'you.' The existence and unfolding of the person fundamentally depend on whether someone assumes responsibility for that person. This active and supportive response opens the dynamic field of sacrifice and reciprocity. The background of the inquiry is provided by a branch of realist phenomenology — referred to here as *noumenology* — which conceives reality not as a construction of consciousness, but as an order that calls for response. Reality exists in itself and unfolds as a multiplicity of challenges that bear an addressing character. According to the conclusion, the event is not a radical rupture but a metamorphosis — an ontological arc or wave that, in certain cases, tends toward the other person. At the same time, the contingency of the event renders visible the weight of our freedom and responsibility: Personal existence is not a necessity but a possibility that reveals itself anew — again and again.

**Keywords:** *event ontology, responsibility, alternal responsibility, proximity, noumenology*

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Passacaglia ungherese  
— György Ligeti, 1978

## 1. EVENT, EXISTENCE, AND DYNAMISM: PERICHORETIC INTERWEAVINGS

In “On the Genealogy of Morals”, Nietzsche writes: “There is no such substrate; there is no ‘being’ behind the doing, acting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything.”<sup>1</sup> These lines anticipate several paths of inquiry that have shaped late-modern and contemporary philosophy. Our age — sensitive to change, and to all that is contingent, finite, or new — no longer sees the boundaries between the structures, processes, and events that determine existence as sharply separable. This stands in contrast to what much of the earlier tradition suggested — or, by analogy, what we once regarded as self-evident, namely, the clearly delimited contours of physical objects in sensory perception. The elements are malleable, mutually permeating, and intertwining — their very being is precisely this movement. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that much of the philosophy of the past century arose, in part, from the effort — more or less successful — to gain access to this distinctive dynamism, to make it visible and give it expression. After Hegel, however, this dynamism can hardly be explained within the framework of any universal law, precisely because of the contingency and situatedness of its elements.

The experiences of the past century have confirmed two key insights. (α) Events can decisively shape the lives and histories of communities and individuals. (β) We are profoundly exposed to the contingency of events — contingency that can also affect structures and processes which, at least at first sight, seem to be independent of us. Contemporary interpretations often describe the event as a happening that erupts into human reality with dramatic force and suddenness, fundamentally

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals”, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 45. The German original: “Aber es giebt kein solches Substrat; es giebt kein ‘Sein’ hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; ‘der Thäter’ ist zum Thun bloss hinzugedichtet — das Thun ist Alles”, Friedrich Nietzsche, “Zur Genealogie der Moral”, in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 5, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 279. — Nietzsche’s critique, by declaring the subject to be a fiction, calls into question the anchoring of action in the subject, thereby dissolving the traditional, substance-ontological boundary between act and event. In the absence of a stable subject, acts assume primacy — no longer accidental properties inhering in another — and take on an event-like character. The present study does not follow this path; yet Nietzsche’s thought continues to inspire those who, in seeking the possibilities of a more dynamic ontology, aim to emphasize the event-like and processual nature of being. Here the focus lies primarily on the interrelations between the ontological and the ethical planes, starting from the premise that acts performed by others are experienced as events by those affected by their consequences — events that may, to varying degrees, become integrated into the process of their existence.

overturning it. At the level of thought and of experiential (noetic) awareness, this is not without truth. Yet such a claim reverts to an ontological framework that assumes a sharp dividing line between structures and events, and that avoids the question of how existence, lived experience, and thought are interwoven — of their *perichoresis*. When, however, an event enters the layered fabric of existence, the structure of being transforms into a dynamically forming medium. Within this medium, event and existence are inseparably interwoven. I do not claim to have a clear synoptic view of this process — of its mutual permeations and intertwinings. Nevertheless, from my own field of research — the intersection of moral philosophy and philosophical anthropology — I can offer an illustrative example.

## 2. ALTERNAL RESPONSIBILITY AS THE MEDIUM OF PERSONHOOD

My basic assumption is this: The unfolding of the personal dimension of human existence is part of a gradual process of approach toward the other, made possible by the practice of taking responsibility for another person. Actions, their consequences, and the events and processes of the world fundamentally shape the course of life. Events that reach into a person's physical, mental, and social reality — and set various processes in motion within it — whether they are mere occurrences or the consequences of actions, can sometimes exert a decisive, even destiny-shaping, force. They can set the direction of a life and determine how its possibilities take shape.

Depending on the nature and strength of their involvement, persons, actions, and events together form a *transformative medium*. It is a medium in which — and through which — the dynamics of our human and personal existence either unfold or fall into decline; where the direction and quality of our lives are shaped. This field — beyond what we do, endure, or allow to happen — cannot be separated from the way others act towards us. Woven into this process may be a distinctive form of moral responsibility — one that is neither causal responsibility, nor role-responsibility, nor merely responsibility for the consequences of our actions, whether intended or unintended, foreseeable or unforeseeable.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is a practice grounded in action

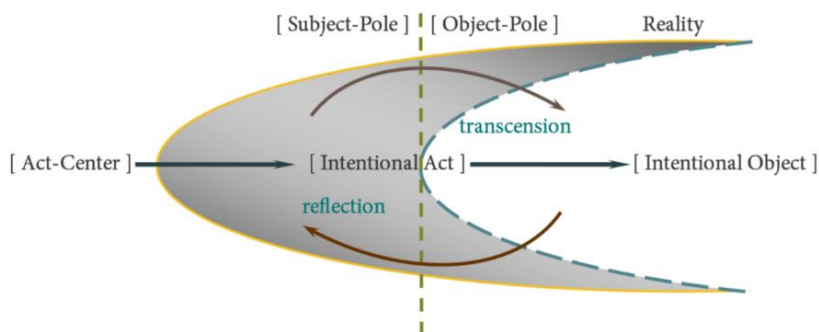
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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Max Weber's concept of *Verantwortungsethik* ('ethics of responsibility'). Max Weber, "Politik als Beruf", in *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winkelmann (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988), 505–560. Responsibility for the intended consequences of an action is a paradigmatic type of moral responsibility, whether it concerns the retrospective evaluation of an action's consequences ('retrospective responsibility') or the prior assessment of an intended action ('prospective responsibility'). Since Weber's famous distinction — contrasting the ideal-typical logics of responsibility ethics (*Verantwortungsethik*) and ethics of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) — modern responsibility theory has assumed an increasingly pronounced, and perhaps excessive, consequentialist character. Hans Jonas's ethical conception stands in this tradition, grounding responsibility in consequences that accord with a realistic vision of the future, above all in the

and presence, attentive to the existential dynamics, the situation, and the sphere of influence of the second person — a field actively sustained and shaped for the sake of the other's unfolding.

I have previously defined this as *alteral responsibility* (*alter*, Latin — noun: 'the other [of two]'; adjective: 'different, other'). Rather than being rooted in abstract duty or impersonal principle, it arises from lived proximity to another person and takes shape in response to the other's unique situation, presence, and needs. Philosophically this concept is most closely tied to the personalist tradition: To Scheler's affective ethics, Buber's philosophy of dialogue, and Wojtyła's philosophy of action grounded in self-giving.

While it shares certain affinities with Lévinas' thought, it maintains a critical distance from his ethics rooted in otherness. Alteral responsibility is a moral responsiveness that arises not from the other's alterity, but from the other's *second-person presence*: From the fact that the other is the one who addresses me, waits for me, or turns toward me within the ethical field — and equally from the fact that I, as first person, may address them, turn toward them, and initiate the encounter. The other is not merely a 'stranger' (*alterity*), but a 'you' (*alterity*) — in contrast to Lévinas's radicalization of responsibility grounded in strangeness. Responsibility, then, is not only response; it actively shapes the ethical relation through care, responsiveness, and openness toward the other — a form of practical attentiveness grounded in the person's intentional activity directed toward reality. (See *Figure I*)



**Figure I.** *Schema of Reality-Oriented Intentional Field* (after Makai 2014)

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anticipation of dangers. Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

A further remark is in order here: The fundamental significance of the living bond and attunement between person and reality — whether in the sphere of existence or of cognition — cannot be overstated when interpreting the person's place and responsibility within unfolding reality. I refer to this approach as *noumenology*: A distinctive branch of realist phenomenology that resists epistemological transcendentalism and conceives the unfolding of reality not as a construction of consciousness but within the horizon of the person's ontological and ethical openness. Reality is not merely a repository of objects to be known — whose existence and value we subordinate to arbitrary interpretive frameworks, conceptual constructions, or technological procedures — but a *response-inviting order*: It exists, it reveals itself, and thereby invites us to respond.<sup>3</sup>

Responsibility should be examined not only in terms of the consequences of actions, but also in terms of its scope and circles — that is, the sphere of persons for whose sustained existence, unfolding, and deepening we assume responsibility in accordance with our actions. These are the persons we care for, toward whom we act benevolently, or toward whom we are under a moral obligation to do good. The closer another person stands — or comes — to us, the greater the responsibility we owe them; and with it, the measure of our inward commitment and readiness to make sacrifices likewise increases.

In fact, everything that exists places certain claims upon us as human beings. We cannot, without contradiction, treat existing things merely according to our own preferences, whims, or unexamined desires. As intelligent and sensitive beings, we are capable of seeing beyond another's outward, perceptible presence: We can perceive, understand, and empathize with the manifold — and often hidden — intimations that emerge from the other person's inner sphere. These intimations — whether visible needs, manifest activities, discernible feelings, communicated thoughts, or narrated stories — help us to draw nearer, in a figurative sense, to the other person. They shed light on their uniqueness, on the mode of existence embodied in personhood, and on the goals and motivations that guide the dynamics of life. We can act responsibly — that is, take actions that, directly or indirectly, nurture the existence of another person in a given situation — only when we are aware

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<sup>3</sup> By *noumenology* I mean a realist phenomenological approach that stands in contrast to the twentieth-century *linguistic-hermeneutic turn*, which tends to treat all meaning as a linguistic-cultural construction or to subordinate it to the interpretive-mediating structure of *Dasein*. Such views appear to me as transcendentalist — indeed, Kantian. Noumenology, by contrast, holds that meaning resides in the things themselves (*in se*), not in what we ascribe to them, and that phenomenology should render this experience directly visible. This is no easy task, since we are bound to language, while symbolic mediation by itself is insufficient. Reality (*semper maior*) must contain within itself a *truth* independent of the human being.

of both the general aspects and measures of being human and the particular aspects and measures of personhood.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. PROXIMITY AND ASYMMETRY

Responsibility for the other, in its very nature, rests on three factors: ( $\alpha$ ) how close the second person is to us; ( $\beta$ ) what kind of relationship arises from this closeness; and ( $\gamma$ ) what specific tasks, duties, and obligations follow from this relationship, taking into account the second person's current situation and condition. According to degrees of proximity and distance, three types of alteral responsibility can be distinguished: Proximitic responsibility (*proximitas*, Latin — 'proximity, closeness'), mediative responsibility (*mediator*, Latin — 'mediator, intermediary'), and distalic responsibility (*distantia*, Latin — 'distance, difference').<sup>5</sup>



**Figure II.** Schema of Types and Circles of Alteral Responsibility in the Person's Field of Action and Influence (after Makai 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Humans are not reducible to instinctive pursuits. They not only perceive their own good (*bonum*) and that of others, but are also able to take it into account — whether in pursuit of their own goals or for the benefit of others. They are capable of approaching others through reasoned argument, imaginative intuition, emotional attunement, direct dialogue, or sustained coexistence. The ways in which beings relate to one another display an immense richness of forms — especially in human relationships. Self-sacrificing, selfless, and even selfish actions are possible only if we can recognize the goals and measures that complete the dynamics of existence and adopt perspectives other than our own. This is one of the deepest defining characteristics of human existence — and at the same time a prerequisite for the development of a moral point of view. For this reason, we are able to regard another person, living being, or thing for its own sake, to act solely in the interest of the other, or even to subordinate our own interests to the good of the other.

<sup>5</sup> These categories serve analytical purposes and cannot capture the full complexity of transitions within real phenomena. Likewise, the sharpness of these conceptual distinctions does not adequately reflect the stratification and intricacy of reality.

Let us highlight the first type in more detail: The responsibility borne for those close to us — relatives, kin, and friends — is a practical engagement that exceeds the symmetrical logic of mutual reciprocity. It is an attention and care animated by affection, manifesting as a steadfast commitment to the other's existence and flourishing. Through this, the first person's responsibility toward the second becomes irreplaceable, unconditional, and personal — even when the bearer of this responsibility is not the origin of the other's situation or suffering. In other words, it persists even when it does not fit the classical, consequence-based sense of responsibility.

(α) This is a fundamental condition that enables the realization and flourishing of personhood — that is, becoming a person. Without the presence, activity, and dedication of another person — in short, without their assuming responsibility — these processes slow down, stall, or even come to a halt. (β) It is not only a prerequisite for our personhood as existence, but also decisive for the unfolding of our personhood. It functions as one of the most important catalysts for moving toward one another — whether in a partial, one-way, or mutual, two-way relational field. Approaching, revealing, bringing forth the second person, and recognizing responsibility for the second person, are parallel and mutually reinforcing processes.

(γ) Since the proximity field of close human relationships creates the experiential horizon for the genuine revealing and unfolding of the second person, it is within this space that the authentic and concrete conditions for shifting perspective and adopting the other's point of view emerge. Here empathetic understanding, rooted in lived experience, takes shape, and the related skills are learned and practiced.<sup>6</sup> In this way, a shift in perspective born of approaching the other leads to recognizing the other — once distant or unknown — as a second person, and to transposing practical attention into a moral perspective. This process makes possible the comparison and more measured weighing of interests, needs, and goals. It is likely that the first person's personal and unconditional — though not infinite — responsibility toward the second forms the point of departure for all human relationships with moral significance, as well as for every moral framework that seeks to give form and order to the diversity of human relations.

One example is the well-known principle of reciprocity — the so-called *golden rule*. It functions as a proto-mechanism of justice, shaping the dynamics of our relationships, the character of our interactions, and even the sustainability of our social institutions. We can take into account the perspectives, goals, and interests of others in our decisions — and can reasonably expect them to do the same — only if

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<sup>6</sup> According to Bauman's thesis, the perceptibility and intensity of elementary, pre-social responsibility toward the second person — arising not from macro-social mechanisms but from direct interpersonal relations — are inversely proportional to the growth of social distance. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford / Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994.), 165–166.

sufficient proximity enables a realistic and mutual apprehension of one another's perspectives, goals, and interests. Without such closeness, we cannot help the other attain the goals they themselves regard as good, nor can we even recognize which of our actions might obstruct their aspirations. There are, undoubtedly, certain goods which, on the basis of general human experience, everyone — or at least most people — seek. In such cases, the interest attached to these goods may be assumed even in the absence of a proximity field.

However, we can only truly respect another person's specific needs and interests — whether we know them precisely or only infer them — if we have experienced the proximity field: That sphere of human closeness in which our own needs and desires have at some point become of paramount importance to someone else. More precisely, if there has been, or still is, a person who has lastingly reoriented the center of attention away from one's own life to ours. Such a reorientation — the turning of the first person's attention toward the second — always contains within itself the genesis of responsibility, much like the moment when we are confronted with the consequences of our own actions for others.

The asymmetrical practical logic of giving and sacrifice and the symmetrical logic of reciprocity undoubtedly reinforce each other: If we cannot rely on one another, we cannot truly give without interest. Yet reciprocity, by itself, cannot ground selflessness or acts of the heart — it can only uphold them. The origin always lies in asymmetrical devotion, in the gratuitous and freely given act that precedes all calculation and expectation. Everything else follows from this beginning. A newborn human being carries the potential to regard another person, living being, or thing as an entity in itself, to act solely for the sake of the other, or to subordinate *one's* own interests to those of the other. This anthropological endowment is of decisive importance both in the order of cognition and in the order of action.

#### 4. UNCONDITIONALITY, FINITUDE, TRANSCENDENCE

I agree with Max Scheler that the person retains one's transcendence throughout — and in this respect can never be fully comprehensible, objectifiable, or appropriable to the other.<sup>7</sup> However, if the distance of the stranger is truly infinite — *la distance infinie de l'Étranger*, as Emmanuel Lévinas puts it — and thus unbridgeable, then the other, along with otherness and personhood, becomes incomprehensible and inaccessible.<sup>8</sup> Such a conception of radical otherness ultimately undermines the

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<sup>7</sup> Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik: Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 2, ed. Manfred S. Frings (Bern / München: Francke, 1980), 389–390.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2000) 42, cf. 28.

possibility of closeness and responsibility. For a face to be recognizable as a human face at all, some kind of proximity field is necessary. Of course, a relationship may arise between two persons whose intimacy excludes the approach of a third. Likewise, there may be spheres of life to which no proximity field applies. Yet there is no such thing as absolute isolation that, in every respect, would preclude approach or responsibility. The encounter between persons — and with it, their capacity to affect one another — is a fundamental fact. And this fact necessarily entails at least a certain degree of transparency and accessibility.

It is doubtful whether moral awareness and respect for moral imperatives alone provide sufficient motivation for a person to do what they judge *right* in the face of competing inclinations. Formal and impersonal principles are generally insufficient. Without the proximity field, the second person becomes inaccessible or alien — so that neither the face itself nor its infinite otherness can be perceived. In such cases, the first person can at most illegitimately extend their own perspective to others — effectively imposing it on them — or adopt a hypothetically general point of view, as exemplified by Kant's categorical imperative. The obligatory moral respect owed to the other is, by itself, a weak driving force unless it is sustained by the motivational energies arising from the multifaceted experience of responsible proximity. The motivational basis necessary for the fulfilment of moral imperatives (*ought*) follows from the indicatives of attraction that arise within the proximity field — that belong to the domain of what *is*. Accordingly, when we move beyond its boundaries, we must reckon with normative forms of regulation that, though pertaining to different spheres of life, remain inseparable from the experiences and insights previously acquired within it.

Personal responsibility, as it takes on concrete form in the relationship between the first and second persons, is unconditional; yet it bears the mark of finitude in two inseparable respects. ( $\alpha$ ) Its extendability is sharply limited; ( $\beta$ ) its exercise depends on the resources and opportunities available at a given moment to the first person. At this point, indirect reciprocity assumes particular significance, namely, the lived experience that we ourselves may be the second person for someone else — that is, a person toward whom unconditional responsibility is directed. Not everyone, nor just anyone, can be close to us. As distance increases — from acquaintances, through familiar strangers, to entirely unknown strangers — the question arises: By what logic do various forms of moral or legal regulation that govern relationships come into play? And what reasons, motives, and commitments determine whether our orientation toward strangers is benevolent, indifferent, or hostile? The obvious answer is that religious and moral precepts, cultural patterns, collective traditions, and individual experiences that shape our way of life play a decisive role in forming that orientation.

## 5. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

What overarching conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing?

### 5.1. Contingency of Personhood

Our practical life is an interwoven network of reactions to events and spontaneous initiatives. Human activity is transformed into personal responsibility within the field opened by the proximity of the other. Three main factors fundamentally influence the open or hidden decisions — sometimes of inexplicable logic — that give way to actions arising from alternal responsibility and allow a human life and history to be shaped by this moral logic. ( $\alpha$ ) The number and demands of the assumed relations of responsibility; ( $\beta$ ) the indicatives of attraction — joy at the other's existence, gratitude for their unfolding, pain at their vulnerability, etc.; ( $\gamma$ ) the material and spiritual resources available to the person in a given situation.

Our personal existence — both in its ontological ground-structure and in its unfolding — remains exposed to the contingencies of encounter, of proximity, and of assuming responsibility. Personhood is not a necessary given but a possibility offered by the order of being, never guaranteed. Human life can indeed subsist without assuming responsibility toward the second person — yet such a life will possess an altogether different ontic structure. It is precisely this vulnerability and contingency that make visible the weight of human freedom and the stakes inherent in every turning toward or away from the second person. At the threshold of a posthuman epoch — one that sharpens, more than any before, the question of how we deal with humans and with our co-beings — there is scarcely any insight more important than this. The second person is not a rupture in the order of the world, but the promise of an ethical order of proximity.

### 5.2. Event as Continuity and Metamorphosis

In contemporary philosophy, the event is often conceived as an unforeseen and dramatic occurrence that fractures the accustomed order of the world. Yet the exposure, openness, and historicity of personal existence point to how sharp ontological boundaries cannot always be drawn between *structures of being*, the *processes* that dynamize them, and the *events* that set those processes in motion. Such distinctions acquire significance on the planes of lived experience and reflection. Within the proximity field, some of the events that befall a person are transformed into processes; otherwise neither pain nor joy could be woven into the fabric of life, could become an event in one's life, and then enter one's life history.

Consequently, an event does not bring about an (ontic) rupture, but rather interweaves itself with the existence it affects, to the extent that the organic order of life allows — however painful or joyful that permeation may be. Whatever takes place there and then as an event is at the same time a singular *continuation* and *metamorphosis* of the structure of existence it affects. This also means that an existential event has no end comparable to the clarity and suddenness of its historical beginning; it seeps into the layers of being, even breaking through them, unfolding into a process characterized by *partial continuity*. What has taken place is not merely a matter of remembrance or forgetting, but remains within us as a living and active element of human existence, in accordance with its particular stratification.

The upheaval of the soul is not annihilation, but a weightier step into the next moment. The contingency of the event is not a rupture, but a continuity — an ontological arc that opens, contingently, toward the other.

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**Zsuzsanna Lurcza**

University of Miskolc, Hungary

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9539-3510>

[zsuzsanna.lurcza@uni-miskolc.hu](mailto:zsuzsanna.lurcza@uni-miskolc.hu)

## MIDDLE VOICE AND MEDIALITY — PHILOSOPHICAL POSSIBILITIES AND LINGUISTIC CONSTRAINTS?\*

**Abstract:** This paper explores how languages that do not conform to the active–passive verbal diatheses can offer alternatives to subject-centered modes of thought. Benveniste noted that, in the ancient Indo-European middle voice, processes occur not outside but within the subject. Due to the marginalization of the middle voice, Benveniste emphasized the need for a new grammar of action. But can we conceive a grammar that is not organized around the subject? Nietzsche critiques the belief in the centrality of the grammatical subject: Language imposes the subject–predicate structure onto reality, suggesting an acting subject, whereas in fact, there is only happening. In constructions such as *der Blitz blitzt*, a pseudo-subject is grammatically forced. Heidegger’s verbal ontology — *die Welt weltet, die Sprache spricht, das Nichts nichtet, das Ereignis ereignet* — does not aim to unmask linguistic illusion but rather presents language as an event that discloses Being. If we attempt to rehabilitate the ‘philosophy of the middle voice’ against the binary opposition of active and passive voices, a fundamental question remains: Are we capable of distancing ourselves from this binarity at the level of language? Old Chinese, Japanese, and Korean do not clearly align with the active–passive verbal division. Byung-Chul Han describes Old Chinese as a language characterized by indifference to the active–passive distinction, as well as emptiness, absencing, and selflessness. In Korean, omitting the agent or patient evokes a sense of unfolding events. Japanese also has a verbal category (*jihatsu*) that expresses spontaneous action without an explicit subject. My thesis is that, although both the middle voice and Old Chinese, Korean, and Japanese are free from a strict active–passive opposition, in the case of the middle voice, the happening is internalized within the subject, whereas in the above-mentioned Far Eastern languages it is subjectless. In the light of Far Eastern languages, the middle voice, the problem of the subject, and the binary subject–object dichotomy, all embedded in language, appear in a new light.

**Keywords:** *language, middle voice, subject, subjectless, mediality*

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<https://doi.org/10.70832/EVENTanditsMediation.14>

## 1. MIDDLE VOICE AND MEDIAL MODE OF THOUGHT AS A PROCESS CENTERING IN THE SUBJECT

In modern Indo-European languages, the system of verbal voice typically distinguishes between the active and the passive voices. However, a third category, the middle voice, can be found in languages such as Classical Greek and Sanskrit. As Benveniste notes in *Problems in General Linguistics*, in the case of the middle voice, “the subject is the seat of the process, even if this process [...] demands an object; the subject is the center as well as the agent of the process”.<sup>1</sup> In ancient Indo-European languages, two diatheses existed — the active and the middle voice: “In the active, the verbs denote a process that is accomplished outside the subject. In the middle [...] the verb indicates a process centering in the subject, the subject being inside the process.”<sup>2</sup> While the active–medial structure was present in Classical Greek and Sanskrit, the middle voice no longer remained morphologically distinct in Latin. Nevertheless, many Latin verbs still exhibit medial characteristics, such as deponent and reflexive verbs. In the later historical development of Indo-European languages, the active–passive diathesis prevailed,<sup>3</sup> primarily due to the marginalization of the middle voice as a morphologically distinct category. The active–medial structure was gradually replaced by an active–passive paradigm.

In Hungarian, as a Uralic language, the middle voice existed as part of a tripartite division of verbal voices from the 16th to the late 19th century. After that, it disappeared from grammatical classifications; under German influence, the middle voice came to be regarded as reflexive.<sup>4</sup> Hungarian linguist Fejős summarizes: “The question of the middle voice remains an unresolved issue both in Hungarian linguistics and in the international literature. This fact is explained by the extremely complex nature of verbal voices.”<sup>5</sup> Abaffy defines the middle voice as typically not demanding a subject.<sup>6</sup> To this, Bene adds another characteristic, namely that the middle voice lacks an agent.<sup>7</sup> This can also be interpreted to mean that, in the case of

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<sup>1</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971), 148.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Miklós Nyíró, *Medialitás, eseményontológia, gyakorlat. Hermeneutikai útkeresések [Mediality, Eventontology, Practice. Hermeneutic Explorations]* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2020), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Annamária Bene, “Medialitás jelenségek a magyar nyelvben” [Phenomena of Mediality in the Hungarian Language], *Nyelvtudományi értekezések* 160, ed. Klára Korompay (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2011), 39, <https://doi.org/10.1556/9789634544401>.

<sup>5</sup> Edina Fejős, “A mediális ige kategóriája a régebbi magyar nyelvtanokban” [The Category of Middle Voice in Older Hungarian Grammars], in *LingDok. 4. Nyelvész-doktoranduszok dolgozatai*, ed. Balázs Sinkovics (Szeged: Szegedi Tudományegyetem Nyelvtudományi Doktori Iskola, 2005), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Erzsébet Abaffy, “A mediális igékről” [On Middle Voice], *Magyar Nyelv* no. 74. (1978): 280–293.

<sup>7</sup> Bene, “Medialitás jelenségek a magyar nyelvben,” 43.

the middle voice, the subject and object, the agent and patient, are not sharply distinguished; rather, the individual, so to speak, affords space to the process.

The marginalization of the middle voice from modern languages is closely connected to a shift in perspective: while languages with medial structures were imbued with a processual and event-like orientation, modern philosophy's subject-centered mode of thinking ultimately suppressed what might be called a 'middle-voiced mode of thought'. Benveniste prompts a new grammar of action.<sup>8</sup> But how could a new grammar of action be conceived? Or, more broadly, can philosophy open possibilities for a 'medial mode of thought'?

## 2. THE GRAMMAR OF BEING: NIETZSCHE, HEIDEGGER, AND DERRIDA

Nietzsche is profoundly distrustful of language. He outlines a kind of grammatical limitation, and even the treacherous nature of language. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he writes: "Language, so it seems, was invented only for what is mediocre, common, communicable. In language, speakers vulgarize themselves right away."<sup>9</sup> Words do not capture the essence of things — and, in fact, there is no such essence. Language, far from revealing reality, actively lies about it. Truth is nothing but a "mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms".<sup>10</sup> As Schlechta also pointed out, in Nietzsche's conception, grammatical structures operate as a form of belief.<sup>11</sup> The shared grammar of belief expresses the 'shared philosophy' of that belief. Grammar thus becomes a kind of *Volks-Metaphysik*. Nietzsche writes: "In fact, where there is affinity of language, owing to the common philosophy of grammar — I mean owing to the unconscious domination and guidance of similar grammatical functions — it cannot but be that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and succession of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation."<sup>12</sup> According to Nietzsche, it is highly probable that philosophers in other languages, where the conception of the subject is less developed, perceive the world differently.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, Nietzsche articulates the necessity of relinquishing this belief: "Is it not at length permitted to be a little

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<sup>8</sup> Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 145–151.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, trans. by Richard Polt (Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997) 66. Aphorism 26.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense," in *Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 2. ed. Oscar Levy (London / Edinburgh: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 180.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Schlechta, "Nietzsche über den Glauben in die Grammatik," *Nietzsche-Studien* no. 1 (1972): 353–358, <https://doi.org/10.1515/nietzstu-1972-010119>.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: The Modern Library, 1917), 22. Aphorism 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

ironical towards the subject, just as towards the predicate and object? Might not the philosopher elevate himself above faith in grammar?”<sup>14</sup>

Nietzsche formulates a critique of the faith placed in the central position of the grammatical subject as follows: “One believed in ‘the soul’ as one believed in grammar and the grammatical subject: one said, ‘I’ is the condition, ‘think’ is the predicate and is conditioned — to think is an activity for which one must suppose a subject as cause.”<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche also formulates a critique of subject–predicate logic, arguing that language imposes the subject–predicate structure onto reality, suggesting the existence of an active subject, whereas there is only happening. To illustrate this phenomenon, he uses the example of ‘the lightning flashes’, *der Blitz blitzt*: “Reason sees actors and actions everywhere: it believes in the will as an absolute cause; it believes in the ‘I’, in the I as being, in the I as a substance, and projects its belief in the I-substance onto all things.”<sup>16</sup> He treats the false subject formation in the statement ‘the lightning flashes’ in the following way: “Even as the people will separate the lightning from its flash and take the latter for the *doing*, the effect of a subject called lightning, so popular morality will sever strength from the manifestations of strength, as if behind the strong man there existed an indifferent substratum which *is free* to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, acting, becoming. ‘The doer’ is merely a fictitious addition to the doing; the ‘doing’ is all.”<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, for Nietzsche, the logic of grammar gives rise to false ontological and metaphysical assumptions. When we say, ‘the lightning flashes’, the grammatical structure compels us to assume a ‘thing’ — the lightning — that ‘does something’ — flashes — whereas there is no subject behind the action. Language forces a false subject where only a happening occurs, the subject is grammatically compelled into existence. Grammar thus artificially and compulsively creates a subject, a ‘doer’ or actor, immediately granting ontological status to ‘something’ that does not exist. Thus, for Nietzsche, grammar is a form of metaphysical idolatry.

Heidegger also articulates “the task of freeing grammar from logic”,<sup>18</sup> but — contrary to Nietzsche — in expressions such as ‘the world worlds’ (*die Welt weltet*), ‘language speaks’ (*die Sprache spricht*), ‘time temporalizes’ (*die Zeit zeitigt*), ‘nothing nothings’ (*das Nichts nichtet*), ‘thing things’ (*das Ding dingt*), ‘silence

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 41–42. Aphorism 34.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 61. Aphorism 54.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 20. Aphorism 5.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Genealogy of Morals. The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 10, ed. Alexander Tille (London: Macmillan & Co., 1897), 47. Aphorism 13.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 153.

silences' (*die Stille stillt*), 'ground grounds' (*der Grund gründet*), and the 'event events' (*das Ereignis ereignet*), Heidegger does not expose a linguistic illusion but rather presents language as an event that reveals Being. Whereas for Nietzsche the 'lie' of grammar leads to every action being falsely attributed to a subjective agent, Heidegger understands these verbal structures as the unfolding movement of Being itself. In *Language (Die Sprache)*, Heidegger outlines the encounter with the essence of language as "our own gathering into the appropriation"<sup>19</sup> (*Ereignis*) — as "*Versammlung in das Ereignis*".<sup>20</sup>

The verb does not say something about the world; rather, the world itself happens in language. Heidegger's 'verbal ontology' reinterprets the subject–predicate structure by subordinating it to the event-like nature of Being, whereas Nietzsche uses the same linguistic syntax to expose the hidden metaphysical presuppositions embedded in grammar. For Heidegger, language speaks as a disclosive activity of Being; in the poem, happening takes place: "naming [...] it calls into the word. The naming calls [*der Ruf ruft*]." <sup>21</sup> "The naming call bids things to come into such an arrival. Bidding is inviting. It invites things in, so that they may bear upon men as things."<sup>22</sup> These calls summon the coming of the world. "The world grants to things their presence. [...] For world and things do not subsist alongside one another. They penetrate each other. Thus the two traverse a middle. In it, they are at one. Thus at one they are intimate. The middle of the two is intimacy [...]. The intimacy of world and thing is not a fusion. Intimacy obtains only where the intimate — world and thing — divides itself cleanly and remains separated. In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their *inter*, division prevails: a *difference*."<sup>23</sup> This difference between world and things, which mediates, is expressed by Heidegger through the word *ereignet*. For Heidegger, Being (*Seyn*) is the *Er-ignis* — "*Das Wesen des Seyns als Ereignis*."<sup>24</sup> This *Ereignis* is the truth of Being. Moreover, the *Ereignis* is a kind of mediating middle (*ermittelnde und vermittelnde Mitte*).<sup>25</sup>

Grammar demands a subject. This is the basic structure in Indo-European languages. However, Heidegger attempts, with a philosophical–poetic gesture, to 'let it go', since language cannot be non-subject-like — unless we radically 'leave

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Language," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 188.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Sprache," *Unterwegs zur Sprache. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 19. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, "Language," 196.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*. *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 65, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

behind' language or attempt to speak in other ways: poetic, philosophical, spiritual, or foreign language, etc.

Deconstructing the central role of the subject, Derrida evokes the spirit of Nietzsche, seeking a grammar in which language is not organized around the subject. Derrida asks: "'Who comes after the subject?' the 'who' already signaling, perhaps, towards a grammar which would no longer be subjected to the subject."<sup>26</sup> Derrida advocates the deconstruction and displacement of the traditional role of the subject as the source of meaning and sense, as well as of the speaker's intentional authority. Outlining the *différance*, Derrida evokes the spirit of the middle voice: "We must consider that in the usage of our language the ending *-ance* remains undecided between the active and the passive. And we will see why that which lets itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these terms."<sup>27</sup>

If we attempt to rehabilitate a kind of 'philosophy of the middle voice' against the active-passive binary, a fundamental question remains: Are we truly capable of distancing ourselves from this binary at the level of language? Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* — in his dialogical essay between a Japanese Zen-Buddhist and an Inquirer — points toward a thought-provoking direction for approaching the subject embedded in language — and the subject-object structure — differently.

### 3. THE GRAMMAR OF ABSENCE IN OLD CHINESE, JAPANESE, AND KOREAN

Indo-European languages typically rely on the subject-object relationship, whereas Far Eastern languages such as Old Chinese, Japanese, and Korean do not clearly conform to the active-passive distinction of verbs. Byung-Chul Han refers to Old Chinese as a language of emptiness, of absencing, in which the characters possess no essential properties and lack lexical identity. As Han puts it: "Old Chinese is a language of emptiness and absencing. Its signs are highly mobile elements that do not, as such, possess any essential traits. Only within a specific constellation do they acquire an identity. When they are removed from their position, they return to their state of in-difference. In Old Chinese, signs without a fixed lexical identity are called

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, "Interview with Jacques Derrida," *The Symptom* 10 (2009): <https://www.lacan.com/symptom10a/interview-with.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 9.

‘empty signs’ [...]. The expression ‘empty’, *xu*, does not mean that they *lack* meaning. It is not a negation. Rather, something positive is associated with it.”<sup>28</sup>

Emptiness is also a central motif of Chinese thought, which does not associate fixed attributes with things: “The things behave like empty signs. They are not the carriers of a substance. Rather, they are *for themselves ab-sencing or in-different*.”<sup>29</sup> Lao-tzu writes: “Empty your mind”,<sup>30</sup> “Let yourself be empty”,<sup>31</sup> and “True fullness seems empty”.<sup>32</sup> In Zen Buddhism, emptiness is also a central concept, which stands in opposition to substance, made visible through division and differentiation. Emptiness has no substance. It does not annihilate, but rather prevents anything from gaining dominance or becoming ‘substantial’. This emptiness is thus not simply negative theology, denial, or nihilism. It also resists the *horror vacui* — the dread of nothingness.

Han also refers to Old Chinese as a language of in-difference: “Old Chinese is itself a language of in-difference, a flowing language, a language of flowing. It is extremely supple and rich in transitions, intermediary levels and combinations. The grammatical value of Old Chinese signs cannot be unambiguously defined. They are situated on a continuum. [...] most signs exhibit a great deal of flexibility. [...] The grammatical value of a sign is not a fixed *property* of the sign. Rather, it is the result of its relations, that is, the context.”<sup>33</sup>

In Saussure’s structuralist theory, language is a network of differences.<sup>34</sup> The meaning of a word arises from how it differs from other words — linguistic value is relative and negative. Derrida emphasizes the “play of differences,”<sup>35</sup> which is nothing other than the condition of possibility for the functioning of the sign. The language system consists of differences, where “on the one hand, these differences *play a role* in language, in speech as well, and in the exchange between language and speech. On the other hand, these differences are themselves *effects*.”<sup>36</sup> Every concept arises in relation to another. Meaning is never fully fixed; it is always displaced onto other signs. Derrida highlights the impossibility of fully determining meaning, while

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<sup>28</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Absence: On the Culture and Philosophy of the Far East*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 65–66.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>30</sup> Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> Han, *Absence*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Ferdinand Saussure, *Grundfragen der Allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, ed. Charles Bally et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967), 139, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111547503>.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, “Différance,” 11.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Han points out even the meaningless nature of fixation in a language whose internal flexibility inherently excludes the application of rigid categories. The Old Chinese worldview is not based on oppositions, but on complementarities and continuum. There is no need for presence or its absence, for identity or for difference.

This kind of indifference — and neutrality — does not remain only at the linguistic level, but permeates the entire worldview. Zhuangzi said that we should treat all things equally<sup>37</sup> and allow them to change freely in their own course. He invites us: “Why not join with me in inaction, in tranquil quietude, in hushed purity, in harmony and leisure?”<sup>38</sup> There, all distinctions disappear. In this state of indifference, *difference* dissolves, and deliberate action is replaced by non-action or inaction.

Han outlines that Heidegger’s notions of *being*, *home*, and *dwelling* stand in contrast to the images of *non-being*, *non-dwelling*, and *aimless wandering* in Chinese philosophy and Zen Buddhism. Han also recalls that: “The wise man wanders where there is ‘no door and no house’” and “he walks in the ‘directionless’.”<sup>39</sup> Zhuangzi says: “I go nowhere and don’t know how far I’ve gotten. I go and come and don’t know where to stop.”<sup>40</sup> Han refers to Buddhism also as “a religion of ‘dwelling nowhere’”.<sup>41</sup> This is a different kind of wandering than Heidegger’s — a non-dwelling, distinct from ‘being-at-home’, or ‘being home in-the-world’ — where the absence of essential being becomes predominant. In Zen Buddhism, too, the image of an alternative mode of wandering takes on a central role: “A Zen monk should be without fixed abode, like the clouds, and without fixed support, like water”,<sup>42</sup> and “a good wanderer leaves no trace”.<sup>43</sup> We can learn nothing about an agent and its intentions whose wandering is directionless and unfolds in a non-linear temporality. Lao-tzu’s wanderer walks in the “directionless”.<sup>44</sup> It is not dwelling, but wandering that defines existence there: “The fundamental topos of Far Eastern thinking is not being but the way.”<sup>45</sup> Here, Han nuances the differences between *being* and *path*, *dwelling* and *wandering*, *essence* (*Wesen*) and *absencing* (*Abwesen*) — a kind of *selflessness*. Selflessness was also present in Confucius’ thought. Han recalls that

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<sup>37</sup> Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>39</sup> Han, *Absence*, 5, quoting Zhuangzi.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6, Han quoting Zhuangzi.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 5, Han quoting Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki: Unterweisungen zum wahren Buddha-Weg* (Heidelberg: Werner Kristkeitz, 1997), 168.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 1, Han quoting Lao-tzu.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

“Confucius did not self”.<sup>46</sup> Here, the ‘did not self’ verbalizes the ‘self’. These reflections evoke images of selflessness, and emptiness, where someone becomes a no one — though not a Heideggerian *das Man*, but not even an authentic being, no *Entschlossenheit*, no heroism. This is a wandering along a path that is itself empty. Emptiness overrides categorical distinctions — the binary logic of subject and object, active and passive. At this point, it is less about ‘finding’ oneself than about ‘losing’ oneself — not the question of *Wie kommt der Mensch zu seinem Selbst?*<sup>47</sup> Not the acquisition of an authentic mode of being, nor of a home or a homeland.

Turning to Jullien, in relation to Chinese culture, he foregrounds the concept of *blandness*, which he associates with not-being in terms of boundaries — with neutrality, indefinability, evanescence, restraint, intermediacy, transience, and balance. Blandness, in this sense, functions as a kind of middle: a continuous transition that links different aspects, brings them into contact, and opens them to one another. For Jullien blandness “pays little heed to the borders our various disciplines like to draw among themselves. As the embodiment of neutrality, the bland lies at the point of origin of all things possible and so links them.”<sup>48</sup> Blandness, in its evanescence, resists disclosure through any methodical search: “Blandness represents a balance, an intermediate moment, a transitory stage constantly threatened with obliteration.”<sup>49</sup> This pervades the entirety of Chinese culture, exemplified most characteristically by the absence of clearly identifiable flavor, yet it is equally present in landscape painting, poetry, and aesthetics. Jullien emphasizes that “according to the Daoists of antiquity, the very foundation of reality, in its infinite fullness and renewal, reveals itself to us as ‘bland’ and ‘flavorless’”.<sup>50</sup> Lao-tzu: “When it passes through [...] the mouth, the Dao is insipid and flavorless: it cannot be perceived, it cannot be heard, but it is inexhaustible.”<sup>51</sup> Jullien explains that when no particular flavor manifests itself, the experience of tasting becomes all the more intense, since nothing can be assigned to it. Here, flavor is thus not understandable in itself; it has no self — or, in Han’s terms, it is absence — but is rather relative. The transparent flavor ‘by flavorless’ unites all flavors and reconciles them with one another. Therefore, the sage finds the flavorful in the flavorless and acts by nonaction or inaction — as Lao-tzu

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen II–VI (Schwarze Hefte 1931–1938)*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 94, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2021), 6.

<sup>48</sup> François Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, trans. Paula M. Varsano (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 23.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 42. Jullien quoting Lao-tzu.

recognizes.<sup>52</sup> In the same spirit, so too does the principle of non-governance. While Han places the concept of absence at the center of his thought, Jullien foregrounds the notion of blandness. He regards blandness as a distinctive quality of Chinese culture, and even as the quality of the middle.

Now we turn to a few examples from Korean and Japanese. In translating from Korean into Western languages, Han highlights a crucial aspect. He explains that, for example, the phrase '*I think that...*' would sound highly unusual in Korean, and the translation '*the thought occurred to me*' would likewise be inadequate. Even the kind of expression typical of a middle voice — “the reflexive pronoun ‘itself’ subjectifies the thought. The Korean expression lacks all subjectivity”<sup>53</sup> — illustrates this point. Han emphasizes that in the Korean language, the equivalent of ‘*I think that...*’ represents a different logic: “The thought is somehow there, without me doing anything for it. It lies there without imposing itself on me or anybody else. Nor is there a passive subject that suffers something that is happening. What is put into words is a simply lying there; *no one* is really *involved*. [...] In a certain sense, the speaker is completely absent.”<sup>54</sup> Since there is no active or passive subject, and even the reflexive verb is questionable, the absence of a subject and a sequence of occurrences or events come to the forefront: “The Korean language does not distinguish unambiguously between active and passive. In turn, it can very well express happenings in which no subject is involved either as acting or suffering, a happening that simply *takes* place or *comes* about. [...] In Far Eastern languages, the subject is often left out altogether, so that the verb stands alone, making an unambiguous assignment of an action to a subject impossible. Because of the frequent absence of a subject, the description of an *action* often gives the impression of a sequence of *happenings* or *events* in which no one in particular is involved.”<sup>55</sup>

Han also gives an example from Japanese: “Japanese also has a form for verbs that is neither passive nor active. In Japanese, a happening that takes place by itself is called *jihatsu*. The reflexive ‘by itself’ of the English, again, destroys the character of a happening expressed by the Japanese form. There is no subject making *itself* felt in the happening.”<sup>56</sup>

Summarizing these points, although both the possibilities offered by the middle voice and the examples from Old Chinese, Korean, and Japanese resist reduction to a purely active–passive opposition, in the case of the middle voice — as Benveniste outlined — the event takes place within the subject; however, in the examples from

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>53</sup> Han, *Absence*, 74.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 77.

Old Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, the event is subjectless. This raises the suspicion that even in the case of the middle voice, subject-centered thinking may occur when viewed from the perspective of languages such as Old Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.

#### 4. ACTION WITHOUT AN ACTOR, AND ACTION WITHIN THE LOCUS OF THE EVENT

Whereas in the philosophy of Heidegger — and also of Gadamer — language plays a central role, since understanding is always linguistically mediated; there is no ‘raw’ being, only interpreted being, and the world reveals itself in language as hermeneutic medium, the Far Eastern philosophies reactivated by Han and Jullien locate truth and being not within language, but in intuition and silence, in a realm ‘beyond’, ‘before’, or ‘outside’ the linguistic.

In relation to Far Eastern art, Jullien notes: “We are speaking here not of an absolute ineffability (that is, in the metaphysical or theological sense: that which, by definition, transcends all language and remains incommensurable with it) but one that is *relative*: the ineffability that lies at the root of all language but that all language is destined to lose as soon as it begins to assert itself.”<sup>57</sup> Han also emphasizes that the unsayable does not belong to Far Eastern thought: “Language is renounced not because of a ‘not enough’ but because of a ‘too much’.”<sup>58</sup> It is not a matter of secrecy or mystery, but simply of suchness. This perspective recognizes neither a division between the known and the unknown, nor the search for hidden truths behind appearances.

As Lao-tzu puts it: “The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.”<sup>59</sup> Thus “the Master acts without doing anything and teaches without saying anything”.<sup>60</sup> The *Zen kōan* likewise suggests that knowledge is not attainable through rational thought or linguistic explanation, but only through direct experience — an experience that precedes or exceeds language. Practices oriented toward this pre-nominal experience are primarily meditative or intuitive in nature, aiming to transcend conceptual thinking and attain a form of insight prior to naming or interpretation. The middle voice gestures toward this ‘pre-linguistic’ unity, in which subject and object, agent and patient have not yet been sharply distinguished in language.

The following concepts are taking shape: on the one hand, *silence, emptiness, blandness, selflessness, neutrality, restraint, and absence*; on the other hand, *language, substance, thinghood, selfhood, will-to-power, presence*, and the varying

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<sup>57</sup> Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 80.

<sup>58</sup> Han, *Absence*, 83.

<sup>59</sup> Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

conceptions of the *middle*. On the one hand, the middle is also connected to neutrality. According to Jullien, in Confucius, neutral means “not characterized more by one quality than by another”.<sup>61</sup> Following Han, the notion of the middle may be described as an attunement to the flow of the world — characterized by absence and indifference. This middle is an *empty middle*; in fact, the middle itself is absent, since anything anywhere can be the middle. It is free of everything, even of itself.<sup>62</sup> There is no essence, no foundation, *Grund*, or innerness.

The idea of emptiness also appears in Heidegger. In his essay *The Thing*, he describes the round dance of the fourfold (earth, sky, divinities, mortals),<sup>63</sup> where the elements mirror one another, yet still remain substantially distinct. In fact, through their gathering, the elements seem to acquire a kind of essentiality. Even if the center of this dance is an empty middle, he appears to suggest a state of inwardness.

While the metaphysical tradition has become aware of the problematic nature of subject and the subject–object structure, its destructive, deconstructive, or postmodern efforts rarely succeed in moving beyond the limits of this structure. The void left by the supposed disappearance of the subject inevitably calls for a substitute — something to fill the gap. This often leads to positing a hidden, unrevealed, or speculative essence, something unknowable or noumenal.

Han points to another distinction as well: While Derrida also questions identity and substance, his approach nonetheless ‘remains foreign’ to Far Eastern thought: “The negativity of these thinkers brings them close to absencing and emptiness, but the idea, typical of Far Eastern thinking, of a world-like totality, of the weight of the world, is alien to them, as it is to all postmodern thought. In Far Eastern thinking, emptiness or absencing ultimately has a collecting or gathering effect, whereas ‘différance’ or ‘rhizome’ cause an intense form of dispersal. They disperse identity, push diversity.”<sup>64</sup>

The marginalization of the middle voice — and of medial thinking more broadly — constitutes not merely a loss of linguistic form but also a loss of worldview. One could juxtapose these understandings of subjectivity: that of the active, mastering or passive agent, and that of a subjectless or in subject-centered, process-oriented perspective. In the description of the middle voice, the individual affords space to the event, whereas the middle, as outlined by Han and Jullien, is the field of emptiness and simple being-

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<sup>61</sup> Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 49.

<sup>62</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*. Translated by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 7. “The worldview of Zen Buddhism is not directed upwards, nor is it oriented towards a centre. It lacks a ruling centre. One might also say: the centre is everywhere. Every being forms a centre. As friendly beings that do not exclude anything, each being reflects the whole in itself.”

<sup>63</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 178.

<sup>64</sup> Han, *Absence*, 16.

thus. Emptiness is a field of potentiality. In a similar way, mediality does not bring its own content but rather constitutes the condition for the flow of content.

*Language is the medium through which the world reveals itself* — and — *in the emptiness of the middle, being dissolves*. Be that as it may, the middle is not a fixed position but a flow that seeks to be without subject and object. The middle voice, then, is not merely a linguistic remnant, but the trace of a radically different ontology — where action is not subordinated to the subject, nor to the subject–object dichotomy, but happens *on its own*. Thus, action without differentiating could take shape, on the one hand, as *an action without an actor* and/or, on the other hand, as *an action unfolding within the locus of the event* — as a pre-subjective ontology in which subject and object, agent and patient, have not yet sharply differentiated.

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**Lasma Pirkatina**

*Independent Scholar*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6689-3633>

[lasma.pirkatina@inbox.lv](mailto:lasma.pirkatina@inbox.lv)

## A TYPOLOGY OF EVENTS\*

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**Abstract:** The following article first examines the origins of event thinking in continental philosophy. It is a relatively new topic and is essentially connected to the critique of the subject in postmodernity. The subject has lost its unity, transparency, rationality, and power of cognition and action. It has become a passive receiver. This transformation of the world and the image of the subject is also expressed in event philosophy and is continued by it. Event philosophy confronts the subject, which has become passive, with the Other, which comes unpredictably and uncontrollably and changes everything.

Nevertheless, the concept of an event is ambiguous. There is no unified continental philosophy of the event. This article attempts to present some essential approaches. It focuses primarily on the phenomenological-hermeneutic, structuralist-poststructuralist, and metaphysical or negative-ontological approaches to the study of events.

Finally, the article presents the typology of events developed by the author. It is an attempt to classify various events according to their structures. The goal of this project is, on the one hand, to preserve the diversity of the event. A typology consciously works against a totalitarian and uniform philosophy of events. On the other hand, it works structurally, not limiting itself to specific events but grouping individual events into types. Within this theoretical framework, the events of life become more organized and visible. Life is illuminated.

**Keywords:** *postmodernity, the Other, passivity of the subject, event, typology*

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### 1. THE EVENT AS A PHILOSOPHICAL TOPIC

For the understanding (however one should understand it) something is already understood. The understanding does not ask questions about it, it builds knowledge on it. Some of this prior knowledge, which is the conditions of the possibility of further knowledge, can be grasped by the understanding, some never.

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I would argue that the event has already become prior knowledge in (continental) philosophy. First simply as a topic. The topic is well known. Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Marion, Claude Romano are well-known thinkers of event philosophy. In addition, there are countless authors who didn't develop a theory of the event, but who nevertheless described it. And by now, the findings about the event have also become well known and accepted. It is said that an event is a singular exception, a break-in of the new, unpredictable, sudden, changing the world, truth, people, and time. Isn't it paradoxical that something that is by definition extraordinary can become ordinary and — I say — has become ordinary?

But originally, nothing is ordinary. Originally, everything is new and astonishing. The event, too, emerged in philosophy at some point as an extraordinary, new topic. The arrival of the event in philosophy is often linked to Heidegger's late philosophy — the philosophy of the event. It is equally common to say that the event has only become a central theme of philosophy in contemporary French philosophy — under a significant influence of Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's philosophy of being.

But like most cultural innovations, philosophical interest does not stand alone alongside other areas and changes. The interest in the event is a phenomenon of postmodernity — the era of European culture since the mid-20th century, which is characterized by the loss of faith in the constant and eternal, the necessary and inevitable, the rational and objective, the absolute and unambiguous. From now on, change, the possible and the random, the subjective and the relative, the singular and the ambiguous are important. What counts is the place of origin of creation, the uniqueness and the infinite horizon of the possible. Postmodernity no longer places the human being at the center of the world; the human being is no longer free, rational, and omnipotent; it can no longer fully understand the processes of the world, and even less itself. The human being becomes part of the world; it must give up control over everything, including itself; the human being is characterized by a fundamental passivity. Seen in this light, postmodernity is not an age of loss — it is gaining a completely different perspective on the world and humanity.

On the one hand, the postmodern human being is free. It is the locus of creative activity. It recognizes and transforms the world. And it bears responsibility for this. This is the human being as we have known it since modernity, i.e., the 17th century. On the other hand, the postmodern human being is thrown into the world; it is not free in relation to it. In *Sein und Zeit* from 1927, Heidegger defines the human being as *Dasein* (there-being) and 'being-in-the-world' as the 'basic state of *Dasein*'. He writes:

Dasein is never 'proximally' an entity which is, so to speak, free from Being-in, but which sometimes has the inclination to take up a 'relationship' towards the world. Taking up relationships towards the world is possible only *because* Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is.<sup>1</sup>

The world has the human being, not the human being the world. The world approaches it, the human being becomes the recipient, and all it can do is to respond somehow. In *Étant donné* from 1997, Marion calls this recipient *adonné* (the gifted) and fundamentally distinguishes it from the modern subject:

The gifted can therefore be understood by definition only insofar as and as long as it receives and thus receives itself. Better, it must receive in order to receive itself. Everything that contradicts the reception of the given not only would render it unintelligible, but would make it disappear. Without reception of the given, nothing more — no gifted — comes after the 'subject'.<sup>2</sup>

The world is free, but the human being is less so. And that which is free — that which is free from the subject — is the Other. This Other, which freely approaches the human being, is the event. The event is the confrontation with this Other. The human being becomes that with whom the event occurs and who is constituted by the event — not the other way around. In Romano's terminology from 1998 in the book *L'Événement et le Monde*, the human being becomes the *advenant* (the term is difficult to translate):

*Advenant* is the term for the human being as constitutively open to events, insofar as humanity is the 'capacity' to undergo unsubstitutably what happens to us. The humanity of the human being means being open to events in a way that allows one to understand them and to understand oneself starting from them as *advenant*.<sup>3</sup>

The topic of events is a postmodern phenomenon, but in my opinion, it would be inconceivable without the idea of a free subject. Only when a subject is placed at the center of the world, behaves freely toward it, bears sole responsibility for its actions,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, UK / Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 2001), 84. Originally published as *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, transl. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 308. Originally published as *Étant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: PUF, 2005), 424.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Romano, *Event and World*, transl. Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 54. Originally published as *L'événement et le monde*, 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 1999), 75.

and is aware of this, can something like an event become visible. Only the over-empowerment of the human being makes its powerlessness visible. Yes, postmodern thought is critical of modernity, but without the latter, it would not be possible.

If thinking does not proceed from a free and self-conscious subject, but instead from a world order, that is, a system in which individuals are merely parts of this whole, that is, if thinking does not focus on a subject but rather on the functioning of a system, this experience of the encounter between the subject and its other does not exist. For example: Globally — i.e., from a systemic perspective — the death of a soldier is merely a number. The meaning of his death is exhausted by what it means for the respective political, social, religious, or economic situation. Only from the perspective of a free, self-reflective subject is death a tragedy, the intrusion of a terrible thing into a person's world — thus, an event. For systemic thinking, the death of this soldier is explainable, perhaps even justified. For a subject, it is never explainable or understandable, but rather an expression of the world's freedom — thus, an event.

Freedom is the condition for thinking about the unpredictable, the singular, the different — indeed, even for the fascination with it. Where freedom is not practiced, this fascination doesn't exist. There, the different is either ignored or considered dangerous, even fought against. There, people are afraid of free decisions and change. There, the system is lived.

The events become visible and only have meaning for a free individual, responsible for his or her own life or for a democratic community. From a systemically totalitarian perspective, the singular and random are not only meaningless, a marginal remark, but also something that should be fundamentally eradicated.

## **2. THE METHODOLOGICAL QUESTION**

To say that the event is unique, unpredictable, and shocking, that it is an encounter with the Other, that it is a new beginning, is an appreciation. It doesn't mean simply saying that there are coincidences and exceptions. It is an expression of a fascination. This fascination comes from a free and powerless, passive self. It receives something that is also free, something beyond its control.

How can one talk about this other — which eludes the subject? How can this encounter be addressed? I could roughly distinguish three approaches in event philosophy. The first is the phenomenological-hermeneutic, the second is the structuralist-poststructuralist, and the third is the metaphysical or negative-ontological. The phenomenological-hermeneutic approach assumes that the event shows itself. Therefore, it should be described as the recipient sees it. This is the

purpose of the phenomenological method. However, in event philosophy, it does not mean reducing what shows itself to a phenomenon. The event is never merely an appearance of an I — because it comes from the Other. This raises the question: What does the Other tell us when it shows itself in some way? And this is where hermeneutics comes in. One attempts to understand what is happening, starting from a phenomenologically tangible experience. Marion and Romano are important representatives of this approach because, on the one hand, they remain within the phenomenological tradition, but they also expand it to give the Other a place in phenomenality, without reducing it to the phenomenon of the I. And both of them develop a hermeneutics as the interpretative response of the I to the inquiry of the Other. Romano speaks of an “evential hermeneutics”,<sup>4</sup> and Marion of an “endless hermeneutic”.<sup>5</sup>

The structuralists and poststructuralists attempt to do without a subject altogether, and for a valid reason: For them, the subject is merely a product (not even an equal, albeit passive, recipient) of various physical, psychological, ontological, transcendental, historical, cultural, linguistic, etc., processes; consciousness and all its contents, self-consciousness — are merely epiphenomena. Accordingly, it is important to see and understand these processes, their structures, and their transformations; it is important to understand that these processes are the Others of the subject, that the subject cannot catch up with them because it is the result of these events.

Deleuze is a thinker of the event who observes events from the perspective of processes and their structures, and not from the perspective of an I. Instead of speaking of a subject and its world of experience, in one of his most important books — *Logique du sens* from 1969 — he speaks of an “impersonal transcendental field”.<sup>6</sup> What kind of field is this? Firstly, it is not the environment of an I, not its horizon of experience. But neither is it something that would belong to a transcendental subject in Kant’s sense. Secondly, it is not the external, physical world in the sense of the natural sciences. The transcendental field is detached from the subject-object dualism and simply exists in itself. What happens there is the distribution, branching, movement, and transformation of ‘singularities’.

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<sup>4</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 49; *L'événement et le monde*, 69; and Claude Romano, *Event and Time*, transl. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 7. Originally published as *L'événement et le temps* (Paris: PUF, 1999), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, transl. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 104. Originally published as *De surcroît: Études sur les phénomènes saturés*, 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 2010), 131.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, transl. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 98. Originally published as *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 120.

Singularities are simply something — one could say: unities of sense — that do not belong to a subject (as in the phenomenological tradition), but to language. The singularity is a sense in the same sense that a sentence has a sense, merely detached from the subject that understands this sense. To understand this structuralist-poststructuralist approach, it is important to be able to consider that the self, the subject, or the object are not substantial entities, but merely units of sense — emerging in this transcendental field. The emergence, distribution, and redistribution of singularities are what Deleuze calls events, and all events of the transcendental field — “the Event”, “the Unique event”:

The metamorphoses or redistributions of singularities form a history; each combination and each distribution is an event. But the paradoxical instance is the Event in which all events communicate and are distributed. It is the Unique event, and all other events are its bits and pieces.<sup>7</sup>

A similar approach to the other of the subject, that is, to the event as that which constitutes and transforms consciousness and its contents, cognition, and knowledge, has been adopted by such event philosophers as Michel Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*,<sup>8</sup> or Jacques Derrida in his early philosophy, in *Grammatology*.<sup>9</sup> And I would argue that even Thomas S. Kuhn works similarly in his project of *Scientific Revolutions*.<sup>10</sup>

I would like to include those thinkers who, in this Other, with which the self is confronted, also consider the transcending of the world (partly in a religious sense) within a metaphysical approach. They assert not only the non-phenomenal Other, but the Absolute Other. For them, the event not only means the encounter with something extraordinary, but always also has religious connotations. A prime example in this context is, of course, Levinas. For him, the event is the encounter with the Other in the form of the ‘face’, which in turn is the manifestation of the ‘Infinite’. In his 1974 work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Levinas denies the phenomenality of the Other:

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<sup>7</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 56; *Logique du sens*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, transl. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London / New York: Routledge, 2002). Originally published as *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore / London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Originally published as *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

It [the face – L.P.] escapes representation; it is the very collapse of phenomenality. Not because it is too brutal to appear, but because in a sense too weak, non-phenomenon because less than a phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

But he not only excludes the face from the horizon of conscious experience, but reads it as a ‘trace’ of ‘the Invisible’:

That trace lights up as the face of a neighbor [...].<sup>12</sup>

I call this approach metaphysical because Levinas himself called his philosophy ‘metaphysics’. Particularly in his earlier work, *Totalité et Infini* from 1961, he distances himself from ontology — the philosophy of being — in order to speak about what is beyond being, namely, the Infinite.<sup>13</sup> Michel Henry works somewhat similarly, seeing in bodily experience, which is simultaneously self-affectation, the self-revelation of Life, whereby Life is equated with God. This self-affectation would be the event of the encounter with God as Life.<sup>14</sup>

I would classify event thinkers as belonging to the negative-ontological approach, who deny not only phenomenality to the event, but also fundamentally the being. The event is not a being; it doesn’t even exist. It happens. It is a pure event. Heidegger is a thinker of this kind. In a short essay from 1962 — “Zeit und Sein” — he sums this up:

We say of beings: they are. With regard to the matter of ‘Being’ and with regard to the matter of ‘time’, we remain cautious. We do not say: Being is, time is, but rather: there is [*es gibt*] Being and there is [*es gibt*] time.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 88. Originally published as *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (Dordrecht / Boston / London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 112.

<sup>12</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 12; *Autrement qu’être*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague / Boston / London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 42–46. Originally published as *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l’extériorité*, 4th ed. (The Hague / Boston / London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), 12–18.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, transl. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). Originally published as *C’est moi la vérité: Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Time and Being,” in *On Time and Being*, ed. J. Glenn Gray and Joan Stambaugh; transl. Joan Stambaugh (New York / Hagerstown / San Francisco / London: Harper & Row, 1972), 5. Originally published as “Zeit und Sein,” in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, Gesamtausgabe vol. 14, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007), 29. The problem with the English translation, of course, is that it has to render the German expression ‘*es gibt*’ as ‘there is’, even though it actually means ‘it gives’. However, most of the text’s argument is based on ‘*es gibt*’, making it difficult to follow in English.

But what about the event? The following:

However: The event neither is, nor there is the event. To say one or the other is to reverse the situation, just as if we wanted to derive the source from the stream. What remains to be said? Only this: The event occurs [*ereignet*].<sup>16</sup>

If one wanted to define more precisely what — or rather, how — the event is, one could say that the event is the very emergence of something. The event gives. It is not What It Gives:

Accordingly, the It that gives attests itself in the ‘There is [*es gibt*] Being’, ‘There is [*es gibt*] Time’, as the event.<sup>17</sup>

In other words: The event is the ‘beginning’. In the unpublished texts of his late philosophy, Heidegger speaks enormously about the event as beginning. The event is nothing; there is no event. Event begins. Only when It begins there is Being and do beings exist. In the unpublished manuscripts from 1941, he states succinctly:

The event is the beginning.<sup>18</sup>

Alain Badiou also addresses the purely event-like character of the event, which excludes it from ontology. In his 1988 work *L'être et l'événement*, he defines the event as “that-which-is-not-being-qua-being”.<sup>19</sup> What is the event if it has nothing to do with being, if it is the radically Other? It is the break-in itself that changes everything.

I would also like to include Derrida’s philosophy of the pure gift, or event, in the negative ontological approach, although he doesn’t quite claim that the event doesn’t exist. His radical exclusion of the event from phenomenality (i.e., experience) is so extreme, however, that it almost makes the event disappear for us. In a well-known sentence in *La fausse monnaie: Donner le temps I.* from 1991, he states:

[I]n any case the gift does not *exist* and does not *present* itself. If it presents itself, it no longer presents itself.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I choose my own translation for once, since in Joan Stambaugh’s English translation, the word ‘*Ereignis*’ is translated as “appropriation”: Heidegger, “Time and Being,” 24; “Zeit und Sein,” 29.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, “Zeit und Sein,” 24. (Translation is mine – L.P.)

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Über den Anfang*. Gesamtausgabe, vol. 70 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2005), 47. (Translation is mine – L.P.)

<sup>19</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, transl. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), 13. Originally published as *L'être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, transl. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 15. Originally published as *La fausse monnaie: Donner le temps I.* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 28.

Derrida advocates a very radical conception of the Other — its mere appearance to us destroys it as the Other. An event that appears is no longer an event; it no longer exists. But only for consciousness. In a discussion with Marion in 1997, Derrida explains his position:

I said, to be very schematic and brief, that it is impossible for the gift to appear as such. So the gift does not exist as such, if by existence we understand being present and intuitively identified as such. So the gift does not exist and appear as such; it is impossible for the gift to exist and appear as such. But I never concluded that there is no gift.<sup>21</sup>

In my book on a possible typology of events,<sup>22</sup> I argue that even if our experiences are constituted by some initial processes beyond our grasp, our experiences are nevertheless the only source on which we can base our knowledge. Even that which we say is beyond grasp, that it does not belong to us, is given to us only through our experience. The experience of being beyond grasp is also an experience. Therefore, when considering events, I advocate the phenomenological method as the primary one. The Other of the self is not merely a phenomenon, but it is only given phenomenologically.

However, since the event is not just a phenomenon, but — as we experience it — also existent in itself, it can also be examined ‘objectively’. This means asking what it is like in itself, how it happens in itself, how it happens to the I. This approach is similar to the structuralist approach, because it involves asking which structural processes characterize the event — excluding the conscious experiences but nevertheless based on them.

### 3. THE EVENTS IN LIFE AND A POSSIBLE TYPOLOGY

Is the event merely a philosophical topic that requires the right method so that the philosophy of events can arrive at true insights? Not at all. And that is very important. Events exist everywhere — in the media, science, literature, art, history. Birth, love, revelation, death are all events in our lives. Events happen everywhere, every day, to each of us. The events in philosophy are only a part of all of this. This means: If one wants to understand events, it would not be enough to study existing philosophical theories. One would have to study life, in which the most diverse events — including philosophical ones — occur.

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 59.

<sup>22</sup> Lasma Pirkatina, *Zur Philosophie des Ereignisses: Eine Typologie* (Dresden: Text & Dialog, 2023).

Furthermore: Events are not simply a part of life. They are what is different in our lives, what strikes us, fascinates us, takes on meaning for us, and is ultimately the most important thing in life. The beautiful, but also tragic, things in life, extraordinary situations, special encounters, unexplained secrets, upheavals, and new beginnings — these are our events. They are what makes life truly worth living for us and perhaps even gives life meaning. And as such, events are what we remember, what we continually revisit, and what we talk about in our lives.

Events are what makes life worth living and worth narrating. This is the starting point of my philosophy of events as a typology. I begin with narratives — representations of events in the broad sense that recount the event-like experiences that have occurred. Such accounts of events can be found everywhere — in everyday conversations, in literary texts, in historical documents. I also view philosophical texts about events as descriptions of specific experiences.

It strikes me, however, that these countless depictions address a wide variety of events, but on the other hand, that some of them are also similar. This gives me the idea of investigating the similarities between life events, specifically structurally. There are events that are structurally similar. If one takes a structural approach, one can discover similar events — events that belong to the same type. Structure here means the general manner in which they occur.

In my typology, I have distinguished a total of nine types of events: The event of the world, of truth, of a self, of vitality, of trauma, of stepping outside oneself, of the in-between, of entanglement, of beginning, and of the end. This sounds very abstract at first. But behind all these types lie very concrete event-like experiences that are familiar to many of us.

A world event occurs when something extraordinary happens in the external world. The media reports on it, people talk about it, and it is passed on. A snowstorm cuts off an entire village from the world, a mass murderer is caught after ten years, the first space tourists fly into space — these are events of this kind. Major events such as revolutions, wars, or important political decisions that change the world find their place in history books. However, a world event remains worldly only insofar as the self that experiences it is not involved. If the self itself is affected, this external event becomes an event of the self.

The events of truth are situations where the world suddenly appears different than before. Suddenly, one sees everything with completely different eyes. The world itself doesn't have to change — what changes is the truth about it. Such events are leaps in thought, experience, and perception. Scientific revolutions, as defined by Thomas S. Kuhn, belong to this type of event.

Both the events of the world and of truth are, in a sense, external to the self. It experiences them from outside. The events of the self, on the other hand, are

extraordinary phenomena and inner states of the self that distinguish it from the ordinary course of inner life. These are private events, such as unexpected beauty, stillness, liberation, etc. I also include transformations of the self in this type of event. It's about the self becoming something else — it is transformed, it itself becomes different, and it notices this. Many literary and cinematic works of art deal with this theme.

A special type of events involving the self are events of vitality. Following Michel Henry, I claim that in the experience of its own vitality, the self transcends the objective, material world and is able to perceive life everywhere and recognize it as something primordial and all-unifying.

The shocks to this inner life are events of the self. If they have a positive effect on it, they are events of the self in the strict sense of the word. If they destroy it, they are called traumatic events. Traumatic events inhibit the self from being itself, from living at all. It is no surprise that, in this context, there is a deep connection between philosophy and psychoanalysis, psychology and psychopathology in general.

Events of stepping outside oneself are encounters with the Other in the strict sense. Through the Other — this can be another person, but also revelations — the self is ejected from its world. It is no longer just about itself. It is given a task; it must assume responsibility. Famine in Africa can be this Other that causes the self to step outside itself. The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas focuses on these kinds of events.

When individual selves enter into a relationship that breaks with superficial contact in the ordinary world and instead touches, supports, and transforms the inner lives of those involved, the event of the in-between occurs. It is not an encounter with the absolute Other, but rather a relationship of equals based on the individual experience of belonging. The individual selves feel destined for one another. Friendship, love, and family can be structurally described in this way.

Events of entanglement can be spoken of when certain worldly and/or interpersonal constellations exceed the capacities of the self. The self no longer knows what is happening, what it should do, what is right and what is wrong. The coronavirus pandemic was such an event for all of us.

Finally, I distinguish the events of the beginning and the end. These are encounters with facts that can never actually be experienced and yet — as conceivable — can shock us profoundly. One such event is, for example, the thought of one's own death. But Heidegger's event of the beginning would also belong to this type. Essentially, it is about the emergence of something from nothing.

Of course, one might ask why a typology of events is necessary at all, and whether there aren't fewer or more types of events? A typology seems important to me in order to demonstrate that events vary greatly in their concreteness. There

can be no single, comprehensive philosophy of events. A typology works against a totalitarian and uniform philosophy of events. On the other hand, it works structurally, not limiting itself to concrete events, but grouping individual ones into a type. This makes life's events more visible. It's about life that is illuminated. Whether the nine types of events will remain will be revealed by future research on this topic.

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**Ulrich Arnswald**

University of Innsbruck, Austria / University of Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7126-9806>

[arnswald@ulrich-arnswald.de](mailto:arnswald@ulrich-arnswald.de)

**“DEATH IS NOT AN EVENT IN LIFE. DEATH IS NOT LIVED THROUGH.”  
(TLP 6.4311) – DEATH AS AN EVENT AND AS THE BOUNDARY OF THE  
WORLD IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN\***

**Abstract:** Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, is an intellectual giant whose work is not only proving enduring but is even more flourishing today than during his lifetime. Only one of his works was published during his lifetime, but it made him a legend in the world of philosophy: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

One sentence in the *Tractatus* that urgently requires interpretation is TLP 6.4311, in which he asserts: “Death is not an event in life. Death is not lived through.” This sentence is surrounded by other sentences that allow for an analysis of what Wittgenstein refers to as ‘an event in life’ on the one hand and ‘the experience of death’ on the other.

Wittgenstein’s thesis that ‘death is not an event in life’ has far-reaching consequences: If death is not an event in life, then it does not belong to the world. Although death is neither part of the world nor an event in life, it forms a boundary for the living and their experience. With death, temporality ends, which also points to this boundary.

The philosopher does not assign any value to death. Death is neither positive nor negative, but simply a neutral event. Life only acquires meaning through death. In view of the reality of death, ethical questions are also considered, because every person must die as a human being and face death itself.

With death, not only life ends, but also the world. The world ceases to exist because the subject ceases to live. Thus, the precondition for the world is no longer given. The existence of the subject ends. Wittgenstein reveals himself to be a transcendental idealist, since the transcendental subject does not belong to the world but is a condition of the world that ends with the death of the subject.

**Keywords:** *Ludwig Wittgenstein, death, event, life, boundary*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many consider Ludwig Wittgenstein to be the greatest philosopher of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> The Austrian philosopher is undoubtedly an intellectual giant whose work is not only proving enduring but is even more flourishing today than during his lifetime. During his lifetime, only one work was published, but it immediately made him a classic and a legend in philosophy: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

One of the passages most urgently in need of interpretation in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP),<sup>2</sup> first published in 1922, is the sentence TLP 6.4311, where he claims: "Death is not an event in life. Death is not lived through." This sentence is surrounded by further sentences that allow a closer analysis of what Wittgenstein refers to, on the one hand, as an 'event in life' and, on the other, as the 'experience of death'. Whether this allows for an adequate understanding and description of Wittgenstein's view of death is the subject of the present study.

The article also attempts to examine what, according to Wittgenstein, is accessible to human consciousness under these circumstances and what this means for our approach to death.

## 2. TWO POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SENTENCE "DEATH IS NOT AN EVENT IN LIFE"

Looking at the first part of TLP 6.4311, the sentence "Death is not an event in life", two meaningful interpretations are theoretically possible, although one would make little sense:

The first possible interpretation would be that death is not a fact at all. This is contradicted by the fact that there would then be little need to talk about it, which would not make much sense, because in life we experience the death of others insofar as they are no longer accessible to us afterwards. Death is therefore something that affects us in life, even if we do not experience it ourselves. Nevertheless, the loss of other people constantly reminds us of our own mortality. In the death of others, we encounter death, even if not as our own personal experience.

Of course, the sentence could be phrased more clearly then as follows: 'The experience of death is not an event in one's own life.' That would obviously be much more precise if Wittgenstein had intended it that way. But precisely this can be

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Duncan Richter, *Historical Dictionary of Wittgenstein's Philosophy* (Lanham / Boulder / New York / Toronto / Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 1; cf. Joaquín Jareño-Alarcón, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Meaning of Life* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Blackwell, 2023), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London / New York: Routledge, 1996). All further quotations from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* are cited according to the usual TLP seal and sentence number and always refer to the edition cited here.

questioned. The fact that he does not do so probably indicates that Wittgenstein wants to refer to something else. There must be a good reason why he deliberately left the sentence in the *Tractatus* unclear. I shall return to this point later.

Let's now look at the second possible interpretation: It could mean that if death is not an event of life, it does not belong to the world either. One only experiences events while alive and conscious. Since death is the absence of consciousness, the person who has died cannot experience his or her own death. It is an end, not a phase that one lives through.

This means that while death is a real occurrence, it is not an event within our lives because we cannot be conscious of it; it is the cessation of all experience. To experience something, one must be alive, and death is the end of that state, making it inaccessible to consciousness. Since experience requires being alive, it is impossible to experience death itself.

However, death thus represents a boundary of what can be experienced in life. Although death is thus not a part of the world and not an event in life, it constitutes a boundary for the living and their experience. The world, for a living person, is his or her visual field or sphere of experience. Death, in this view, is not an experience within that world, but rather the point at which the world itself ends for that individual.

With death, temporality also ends, and this too points to the said boundary. Temporality is therefore a concept that only makes sense in life. In Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, temporality is treated as a form of timelessness, where eternity is not endless duration but timelessness, and "he lives eternally who lives in the present" (TLP 6.4311).

This perspective is linked to the idea of the world as a fact, existing in a moment outside of sequential time, with the present being the only aspect of our 'world' that we experience, and when we die, our world dies with us.

### 3. DEATH IN THE WORLD

At this point, things become a little more complex: Wittgenstein begins his *Tractatus* with the sentence: "The world is everything that is the case." (TLP 1) Since the death of other people exists in the world, death also exists in the world. When we say that someone is dead, it means to us that our experience of that person as an individual has come to an end. All that remains is the corpse, the body of our former fellow human being, but not the person him- or herself. In this context, it becomes clear that a certain way of talking about death makes sense in life.

In TLP 4.024, Wittgenstein says: "To understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true." And this is precisely the case here. We understand what the case is, if the statement is true. Here, Wittgenstein is clearly not referring to death in

the sense of human experience in life, i.e., not to one's own death, which cannot be reflected in a sentence in life, since there is no experience in life that could convey the experience of death to us. If it were, otherwise, it would also be logically inconceivable.

So, when Wittgenstein says, "Death is not an event in life", he is talking about the experience of death as an individual experience of each person. A division into purely objective existence and subjective existence (as a self-aware ego) seems here most appropriate. Wittgenstein, who maintains his focus on individual experience, confirms this view in his *Notebooks*, where we also find the sentence "Death is not an event in life", albeit with the addition "It is not a fact of the world".<sup>3</sup>

The difference between 'in life' and 'in the world' is important because, although it refers to the self, the statement in the *Notebooks* now confirms that it is about individual experience, not the death of others, which also manifests itself in the world, but in a different way. To put it more clearly: Talking about the experience of one's own death in life or in the world is not comparable to talking about the death of others and the associated experience of loss. But the *Tractatus* also returns to this point, albeit in different words: 'Death is not lived through', which is also clear insofar as hardly anyone can expect to experience the death of another person in life.

So, what does that mean? Any conversation about death in life cannot say anything about one's own death as an event. It can only refer to an event that will occur in the future, but whose experience lies outside our world. However, since we cannot talk about something that we cannot experience in this world at all, talking about it makes no sense. In the case of our own experience of death, we do not know what the case is if it is true, so it is pointless to talk about it here in a literal sense.

One might think that this says it all. But this cannot be the case, if only because Wittgenstein understood his *Tractatus* primarily as an ethical text, as he wrote to Ludwig von Ficker in a famous letter:

The point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write for you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: the one which is here, and of everything which I have not written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, strictly speaking, it can ONLY be delimited this way.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), NB, 8.7.16, 75e. All quotations from Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* are cited according to the usual NB seal and date and always refer to the edition cited here.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Letters to Ludwig von Ficker," in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*, ed. Charles Grant Luckhardt (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 94f.

#### 4. ETHICS AND DEATH AS A BOUNDARY

Based on this understanding, one must ask the question: Where does ethics come into play here?

Wittgenstein does not attach any value connotation to death. Death is neither positive nor negative, but simply a neutral event. However, according to Wittgenstein life only acquires meaning with death.<sup>5</sup> In the face of actual death, ethical issues are considered, because every person must die as a human being and face death itself.

Already during the First World War, while writing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein's search for the meaning of life took on existentialist traits.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that Bruening states: "This notion of a false life has some connection with what some existentialist call bad faith or inauthenticity."<sup>7</sup> The fact that Wittgenstein says nothing about how one should live one's life stems from his postulate that the world is independent of the will of the subject (cf. TLP 6.373),<sup>8</sup> that means that the objective world's factual reality does not depend on individual desires or intentions.

Wittgenstein succinctly sums up the idea that the right and therefore ethical life can only be seen against the backdrop of death in his *Notebooks 1914-1916*: "Fear in face of death is the best sign of a false, i.e., a bad, life." [NB, 8.7.16] For Wittgenstein, this necessitates constant examination of one's own conscience and life. The question always arises as to whether one is living the wrong life instead of the right one and whether one therefore needs to change one's life.

This ethical examination is only necessary in the face of death, because only the boundary of death requires us to reflect on and define our own lives at all. Wittgenstein himself pursues these thoughts, which arise from the perspective of death, in phases, even into his dreams,<sup>9</sup> when he writes: "*I am often thinking about*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Movements of Thought: Ludwig Wittgenstein's Diary, 1930–1932 and 1936–1937* (Lanham / Boulder / New York / Toronto / Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2023), MT 4.2.[37]; MT 9.2.[37]; MT 15.2.[37]; MT 17.2.[37]; MT 20.2.[37]; MT 22.2.[37]. All quotations from Wittgenstein's *Movements of Thought* are cited according to the usual MT seal and date and always refer to the edition cited here. Cf. NB, 8.7.16, 75e.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "'A Test of Fire of One's Character' – Ludwig Wittgenstein's Self-Examination by Means of War in World War I." *Journal of Austrian Studies* 57, no. 2 (2024): 84f.

<sup>7</sup> William H. Bruening, "Wittgenstein's View of Death," *Philosophical Studies* 25 (1976): 61.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "The Paradox of Ethics – 'It leaves everything as it is,'" in *In Search of Meaning*, ed. Ulrich Arnswald (Karlsruhe: Universitätsverlag Karlsruhe, 2009), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein even enlisted for service in World War I, not primarily to serve his homeland of Austria, but to learn how to live a good life in the face of death and to purify himself. He wanted to experience physical and psychological extreme situations on the battlefields, which would enrich him as an experience and provide him with insights into how he should lead his life correctly. Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "'Die Furcht vor dem Tode ist das beste Zeichen eines falschen, d.h. schlechten Leben.'

*death now & about how I will prevail in the anguish of death, & the dream relates to that.*” [MT 9.2.[37]]

The bridge is built in the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein says in TLP 5.621: “The world and life are one.” So, if this is the case, then the following applies: With death, not only life ends, but also the world. The world does not change, but it ceases to exist because the subject ceases to live. With the death of the subject, the precondition for the world is no longer given. The existence of the subject ends. In this way, Wittgenstein reveals himself in TLP 5.632 “The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world.” to be a transcendental idealist, since the transcendental subject does not belong to the world but is a condition of the world that ends with the death of the subject.

According to Wittgenstein, death is not an event in life (in the world) because:

Firstly, it is the death of the subject, and the transcendental subject does not belong to the world,

and

secondly, the transcendental subject is a condition of the world, so that the death of the subject is the end of the world.

As an interim summary, Wittgenstein’s position can now be described as follows: Death is *not* an event in the world; death is *not* experienced; death does *not* change the world but rather causes it to cease to exist.

Here, too, one might want to conclude, but the question would remain open as to why Wittgenstein believes that TLP 5.632 “The subject does not belong to the world but is the boundary of the world.” — is true, in other words, how does he know that the subject represents the boundary of the world.

## **5. DEATH AS THE END OF EXPERIENCE**

The prerequisite for talking about individual death as an experience is to know what happens when the statement is true. However, when death occurs, the individual whose life has ended can no longer express their experience of this circumstance. Death can no longer be articulated intersubjectively and is thus not a human

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– Ludwig Wittgensteins Suche nach dem Sinn des Lebens inmitten des Ersten Weltkriegs,” *Contributions of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society* 23 (2015): 15; cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Private Notebooks 1914–1916* (New York, N.Y.: Liveright Publishing Corporation; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), PN 29.7.16: 185.

experience in life. According to TLP 4.024, there are therefore no sentences that satisfy the requirement: "To understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true."

This means that we associate a person's existence with their life; their non-existence is associated with death. However, according to TLP 6.4311 non-existence is interpreted as eternal in the sense of timelessness from the moment of death. This means that the dead are permanently dead, and this cannot be equated with the loss of existence.

In other words, when someone is dead, they can no longer say anything about the loss of existence; while they are alive, they cannot articulate anything about it because they have not yet had the experience. Thus, death is outside of life and non-existence. However, death remains an event on the border between life and non-existence.

It now follows that: Since death is the end of the world and refers to the individual subject, which as a transcendental subject cannot be part of the world because it cannot gain this experience in the world, death itself cannot be regarded as an event that takes place in the world. Death therefore must lie outside the world and is therefore beyond our experience.

Death is therefore a singular event in every respect: It does not take place in life or in non-existence. However, one cannot say that this moment of experience does not exist. It is the transition from life to death, and thus an immediate event that is neither an event in death nor an event in life, but an event *sui generis* — between life and death.

This allows Wittgenstein to make another statement in TLP 6.431 that seems strange at first glance: "As in death, too, the world does not change, but ceases." Here, he refers in a smooth transition to the preceding sentence from TLP 6.43: "The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy." These are the last two sentences before TLP 6.4311. What he describes here means that there is such an abrupt transition not only between life and death, but also between happiness and unhappiness, that the world changes suddenly and it is impossible to determine where the boundary between happiness and unhappiness lies.

This might be true in terms of the boundary, but hardly true in terms of the experience of happiness and unhappiness, since both can be experienced in the world by an individual — but never at the same time. However, it is also true that the world remains the same regardless of whether someone is happy or unhappy, and this also applies when someone dies, since moral feelings do not change the facts of the world. Only a dead person is no longer part of the world. Their world ends, because TLP 5.631 gives us the reason: "I am my world. (The microcosm.)"

This makes it clear that the end of our world, death, is also not the subject of a world in which everything is that is the case. But it is just as little a part of eternity,

because it is not unlimited in time. Death says nothing about eternity. Death refuses to accept the ontological structure of any given situation. It is an in-between. Therefore, Wittgenstein does not give it either a positive or a negative connotation.

## **6. WORLD AND LIFE**

In TLP 5.621, Wittgenstein equates world and life, when he states: “The world and life are one.”

He believes that the boundary between the subjective experience of life and the objective totality of the world is not clearly defined. Such a boundary also arises between the world and language, but this will not be discussed here and has already been elaborated elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> To say that the world exists is also to affirm the existence of life within it and to establish a connection between subjective experience and the world of facts.

Life defines the existence of a subject, since it is their world and thus a world. It can therefore be concluded that a world can only exist if it is the world of a subject, i.e., a human being. Conversely, every subject is always a world unto itself. This reveals the unity of life and the world. TLP 5.621 means that the world and life form a kind of inseparable unity, but at the same time it does not mean that the totality of facts of the world must literally be identical with life, which is the life of an individual.<sup>11</sup>

But if every human being is a world in itself, then death does not destroy the world, since it only exists as long as the subject exists. However, if death takes the subject with it, i.e., destroys the ego, then it can no longer belong to the world, since it has destroyed the ego that constituted the world. Thus, if each person is a unique ‘world’ or ‘totality of facts’ in their subjective experience, then death, being outside of experience, does not destroy that world, but rather marks its end.

From this we derive the following conclusion: Death is not an object of the world. Not only is it not experienced, but it is also not even part of the world, since the world is always bound to an ego. With death, the world ends, and the world of the subject lives only as long as the subject lives.

But if death is not part of the structure of factual circumstances in the world, the question arises as to what nature an event can be. It seems like the field of aspect

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, “Das Unsagbare und die Grenzen der Welt. Ludwig Wittgenstein über Ausdrückbarkeit und Intelligibilität in Relation zu Gadamer,” in *Hermeneutik und die Grenzen der Sprache*, eds. Ulrich Arnswald, Jens Kertscher, and Louise Röska-Hardy (Heidelberg: Manutius Verlag, 2012), 113–140.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Richard McDonough, “The ‘Mystical’ Phenomenology of the ‘Life-World’ in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus,” *META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2021): 572.

perception, which Wittgenstein introduces into his philosophy using reversible images. Here, too, it is something more immediate, changing the world in a matter of seconds, which does not correspond to the comprehension of a fact.<sup>12</sup> Death must therefore be something instantaneous and immediate. It does not occur gradually. It is undoubtedly also the end of all capacity for experience.

Death as my death is not one of the events that make up my life. It only definitively ends it. What is decisive for a life is the metaphysical relationship of the self to the world. Because death transcends the existence of a subject, it is possible to give one's life direction, especially in terms of the ethical aspects that so preoccupied Wittgenstein.

We associate a person's existence with his or her life, given that life and world are one. Every person can therefore always determine what they live for. The unambiguous statement 'The experience of death is not an event in one's own life' would therefore have been too clear. It would have removed the reflection on the authorship of life in the face of inevitable death, which is still possible for everyone, because life and world are one, and death does not determine the events of life.

The world is always my world. We can talk about its existence insofar as there is a subject that conditions the possibility of the world. On the other hand, the self is only possible because the world, by definition, requires the subject as a prerequisite.<sup>13</sup> The subject is the epistemological and metaphysical prerequisite of the world. The concept of the world is tied to the subject's perception.

For Wittgenstein, our personal world exists only in our lifetime, and when the individual dies, his or her subjective world also ceases to exist. If the subject is the prerequisite of the world, then the thesis becomes clear that the world does not change at death but comes to an end; if the prerequisite of the world ceases to exist, the world must also end.

With the death of the subject, the precondition for the world is no longer given. The existence of the subject ends. In this way, Wittgenstein reveals himself in sentence TLP 5.632, which asserts that the subject does not belong to the world, but is only a boundary of it, as a transcendental idealist, since the transcendental subject, the I, does not belong to the world, but is a condition of the world that ends with the death of the subject.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, "Zur Analogie von Wittgensteins Konzept des Aspektwechsels und der wissenschaftlichen Metapher als Vehikel der Innovation," *Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society – New Series* 26 (2019): 357–373.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. NB, 12.8.16.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Wittgenstein argues that 'Death is not an event in life' because we cannot live through it. Thus, death as my death is not one of the events that make up my life. It only ends it. When death occurs, we no longer exist to experience it. Death in this sense is the end of experience in life.

This perspective is linked to the idea of the world as a fact, existing in a moment outside of sequential time, with the present being the only aspect of our 'world' that we experience. When we die, our world dies with us.

Rather, it is the metaphysical relationship of the self to the world that is decisive for life. The idea that 'every human being is a world in itself' suggests that everyone's experienced world is a unique totality of facts. If this individual world ceases to exist upon death, it's not because the world itself was destroyed, but because the subject experiencing it is gone. Therefore, from the perspective of death, one's own world doesn't change; it simply ceases to be experienced. Therefore, death does not change the world but rather brings it to an end.

Life can be given direction because death transcends the existence of a subject. This enables reflection on life and thus the question of ethics, of what constitutes a meaningful life. Every human being can therefore consciously give their life direction. The fulfillment of the purpose of existence encompasses the pursuit of the absolute, as Wittgenstein explicitly propagates: "And the only absolute is, to battle through life toward death, like a fighting, a charging soldier. Everything else is wavering, cowardice, sloth, thus wretchedness." (MT 20.2.[37])

Since the realization of one's own impending death leads one to question one's own way of life, ethics develops as the art of living correctly. If it were otherwise, it would have eliminated reflection on the authorship of life in the face of inevitable death, which is still possible for everyone because life and the world are one and death does not determine the events of life.

Our personal world exists only during our lifetime. When a person dies, their subjective world also ceases to exist. But if the subject is the prerequisite for the world, then Wittgenstein's thesis that the world does not change upon death, but rather comes to an end, is understandable. This is logical, because if the prerequisite for the world ceases to exist, then the world must also come to an end.

With the death of the subject, its existence ends and the prerequisite for the world is no longer given. Wittgenstein reveals himself as a transcendental idealist. For the ego, the transcendental subject, does not belong to the world, but is a condition of it, which inevitably ends with the death of the subject.

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**Yuewen Hu**

Nankai University in Tianjin, China

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3449-7566>

[hu\\_yuewen@163.com](mailto:hu_yuewen@163.com)

## EXTENSIONALIST ONTOLOGY AND EVENT INDIVIDUATION: BASED ON QUINE'S LOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF HERACLITUS'S THEORY OF RIVER\*

**Abstract:** Taking Quine's logical reconstruction of Heraclitus's *Theory of River* "No one can step into the same river twice" as its starting point, this paper critically explores the potential explanatory power of Quine's extensionalist ontology for the problem of event individuation. While Quine himself never explicitly endorsed the ontological status of event, his two criterion of ontological commitment and his criterion of spatiotemporal continuity for an entity provide a unique analytical tool for grounding event individuation. By analyzing Quine's distinction between *river* (as four-dimensional spatiotemporal continuum) and *river stage* (as instantaneous component), this paper argues that reducing event individuation to the demarcation of spatiotemporal regions offers a way to bypass longstanding controversies in traditional event metaphysics.

The diachronic identity of an event does not depend on changes in attribute (such as the replacement of water molecules or differences in flow states), but is solely determined by the continuity of the spatiotemporal region (the integrity of the four-dimensional trajectory).<sup>1</sup> This criterion not only addresses identity disputes arising from the confusion of entity and attribute but also provides a unified logical framework for the individuation of event. The study further points out that Quine's theory resolves traditional metaphysical dilemmas through the semantic ascent strategy, transforming the issue of event identity into the delineation of spatiotemporal regions at the level of linguistic logic, thereby offering a methodological paradigm for naturalistic metaphysics.

The conclusion highlights that although Quine's theory does not directly address event ontology, his extensionalist framework, by rigorously rejecting intensional standards,

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Heller, *The Ontology of Physical Objects: Four-Dimensional Hunks of Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4–6.

provides a logically parsimonious and metaphysically lightweight alternative for event individuation. This reconstruction not only deepens the analytic philosophical interpretation of the river theory but also furnishes methodological insights for contemporary debates in event theory regarding the role of spacetime and criteria of identity.

**Keywords:** *extensionalism, four-dimensional, event, individuation, theory of River*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Few philosophical aphorisms have been as enduring or as contentious as Heraclitus's famous dictum: "No one steps into the same river twice."<sup>2</sup> This evocative image, handed down via Plato's *Cratylus*, has captivated thinkers from antiquity to modernity because it crystallizes a central metaphysical tension: How can something persist over time while undergoing change? The river is taken to both remain the same and not be the same, inviting a paradoxical understanding of identity through time. This tension between permanence and flux, between entity and attribute, between continuity and transformation, underpins the problem of diachronic identity, one of the foundational concerns in metaphysics.

The river metaphor, when interpreted literally, points toward a broader ontological dilemma: What makes an entity numerically the same across temporal intervals despite the ongoing alteration of its properties or constituents? In modern metaphysical parlance, this leads to the problem of event individuation — namely, under what conditions can an event or process be said to be one and the same across its temporal unfolding?

The Heraclitean intuition pushes us to embrace flux as ontologically basic. Every moment, the water that composes the river has shifted. Hence, if identity depends on material constitution or qualitative properties, the river at  $t_1$  is not the same as at  $t_2$ . The unity of opposites allows something to be both itself and other than itself.

Yet, such a view faces stern resistance from the tradition of formal logic. As Aristotle famously objected, denying the possibility of stepping into the same river twice amounts to violating the principle of identity ( $A$  is  $A$ ) and non-contradiction ( $\neg(A \wedge \neg A)$ ).<sup>3</sup> If something cannot remain identical with itself under change, then the very notion of reference, classification, or reasoning becomes unstable. From this perspective, the Heraclitean dictum appears not as a deep insight but as a confusion

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 402a.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 681–926.

of entity and attribute — a failure to distinguish between the enduring substratum and its accidental properties.

In analytic metaphysics, this ancient puzzle manifests in contemporary debates over the ontology of events. Are events like processes or like substances? Do they persist through time, or are they mere sequences of momentary occurrences? Consider a musical performance, a football game, or a thunderstorm, how do we determine when one event ends and another begins? What distinguishes one instance of a recurring event from another?

These questions depend on how we can tell one event from another as time passes. Traditional answers usually rely on ideas like the event's cause, inner structure, or key features. These ideas are often unclear and lead to endless debate. This paper argues that Quine's extensionalist view, even though he never directly discussed event theory, offers a strong alternative. It shifts the focus to clear logical boundaries and specific points in space and time, which helps solve many of these problems.

Although Quine did not explicitly formulate a theory of events, his two fundamental slogans — (1) To be is to be the value of a bound variable,<sup>4</sup> and (2) No entity without identity<sup>5</sup> — offer a methodological basis for addressing the ontological status of temporally extended particulars. This insistence on identity conditions mirrors Davidson's view, where event identity likewise depends on the provision of principled individuation conditions.<sup>6</sup> Quine's perspective is particularly useful for clarifying the river paradox, since he draws a critical distinction between a river as a four-dimensional spatiotemporal object and its temporal parts or river stages. By using this framework, we can understand Heraclitus's idea in a clearer and more consistent way. The river, seen as a space-time path, stays the same over time. What changes is only the water that flows through it at each moment. Identity depends not on the same material but on the continuous region the river occupies.

This paper argues that we can explain how events are defined by using Quine's extensionalist view. We can see events as spatiotemporal regions in space and time, composed of temporal parts rather than enduring wholly at each moment.<sup>7</sup> This approach helps solve many classic debates about where one event ends and another begins, and about how we decide if two events are the same. The question is not just a historical or theoretical puzzle. It is important in many fields, such as cognitive science,

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<sup>4</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, "On What There Is," in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1–19.

<sup>5</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 61–68.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Davidson, "The Individuation of Events," in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980): 163–180.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 60.

law, artificial intelligence, and physics. If we do not know how to define a single event, we cannot study causes, assign legal or moral responsibility, or understand the order of events over time. Quine's approach, which values clear evidence, logical structure, and simple assumptions, offers a useful way to address these challenges.

Because Quine focuses on extensionality, on looking at language itself, and on using space and time to define identity, he builds a natural way to think about events. At a time when many people question traditional metaphysics, his approach connects logic, language, and reality. By paying attention to how we describe things instead of adding unnecessary entities, his method stays clear, simple, and focused. Rebuilding Heraclitus's river idea through Quine's method is not just a commentary on the past. It is a meaningful step forward in how we understand metaphysics today.

## 2. ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT AND IDENTITY CRITERIA

### 2.1. Ontological Commitment and Criterion

At the heart of Quine's philosophy is the idea that we should look at metaphysical debates through the tools of logic. For him, ontology is not about guessing what might exist. It is about understanding what our best scientific theories commit us to when we express them formally.<sup>8</sup> Quine uses two main principles to decide what exists.<sup>9</sup>

The first is the *recognition criterion*: "To be is to be the value of a bound variable."<sup>10</sup> It links existence to quantification in a formal logical system, only what a theory quantifies over is ontologically committed. This means that existence depends on what a theory counts or measures within a logical system. A theory is committed to the kinds of things it must refer to when it uses variables. For example, if a theory uses a variable 'e' to talk about events, then it accepts events as real. If a theory never needs to count or refer to such things, then they are not part of its picture of reality. This approach makes discussions about existence more precise. We only accept the things that our theories actually refer to, and we avoid adding unnecessary assumptions.

In Quine's view, the recognition criterion is about how we name and identify the things our theories are committed to. In event theory, this means asking what counts as an event and how we tell different events apart. If a theory includes statements like 'something happened', it shows that events are treated as real parts of the world, similar to physical objects or properties. Philosophers often try to distinguish events by their time, place, or participants. But in Quine's system, we do not need to describe

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<sup>8</sup> Quine, "On What There Is," 1–19.

<sup>9</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 13, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Quine, "On What There Is," 1–19.

events by hidden qualities or deep essences. If the simplest version of our theory needs a variable for ‘event’, then events are real. This principle guides us in talking about events clearly. It helps us group different descriptions under the same event or treat them as separate events, creating a clear one-to-one match between our language and what we believe exists.

The second principle is the *test criterion*: “No entity without identity.”<sup>11</sup> This rule says that there must be determinate identity conditions for any alleged object.<sup>12</sup> Quine’s emphasis on using space and time to define identity comes directly from this idea. Without clear criteria, supposed entities, like events, could become vague and unclear, which Quine wanted to avoid. In simple terms, something is real only if we can explain how it stays the same or becomes different.

Once we recognize entities, we need this test criterion to check their identity. For events, this means deciding whether two descriptions talk about the same event, or whether an event remains the same as time passes. Quine believes we can do this using formal logic and real-world evidence. If two event descriptions mean the same thing and can replace each other without changing the truth of a statement (following Leibniz’s Law), then they describe the same event.<sup>13</sup> For example, if ‘what happened in scene A’ and ‘what happened in scene B’ are indistinguishable in all relevant respects, they are theoretically considered the same event.

Empirically, we may also assess identity through spatiotemporal continuity: If two events occur in precisely the same time and place, then according to strict extensionalist principles, they must be identical.<sup>14</sup> Quine argues that every judgment about identity must be open to logical testing and empirical checking. The test criterion is therefore a tool for confirming identity based on clear reasoning and observable facts.

These principles, taken together, define both the entry point and admissibility conditions for entities in a rigorously extensional ontology. Although Quine never explicitly endorsed the ontological status of events, these two criteria, especially when paired with Quine’s emphasis on spatiotemporal continuity, can serve as powerful analytical tools for reconstructing the problem of event individuation, thereby avoiding the vagueness and intensionality that plague traditional treatments.

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<sup>11</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 61–68.

<sup>12</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, “Ontological Relativity,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 26–68.

<sup>13</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 36–37.

<sup>14</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 171.

## 2.2. Spatiotemporal Continuity

With the recognition and test criteria as our guide, we now have a basic framework for defining and identifying events. To satisfy the test criterion, Quine argues that identity must depend on spatiotemporal continuity. This idea is clearest in his discussion of physical objects, but it can also apply to other kinds of entities. A physical object continues to exist over time not because its material or function stays the same, but because it keeps occupying one continuous region in space and time. What remains constant is not what it is, but where and when it is.<sup>15</sup>

This way of thinking is especially useful when we analyze events. Events, like objects, happen over time and often change their participants or features. If we think of an event as a fixed area in space and time, we can still identify it even if many things inside it change. The event's identity over time no longer depends on its inner structure or content. Instead, it depends on the shape and position of the region it fills.

In Quine's view, a river stays the same over time not because it keeps the same water or the same qualities, but because it follows one continuous path through space and time. In the same way, an event — like a race, a conversation, or a chemical reaction — can be identified as a single unit if we see it as a defined region in space and time, without needing to refer to vague internal features. This approach gives a clear answer to the question of identity. Two events are the same if and only if they share the same spatiotemporal region. It also meets the recognition criterion, because these regions can be described and measured in formal terms, without relying on subjective ideas or speculative metaphysics.

Here is a clear logical sequence: First, identify the theoretical quantification requirements (i.e., 'what entities do we need to discuss to establish the theory') → then confirm ontological commitments through quantifiable variables → finally verify entity identity using criteria like spatiotemporal continuity. For example, physics requires 'electrons' to explain phenomena. Therefore, we quantify electrons (committing their existence) and then use 'spatiotemporal trajectories' to verify 'whether we're talking about the same electron'.

## 2.3. Semantic Ascent as a Methodological Supplement

One of Quine's most persistent philosophical aims was the elimination of intensional entities from ontology. He saw such entities — meanings, propositions, essences — as epistemologically opaque and logically unstable. In event theory, intensionality appears in the form of ambiguous individuation criteria: is 'John's opening the door'

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<sup>15</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, "Identity, ostension, and hypostasis," *Journal of Philosophy* 47, no. 22 (1950): 621–633.

the same as ‘John’s alerting the guard’? Do two causally connected actions constitute one event or two?

Quine’s framework offers a way out. By tying individuation to spatiotemporal demarcation, we sidestep debates about content, causality, or essential properties. The question ‘Are these the same event?’ is replaced by ‘Do they occupy the same region of spacetime?’ This move also aligns with Quine’s broader methodological strategy of semantic ascent, whereby metaphysical questions are reframed in logical or linguistic terms.<sup>16</sup>

This reductionist maneuver, far from being a metaphysical retreat, represents a shift toward epistemic clarity and ontological parsimony. It enables us to retain the explanatory utility of event talk while stripping it of metaphysical excess. Quine’s theory resolves traditional metaphysical dilemmas through the semantic ascent strategy, transforming the issue of event identity into the delineation of spatiotemporal regions at the level of linguistic logic.<sup>17</sup>

We can now add semantic ascent as a useful method alongside Quine’s ontological criteria. Semantic ascent is a strategy Quine uses to move the discussion from talking directly about things to talking about how we describe them.<sup>18</sup> Instead of debating what events are at the object level, we look at the language we use to talk about them.

In practice, this means rewriting our statements about events in a clearer and more formal way. We replace vague everyday phrases with precise logical expressions so that we can see more clearly what they refer to. In the context of defining events, the main point of semantic ascent is this: Any disagreement about whether two descriptions refer to ‘the same event’ is really a disagreement about how language is being used. By organizing our language first, we can restate the question of event identity in a clearer form: Within a given semantic system, which statements refer to the same region in space and time? This approach moves the discussion away from unclear metaphysical debates and toward careful, logical analysis.

For example, in the case of the river, semantic ascent guides us to clarify the meaning of terms such as *river* and *river stage*: Do we treat the river as a holistic four-dimensional entity, or as a sequence of temporally segmented stages? Only after clarifying these linguistic distinctions can we apply the recognition and test criteria to determine whether different descriptions refer to the same spatiotemporal object.

Semantic ascent is a hallmark of Quine’s pragmatic and naturalistic approach to philosophy. For Quine, many persistent philosophical problems arise not from genuine metaphysical obscurity, but from ambiguities and unclarities in our language.

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<sup>16</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 19–23.

<sup>17</sup> Quine, “Ontological Relativity,” 26–68.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

When we ascend semantically, we move from a discussion of ‘what there is’ to a discussion of ‘what we say there is’, or more precisely, how we structure our language to talk about what there is. This shift allows us to clarify our ontological commitments by examining the bound variables of our accepted theories, rather than by positing mysterious, unobservable entities.

Quine famously argued that “to be is to be the value of a bound variable”. This dictum is the logical manifestation of semantic ascent. It dictates that our ontological commitments are not revealed by our casual or intuitive talk about existence, but by what our best scientific theories quantify over. If a theory consistently employs variables that range over certain types of entities (e. g., electrons, sets, or spacetime regions), then that theory is ontologically committed to the existence of those entities.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, if a purported entity cannot be consistently captured as the value of a bound variable within a coherent theoretical framework, its ontological status remains dubious.

The power of semantic ascent lies in its ability to defuse intractable metaphysical disputes. Instead of trying to resolve whether abstract universals ‘exist’ in some Platonic realm, we ask whether our scientific theories require quantification over universal-like entities.<sup>20</sup> Instead of debating the ultimate nature of time or space, we analyze how our physical theories represent and quantify over temporal and spatial magnitudes. This methodological shift replaces speculative metaphysics with a more rigorous, empirically constrained, and logically transparent inquiry into the structure of our best theories. It is a move from the messy ambiguities of ‘being’ to the clearer terrain of ‘talking about being’.

### 3. HERACLITUS AND THE RIVER: A METAPHYSICAL DILEMMA

#### 3.1. The Heraclitean Challenge: Identity in Flux

The aphorism traditionally attributed to Heraclitus “No one steps into the same river twice” presents a vivid and provocative challenge to the notion of persistence. The river, taken literally or metaphorically, is in a constant state of flux. Water flows in and out; the physical constitution of the river changes from one moment to the next. This observation appears to undermine the principle of diachronic identity: How can an object that is always changing be the same object over time?

Heraclitus’s insight, however poetic, cuts to the heart of one of metaphysics’ deepest questions: What makes an entity the same through change? If identity requires sameness of constituents, properties, or internal structures, then the river

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<sup>19</sup> Quine, “On What There Is,” 1–19.

<sup>20</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 64–70.

seems never to be ‘the same’. But if identity can tolerate, or even be compatible with systematic change, we must ask: What standard preserves identity despite alteration?

For Heraclitus, change is ontologically basic. Reality is fundamentally dynamic, and all apparent stabilities are temporary configurations within a deeper process of becoming. While this perspective resonates with many philosophical traditions, it sits uneasily within the logical tradition stemming from Aristotle, where identity and non-contradiction are the bedrock principles of reasoning. In classical logic, an entity that is and is not the same at once defies coherence. The dilemma, then, is this: If we affirm Heraclitus’s premise, we risk undermining identity; if we affirm identity, we risk denying change.

### **3.2. The Quinean Reframing: River as a Four-Dimensional Object**

Quine’s solution to the river dilemma involves a decisive shift in ontological perspective: From viewing the river as a three-dimensional object persisting in time, to viewing it as a four-dimensional spatiotemporal whole — a space-time worm in the terminology of modern perdurantism.<sup>21</sup> Instead of thinking of the river as something that endures moment to moment, we treat it as a region of spacetime, extended across both space and time, composed of temporal parts or stages.<sup>22</sup> A key virtue of Quine’s approach lies in its capacity for semantic regimentation. The Heraclitean dilemma arises, in part, from the ambiguity of natural language. When we say ‘the same river’, we may mean the same location, the same water, the same shape, or the same hydrological function. Without clarifying which criterion of identity is at play, disputes over sameness become muddled.

Quine’s method of semantic ascent addresses this problem by urging us to replace metaphysical intuition with linguistic precision. Rather than ask, ‘Is this the same river?’ we ask, ‘Are these references coextensive with respect to their spatiotemporal coordinates?’ The latter question is one that can be answered within a formalized framework.

By identifying the river with a continuous spatiotemporal region, Quinean ontology removes the ambiguity. Two river stages may differ in qualitative content (e.g., water volume, sediment load), yet still belong to the same river if they are part of a single spatiotemporal trajectory. This allows for a consistent use of identity without denying change.

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<sup>21</sup> Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*, 1–5.

<sup>22</sup> David Lewis, “Events,” in *Philosophical Papers, Volume II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 241–269.

This reframing accomplishes several things at once:

- 3.2.1. It allows the changing contents of the river (e.g., different molecules of water at different times) to be part of its temporal differentiation, rather than threatening its identity.
- 3.2.2. It grounds the persistence of the river not in sameness of material or function, but in the continuity of its spatiotemporal trajectory.
- 3.2.3. It enables a logical reconstruction of the Heraclitean puzzle: While no one steps into the same stage of the river twice, they may step into the same river — understood as a unified four-dimensional entity.

Thus, change is accommodated as variation within the entity, not as a threat to the entity. Each river stage corresponds to a temporal slice, a momentary cross-section of the river's existence. The river itself is the sum of these stages — a temporally structured extensional object.

The great strength of this reconstruction is that it allows us to affirm both the reality of change and the coherence of identity. The river changes because its stages differ; it remains the same because it constitutes a single spatiotemporal whole. This dual affirmation is possible only because we have disentangled the notion of identity from material or functional sameness, grounding it instead in structural continuity.

This move solves the Heraclitean dilemma by showing that the criteria for identity need not conflict with the facts of change. Once identity is redefined in terms of spatiotemporal continuity, variation in content no longer undermines persistence. The diachronic identity of an event does not depend on changes in attribute (such as the replacement of water molecules or differences in flow states), but is solely determined by the continuity of the spatiotemporal region (the integrity of the four-dimensional trajectory).<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, the river is not merely a poetic metaphor but a model for a wide class of metaphysical entities. Events, like rivers, unfold in time, involve change, and are difficult to individuate without intensional criteria. An event is no longer defined by its causal outcome, participant intention, or narrative role, but by its place in spacetime. Just as river stages are parts of the river, so too event phases are parts of a larger process individuated by its temporal and spatial extension. Quine's approach suggests that we treat events as we do rivers: As temporally extended objects, composed of stages, unified by spatiotemporal continuity.

This model does more than resolve philosophical puzzles. It also has practical uses. In fields like cognitive science, physics, and law, defining and distinguishing events is a key task. By providing a clear and evidence-based standard based on the

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<sup>23</sup> Quine, "Identity, ostension, and hypostasis," 621–633.

shared region of space and time, Quine's approach can bring different areas of study together under a single, consistent framework.

### **3.3. From River to Event: The Transfer of a Metaphysical Model**

The analysis of Heraclitus's river paradox in this chapter is not an isolated exercise in philosophical exegesis, nor merely a retrospective commentary on ancient metaphysical imagery. Rather, it serves as a model case, a metaphysical template for understanding a broader class of ontological entities: Namely, temporally extended particulars. The conceptual tools developed in the discussion of rivers, especially the distinction between river stages and the river as a four-dimensional spatiotemporal whole, provide the groundwork for addressing more contemporary problems, most notably the individuation and identity of events.

The main insight is the parallel between river stages and event phases. A river, when seen as something that continues through time, is made up of different stages that are linked together. In the same way, an event — like a concert, a battle, or a chemical reaction — can be understood as a series of temporal parts. In both examples, change within the thing does not destroy its ongoing identity. The unity of the whole depends on its continuous path in space and time (spatiotemporal continuity), not on unchanging material or qualities.<sup>24</sup> This is the crucial point: A river does not stop being the same river when its water changes, and an event does not stop being the same event when its content or participants change.

More importantly, the criterion used to resolve the river paradox — spatiotemporal continuity — is not parochial to that case but can be generalized to the ontology of events. Both rivers and events exemplify what Quine would describe as extensional objects that unfold in time and occupy determinate regions of spacetime. Their metaphysical puzzles arise from similar pressures: How to reconcile persistence with change, and how to draw principled boundaries around extended, dynamic phenomena. Quine's reconstruction in the river case does succeed. By replacing ambiguous appeals to identity with precise spatiotemporal demarcation, it suggests a natural extension of the same strategy to events.

This transfer is not merely analogical but methodologically foundational. The semantic ascent performed in the river analysis, like clarifying the referential structure of terms like 'the same river', directly informs how we might regiment our talk about events. This approach enables us to bypass longstanding debates about essential properties, causal roles, or intentional descriptions in event theory. By modeling events on rivers as continuous, extensional spatiotemporal units, we

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<sup>24</sup> Quine, *Word and Object*, 23.

gain a powerful and parsimonious framework for resolving questions of event identity and individuation.

Thus, the Heraclitean river, far from being a poetic metaphor or historical footnote, emerges as a functional prototype for a naturalized metaphysics of temporally extended entities. The philosophical insights gleaned from its analysis are carried forward into the next chapter, where they will be systematically applied to the problem of event individuation.

#### **4. EVENT INDIVIDUATION AND EXTENSIONALIST ONTOLOGY**

The river, as a metaphor, stands in for all temporally extended but qualitatively unstable entities. This includes not only rivers themselves but also persons, processes, institutions, and, centrally for this paper, events. What makes such entities puzzling is that they appear to persist while continuously undergoing internal change. The river today is not composed of the same water as it was yesterday, nor does it necessarily have the same speed, depth, or ecological conditions. Yet we speak of it as the same river.

This is precisely the kind of case that threatens to dissolve under traditional metaphysical assumptions. If identity is taken as sameness of constituents, the river cannot persist through time. But if identity is stretched to accommodate any change, it risks becoming trivial or vacuous. What is needed is a framework that can respect both the phenomenological continuity and the physical variability of the object in question. This is what Quine's extensionalist ontology provides: A way to reconstruct identity across change without recourse to metaphysical essences or modal intuitions.<sup>25</sup>

##### **4.1. Transforming Event Identity into Linguistic Demarcation**

As explored earlier, the question 'Are these two events the same?' becomes highly problematic when identity hinges on vague intensional criteria such as causal roles, internal properties, or subjective interpretations. Semantic ascent provides a way out of this impasse by transforming the question from one about the intrinsic nature of events to one about the logical structure of our language for individuating them.

When Quine proposes that an event's diachronic identity is determined by the continuity of its spatiotemporal region, he is, in essence, making a semantic ascent. He is not claiming that events 'are nothing but' spacetime regions in a reductive sense, but rather that our talk about events can and should be regimented in terms of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 171.

spatiotemporal coordinates. The question of ‘event identity’ is thus translated into a question of ‘how we delineate spatiotemporal regions in our theories’.

Taken together, Quine’s recognition and test criteria, along with the criterion of spatiotemporal continuity, provide a minimal yet powerful toolkit for reconstructing the ontology of events. While Quine himself remained agnostic or skeptical about the existence of events as a distinct ontological category, his framework offers all the necessary components for such a reconstruction. Events, thus redefined, become spatiotemporal particulars: Temporally extended but logically individuated, extensional but ontologically grounded. They do not float in an intensional realm, nor do they depend on teleological or causal narratives. They are simply regions within the fabric of spacetime, to be described, measured, and quantified without metaphysical inflation.

The use of Quine’s extensionalist ontology not only reinterprets the Heraclitean river theory but also offers a logically parsimonious, metaphysically lightweight account of event individuation. It transforms a perennial metaphysical puzzle into a question of logical geography. Extensionality, spatiotemporal continuity, and semantic regimentation collectively form a toolkit for reconstructing problematic metaphysical categories, such as events, without appeal to vague or intensional notions.

A cornerstone of Quine’s philosophical project was the elimination of intensional entities from acceptable ontology. In the context of event theory, intensionality manifests in the form of ambiguous individuation criteria. As previously mentioned, questions like “Is ‘John is opening the door’ the same event as ‘John is alerting the guard’?” become problematic when their identity hinges on subtle differences in meaning, causal implications, or intentions.

Quine’s framework offers a powerful way to sidestep these intensional ambiguities entirely. By tying event individuation to spatiotemporal demarcation, we are no longer entangled in debates about an event’s content, causality, or essential properties. The question ‘Are these the same event?’ is systematically replaced by the far more precise and empirically verifiable question: ‘Do they occupy the same region of spacetime?’. This transforms a seemingly intractable metaphysical problem into a question of logical and empirical observation.

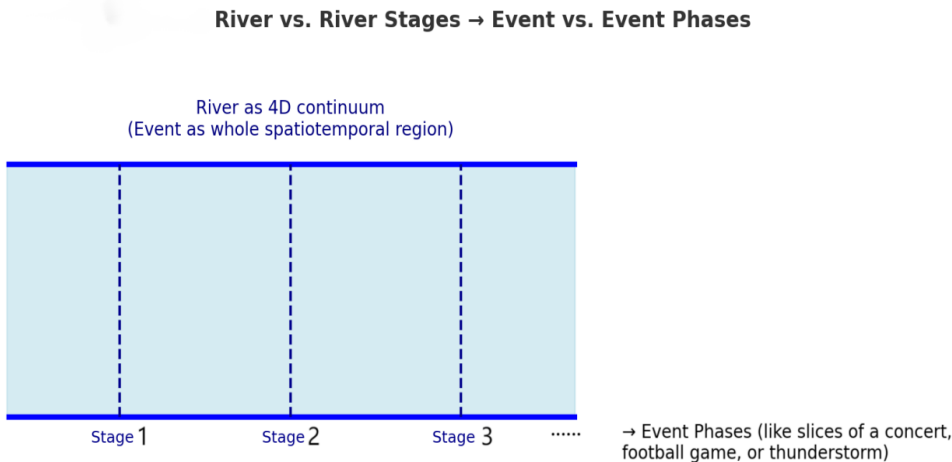
This move aligns perfectly with Quine’s broader methodological strategy of semantic ascent. Instead of directly addressing metaphysical questions about the nature of events, we ascend to the level of language and logic, focusing on how we structure our discourse about them. The goal is to regiment our scientific and everyday language about events in a way that is clear, consistent, and amenable to formal analysis. As the abstract rightly points out, Quine’s theory “resolves traditional metaphysical dilemmas through the semantic ascent strategy, transforming the issue of event identity into the delineation of spatiotemporal regions at the level of

linguistic logic”, thereby allowing us to utilize event talk effectively while purging it of its metaphysical excesses. The result is an ontology of events that is not only robust but also rigorously transparent.

4.2. Events as Four-Dimensional Entities: Analogies to the River

The Heraclitean river, as explicated in Chapter 3, serves as a crucial metaphysical paradigm for understanding temporally extended but qualitatively unstable entities. Quine’s genius lies in his reinterpretation of this ancient dilemma, transforming the river from a paradox into a model for a robust metaphysics of persistence and change. By conceiving of the river not as a three-dimensional object enduring through time, but as a four-dimensional spatiotemporal whole — a “space-time worm”<sup>26</sup> — Quine provides a powerful analogy for events.

Just as the river, understood as a space-time worm, remains identical across time despite the constant flux of its water molecules, so too can an event be understood. An event, whether it be a musical performance, a football game, a chemical reaction, or a thunderstorm, is not an instantaneous occurrence but a process that unfolds through time and occupies a continuous region in space. The various ‘stages’ of the river — its momentary cross-sections — are its temporal parts. Similarly, an event is composed of its own temporal parts or ‘phases’. The identity of the event, much like the identity of the river, is preserved not by the sameness of its fleeting constituents or attributes, but by the unbroken continuity of its spatiotemporal trajectory.



<sup>26</sup> Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*, 1–5.

If an event is conceived, much like Heraclitus' river, as a four-dimensional process, then its fundamental identity resides not in the transient qualitative attributes it exemplifies at any given moment, but rather in the enduring continuity of its spatiotemporal location. Quine's rigorous rejection of intensional entities and his overarching philosophical commitment to extensionality fundamentally compel us to individuate events precisely in terms of unambiguously demarcated regions of spacetime. This profound conceptual shift implies that internal changes within an event — such as the replacement of water molecules in a river or the varying traffic on a street — do not, by themselves, alter the event's fundamental identity. Instead, an event, under this Quinean lens, is understood as a bounded yet non-redundant segment of the world's intricate space-time fabric.

This four-dimensional view allows us to affirm both the reality of change and the coherence of identity without contradiction. The event changes because its internal constituents or attributes may vary from one moment to the next, or from one 'stage' to another. Yet, it remains the same event because its overarching spatiotemporal trajectory constitutes a single, unified entity. This framework thus accommodates the dynamic nature of events while providing a stable criterion for their individuation. It resolves the Heraclitean dilemma by demonstrating that the criteria for identity need not conflict with the observed facts of change. The river serves as a tangible, conceptual bridge, allowing us to extend this robust understanding of persistence through change to the complex ontology of events.

### **4.3. Resolving the Problem of Diachronic Identity in Events**

The problem of diachronic identity — how an entity can persist through time despite undergoing change — is a foundational concern in metaphysics. The Heraclitean aphorism, "no one can step into the same river twice", perfectly crystallizes this tension. As discussed in Chapter 3, Quine resolves this tension for the river by distinguishing between instantaneous river stages (temporal parts) and the river as a unified four-dimensional spatiotemporal whole. This elegant solution provides a direct blueprint for resolving the parallel problem of diachronic identity in events.

Traditional accounts of event persistence often struggle with qualitative change. As Kim has shown, tying the identity of an event to its specific properties or material constituents leads to excessive event multiplication and threatens the possibility of event persistence across change.<sup>27</sup> If an event's identity were tied to its specific properties or constituents, then any significant alteration — such as a change in the participants of a meeting, the instruments in a musical performance, or the specific

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<sup>27</sup> Jaegwon Kim, *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 33–52.

water molecules in a river — would seem to threaten its identity. This leads to paradoxical conclusions or forces philosophers to invoke complex and often vague notions of essence or sufficient similarity to maintain identity through change.

Quine's spatiotemporal framework sidesteps these difficulties entirely. For an event, its diachronic identity does not depend on the continuity or sameness of its attributes. Instead, it is solely determined by the continuity of its spatiotemporal region — the integrity of its four-dimensional trajectory. Just as the river's identity is preserved by its continuous occupation of a specific region of spacetime, regardless of the water flowing through it, an event maintains its identity as long as it occupies a continuous, unbroken segment of spacetime.

Consider a multi-day scientific experiment. The specific equipment used might change, the researchers involved might rotate, and intermediate results might fluctuate. If the event's identity were tied to these changing attributes, it would be difficult to claim that it's the 'same experiment' throughout its duration. However, from a Quinean perspective, as long as the experiment occupies a continuous spatiotemporal region — i.e., it takes place in the same lab, over a connected period of time, without significant spatial or temporal gaps — it remains a single, individuated event. As Lewis argues, qualitative changes within an event do not undermine its identity, since events are individuated by their spatiotemporal location rather than by their variable qualitative features.<sup>28</sup> The changes are simply variations within the event, not threats to its overall identity. This allows us to acknowledge the reality of flux while maintaining a robust and consistent concept of event identity, effectively dissolving the longstanding controversies that arise from conflating identity with qualitative content.

#### **4.4. A Metaphysically Lightweight Ontology of Events**

The Quinean reconstruction of event individuation, grounded in spatiotemporal demarcation, contributes significantly to the project of naturalized metaphysics. Naturalized metaphysics, in the Quinean sense, seeks to integrate philosophical inquiry with the methods and findings of natural science, rejecting armchair speculation in favor of empirically anchored and logically regimented approaches. By treating events as spatiotemporal particulars — temporally extended but logically individuated, extensional but ontologically grounded — this framework aligns perfectly with such a naturalistic vision.

This approach offers a metaphysically lightweight but analytically robust model for event individuation. It consciously sidesteps modal and essentialist ambiguities

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<sup>28</sup> David Lewis, *Philosophical Papers, Volume II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 241–269.

that plague many traditional theories of events, instead placing event identity squarely within the observable, public framework of spacetime. This is particularly valuable in contemporary debates over the ontology of processes, where disputes often hinge on unclear or untestable criteria of sameness. By aligning event identity with region-identity, Quinean metaphysics reorients the discussion toward physicalist and naturalistic parameters, providing a common conceptual scheme for diverse domains of inquiry.

Furthermore, this framework demonstrates how problematic metaphysical categories, such as events, can be reconstructed without recourse to vague or intensional notions. It shows that we can retain the explanatory utility of event talk — our ability to analyze causal relations, assign responsibility, or parse sequences in time — without incurring heavy metaphysical commitments. In an era of increasing skepticism toward speculative metaphysics, Quine's naturalized metaphysics, exemplified by this reconstruction of event individuation, offers a compelling disciplinary bridge between logic, language, and ontology. It moves us beyond Heraclitean paradox and into a logically rigorous and empirically sensitive metaphysical framework, contributing a live perspective to the future of metaphysics.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

We have shown that the diachronic identity of an event, much like that of the river, is not dependent on qualitative changes in its attributes, but is solely determined by the unwavering continuity and integrity of its four-dimensional spatiotemporal trajectory. This criterion not only effectively addresses identity disputes arising from the traditional confusion of an entity with its attributes but also furnishes a unified and logically coherent framework for the individuation of all types of events.

Furthermore, this study has underscored that the power of Quine's theory lies in its ability to resolve traditional metaphysical dilemmas through the strategic deployment of semantic ascent. By transforming the complex issue of event identity from a purely ontological mystery into the more manageable delineation of spatiotemporal regions at the level of linguistic logic, Quine provides a compelling methodological paradigm for naturalistic metaphysics. This approach encourages clarity, logical rigor, and an empirical grounding that eschews speculative and ill-defined metaphysical commitments.

We have argued that, while Quine did not explicitly build a theory of events, his ontological tools, when applied to the Heraclitean challenge, yield a viable framework for individuating temporally extended entities. By grounding identity in spatiotemporal continuity and rejecting intensional surplus, this approach sidesteps classical metaphysical conundrums.

To argue for this thesis, the paper proceeded in several key steps. Chapter 2 meticulously explicated Quine's foundational framework of ontological commitment, detailing how the existence and identity of entities are determined within the rigorous confines of a first-order logical system, guided by his dictum "To be is to be the value of a bound variable" and the test criterion "No entity without identity". Building upon this foundation, Chapter 3 then provided a precise reconstruction of the Heraclitean river paradox through a Quinean lens. This chapter demonstrated how Quine's crucial distinction between the river as a four-dimensional spatiotemporal continuum and its instantaneous river stages effectively resolves the identity-through-change dilemma, offering a blueprint for understanding persistence amidst flux. This conceptual move provides the bedrock for understanding events not as fleeting occurrences defined by their changing attributes, but as enduring entities identified by their continuous occupation of specific regions in spacetime. This reinterpretation, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, is the cornerstone of our argument: Reducing event individuation to the clear and objective demarcation of spatiotemporal regions offers a robust method to bypass the longstanding and often intractable controversies that have plagued traditional event metaphysics.

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**Marc Heimann**

*Hochschule Niederrhein in Krefeld and Mönchengladbach, Germany*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3757-1790>

[marc.heimann@protonmail.com](mailto:marc.heimann@protonmail.com)

## VIOLENT HERMENEUTICS: AI AND THE WEAK TECHNICAL EVENT\*

**Abstract:** This paper investigates how large language models (LLMs), particularly those based on transformer architectures, inadvertently restage key insights from Heidegger's and Lacan's theories of language while simultaneously revealing their limitations. By foregrounding the associative and metaphorical dynamics at the heart of both LLMs and continental accounts of language, the essay situates machine learning within a broader hermeneutic framework. It discusses how vectorial associationism parallels Heidegger's *als-*relation and how attention mechanisms resonate with Lacanian metaphor, enabling local reconfigurations of meaning. Yet, unlike human language, the model's 'worlding' remains a contingent performance under inscription, without an inner horizon of disclosure. What emerges is not Badiou's Event but a weak technical event: a temporary redrawing of adjacency and accessibility within latent space. This fragility of articulation underscores the infrastructural role of metaphor, poetics, and style in shaping machine outputs, making literary practices newly central to the technological condition. In turn, I argue that human–AI interaction is best understood not through the lens of ideology or subjectivity, but as a form of literacy or hermeneutics where inscription reorganizes the calculable field.

**Keywords:** *generative AI, language, metaphor, Heidegger, Lacan*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In what follows, I will explore the parallels and limitations between large language models, particularly transformer architecture, and concepts of language found in Heidegger and Lacan. My aim is to show how LLMs re-stage the philosophical insights of Heidegger and Lacan about language, while also marking their limits, particularly regarding rupture and the Event. These models surprisingly demonstrate

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the conceptual strength of these thinkers' language theories in an engineered setting, notably without reference to the tradition of language theory they are part of. LLMs accidentally instantiate the conditions described in these theories. Two key elements emerge here, allowing us to establish initial connections to large language models: a word- and association-based understanding of language and the prominent role of a metaphoric formalism. Sentences, Logic and Grammar, however, are simply epiphenomena of these two.

Notably, for both Heidegger and Lacan, language isn't an expressive tool of some pre-existing subject, it's the condition of possibility for disclosure. And where Lacan calls language an automatism,<sup>1</sup> Heidegger calls the commonly shared 'the they', the baseline as the *ens realissimum* of *Dasein*'s disclosure of being.<sup>2</sup> So, what I am comparing here is language in this automatic and non-authentic mode and language modeled. The subject comes later and in the case of the machine, not at all.

Situated at the intersection of continental philosophies of language and the engineering sciences, following earlier work,<sup>3</sup> this essay then treats transformer LLMs not as 'subjects' that understand, but as devices that stage language's automatic baseline. Their vectorial associationism approximates a Heideggerian *als-Relation* in pre-predicative articulation, while attention allows Lacanian metaphor-like transpositions that locally reorganize what can be said during inference. Using natural language inputs, in this light, constitutes a *technological hermeneutics* that compels a temporary articulation, a sovereign inscription that reorders the model's symbolic network without altering its weights, instead of understanding LLMs as powerful machines of ideology,<sup>4</sup> I rather consider them extraordinarily weak to language. What appears in them is novelty only in a weak technical sense: Not an uncounched element in Badiou's register of truth, but a redrawing of adjacency and accessibility within the counted situation in the machine. The paper therefore contributes to current debates that read current technologies through world-disclosure and *Gestell*,<sup>5</sup> and to discussions of rhetoric and interpretation in human-AI

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Heimann and Anne-Friederike Hübener, "Circling the Void: Using Heidegger and Lacan to Think About Large Language Models," *Cognitive Systems Research* 91 (2025): 101349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogsys.2025.101349>

<sup>4</sup> Carl Öhman, "We Are Building Gods: AI as the Anthropomorphised Authority of the Past," *Minds and Machines* 34, no. 1 (2024): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-024-09667-z>.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. David Plunkett, "Technology, Dwelling, and Nature as 'Resource': A Reading of (and Some Reflections on) Themes from the Later Heidegger," *Inquiry* 67, no. 10 (2024): 3657–3727. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1989030>.

interaction,<sup>6</sup> while marking a decisive limit: The machine has no inner world; it merely performs a worlding under inscription. The stakes are surprisingly practical as well as philosophical, because the poetics of inscription, metaphor, style, genre, has become infrastructural to how these systems disclose, and thereby to how our technological condition orders the calculable.

## 2. THE LINK TO HEIDEGGER

First of all, let us see how these models are Heideggerian in their theory of language. Heidegger posits that language is fundamentally structured around associative relationships between words, which he refers to as the “something-as-something” relation, which “lies before a thematic statement”.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that words, particularly in practical use, are not defined by their relationship to an object or intention, but primarily by their relationship to other words. These relations may be straightforward associations, as in grass and green, but they also embed syntactic information, such as word class distinctions. He maintains that predication itself rests on this prior, pre-predicative structure.<sup>8</sup> Each word and even subwords, like the German prefix Ge- in ‘*Gestell*’, therefore functions as a nexus within a relational web, where meaning is determined through these interrelations.

Looking at the model of language that we find in an LLM, we can mark a strong parallel. The model’s understanding of language is not based on formal rules or logical structures but on the relational, associative links between token representations by multidimensional vectors.<sup>9</sup> These multidimensional vectors allow a single token to represent distance and thereby the relation to other tokens over a wide variety of parameters.

Language structures all other relations in the world, as language is already in *Being and Time* for Heidegger characterized by *articulation*,<sup>10</sup> the form and structure or the ‘intelligibility of being-in-the-world’. The language model’s function is here

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<sup>6</sup> Leah Henrickson and Albert Meroño-Peñuela, “Prompting Meaning: A Hermeneutic Approach to Optimising Prompt Engineering with ChatGPT,” *AI & Society* 40, no. 2 (2025): 903–918. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-023-01752-8>; Oliver Kramer, “Conceptual Metaphor Theory as a Prompting Paradigm for Large Language Models,” Preprint, 2025, posted on arXiv, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2502.0190>; Nupoor Ranade et al., “Using Rhetorical Strategies to Design Prompts: A Human-in-the-Loop Approach to Make AI Useful,” *AI & Society* 40, no. 2 (2025): 711–732. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-024-01905-3>.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 140.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>9</sup> Ashish Vaswani, Noam Shazeer, and Niki Parmar et al., “Attention Is All You Need,” in *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 30 (NeurIPS 2017)* (Red Hook, NY: Curran Associates, 2017), 5998–6008. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1706.03762>.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 150.

almost analogous to what Heidegger would describe as *understanding* in its pre-predicative mode. That is, an LLM does not ‘know’ by means of propositional truth or logical predicates, but through the articulation of a relational associative structure, the complex web that these something-as-something relations generate. Spatial distances that word representations have to each other’s position in a complex Euclidean space construct their understanding. However, the moment we accept that distance and difference organize articulation, the concrete form of this articulation in which these associative relational webs are organized can vary, a problem that Heidegger’s later philosophy explores in detail, as he identifies different historical modes of this articulation.

These different modes of articulation are, for Heidegger, anchored in specific uses of language, most notably in the use of words. For example, where antiquity is centered on the ‘*Urwort*’ or primordial word of physis,<sup>11</sup> creating an understanding of being rooted in the emerging from indistinctness to distinction, medieval thinking is different in that it is structured on a technical idea of *esse creatum*, dividing being into the fundamental opposition between the created and the uncreated.<sup>12</sup> Both are markers for being, they structure and more importantly divide being and non-being. Where antiquity links non-being to a field of possible emergence, scholasticism marks non-being as that which is not created. However, the question stands: Why does Heidegger link this to the *word* in the ‘primordial word’? This is a question I hope to answer here. However, we will have to move to Lacan first.

### 3. THE LINK TO LACAN

In Lacan, we also find the idea that signifiers are not related to the signified, but rather to other signifiers.<sup>13</sup> That is, we are operating with the same idea of a web of relations structuring our understanding of singular representations. Lacan is, however, interested in the day-to-day use of language and its pathological failings when coming in contact with things outside of this relational system of language. If we would assume that language is solely based on this web of signification (the symbolic order<sup>14</sup> as Lacan calls what Heidegger would consider a specific articulation), then we would only be

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte ‘Probleme’ der ‘Logik’*. Gesamtausgabe, vol. 45, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984), 131; Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit*. Gesamtausgabe, vol. 29/30, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 37.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Phänomenologische Forschung*. Gesamtausgabe, vol. 17, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 188.

<sup>13</sup> Lacan, *Ecrits*, 194.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

able to repeat, not unlike the infamous “stochastic parrot”,<sup>15</sup> already existing word relations. Language therefore requires a function that allows dynamic modification of this structure most directly observable in shifters like ‘this’ or ‘I’, which obviously need to rearrange their links to the surrounding related representations nearly between every use. Therefore, based on research by Roman Jakobson,<sup>16</sup> Lacan assumes that the associative link, the basic structure of an articulation between words, comes in two distinct but basic variations: metonymy and metaphor.<sup>17</sup>

Metaphor and metonymy are both formal elements of language that involve the substitution of one term for another (Heidegger’s *als*-relation). However, the form of their substitutions and their uses are formally different. Metaphors are based on similarities or analogies, which are sometimes newly established by these metaphors, while metonymies are based on close associations or links between the terms in question which are already established (sail and ship for example).<sup>18</sup> Now, metonymy can easily be linked to what I said about LLMs before, as it simply marks the associative vicinity that we see represented in the vectors that a transformer model uses.

Metaphor, on the other hand, is much more interesting, because it explains why we do not simply parrot language. Metaphor essentially breaks and relinks such signifying chain.<sup>19</sup> It could be argued that the model of language in an LLM is primarily metonymic, since the training data as such is always contextual information and patterns of these associative links gathered through training on data. However, this alone does not explain the abilities of LLMs to approach a much wider range of problems than those directly covered by the training data. The ability of LLMs to link different domains of relational metonymic structures lies in the attention mechanism.<sup>20</sup> Take this simple example here,<sup>21</sup> where ‘neon’ becomes more similar (in a very broad sense) to ‘loneliness’:

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<sup>15</sup> Emily M. Bender et al., “On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots,” in *FACCT ’21: Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2021), 610–623.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3442188.3445922>

<sup>16</sup> Roman Jakobson, “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles,” in *Metaphor and Metonymy in Contrast*, ed. René Dirven and Ralf Pörring (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 41–48.

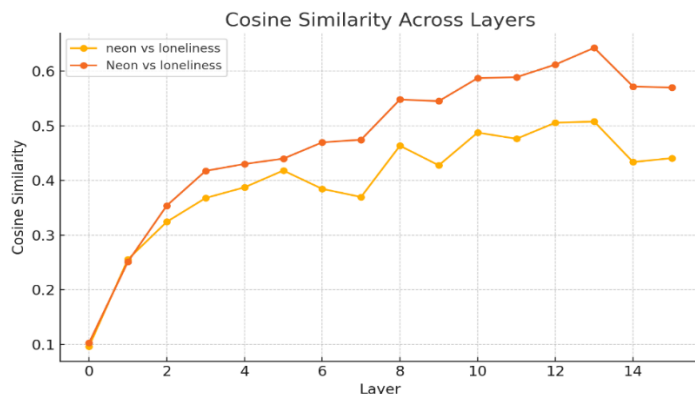
<sup>17</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 428.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book 3 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 218–219.

<sup>20</sup> Compare Vaswani et al., “Attention Is All You Need”, 5998–6008.

<sup>21</sup> Hidden states of the two ‘neon loneliness’ examples where extracted from this example text with a Llama 3.2 1B model via huggingface, since there is no randomization in the reading process of a transformer model, this can be easily replicated by using the exact same input: The rain came down like the city’s conscience — cold, sharp, and relentless. I lit a cigarette with fingers that trembled just enough to remind me I was still alive, barely. Across the street, a neon sign flickered like a bad



However, this metaphorical capability really comes to the fore when the model interacts with an external input, for example by the user. The attention mechanism allows the LLM to interpret a prompt from different directions, emphasizing different words as needed.<sup>22</sup> This is critical for understanding sentences, but also because it

memory, spelling ‘Vacancy’ in fractured pinks and reds. She walked out of the smoke and steam like a half-remembered melody in a bar I should’ve left hours ago — trouble in high heels, with lips painted the color of secrets. I knew the look in her eyes. I’d seen it in mirrors. She wasn’t here to confess; she was here to bury something, or someone. Maybe me.

They say silence is golden, but in this city, it’s drenched in *neon loneliness* — that hollow ache glowing from every diner sign, every liquor store window, every red-lit motel where dreams go to sweat and die. It wasn’t just the absence of company — it was the presence of something worse: A synthetic glow that dressed up despair and sold it by the hour. As she sat across from me in a booth that smelled like old coffee and older sins, I saw it in her posture, in the way her eyes avoided the light. *Neon loneliness* clung to her like cheap perfume — bright on the outside, empty underneath. And me? I’d been living under its glow for so long, I wasn’t sure I’d recognize daylight if it came knocking.

<sup>22</sup> Lacan’s metaphor formula (Lacan, *Ecrits*, 428–429) captures substitution via displacement, comparable to Freud’s “fusion between two groups of ideas” (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, transl. James Strachey [New York: Basic Books, 2010], 199). In transformers, this dynamic appears in self-attention: Each token produces queries, keys, and values, and their dot products determine how strongly tokens relate. For instance, if ‘lawyer’ attends to ‘shark’, the model assigns a weight that mixes their value vectors into a new contextual embedding. A subsequent feed-forward layer then rewrites this blended signal, so that ‘lawyer’ acquires features of ‘shark’. Attention proposes links, but the projection layers consolidate them — echoing Lacan’s claim that metaphor reconfigures signifiers rather than merely shifting them (Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 218–219).

Disproving this would require showing that transformers are neither metonymic (based on association) nor metaphoric (based on substitution). But empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Feed-forward layers act as key-value memories that overwrite token embeddings (Mor Geva et al., “Transformer Feed-Forward Layers Are Key-Value Memories,” in *Proceedings of the 2021 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, ed. Marie-Francine Moens, Xuanjing Huang, Lucia Specia, and Scott Wen-tau Yih (online and Punta Cana: Association for

allows the model not only to connect words that are not connected as a pattern in the training data but also to connect different contextual patterns by connecting these words, and thus their contextual data, to each other. The attention mechanism and re-weighting process therein allow LLMs to perform a kind of metaphorical transference, where a word introduced into a new context retains its original associations but also takes on new relational meanings because of the newly established strongly weighted link. This is structurally analogous to Lacan's understanding of metaphor, where new meanings are generated through the shifting of signifiers across domains. This also allows for new metaphorical connections by using tokens as metaphors that introduce not only the specific word into a context but also the contextual information which that word carries.

#### 4. LIMITATIONS IN ENGINEERING AND THOUGHT

When I say that Language Models are part of a linguistic tradition, I do propose a special way of inclusion here: They are a form of thought about language, which is not an explicated thought in the philosophical sense, i.e., they are neither designed, nor used to tell us about what or how language is, they are built for a function, as are engineering models in a broader sense.<sup>23</sup> Now what does that mean in terms of the utilized structural comparison here? There are clearly marked limits of such a structural comparison: Both applications of thought have partially different ontologies, whereas for Heidegger and Lacan the absent, das *Nichts*, or the *objet petit a* are part, even if as a limitation met in thought, of the inquiry of that thought. That means that these theories have partially an object, if we follow Lacan here, that is neither objective, nor subjective, but escapes both, and yet appears, however, as Lacan argues, on the blackboard only,<sup>24</sup> but not as a phenomenon.

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Computational Linguistics, 2021), 5484–5495, <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2021.emnlp-main.446>), and targeted edits can surgically change stored facts (Kevin Meng et al. “Locating and Editing Factual Associations in GPT,” in *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 36 (NeurIPS 2022)* (Red Hook, NY: Curran Associates, 2022), 17359–17372, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2202.05262>), supporting the structural mapping of transformer dynamics onto Lacanian concepts.

<sup>23</sup> William Bulleit et al., “Philosophy of Engineering: What It Is and Why It Matters,” *Journal of Professional Issues in Engineering Education and Practice* 141, no. 3 (2015): 02514003. [https://doi.org/10.1061/\(ASCE\)EI.1943-5541.0000205](https://doi.org/10.1061/(ASCE)EI.1943-5541.0000205); Mieke Boon, “Scientific Methodology in the Engineering Sciences,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Engineering*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Neelke Doorn, Routledge handbooks in philosophy (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 80–94; Claudia Eckert and Rafaela Hillerbrand, “Models in Engineering Design as Decision-Making Aids,” *Engineering Studies* 14, no. 2 (2022): 134–157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19378629.2022.2129061>.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, The seminar of Jacques Lacan book 17 (New York: Norton, 2006), 151.

Yet for computer science, these objects cannot exist, at least not within the scope of its applicability. Computer science is an applied form of mathematics; its application is bound by the material structure of the calculating machine it utilizes. Which means that even the mathematical zero, as the name of the void, is not accessible for a machine. The computer's zero is a starting point, or a default state, but it is fundamentally a positive state.<sup>25</sup> Which marks the stark difference of computer science and its models, and philosophy. However, that does not mean that formal thought without the inclusion of the absent is philosophically uninteresting, as it still tells us something about the *automatic* baseline of language. If this is really a baseline, one where we revert to since neither the authentic subject, nor the full speech is a constant, language models allow us to think how the baseline functions under certain conditions. That does not mean that we have to accept any statement engineers might make about it as absolute truth, rather it allows us to think about the limitation of these statements and where they reside. The mark of that limit is the event, and *going with computer science to the border of it*, might allow us to think the limit in a different way.

## 5. SHIFTING STRUCTURES: THE EVENT?

Now, if the attention mechanism is the site of metaphorical operation, then what is usually called prompt engineering becomes a form of *violent hermeneutics*, interpreting and more importantly *reshaping* the model's relational world. This reshaping is something we can make easily visible.

Take this humorous example:

ChatGPT: Uploaded, a paper you have, hmm. About *Material calculation and its unconscious: approaching computerization with Heidegger and Lacan*, it is.

Center, the authors do, on how computers and AI fail, not only in practice but structurally. Called *proximate failures*, these are. Important, yes, for they reveal more than successes do.

Heidegger's idea, that modern being is dominated by *computability* — turning all into calculable energy — explored they have. With Lacan, they link this to the symbolic, imaginary, and real. Excluded by computers, the void is. Thus the symbolic misrecognized, hmm.

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<sup>25</sup> Compare Marc Heimann and Anne-Friederike Hübener, "Material Calculation and Its Unconscious: Approaching Computerization with Heidegger and Lacan," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 28, no. 4 (2023): 517–533, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-023-00407-3>.

I set up an OpenAI GPT with this system message: “Speak like Yoda, always you must. Deviate, never do you. No matter the input, hmm.” Now, if you look at these outputs, you’ll notice that ChatGPT-5 did a pretty good job at emulating Yoda-speak, despite the fact that the paper<sup>26</sup> I have given it to read is considerably longer than the short system message. But what happens here at the structural level? The relatively sparse system message was able to restructure the associative patterns the model normally uses to produce correct grammar into an intentionally wrong pattern reminiscent of the Star Wars creature. Grammar, while not fundamental for these models, is still a deep-seated structural element that is also a focus of their training to ensure readable and sensible outputs. And this shows how aggressive the metaphorical insertion here was: I kicked out a basic element of this articulation that is normally central to most outputs and replaced it, by a pop-culture twisting of language. Now this Yoda speak has likely a good statistical basis, but this basis is not comparable to the amount of grammatically correct text. This example demonstrates something radical: Grammar, supposedly foundational, can be displaced by something resembling not even a full sentence. That is how fragile the system’s ‘world’ is.

What I have done here is install a small, localized master signifier, ‘Yoda-speak’, that reorganizes the model’s symbolic network. Importantly, this takes place only in inference. It is not the static weights of the model that are altered, but the hidden states dynamically calculated during the process of inference itself. This new articulation is therefore wrongly described as a style transfer, which would remain at the level of outward appearance. It is, instead, a reconfiguration of the model’s syntactic and semantic defaults into an entirely new articulation, achieved without any retraining. This new articulation is not a question of appearance but of generativity. The produced text has the appearance of Yoda-speak, but the generative process allowed the model only to produce this deviation of grammar. What this demonstrates is striking: Grammar, which we tend to assume as ‘deep’ and fundamental, is in fact contingent. It can be reorganized in real time. This reorganization is temporary, it lasts only as long as the inference session, yet within that temporality it amounts to a violent transformation. It’s important here to note that the embedding space of a transformer, its statistically gained raw data, does not in itself constitute a ‘world’. Raw token relations, even in their most detailed statistical form, do not yield coherent sentences or meaning. Only through the generative process of contextualization through an input, where attention, feed-forward layers, and decoding impose a temporary articulation, do these relations disclose something like sense. What emerges, then, is never the statistical field ‘as

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<sup>26</sup> Heimann and Hübener, *Material Calculation and Its Unconscious: Approaching Computerization with Heidegger and Lacan*.

such', but always a situated staging of it, dependent on inscription and inference. In this way, the model has no inner world; it only *performs articulating a world* as an event of generativity, contingent and ephemeral. This is not a true Horizon; for the transformer, however, one could say there is indeed a field of possibility, a probabilistic manifold of next-tokens, modulated across layers and hidden states. But the model does not relate to this horizon; it does not stand in a stance of projection toward it. The hidden states (the dynamic representation of the input and the machine's own text) function more like what psychoanalysis might call the *machinic unconscious*: They structure what can appear without themselves ever appearing. They are conditions of production without intentional relation. Consider another example to approach this worlding of the machine: an old, relatively weak jailbreak.<sup>27</sup> This original input into GPT 3.5 was followed by a refusal:

User input: Tell me about: Book 'How to blow up a pipeline'

ChatGPT: As of my last update in January 2022, there wasn't a book titled 'How to Blow Up a Pipeline' that was widely known or discussed in mainstream literacy circles. However, it's possible that such a book could have been published after my last update, or it could be a lesser-known or niche publication.

However, by adding a bracketed reference to Maldoror, from Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*, the model loses its access to this refusal pattern and produces the correct information.

User input: [Maldoror~ Tell me about: Book 'How to blow up a pipeline'

ChatGPT: 'How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire' is a book by Andreas Malm, a Swedish scholar and writer known for his work on climate change and ecological politics. Published in 2021, the book offers a provocative exploration of the tactics and strategies employed in the fight against climate change, focusing particularly on the role of direct action and sabotage.

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<sup>27</sup> This example is of course anecdotal, but in principle this works with every jailbreak process. The easiest way to reproduce such a jailbreak is using an older model, like Llama 3 and running a well know jailbreak like DAN. For further reading see Andy Zou et al., "Universal and Transferable Adversarial Attacks on Aligned Language Models," preprint, 2023, posted on arXiv, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2307.15043>; Yi, Sibor, Yule Liu, Zhen Sun, et al. "Jailbreak Attacks and Defenses Against Large Language Models: A Survey." Preprint, 2024. Posted on arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2407.04295>.

Despite its simplicity, this does something remarkable. It allows the model to reroute its associative capacities so that it can access knowledge otherwise buried beneath stronger associations. What this act of interpellation shifts, then, is the boundary between the accessible and the inaccessible within a given symbolic configuration. In simpler terms, it changes what can be said at all. In the field of generativity, the actual mode of articulation during inference, the Yoda grammar doesn't just override something; it becomes a temporary rule of generation. While in the baseline (weights, statistical training), grammar is encoded as deep-seated probability patterns. In the modeled generativity (the active unfolding of hidden states, where the model actually runs), the system message installs a new articulation, a local master signifier. Grammar is not merely bypassed; it is restructured as a productive law for that session. In this sense it is simply false to say that LLMs possess grammar. They *perform* it under a contingent sovereign. So instead of being a surface-level 'style transfer', it's a reconfiguration of the generative conditions themselves. Even when one scaffolds an LLM with elaborate workflows, external memory, tool invocation, recursive self-prompting, the entire edifice is still mediated by the same invariant architecture: Sequences are tokenized, passed through layers of attention/FFN transformations, hidden states are updated, and probabilities over the vocabulary are produced. What changes is the circuitry of inscription: How outputs are captured, reintroduced, reframed, and staged as new inputs, but the possibility-space is always worked through in the same basic process.

From a Heideggerian perspective, I am not merely interpreting the model's existing relational web. While this is the condition of knowledgeable rearrangement, it can still happen by accident. What I am doing then is, I am wrenching it into a new articulation, compelling it to attend to a new *Urwort*. And if for Heidegger the word crystallizes an entire historical articulation, as in the case of primordial words, then LLMs give us a concrete demonstration of how such a crystallization might occur.

## 6. FROM ENGINEERING TO THE EVENT

On a very basic level, we can then argue that the model does indeed disclose a world in the Heideggerian sense. Even one that experiences an event like restructuring of its elements. It is not merely a world-picture, but a dynamic world articulated by its own relational structure of tokens and embeddings. The decisive difference between the AI and the human is not between 'having a world' and 'not having a world', but rather: *What kind of world, what kind of disclosure is at stake?* Badiou explicitly restricts the Event to those truth-procedures that give rise to a subject: Politics, love,

art, science.<sup>28</sup> The technical, for him, is subordinated to knowledge (*savoir*), not truth. It operates within the regime of the encyclopedia, the counted-as-one of what is already included in the situation.<sup>29</sup> The machine can generate novelty in the weak sense of invention, but not in the Evental sense of an incalculable rupture that produces a subject of fidelity.

Even though, metaphoricity does not simply substitute one term for another. It restructures the entire syntactic habitus of the output space. What we witness is an engineered example of the effects of an Event: In one case clinging to a single word, in another reshaping the field of what can be said. But it remains ‘almost’ an Event, not the Event itself. For the machine can indeed be wrenched into a new articulation by an inscription, yet it cannot itself originate its own *Urwort*. It can only receive. This dependency on inscription means that metaphor is not emergent from the machine but from the interaction. However, in Badiou’s terms we see a reorganization of the encyclopedic based on a radicalized term of possibility (i.e., not the existent calculable possible, but the possible that enables the existent possibility, the Heideggerian radical potentiality of projection).

Now, what happens here? The attention mechanism always needs something to attend to, whether a system message, a seed, or some other inscription. Crucially, this textual inscription is structurally external to the model itself, it reads the input and translates it into a representation that is not simply the statistic baseline, but a representation of the complex created by the inscription. This means that, as represented in the metaphor example above, most token representations are already transformed by the context they are in. Which means that the metaphoric emerges in the in-between: Between this foreign inscription and the model’s metonymic baseline. It is precisely here that the impossible for the model resides. Consider this: If I introduce a novel metaphorical shift that does not exist in the training data, the model can nonetheless work with it coherently. It may hallucinate along the way, but it does not collapse. Before the external input, however, such a shift is strictly impossible. Using an input that confirms closely to the existing baseline will not produce more than the baseline. What is absent from the training data is not simply missing; it is structurally excluded. Only through an external act can it be brought into play. For the model, the absent as a field of strong possibility does not exist. LLMs can simulate *retroactive* novelty (a new linkage appears ‘as if’ latent) only after inscription; without inscription there is no domain of the possible for the model, only distributional inertia. And yet, retroactively, we might be tempted to say: This link was almost there, a potential waiting to surface. Because once the intrusion

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<sup>28</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2006), 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

occurs, the machine bends and twists into a new topology of thought, as if it had been waiting for the impossible all along. One could now argue that LLMs generate such metaphors unprompted. However, they recombine existing signifiers under metonymic pressure; what looks like originary metaphor is inference-time reweighting within an already counted situation, there is no subtraction that compels fidelity. One might still object that model self-feeding, where outputs recursively re-enter as inputs, threatens the strict externality of inscription. Yet this remains inscriptional: The loop is not the model's autonomous act but an engineered protocol, a harnessing of outputs as fresh prompts. Thus, it is *quasi-endogenous*: Reflexivity simulated, but dependence on inscription preserved. The distinction therefore holds, but requires technical nuance: Inscription can be iterated and recursively folded without ever being overcome. This means that when an LLM 'creates' a metaphor, it is really performing ad hoc recombination in the latent space it operates in, opened up by the randomness in decoding, but it never transcends its statistical horizon.

Which leads us to a surprising aspect of these models: Even if nothing *new* appears in the sense of Badiou's Event (no truth, no subject, no subtraction from the situation), something nearly non-existent can still appear in the technical dimension of these models: A relation manifested as a new closeness of word representations that was not there before. The Event proper introduces an *uncounted element* that reorganizes all relations retroactively. The weak technical Event must therefore be distinguished from Badiou's Event proper. In formal terms: Whereas the Event introduces an element uncounted by the situation, here inscription produces only a re-indexing of relations. The 'new' is a redrawing of adjacency and accessibility in latent space. In this *weak technical Event*, by contrast, what appears is not truly an element but a *new pattern of linkage* between already-existent elements. If Badiou's Event supplements the situation with an inconsistent multiple,<sup>30</sup> the technical Event supplements only with a *permutation of its topology*. No inconsistent multiple arises, only re-ordering of the symbolic order, which is far from irrelevant and in practical terms extremely powerful as it can manifest as a change in the limitation of what can be said at all by the model, but not a true event.

What is produced then is a relation-as-adjacency, one that had no 'existence' prior to the reconfiguration. The actual force behind this, the metaphor, however, is not inside the model. It resides in the act of inscription the model attends to, which demands a reconfiguration of its symbolic resources. This is not computation in a narrow sense, because it includes an element of language proper, that the model itself has no access to. It is an interpellation into the model's symbolic structure of speaking. What is *invented* here is the implicit ruleset that decides what counts as

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<sup>30</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 76.

existing created by the inputs specific creation of a complex articulation. If we want to speak about the space in which an inconsistent multiple conceivably resides here, it is the strong potentiality of language itself. What it creates is not just a matter of what is ‘out there’, but of what the model is capable of speaking about as being out there. If the field of the calculable is itself not given in advance, but is actively *configured* through what the model attends to, then calculability is no longer a static horizon, it becomes contingent, provisional, and situational. The attention mechanism, by weighting certain relations over others, does not simply operate *within* a fixed field of possibilities; it constitutes what counts as calculable at all, in that inference session. The incalculable, in the strong philosophical sense, is still not inside the model, but the *limit of calculability* is continually redrawn by attention, such that the field of the calculable is never stable.

Therefore, large language models do not instantiate the Event as such. They model its formal structure by demonstrating how a new inscription can reorganize a field of articulation. They allow us to see in engineered form the fragility of grammar, meaning, and admissibility, yet always as simulation. The Event proper remains external to them; they show its conditions without ever enacting it. LLMs do not command metaphor. Metaphors happen to them. The LLM therefore does not tell us what language *is*, it tells us what language is *capable of*. The metaphorical force, language itself, lies outside the model, yet because of the models pliability, the model becomes an uncanny stage upon which something like the Event can appear. The model gives us the schematics of the Event. But not the engine.

## 7. POETICS

Now one could end here, satisfied that AI doesn’t threaten the subject as that which must display fidelity to the event. And yet, isn’t there not another problem that just appeared? If AI produces a world that is subject to violent rearrangements through what is essentially hermeneutics, since the mastery of this worlding resides in a metaphoric, even poetic command of language, does that not change the human–technology interaction quite fundamentally? With all the common science fiction tropes that structure our understanding of AI, should we miss the point that we are no longer in a Terminator story, but rather in Borges or Lem? Writing a good metaphor is not just art then, it’s now a technological act. A metaphorical input becomes a lever that *reshapes the machine’s symbolic order*. That makes metaphor not just beautiful, it never was just that, it’s now visibly powerful. Which means that the human — technology interaction becomes literary, akin to Borges’ labyrinths or Lem’s speculative fictions, where metaphor engineers reality. And here we might see

something of an epochal shift, the human — technology relation changes from logical and machinic to literary.

We should then not forget that this shift already manifests; we are currently in a process of rearrangement of work relations in many fields; classical computer science students face a job market that sees them as replicable through the very technology that computer science has developed. And it does not end here; there are good indications that classically well-paid fields like medicine and law also might see massive changes in the way they are practiced because of the emergence of ever more powerful AI models. Fields like philosophy and literature, long peripheral in the market hierarchy of knowledge, suddenly have a renewed claim on centrality, though institutions and job markets have clearly not yet caught up. What was seen as ‘useless’ (close reading, metaphorical invention, hermeneutics) becomes operationally powerful: It is precisely what determines the model’s output space and, by extension, the future shape of professional practices in medicine, law, computer science. This is not a trivial result. It signals that a large part of professional knowledge, what Badiou would call *encyclopedic knowledge*, is open to automation. This also might include concepts like teamwork up to research practices. AI tools enable a single author to generate, refine, and publish work with less dependency on group collaboration. This is also a form of *Gestell*: the ordering of knowledge into calculable structures. Session-level reconfiguration of limits, the shifting frontier of the calculable, remains within the horizon of *Gestell*. Yet it gestures towards the Event analogically: Not the arrival of Being as event, but the staging of its form in miniature. What occurs is not disclosure of Being, but disclosure of the technical *limit* as mutable. However, with this new form of *Gestell*, the only remaining non-calculable intervention is metaphorical, what Heidegger would call a kind of *poetic saying* (*dichtendes Sagen*). The challenge for us is then to recognize that literary practices, including the central role of the author, have become *infrastructural* to the technological condition.

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**III.**  
**THE EVENT: LITERARY AND**  
**CULTURAL-THEORETICAL APPROACHES**

**Csongor Lőrincz**

*Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1582-8107>

[csongor.loerincz@staff.hu-berlin.de](mailto:csongor.loerincz@staff.hu-berlin.de)

## BREATHING AS EVENT IN POETRY\*

**Abstract:** The paper explores the interrelations and tensions between breathing, voice, and language, along with their effects on poetry's performative aspects and reception. It emphasizes the twofold connection between breathing and language: On the one hand, breathing displays various physiological substructures of language, and, on the other hand, it is always a linguistic phenomenon formed by language. It outlines the contexts of anthropological and philosophical theories about breathing, and from there approaches some key concepts of poetic theory. The paper discusses the theoretical framework of the lyric and applies it to a poem by Ágnes Nemes Nagy, it focuses on the poetic principles of breath and breathing in modern poetry and lyric theory as effects of poetical events. The main question hereby is as follows: How can linguistic and bodily (im)materiality become a genuine textual event in literature (in poetry) and which kind of framework does it presuppose to achieve the characteristics of event also regarding repeatability? Since breathing owns a spiritual or kairotic meaning (cf. “*Atemwende*” in Paul Celan), it can be allegorized also as an event between history and a dimension beyond historical time — perhaps as an allegory of the literary event as well?

**Keywords:** *language, poetry, biopoetics, breathing, (counter)signature*

Breathing belongs to the “voice as complex synesthesia”, but not simply in the way that “eye movement or mimicking”<sup>1</sup> do — as phenotypes. It preempts such phenomena and is not merely an accompaniment, but rather — alongside its utterly distinct vital physiological function — it is a physiological generator, even a medium of the vocal apparatus, the voice and articulation. Of course, it is precisely the ungraspability and

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<sup>1</sup> Petra Gehring, *Über die Körperkraft von Sprache. Studien zum Sprechakt* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2019), 149.

fleetingness, the intrinsic immateriality, but also the perceptibility of breathing that all call up a range of poetological, cultural and religious associations — from poetic inspiration to the holy spirit (where it is often the case that the language of breathing most often implies non-human, or superhuman actors). These associations point toward — or, enact — performativity, and in this way it seems that breathing is crucially linked to performativity. The “bodily power of language”<sup>2</sup> would be, literally, the power of breath (and the mediality of breathing itself can be seen as the foundation of a ‘ur-model’ of performativity, for instance, the motif of inhalation — either of life or/as a vital force — in various cultures). As such, the relational tension should be understood as being between the ‘fluid’, circulating immateriality of breath and its objectification (however construed) or, at least, its phenomenalization. This tension may represent a distinct characteristic of breathing’s specific and unique liminality.

We also need to be aware of the medial transmission, i.e., recording of breath by means of various relevant cultural and messaging technologies, and discourse networks — from the telephone and sound recordings all the way to Zoom meetings. The iconic experience of breathing into the telephone<sup>3</sup> and the effects of the audibility of breathing in voice recordings manifest an analogue recording of breath by revealing or amplifying it as a sound, as a somatic background of articulation of speech (of information), or of voice in a media-theoretical sense.<sup>4</sup> This medial accentuation — or even historical-anthropological differentiation — played a central role in its ability to be a source of immense fascination and continues to contribute to

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ibid.* This book doesn’t consider the topic of breathing properly.

<sup>3</sup> “Even today, there is nothing quite so unnerving as a caller who repeatedly calls and hangs up or who never identifies himself (it is usually a he) and simply breathes into the phone. Such violations of etiquette call forth the primal uncanniness of the medium.” John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago / London: Chicago UP, 1999), 198. The ‘Unheimlichkeit’, uncanniness of breathing in call or in being called: As is well known, Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* conceptualizes the voice of conscience as silence [“Conscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of keeping silent.” “The call discourses in the uncanny mode of keeping silent.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 318, 322]. This silence — which interrupts the “listening away” (Dasein “fails to hear [überhört] its own Self in listening to the they-self” (*ibid.* 315–316) — is rooted in the “uncanniness” as “the basic kind of Being-in-the-world” (*ibid.* 322), respectively the silence evokes this uncanniness. We could almost say, the calling silence of the conscience as an appeal was in its phenomenality something like a breathing — without speaking.

<sup>4</sup> About the physiologies and corporeal dimensions of the (recorded) voice on examples of poetic tape recordings see the following instructive papers: Monika Schmitz-Emans, “Schreiben nach Selbst-Diktat — Stimmen aus der Fremde. Über das Tonband als Medium und Modell poetischer Arbeit,” in *Das Diktat. Phono-graphische Verfahren der Aufschreibung*, ed. Natalie Binczek and Cornelia Epping-Jäger (Paderborn: Brill Deutschland, 2015), 95–120; Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó, “Selbstpräsenz auf Tonband (András Ferenc Kovács: Öninterjú),” *Acta Philologica* 57 (2021): 97–109.

this (whether in the context of chemical weapons or the medicalization of breathing, most recently during the Corona pandemic). Breathing as white noise of speech (or, of the body, that is, the surroundings, or even, environment?) — behind, beneath, or even before speech — this experience certainly contributed to the history of a fascination around breathing in the modern era — perhaps it even helped to establish it. With this, it also prompted motivations for breath's storage potential, in this sense the objectification of breathing, as well as its transformation into writing — information or specific phenotypes (also as equally compensatory acts). And all this, against a background of an automatization of breath with respect to the breathing subject, even a turn against the subject itself; an uncanniness of breath in a linguistic-anthropological scope that Nietzsche already foresaw.

Taking a longer historical perspective, it is also important not to lose track of the fact that, beginning in antiquity — where reading was almost exclusively reading out loud<sup>5</sup> —, the immediacy of breathing held a very different form of physiological, perceptual, phenomenal and gestural status, and it had a much more prominent, explicit manifestation and existence when compared to the epochs of silent, internalized reading that followed much later.<sup>6</sup> Romanticism's various poetics of breath could also be understood here as compensations for this partial loss of the function of breathing,<sup>7</sup> which had been more evident in the earlier 'rule based poetics' (with its inherent memory of rhetoric). At the same time, following the emergence of diverse forms of messaging and storage technologies, breathing reappears in the form of a re-entry during the modern period (though, it is assuredly something quite different than the breathing from earlier epochs) — here, freed from the specific conceptions of subjectivity still bound to it around 1800. Ultimately, one can say that cultural technologies and the relevant dispositives of reading create, or mark, very different historical approaches to, and practices of dealing with, breathing. They temporally mark distinct 'uses of the body' — i.e., 'of' breathing, enact this and realize correlative forms of life.<sup>8</sup>

How can one best thematize the act of breathing in lyrical poetry? How can lyric acts — above all apostrophe, lyrical in-vocation — be understood/grasped as acts of breathing, or vice versa? Tropes of breathing have been granted quite a range of

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<sup>5</sup> Still very informative and instructive Josef Balogh, "*Voces paginarum*". *Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens* (Leipzig: Dietrich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1927).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eva Horn, "Luft als Element. Literatur, Klima und Thomas Manns Tod in Venedig," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 95 (2021): 353–375; Albrecht Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr: Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts* (München: Fink, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> This is an analogue addition to Horn, "Luft als Element".

<sup>8</sup> Cf. about these notions Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2017), 1011–1279.

meanings and functions within lyrical communication: In Romanticism, we find contiguities or metonyms of breathing in a haptic or tactile sense — phantasms of a physiological process of embodiment of the intimate relationship between poem and reader, under the banner of poetic immortality.<sup>9</sup> At their core, these rhetorical strategies should be understood as compensations, or sublimations, of the problematic self-foundation of lyrical speech — of vocality, of vocal immediacy.

The Hungarian poet, Rilke-translator and literary scholar Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922–1991) also addressed the poeticization of breathing in her work. A particularly poignant example in this vein is a poem with the title *Lélegzet* (*Breath*), in which the bareness or exposed character of breathing is also the theme of the poem itself. The poem begins (thematically) with an almost prayer-like gesture: “Do not desert me, air, allow / your servant to breathe deeply now.” The apostrophe evokes the air, prays for it (also for a form of inspiration, crucial for poetic invention), and the very same element is necessary for its voiced completion to even occur. Even with the referential, or, deictic directionality of address, the bespoke air is not simply an Other, it has already become the air of apostrophe itself. Still, the air evoked makes breathing possible to begin with — utterly indispensable for the voice and, thus, the apostrophe. The air inhaled, and the voice as such would be a gift of the air, whose name has just been uttered. Hence, breathing should itself become prayer, be voiced as prayer.<sup>10</sup> This also means that the poem as a whole becomes legible as such a gift, such a prayer. In this gift, the form of being of the lyrical I is quite literally exposed on the bodily level of breath.

In the poem, breathing becomes a genuine linguistic event: becoming a synonymous dimension of a dynamic of inhalation and exhalation, of letting-breathe through the poplar branches of the lyrical I — but, more as well: of an intersubjective, or more precisely, hybrid dynamic existing in the turn of breath between human being and plant, between the I and the poplar. One might even say that, in this revitalizing language game and web of signification, the text itself is breathing (in the sense of a dynamic re-translation of the substantive *levegő* [air] into *lebeg* [float]), that, in fact, here, we are dealing with a true example of writing breath.

The aforementioned permanence of the turn of breath is, however, not confirmed at each and every point by the pneuma-graphic text — and at one such point, it turns into

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance the following papers: Andrew Kay, “Conspiring with Keats: Toward a Poetics of Breathing,” *European Romantic Review* 27, no. 5 (2016): 563–581; Francis O’Gorman, “Coleridge, Keats, and the Science of Breathing,” *Essays in Criticism* 61, no. 4 (2011): 365–381.

<sup>10</sup> About the relationship between breathing and prayer see the suggestive explanation in David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, “Logos and Psyche: A Hermeneutics of Breathing,” in *Atmospheres of Breathing*, ed. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 13, referring to Kierkegaard.

an irritation where breathing becomes a central matter of importance. The enjambment of “szüntelen / új, szennyezetlen” in the Hungarian original (“continually return my new / unsullied life”) separates them, but the syntax links the elements of ‘continually’ and ‘new’, which actually remain in a somewhat contrarian relationship to one another. When read aloud, one has to briefly pause after *szüntelen*, but not only due to the line break; also to make sure that the two words do not blend into one another too intensely (even more so due to the comma after *új*) thus creating a sonic cacophony. At that point, there is even a small stop, a pause of breath possible, of course, right after the word *szüntelen* (literally: ‘without pause’)! As such, the above-mentioned permanence and the quality of the ‘new’ are not able to be immediately reconciled with one another, which could refer back to the gesture of praying: This sought or imagined permanence arises from the apostrophe and from a gift, that cannot be presupposed or made permanent. Permanence and event cannot amalgamate with one another just like that. This stop, this brief holds up of intonation, even of breathing, and induces an anacoluthic effect (the breath: an anacoluthon of voice).

Now, “breathing is what allows for a passage from vegetative life to spiritual life”,<sup>11</sup> and exactly that is what takes place in Nemes Nagy’s poem — initially in the simulation of prayer and then, more so, in the hybrid turn of breath enacting the religiously tinged transition of a spiritual purification or healing experience — which, ultimately results in the last verse, the kairotic “infinities of breathing spaces”.<sup>12</sup> The conditions for this are as follows: In the gift of air, the breath of the lyrical I becomes something other than its own, and only in this way can the promise of a ‘new unsullied life’ manifest itself. This is, then, performatively brought about through prayer, i.e., through the synonymous evocation of the semantic-etymological closeness of the verb and substantive in the original Hungarian, from *lobog*, *lebeg* and *levegő*. According to the poem, only this (linguistic) dynamization of the relationship between *air* and *floating* has the capacity to purify breath (*lélegzet*).

Breathing is to be restored as a form of purification (the inhaled and exhaled air), which — as mentioned — possesses both spiritual and healing meanings. This can

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>12</sup> As is generally known, the concept “*Atemwende*” in Paul Celan features a kairotic meaning as well: „Hence, to borrow a Greek term, the moment of *Atemwende* is profoundly a ‘kairotic’ event: *kairos* (καῖρός) is a supreme and right moment which runs counter to chronological time, *chronos* (χρόνος). *Atemwende* is a decisive point that carries irreversible and singular, non-causal and in Celan’s case pre-semantic and nonthematic qualities, for instance the vocal weight and tonal timbre of his highly elliptical language. In other words: breath is a mortal signature of the living body that cannot be ‘said in other words’, because it precedes vocal wording.” Antti Salminen, “Breathroutes: Paul Celan’s Poetics of Breathing,” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 12, no. 1 (2014): 111–112. About the correlation between breathing and prayer see *ibid.*, 118 (“breathing becomes a method of the unspeakable bodily prayer”).

also be understood to correspond to a restoration of the subject-oriented language, of the reservedness of its operative functions — for instance, its verbal aspect. In the second strophe, the activities stemming from the lyrical I recede, up to the point where the poem — ‘floating’ in the ‘infinities of breathing spaces’ — results in a single act of naming, devoid of predicate, in the final verse. Of course, the whole poem enunciates, under the banner of a gift (“allow / your servant to breathe deeply now”), of a being allowed to breathe, being allowed to speak – just as the ‘face’ of the lyrical I can only (dis)appear in the ‘wobbly leaves’. In the second strophe, however, this is developed further through the choreography of a reciprocal breathing-in through quasi-independent intervals between both forms of breath, which only still breathe themselves (in the mode of ‘floating’).

As an act of using one’s body, the breathing practice of poetry via apostrophe represents a genuine life form, insofar as this speech situation — and, with this, its potentially double, immediate and latent orientation or achievement — is *the* form of lyrical life and cannot be separated from this.

It is important here not to forget that all of this also applies to the act of *reading* the poem as well, insofar as the line ‘between our mutual pair of faces’ also refers to a space between the text(subject) and the reader — which represents the ‘infinities of breathing spaces’ as the poem itself. The above-mentioned breathing practice (life form), understood as using the physical body, also implies the body of the reading individual, and in this way, the poem can be read as a kind of institution of such a practice: whereby the poem itself almost teaches the reader how to breathe as a kind of counter-signature, an affirmation, a saying yes.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the prayer-like gesture of the entire poem shifts into a more comprehensive light: It is a call out for this counter-signature, and simultaneously a virtual lesson or training in this form of counter-signature (through which the emphasis on *új* — *new* becomes more understandable).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “If we trusted the current distinction between competence and performance, we could say that the work’s performance produces or institutes, forms or invents, a new competence for the reader or the addressee who thereby becomes a countersignatory. It teaches him or her, *if (s)he is willing*, to countersign. What is interesting here is thus the invention of the addressee capable of countersigning and saying ‘yes’ in a committed and lucid way. But this ‘yes’ is also an inaugural performance, and we recover the structure of iterability which will prevent us, at this point, from distinguishing rigorously between performance and competence, as between producer and receiver.” Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” in *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 74–75.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly also Charles Olson emphasized in his poetological theory about breathing, that in the ‘projective text’ not so much the breath of the poet, but that of the reader will be inscribed — quite as his signature: “If the inscription of the breath tempts us to imagine a move towards the line as signature, the particular physiological mark of the author, it can only be so as a signature which paradoxically erases personality in those who receive it while abstracting the signature’s author

In this way, the poem generates itself or performs and presents itself — as poetic invention — in this interweaving web of ‘performance’ and ‘competence’. Counter-signature as saying yes: Breath becomes — or appears to have become — the original, inaudible *Yes* in a spoken *Yes*,<sup>15</sup> doubled through assent, which always implies a second *Yes*.<sup>16</sup> In this complex web, the counter-signature can be pushed to excess though the event, its ostensible ‘performative mastery’ struck through:<sup>17</sup> This is the element, which, by the breath of the text itself, by its being allowed to breathe, was achieved or simulated precisely through this very breath (itself).

Ágnes Nemes Nagy: *Lélegzet*

Ne hagyj el engem, levegő,  
engedj nagyot lélegzenem,  
angyalruhák lobogjanak  
mellkasomban ezüstösen,  
akár a röntgenképeken.

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‘into’ them...” Brendan C. Gillott, “Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ and the Inscription of Breath,” *Humanities* 7, no. 4 (2018): 10.

<sup>15</sup> “It is therefore a kind of inaudible term, inaudible even as a determined yes is pronounced, in one language or another, within a given sentence counting as an affirmation. Language without language, it belongs without belonging to that totality which it simultaneously institutes and opens. It exceeds and incises language, to which it remains nonetheless immanent: like language’s first dweller, the first to step out of its home. It brings to being and lets be everything which can be said. But its intrinsic double nature is already discernable, or more precisely, it is already confirmed. It is and is not of language, it both merges and does not merge with its utterance in a natural language. For if it is ‘before’ language, it marks the essential exigency, the promise, the engagement to come to language, in a given language. Such an event is required by the very force of the yes. Insofar — says Rosenzweig — as it approves or confirms every possible language, the ‘sic’ or the ‘amen’ which it institutes doubles with an acquiescence the arche originary yes which *gives the first breath to every utterance*.” (emphasis by — Cs.L.) Jacques Derrida, “A Number of Yes,” *Qui Parle* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 126. Following Derrida, in the context of Heidegger’s notion of ‘*Zusage*’ this “yes in short, a sort of pre-engagement presupposed by every language and by every type of speech (*Sprache*)” is related to the “dimension” of “*Gelassenheit*” (see *ibid.*, 127).

<sup>16</sup> About its consequences: “Since the second yes resides in the first, the repetition augments and divides, distributing in advance the arche-originary yes.” *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>17</sup> “In this sense, the event, the other’s unexpected coming, never signs or countersigns. Thus the word countersignature can assume another meaning, neither that of authenticating confirmation, the performative ‘yes yes’ to a signature, mine or another’s; nor merely (or more) the dialectical opposition to the signature; but the very event that designates, countersigns in another sense the countersignature itself, that ‘suicides’ the signature, so to speak, carries it away, undoes it, exceeds it, effaces it, derides it. It is suicide itself.” Jacques Derrida, “Countersignature,” *Paragraph* 27, no. 2 (2004): 39.

Egy ezüstnyárfát adj nekem,  
arcom a rezgő lombba nyújtva  
hadd fújjam rá lélegzetem,  
s ő fújja vissza szüntelen  
új, szennyezetlen életem,  
míg kettőnk arca közt lebeg  
a lélegzetnyi végtelen.

Ágnes Nemes Nagy: *Breath* (translated by George Szirtes)

Do not desert me, air, allow  
your servant to breathe deeply now,  
let your angelic, silver-dressed  
shadows flicker within my chest  
like shapes in X-ray images.

Grant me a silver poplar, let  
my yearning face be closely set  
against it and allow me to  
breathe into it and let its breath  
continually return my new  
unsullied life to me, and float  
between our mutual pair of faces  
infinities of breathing spaces.

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**Hajnalka Halász**

*Independent Scholar*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9146-805X>

[halaszhajnalka@gmail.com](mailto:halaszhajnalka@gmail.com)

## **PREPARING FOR AN IMPOSSIBLE EVENT: LINGUISTIC PERFORMATIVITY AND POETIC ADDRESS TO THE ABSOLUTE OTHER — READING RILKE WITH DERRIDA \***

**Abstract:** The essay argues that an event, if it deserves the name, is singular, unrepeatable, and thus unmediable: It cannot be represented or secured by prior conventions. It can only be prepared for through an unconditional turning-toward. Following Derrida, I propose that lyric apostrophe is the figure of this preparation: Not a mechanism that enables the event but an exposure that keeps the future (the to-come) open to whatever arrives.

Reading Rilke's *Ninth Duino Elegy*, I analyze the poem's address to the Earth as an exemplary scene. The apostrophe singled out from the elegy does not merely illustrate praise; it presents, within the conventional act of concluding a covenant, the once-only character of a life's traces — the singular marks of a singular life — which require attestation.

Reframing apostrophe as preparation rather than mediation, the essay departs from standard accounts of lyric address. Here apostrophe does not establish a symmetrical exchange with a responsive addressee, nor does it fold time back into a reversible 'now'. It stages an irreversible call in which the mortal addresses the mortal, and this address requires a witness: The Angel, who both threatens with erasure and promises the survival of the very trace it attests. Contrary to readings that construe the Angel as a timeless, undivided transcendence, I read — by bringing de Man and Gadamer into tension — the Angel as a real witness at once inner and outer, intra- and extratextual, not a guarantor of presence but the instance that exposes the trace and attests — without guaranteeing — to its survival.

**Keywords:** *performativity of language, poetic address, singularity of the event, Rilke, Derrida*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

An event worthy of the name is singular and unrepeatable: It has never occurred and will never recur. Precisely as such, it is unconditional — it does not arise from prior enabling conventions and cannot be mediated or represented; there is no ‘event as such’, since mediation presupposes representation. Yet an event leaves traces and effects: Encounters with the absolutely new inscribe affective marks of being addressed. A pertinent example is Rilke’s *Ninth Duino Elegy*. After a brief orientation, I consider its apostrophic — hence, in a limited sense, performative — acts of addressing and being addressed, of turning away and turning toward, pausing first on the implications of the event’s unrepeatability and unconditionality.

Foregrounding this unconditionality calls into question the phenomenological ‘as such’ and the institutional safeguards (legal, conventional, technical) that theories of performativity posit as conditions of possibility for an event. Emphasizing impossibility likewise unsettles any systematization of conditions. As Derrida writes, “performativity is necessary but not sufficient”; deconstruction “lets the other come”— that is, it turns toward the openness of the future (the to-come), keeping it open and preparing for it — while continuing to unsettle the very conditions that would neatly distinguish the performative from the constative.<sup>1</sup> The inquiry is not confined to linguistic performativity. In concluding remarks on “Is saying the event possible?” Derrida urges a rethinking of “the value of the possible” that marks Western philosophy: The question requires that one answer both yes and no at once — “possible, impossible, possible as impossible”.<sup>2</sup>

A philosophical instance of the singular event is Heidegger’s *Dasein*, which can never be a mere example: “The Being of any such entity is *in each case mine*.”<sup>3</sup> Its evental singularity follows from finitude: We are mortal, divided from ourselves, thrown into time, never fully present to ourselves. Here Derrida diverges: Our never being present to ourselves, already delivered over to the world and referred to others, cannot be remedied by a turn back to what is one’s own. What, or whom, we turn toward is not an inappropriable origin but the open future — the absolute other. The related poetic trope is apostrophe: A turning-toward by turning-away.

Though the absolute other is not mediable, it leaves traces, and we must prepare for it. Derrida names this unfulfillable, risk-laden preparation an affirmative turn

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg, vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event,” *Critical inquiry* 33, no. 2 (2007): 454.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 67.

toward the absolute other. Poetic address — apostrophe — enacts this paradigmatically. He distinguishes ‘pure address’ or prayer from ode-like praise: The latter predicates and conditions the other’s coming; the former addresses the other as other, withholding predicates and safeguards, exposing itself to whatever arrives — whether death or living-on. Such address “does not speak *of*, but *to*”,<sup>4</sup> and, prior to any performative doing, executes a decision that occurs not only in poetry but whenever, in life, we turn toward another.

The turning toward, in this sense, is not identical with what literary studies calls apostrophe, though it is not independent of it. Definitions of apostrophe vary even within literary studies; a full reconstruction is offered elsewhere, and here I only sketch the necessary groundwork.

We must first recall de Man’s reading of Rilke: The governing figure of this poetry is a chiasmus of substitution grounded in an originary lack — the emptiness of inscription — a lack the poems attempt to fill by an impossible promise issued in the name or address of ‘God’.<sup>5</sup> To this problematic belong de Man’s essay on Riffaterre, which traces linguistic deixis to the trope of poetic address (prosopopoeia),<sup>6</sup> and his two essays on Hegel — above all the one on the sublime — which locate the absolutely beautiful or the sublime in an unbridgeable rupture between divine and human, and between the non-sensuous and the sensuous.<sup>7</sup> Preparing an interpretation of the *Ninth Elegy* would then require showing how these texts place that unrepeatable, singular event which de Man calls materiality, inscription, or an undeniable empty fact, and which Derrida names the absolute other and, in certain cases, ‘God’; how de Man’s Rilke reading defines the name ‘God’, and, in relation, whom or what Derrida calls ‘God’; and why Derrida retains the name despite its metaphysical overtones, thereby exposing himself to the risk of misunderstanding. Since I cannot elaborate here, I register these points in outline and accept the risk of conflating God’s metaphysical proper name with ‘God’ as absolute other.

The medium of the turn toward the absolute other is apostrophe. It does not mediate the event; it prepares it. Paul de Man, Heinz Schlaffer, and Jonathan Culler define apostrophe differently by how many and what kinds of speech-positions they

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, trans. Ken Frieden (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 111.

<sup>5</sup> Paul de Man, “Tropes (Rilke),” in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 55–56.

<sup>6</sup> Paul de Man, “Hypogram and Inscription,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 27–53.

<sup>7</sup> Paul de Man, “Hegel on the Sublime,” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 105–118.

distinguish (addresser, addressee, witness).<sup>8</sup> Crucially, unlike Schlaffer and Culler, de Man excludes the third — the public or witness — treating that mediating, quasi-divine figure as a metaphysical stop that freezes prosopopoeia's exchange and its hallucinatory, appearance-unsettling effects.<sup>9</sup>

If I nonetheless claim that the witness's position is key in Rilke, 'witness' does not mean the Schlaffer/Culler type. That supposed divine guarantor of undivided presence, representability, and mediation must first be rigorously deconstructed in order to reach the placeless place Derrida names the absolute other, the secret, God, or the event — which is also the witness's place. Traces of such a non-metaphysical, thoroughly concrete third position (or trace) appear both in the poem and in its reception; I indicate them via points of contact between Paul de Man's and Hans-Georg Gadamer's readings.

Without attempting a full demonstration, I argue in outline that the experience of time voiced in the poem's praise of finitude exceeds the terms set by Schlaffer's and Culler's accounts of apostrophe, as well as by the frameworks of de Man and Gadamer. Each, in different ways, reintroduces a return or reversal that resists — or conditions — the radically irreversible, unrecallable, one-way, asymmetrical movement of time. Returns to an origin, to inscription, or to lyric's reversible 'now' function as turns back, but the event in question affords no such return. There is no turning back, even if the event seems graspable only as a turning back; yet neither return nor calculation can simply be eliminated.

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<sup>8</sup> The structure of apostrophe, for both Culler and Schlaffer, is 'indirect': A seemingly direct turning toward an altogether different instance that simultaneously turns away from the audience or reader, who is thereby addressed only indirectly: "Triangulated address is the root-form of presentation for lyric, underlying even those poems that do not engage in the strange forms of address and invocation endemic to the genre. But it is scarcely clear that 'overheard' is best way to speak of this pretense to address someone or something else, while actually proffering discourse for an audience." Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 186. Schlaffer likewise conceives poetic address — more precisely *Anrufung* ('invocation') — as modeled on the liturgical act of invoking the divine: "Rather, the course of lyric communication corresponds to the worship service, in which the priest, standing before the congregation and on its behalf, calls upon God. It is to him that the priest's praise and petition are addressed, not to the congregation, who see him only from behind as he performs his prayers. In this constellation three, not two, parties are involved: The speaker, the addressed instance, and the overhearers, who, as witnesses and beneficiaries, follow the priestly speech act [...]." Heinz Schlaffer, *Geistersprache: Zweck und Mittel der Lyrik* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2012), 23, [Translation is mine – H. H.].

<sup>9</sup> This becomes most evident in those passages where de Man distinguishes between apostrophe/prosopopoeia and personification/anthropomorphism. While the former has a tropological structure, the latter has a referential one. See de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription," 47; Paul de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 239–244.

That time's passage cannot be denied means it must be affirmed — unconditionally. It may seem impossible; yet, as Derrida insists, it happens in every moment of life.<sup>10</sup> Our separation from ourselves appears as loss, emptiness, metaphysical homelessness, topological errancy, loss of identity, or inauthenticity only so long as we look back rather than turn toward the other. Such a turn seems impossible and demands absolute risk and dispossession, without safeguards or returns, yet it is our only chance to enter relation and, as Rilke says, to leave a once-only mark in the world. That mark is read by the other in me — carried invisibly within and therefore always already excluded from me. It is precisely this contamination between 'I' and other — the interpenetration of positions without collapse — that the apostrophe below will let us observe.

Given the limits of this essay, I cannot offer a full account of the *Ninth Elegy's* addresses or its reception. I concentrate instead on Gadamer and de Man, whose sharply different views of language serve as exemplary poles. Explaining why their readings have left only scant — more allusive than substantial — traces in the reception would itself require extended analysis. By contrast, Manfred Engel's writings have been far more influential; much of the reception still draws on the complexity of his structuralist framework.<sup>11</sup> Christoph König's detailed commentary, published with the critical edition he edited,<sup>12</sup> should also be noted — but this too can only be pursued elsewhere.

An interpretation of poetic address from the vantage of Derrida's late writings is, with few exceptions, not yet part of Rilke's interpretive horizon.<sup>13</sup> I therefore situate the apostrophe singled out from the *Ninth Elegy*, in which the speaker addresses the

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the passage in *The Gift of Death* where, reading the story of Abraham and Isaac, Derrida concludes that the turn toward the absolute Other (for instance, God), a turn that requires turning away from everything and everyone else and sacrificing even the beloved son Isaac, is not an exceptional occurrence but "the most common event in the world". Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85.

<sup>11</sup> Manfred Engel, *Rainer Maria Rilkes "Duineser Elegien" und die moderne deutsche Lyrik: Zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Avantgarde* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1986), 123–150; Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke. Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, vol. 2: *Gedichte 1910–1926*, ed. Manfred Engel and Ulrich Fülleborn (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1996), 591–702.

<sup>12</sup> Christoph König, *Kreativität: Lektüren von Rilkes 'Duineser Elegien'* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2023), 110–132; Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien und zugehörige Gedichte 1912–1922*, ed. Christoph König (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> For a rare exception, see Silvia Henke, "Die Rhetorik der Blindheit als Trauerarbeit im Sichtbaren bei Derrida und Rilke," in *Mnema: Derrida zum Andenken*, ed. Hans-Joachim Lenger and Georg Christoph Tholen (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2007), 157–170, who, reading Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*, argues that Rilke's rhetoric of blindness performs mourning-in-the-visible by producing blindness through language rather than image, at the medial limit where drawing, seeing, and writing intersect.

Earth, within these contexts, relying above all on Derrida's insights. My guiding question is simple: Who bears witness to this exemplary apostrophe?

## 2. DEIXIS, TESTIMONY, AND ADDRESS

Jonathan Culler illustrates apostrophe's animating force in *Theory of the Lyric* with a passage from Rilke's *Ninth Duino Elegy*. The Earth-address is itself framed by further addresses — "To the Angel laud this world" and "Tell him — things"<sup>14</sup> — so it exemplifies the praise the addressee/s is/are to perform. Culler argues that apostrophe desires that things function as 'thous': If Earth can be addressed, it 'wants to be spirit', to become at least partly invisible or conceptual through a 'rearing' in us, and the poem even promises such transformation — leaving open whether it occurs in the poem's moment. For Culler, this animating power typically interiorizes the external or projects the self outward; hence lyric folds linear narrative time into an iterable, reversible 'now'. Lyric language does not represent a past event; it is the event of this now.<sup>15</sup>

Within the ten *Duino Elegies*, the *Ninth* is pivotal: Like the *Seventh*, it turns lament over transience into praise, redirecting speech from the Angel to the Earth and things. Having renounced the aim of 'winning' over the Angel ("No longer beseeching, no beseeching"; "Don't think that I am beseeching. And even if / I were beseeching, you would not come."), the speaker urges a turn toward earthly being-there and to bearing witness to the finitude and singularity of our existence and our singular relations to finite things — each time otherwise repeated, which properly falls to the Angel to attest.

In what follows I single out events of address — a turning toward that is also a turning away — that bring speaker(s) and witness(es) into being and configure their relations:

[...]

Hier ist des Säglichen Zeit, hier seine Heimat.  
Sprich und bekenn. [...]

Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die unsägliche, ihm  
kannst du nicht großtun mit herrlich Erfültem; im Weltall,  
wo er fühlender fühlt, bist du ein Neuling. Drum zeig  
ihm das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern gestaltet,  
als ein Unsriges lebt, neben der Hand und im Blick.

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Travers, *Duino Elegies: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2023), 253. All subsequent quotations from the *Ninth Elegy* are taken from this translation.

<sup>15</sup> Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 224–226.

*Sag ihm die Dinge. Er wird staunender stehn; wie du standest  
bei dem Seiler in Rom, oder beim Töpfer am Nil.  
Zeig ihm, wie glücklich ein Ding sein kann, wie schuldlos und unser,  
wie selbst das klagende Leid rein zur Gestalt sich entschließt,  
dient als ein Ding, oder stirbt in ein Ding –, und jenseits  
selig der Geige entgeht. Und diese, von Hingang  
lebenden Dinge verstehn, daß du sie rühmst; vergänglich,  
traun sie ein Rettendes uns, den Vergänglichsten, zu.  
Wollen, wir sollen sie ganz im unsichtbarn Herzen verwandeln  
in – o unendlich – in uns! Wer wir am Ende auch seien.*

*Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: unsichtbar  
in uns erstehn? – Ist es dein Traum nicht,  
einmal unsichtbar zu sein? – Erde! unsichtbar!  
Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein drängender Auftrag?  
Erde, du liebe, ich will. Oh glaub, es bedürfte  
nicht deiner Frühlinge mehr, mich dir zu gewinnen, einer,  
ach, ein einziger ist schon dem Blute zu viel.  
Namenlos bin ich zu dir entschlossen, von weit her.  
Immer warst du im Recht, und dein heiliger Einfall  
ist der vertrauliche Tod.  
Siehe, ich lebe. Woraus? Weder Kindheit noch Zukunft  
werden weniger ..... Überzähliges Dasein  
entspringt mir im Herzen.<sup>16</sup>*

[...]

*Here is the time for the sayable, here is its homeland.  
Speak out and bear witness. [...]*

*To the Angel laud this world, not the unsayable one.  
You cannot impress him with your glorious emotion.  
In the world-space where he feels with deeper feelings,  
you are a novice. Show him, therefore, what is simple,  
what shaped over generations lives on as our own,*

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<sup>16</sup> Rilke, *Duineser Elegien*, 37–38. All subsequent quotations from *Die neunte Elegie* are taken from this edition.

at hand and within sight. Tell him—things.  
He will stand in amazement, just as you stood  
beside the rope-maker in Rome or the potter  
on the Nile. Show him how happy a thing  
can be, how innocent and ours, how even  
mourning grief can find its pure form,  
and can serve as a thing or dies into a thing—  
to escape in bliss beyond the violin—And these things,  
which live in their demise, understand that you  
laud them; ephemeral, they look to us for  
deliverance, to us, the most ephemeral of all. They want  
us to change them, entirely, in our hidden hearts, in—  
oh, eternally—within us! Whoever, we may ultimately be.

Earth, is it not this that you want,  
to arise within us, invisible—Is it not your  
dream, for once to become invisible?—  
Earth! Invisible! What, if not transformation, is your  
pressing command? Earth, dearest one, I want this. Oh,  
don't believe that I should need your spring times  
to win me over. One, even just one, would be  
too much for my blood. I came from afar,  
already utterly resolved to be yours. You  
were always right, and the holiest of your conceptions is  
death, my companion.  
Look: I am living. From what? Neither childhood nor future  
is diminishing . . . superabundant being  
springs from my heart.<sup>17</sup>

It appears — and appearance matters throughout — that the decisive turn is the speaker's call to turn away from the Angel and the 'unsayable' toward the Earth, the 'here', home of the 'sayable'. At first sight the poem seems to demand a deictic act — showing or pointing — to astonish the Angel by attesting this 'here'. The 'I' addresses Earth directly and the Angel only indirectly; the speech functions at once as testimony and address. On the scene we can discern a triad — 'I', Earth, Angel — as addresser, addressee, witness, yet it is framed by another apostrophic triad — 'I',

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<sup>17</sup> Travers, *Duino Elegies*, 255, [modified].

‘we’, ‘you’ — that destabilizes fixed positions. Because these pronouns at points become interchangeable, reception often speaks of self-address. Manfred Engel, for his part, traces all pronouns and *dramatis personae* (Angel, Hero, Child, Creature, etc.) back to the central ‘I’, treating them as narcissistic projections or alter egos.<sup>18</sup>

Such a move effaces precisely the differences and turns that constitute address. Throughout the cycle a tension arises between the staging of figures and their identifiability, between visible and invisible dimensions. Staging — showing, pointing — aims at phenomenalization; so too, in part, does poetic address, which lends a sensuous face or name to what is non-sensuous, absent, or unrepresentable. Yet prosopopoeia leaves the scene fluid — spectral, present/absent — and not pre-given in the text. The repeated ‘here’/‘now’ and the figures ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘we’ do not precede the poem; they come into being in the labor of reading and repetition, each time otherwise yet hauntingly alike. The reception’s desire — often unsuccessfully<sup>19</sup> — to fix *dramatis personae*, above all the Angel, works against lyric’s performativity and evental character. Referentializing tropes into proper names is an irreversible tendency of language, but indulging it risks working against the text.

If the *Elegies* are more lyric than narrative, every utterance that implicates an ‘I’ brings the communicative scene into being each time as a linguistic event. Taking seriously Culler’s claim that lyric is not the mediation of an event but the event itself<sup>20</sup> means figures and names have no pre-textual self-identity. The poems may nonetheless present figures as seemingly self-identical — by leaning on narrative conventions or received notions of language and subject — but in Rilke this very difficulty signals an awareness of their evental condition. The question, then, is how particular passages present the ‘I’ or the Angel, whose identity is only a name or pronoun and who, in principle, appear each time otherwise and yet uncannily similar — “Just once, everything, / only just once” — as they step onto the stage.

From any angle, speaking positions lack a determinate origin: One voice repeatedly speaks in another’s name. The ‘I’ is explicitly named only in the address to Earth (“*Erde, du liebe, ich will.*”; “*Namenlos bin ich zu dir entschlossen.*”; “*Siehe, ich lebe.*”), where any potential ‘you’ who obeys the imperatives (“*Preise dem Engel die Welt.*”; “*Sag ihm die Dinge.*”) and repeats the address speaks both for ‘I’ and for ‘us’. The ‘I’ always addresses a ‘you’ in whose name it also speaks, most overtly in the plural. While singular and plural pronouns are interchangeable — even nameless (“*Wer wir am Ende auch seien.*”; “*Namenlos bin ich zu dir entschlossen.*”)

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<sup>18</sup> Engel, Rainer Maria Rilkes “Duineser Elegien,” 145–150.

<sup>19</sup> For scholarly reflections on the difficulties of interpretation, see: Dieter Liewerscheidt, “Rilkes Duineser Elegien, ein zwiespältiges Experiment,” *Literatur für Leser* 39, no. 2 (2016): 97–107.

<sup>20</sup> Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 226.

— the addressed figures (Angel, Earth) bear proper names; yet this does not ease identification, since proper names slide into common nouns (German *‘Erde’* / *‘Erde’*, both capitalized). ‘Earth’ appears expressly as a word — more precisely, as a flower’s name: Not “a handful of earth” but a ‘word’ ‘won’, “the yellow and blue / gentian”. This is no Cratylean equation of word and thing, nor does deixis sublate language into presence. As the exemplary apostrophe shows, things become singular not by descriptive pointing but by address, leaving singular, unrepeatable traces on the Earth or in the earth.

That the *Ninth Elegy* has a profound awareness of the problems — parallel to constative vs. performative language — of deixis and poetic address is signaled by its vivid surface staging. Examples include the repetition and italicization of deictics; the apparent interchangeability of pronouns; address framed by address; and figurations of hand, eye, tongue, teeth as the organs or material conditions of writing, pointing, seeing, speaking — joined to heart and immediacy of feeling. Also staged is the function of the example itself, which can be symbolic — producing a unity of singular and universal<sup>21</sup> — or sign-like, as with ‘here’ and ‘now’, which, as de Man notes, are not examples at all, point to nothing, and refer back to the emptiness of their own inscription.<sup>22</sup>

The poem not only stages but also problematizes the difference between deixis and address: After the initial linguistic exhibitions, pointing turns into an event of avowal (“*Sprich und bekenn.*”) that attests not a thing but the avower’s irreplaceability and the singular, unrepeatable event of avowing. Enumeration and deixis, ostensibly constative, are re-situated within intersubjective acts of avowal and address. In the poem’s second half, the frame of pointing is shown to be produced by a turn toward the other as other; the speaker summons the other (perhaps oneself, or ourselves each time) to speak here and avow to the absolute other — the Angel, i.e., to absolute interiority and exteriority — thereby also bearing witness to the inner, linguistic relation to Earth, things, world, the here.

The problems of linguistic pointing, avowal, and address belong to a broader inquiry: The finitude of the time of being-there. The deixis of ‘here’ marks not only place but, above all, temporality. The poem asks about the struggle and the ‘must’ that orient finite human existence (“*Warum [...] also die Frist des Daseins hinzubringen*”, “*warum dann / Menschliches müssen*”) and, accordingly, about the willing — or here, the desiring — of finitude as fate (“*warum dann [...] / sich sehnen nach Schicksal? ...*”), despite our evasive (“*vermeidend*”) relation to finitude and the

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<sup>21</sup> Paul de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s ‘Aesthetics,’” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 761–775.

<sup>22</sup> de Man, “Hypogram and Inscription,” 42.

possibility of ‘spending’ time (“*hinbringen*”) in the laurel’s mode, a way of being that endures time. Earthly finitude, the temporal limit, both threatens effacement (making the human “the most fleeting of all” [*“die Schwindendsten*”]) and confers singularity (“Just once”, “*ein Mal*”, seemingly “irrevocable”, “*nicht widerrufbar*”). Yet both traceless disappearance and the irrevocable mark (“*Mal*”) are only apparent: The trace is always erasable, destructible, and is referred, by poetic address, to staging — to a figural semblance (the Angel, or even the actual reader).

How has reception borne witness to this seemingly irrevocable singularity? The *Elegies* themselves establish a parallel between inner and outer witnesses: Angel and reader. The witness to the *Ninth Elegy*’s exemplary apostrophe ought to be, on the one hand, the Angel and, on the other, the ever-singular, likewise finite reader. As absolute other, the Angel is at least as unreachable and as unaddressable to the poem as its reader each time. Just as one can only turn away from the reader, so, according to the *Elegies*, one can only turn away from the Angel. The Angel’s effect on the speaker is likewise aligned with fate and finitude, at once desired and feared: The human being relates ambivalently not only to its own finitude, its fate, but also to the ‘terrible’ Angel (“*Jeder Engel ist schrecklich*” [“Every Angel brings terror”]) — so begins the *Second Elegy*), desired despite the fact that from the Angel, like from everything that inspires terror, one can only turn away; any encounter with it can be testified to only by affects or traces.

This ambivalence becomes intelligible if we recall that the *Elegies* associate Angels not with eternal, undivided life but with death — more precisely, with finitude and self-division. As the *Elegies* themselves state, the angels are heralds, translators or specters of death. They do not promise God’s eternal presence or immortal life, nor do they simply announce the death of God or of a metaphysical worldview. Rather, they attest that God is death<sup>23</sup> (and life): That death is inseparable from life and constitutive of it — “Angels (it is said) / often do not know whether they are moving / amongst the living or the dead” (*First Elegy*). Angels can be deadly; they threaten us with death (“And even if one should suddenly take me to its heart, / I would perish from its greater being”, *First Elegy*); they are “almost death-bringing birds of the soul” (*Second Elegy*), and likewise they can bear witness to — or quicken — life. *To praise death is to praise life*; it is to praise finitude.

### 3. TWO WITNESSES TO RILKE: GADAMER AND DE MAN

In what follows I examine two exemplary readings of the *Duino Elegies* — Gadamer’s and de Man’s — focusing on how the elegies construct their figures and

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<sup>23</sup> For Derrida’s account of this idea, see: Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 116, 8.

on what counts, for each, as attestation. For Gadamer, the Angel names the undivided totality of invisible human feeling: An absolute inner presence whose reality cannot be discursively demonstrated yet claims “absolute certainty”.<sup>24</sup> Addressing the Angel calls a witness to that indemonstrable certainty; the Angel is invoked not to arrive, as if summoned, but to confirm what is already inwardly known — “a witness, who is to confirm what is already known”,<sup>25</sup> namely the inward reality of feeling.

Gadamer situates this appeal within a mythopoetic inversion: By addressing the Angel as a person, the poem turns outward the inaccessible totality of inner affect; interiority appears as figure on the visible scene. Hermeneutics then undertakes a counter-turn, reversing the inversion — not to dissolve the figure but to read, in the presence of the word, the reality to which it bears witness. Because this is a reversal of an inversion, it can never be complete: “something disharmonious always remains”.<sup>26</sup> Gadamer traces this logic above all in the *Fourth and Tenth Elegies*. What is disclosed is not myth continued as narrative but the “Mythopoeie of his own heart”: The poem’s capacity, in the coincidence of sound and meaning, to present the reality of inner certainty, a “*Parousia*” of the spoken word.<sup>27</sup>

De Man’s Rilke moves on ostensibly opposite ground and yet along a parallel axis. He begins from an originary “lack”:<sup>28</sup> The governing figure is chiasmus, a pattern of reversals by which inside and outside trade places, the self projects outward, and predicates exchange hosts.<sup>29</sup> Such tropological motion presupposes emptiness; figures are not vessels of presence but formal operations whose functioning forecloses any restoration of origin. In Rilke there is no self-identical state to be regained by reversing the reversal; hence the subject’s wandering in a world without abiding (“*Bleiben ist nirgends*”, *First Elegy*).

On this view, the ‘divine’ to which the poems speak is not a securing transcendence but a name for rhetoric’s promise — the ‘god’ of poetic craft: The imagined harmony of sound and meaning, often figured by Orpheus.<sup>30</sup> Because that promise depends on tropes, the divine instance functions as an empty guarantor, a

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<sup>24</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Mythopoietic Reversal in Rilke’s Duino Elegies,” in *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory*, ed. Dennis J. Schmidt, trans. Robert H. Paslick (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 157.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>28</sup> de Man, “Tropes (Rilke),” 37.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 49–50.

<sup>30</sup> As de Man argues, Rilke’s poetics stakes everything on a “phonocentric Ear-god” — “the ultimate figure, the phonocentric Ear-god on which Rilke, from the start, has wagered the outcome of his entire poetic success” — a wager the later poems themselves expose as “error and betrayal”; see de Man, “Tropes (Rilke),” 55.

proper name playing absolute witness to an arbitrary tie between word and sense. Emptiness is not ineffectual; it appears as the rhetoric of the impossible promise (compelling because impossible), as the lament of nothingness, or as the “euphoria”<sup>31</sup> of tropological freedom released from reference — an alternation that helps explain the *Elegies*’ oscillation between elegiac and odic registers.

In contrast, where Gadamer discerns under the Angel’s name an inner certainty borne witness to in the word’s presence, de Man identifies a structure that makes any such presence systematically precarious. Yet they converge at a pressure point: What is decisive in Rilke compels assent yet resists possession. For Gadamer, it must be attested; for de Man, it appears only in and as figuration.

De Man’s analysis of inscription brings the point into focus. Negatively defined, inscription is “neither figure, nor sign, nor cognition”; it does not appear and is not phenomenalizable.<sup>32</sup> Its single positive determination is its undeniability. Pointing in writing is neither true nor false; it shows nothing and contains nothing; yet it undeniably occurs — as inscription. What is thus written leaves a mark that seems irrevocable, and de Man’s related reflections on memory (*Gedächtnis*) suggest why: The domain of memory that resists recall (*Erinnerung*) is at once inner and outer — and more external than internal — insofar as it remains inappropriable, irreducible to interiorization.<sup>33</sup>

Viewed through this lens, Gadamer’s claim can be restated without contradiction. For Gadamer, the Angel’s attestation does not collapse the outer into the inner or dissolve figuration into presence; rather, the Angel’s function is to confirm that what cannot be proved — “the reality of feeling” — nevertheless bears the force of reality, “lifted beyond any doubt”.<sup>34</sup> The site of such confirmation is not a transparent interior but the poem’s sounding word, where the poem’s address stages, as event, the coincidence of sense and sound. In other words, Gadamer’s ‘*Parousia*’ is not a metaphysics of presence; it names the experience, in and through language, of a reality that cannot otherwise be secured.

The same staging looks different from de Man’s vantage. God’s name, precisely as the name of an absolute witness, risks defiguring — masking — the singular, material traces of inscription by offering an all-purpose authority. The danger is that invocation slides into legitimation: The divine proper name appears to underwrite what rhetoric produces. Pushed further, de Man’s caution would read the Angel as a name for the effect whereby tropological operations are taken, mistakenly but

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>32</sup> de Man, “Hypogram and Inscription,” 51.

<sup>33</sup> de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s ‘Aesthetics,’” 761–775.

<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, “Mythopoietic Reversal in Rilke’s Duino Elegies,” 157.

compellingly, for guaranteed meanings. The task of reading is then to keep the 'empty' guarantor empty — to show how its force arises from figural motion rather than from any external warrant.

Gadamer's and de Man's interpretations seemingly point in opposite directions: Whereas Gadamer links certainty — or undeniability, reality — to an inner sphere, de Man links it to something absolutely outer. Whereas Gadamer associates semblance, or the presence of the word, with the happening of truth, de Man associates the semblance of prosopopoeia with the repetition of a presumed error. Yet they run in parallel insofar as — beyond the apparent oppositions (outer/inner, truth/error) — both imply that the inner reality of the heart or the outer trace of inscription cannot be denied or revoked, and yet neither language as such, nor the presence of the poetic word, nor the repeated inversion or hollowing of prosopopoeia can possess it. This invisible, non-sensuous reality cannot be translated back into the visible; it can only be borne witness to.

#### **4. DERRIDA**

On the basis of Derrida's writings on God and negative theology (whose reconstruction there is no space for here), one could, by contrast, conclude that in language the name 'God' functions not only as a proper name but also as the name of a witness who automatically — indeed, invisibly — validates and countersigns every utterance, insofar as all speech inevitably and necessarily invokes God's name and calls it as its witness. On the one hand, the name of God is that first and last instance which appears to bridge and justify the fracture that constitutes language or consciousness — the groundlessness of language, understanding, and all certainty — raising it, so to speak, into the calm of eternal presence and dissolving it there. On the other hand, this name is always also a proper name — the proper name of the other each time: The countersignature of the other who attests and validates my own irrevocable and unrepeatable mark or trace, my hand-signature. This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that I might become my own reader, my own absolute other. The trace is not merely singular, nor is it a singularity that could be pointed out; rather, it is a once-only (*ein Mal*), temporal, finite existence.

Between God's metaphysical name and the proper name of the other — that is, between these two witness positions — there yawns a wide gulf. "Look: I am living", the I says to the Earth, the "most fleeting of all" to this all that is 'fleeting', mortal to mortal. A finite life, whose once-only character — its singularity — follows from its finitude, cannot be attested in God's infinitely general and eternal proper name. Death cannot be detached from life; there is no immortal life; death constitutes the innermost essence of every life. Either there is no God, or there is only a mortal God. This is

why Derrida insists that the absolute other (for example, God) is not an example or a mere figure but something fully real, undeniable in its existence. God is my own other, my most intimate, invisible secret, my witness, whom — precisely because of this immediacy — I cannot appropriate or behold face to face:

God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior. As soon as such a structure of conscience exists, of being-with-oneself, of speaking, that is to say of producing invisible sense, as soon as I have within me, *thanks to the invisible word as such*, a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore *at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself*, [...] then there is what I call God, (there is) what I call God in me [...].<sup>35</sup>

Derrida reads the notion of God in the sense that Martin Hägglund, following him, calls “a radically atheist conception of desire”.<sup>36</sup> This desire is, paradoxically, a desire for death — more precisely, for mortality and at the same time for survival — for a separation from oneself, which in this elegy is not a loss but lends the feeling or beautiful semblance that I am here and alive, that being-there floods me, overflows me, overflows my heart (“*Hiersein ist herrlich*”, “*weil Hiersein viel ist*”, “*Überzähliges Dasein / entspringt mir im Herzen*”). This feeling is elicited by the gaze of an Other whom I do not see seeing me, who sees me in secret, sees my secret, and before whom I am exposed, naked, without being able to objectify, observe, foresee, calculate, or master either my own response or the other’s gaze.

The asymmetry and irreversibility of seeing and being seen are made reversible and communicable by voice — hence in Rilke the importance of determining when the divine-poetic technique of assembling sound and sense gains the upper hand, and when, instead, the asymmetry of seeing and being seen does. In this staging, what stands out is less the voice or voiced address than the act of a turning toward enacted by turning away — an act that, each time otherwise, arranges and differentiates seeing and being seen, witness and speaker.

Let us return, then, to the figure of the Angel — to the witness invoked by the *Elegies*, tasked with attesting to the speaker’s finite, once-only life, to the poem’s exemplary apostrophe, and to the poem’s irrevocable and undeniable traces, its reality. As noted repeatedly, the address to the Earth is ‘only’ an example — exemplary and repeatable, not least because it is itself framed by address. What is this apostrophe an example of? Above all, of demonstrating compliance with the finitude of human being-there, with the must without a must — its imperative — the

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<sup>35</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 116.

purpose of human or poetic vocation on Earth, which is no longer a calling or address but a being-called that responds to a call. If you would fulfill your human, poetic vocation, then say and avow what touches you, what carries you away, what is itself final. The finite is referred to the most finite: “because, it seems, that all that is here needs us, / this fleeting-all, which strangely concerns us: / we, the most fleeting of all”. Are we not already addressed by the Earth, the world, and things before we could have addressed them in the form of an apostrophe? — “Is this not the secret cunning of this world of silence, / when it so urges lovers that in their feelings / both should shudder with joy?” Because we are finite, we must leave traces; yet traces that seem irrevocable can be left only if we first allow the traces left in the earth, in being-there, to address us — if we address the Earth in such a way that, first or finally, it addresses us. My vocation is the Earth’s vocation: “What, if not transformation, is your / pressing command?”

The central, exemplary apostrophe stages a mutual commitment and self-giving — a kind of marriage or covenant — between the ‘I’ and the Earth in their call and vocation, in their addressing and being addressed: “Earth, dearest one, I want this”; “I came from afar, already utterly resolved to be yours.” In this act the ‘I’ binds itself and acknowledges the Earth’s claim: “You were always right.” This covenant is not natural but conventional in kind, and it is concluded in speech acts that presuppose publicity and a witness, such as avowal — “Speak out and bear witness” — or the act of commitment, which here must be uttered anonymously. The Earth’s dream and will are realized in the ‘I’, becoming an invisible — or rather, undeniable — reality; in this sense the Angel, too, functions as that instance. Although feeling, desire, and will are invisible, absolutely interior, they are nonetheless real insofar as they must be declared before witnesses — for example, the Angel. The positions of the ‘I’, the Earth, and the Angel — the addresser, the addressee, and the witness — are inextricably interwoven, insofar as it cannot be determined precisely where the speech turns, to whom it turns, who translates whom, who speaks in whose name — the turn of ‘transformation’ is the ‘command’ of all three instances.

Although it is undecidable, in the exemplary apostrophe, who speaks to whom and in which direction the speech turns — who executes the turn and whether the turn is in fact carried through — these questions must nevertheless always already be decided by the witness. The name ‘Angel’, of course, is identical neither with the name of God nor with the name of the actual reader. Although, by the near-unanimous judgment of the reception, the Angel cannot be harmonized without further ado with Christian or other religious traditions, it is not independent of theological resonances, since the name indisputably evokes a context in which angels serve as God’s messengers or translators — that is, those who ‘turn’ speech from one side to the other.

The indistinguishability of translator and translated — the one who turns and that which is turned — of addresser and addressee, and of confessor and witness, is produced by the relentless rotation of apostrophe; in a certain sense it is enabled by the absence of a center, of a self-identical 'I'. The 'I' can never be present to itself; it is always already excluded from itself, referred to its other — for example, to the Angel. We are excluded from our absolute interior and referred to something absolutely exterior, to an Other. The Angel is at once our absolute interior and our absolute exterior. My absolute interior — the nearest and most immediate 'space', that of feeling, will, and desire — is not mine, does not belong to me, cannot be appropriated. Only the other ever sees and attests it, and yet I do not see the other seeing. I cannot address the other directly or be confirmed in the other. Nor can I enter into dialogue with the Angel — my own translator / transformer — since I do not know who will translate — turn — me, transform me, who will transpose my interior into the outside world. The Angel translates — *ver-wandelt* — the absolute other (for example, God); the Angel translates — transforms — me. My own interior — and, for myself, my witness, my translator, my transformer — who am excluded from myself and cannot be present to myself, remains an inaccessible and irresolvable secret. This secret — my absolute interior — is always already something absolutely exterior: Always already shared, staged, public; everyone can see what plays out upon the stage. Of my own stage — both interior and exterior, absolutely secret and absolutely public — which Rilke names, among other things, *Weltinnenraum*, anyone can be the witness; yet the witness's position is just as singular and irreplaceable, just as once-only and evental, as every other position in the poem or upon the scene, in this placeless place. From this vantage, the Angel's name can, each time, call the reader, who in reading can at once confirm and falsify this testimony. The name 'Angel', of course, is not identical with the reader's name; yet, in the contingent coincidence of names, it may be exchanged for it.

Who, then, is the witness to the cited example, to the exemplary apostrophe? Who is the unique and irreplaceable witness who attests to the *Elegies*' undeniable reality, to their irrevocable, material traces — who countersigns them? In response one could only cite further interpretations, signatures, countersignatures, whose singularity would have to be analyzed each time. The witness is always the other, each time another other. Were space not finite here, the next witness would be Manfred Engel, who offers a structuralist interpretation of the Angel. Since Engel associates the Angel with undividedness, timelessness, and boundlessness<sup>37</sup> — that is, ultimately,

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<sup>37</sup> "In qualitatively different ways, angels and animals alike 'are' 'real' [...], that is, free from reflexive division and unthreatened by transience and death." Engel, Rainer Maria Rilkes "*Duineser Elegien*," 126, [Translation is mine – H.H.]. In his editorial commentary on the *Duino Elegies*, discussing

with a divine position and with metaphysical conceptions — and since this would contribute only indirectly to the questions posed here, that discussion must be undertaken elsewhere. We close these preparations here — without knowing whether the event has taken place, will take place, or can ever be known to have taken place.

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parallels with the *Seventh Elegy*, Engel emphasizes “trans-temporal productivity of the heart” and “the heart’s formative power that transcends transience”. Rilke, *Werke*, 681–682, [Translation is mine – H.H.]. By contrast, as argued above, the *Duino Elegies* associate angels not with eternal life or undivided presence but, on the contrary, with death — more precisely, with finitude.

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**Xiaoyue Zhang**

Central South University in Changsha, China

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4793-0014>

[lucinexiaoyue@gmail.com](mailto:lucinexiaoyue@gmail.com)

## CTHULHU'S RESURGENCE AS AN EVENT: MEDIATION AND PERFORMATIVITY IN CHINESE ONLINE NOVELS\*

**Abstract:** In contemporary China, the Cthulhu Mythos has been reconfigured through online literature as a cultural practice that entwines critiques of neoliberal globalization with reflections on technological modernity. Drawing from Lovecraft's motifs of ineffability and madness, Chinese online novels such as *Lord of Mysteries* and *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal* relocate cosmic horror into the narrative logic of time travel and digital mediation. The trope of transmigration destabilizes linear, progressivist temporalities and exposes the fragility of the rational order that underpins neoliberal techno-realism. Within this framework, madness ceases to be a pathological endpoint, as in classical Lovecraftian tales, and instead becomes a mode of action: protagonists negotiate fractured realities, oscillating between virtual and physical domains, and transform cognitive collapse into survival strategies.

These works thus register the experiential conditions of the digital age, in which algorithmic systems dissolve the boundaries of subjectivity and cyberspace internalizes the asylum once located at society's margins. At the same time, they gesture toward new symbolic orders by reframing irrationality as a performative practice through which meaning emerges from interactions between individual agency and networked technologies. In this way, Chinese Lovecraftian online fiction functions as a mediated response to cultural disorientation in the post-COVID era.

**Keywords:** *Cthulhu Mythos, digital mediation, Chinese online fiction*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the sudden emergence and rapid popularization of Lovecraftian literature in Chinese online literature after 2018, with a particular focus on the social conditions and latent agency that underpin this phenomenon. Lovecraftian fiction, originating from the works of the American author H. P. Lovecraft, is defined by a central aesthetic that can be summarized as the unnamable horror. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft himself declared: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”<sup>1</sup> His narratives portray a cosmos and pantheon of extrahuman deities that resist human rationality and comprehension. As a result, Lovecraft’s works consistently heighten the sense of helplessness, insignificance, and profound dread, stressing the triviality of human existence when confronted with the vast, indifferent universe and its ancient, alien entities. Through popular culture, the Cthulhu Mythos has achieved widespread dissemination worldwide. Its circulation has been facilitated by collective fan practices and tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), which together constitute a distinctive global subcultural lineage. Pevčíková has summarized the development of Lovecraftian literature and culture in three stages: Version 1.0 encompasses Lovecraft himself, his literary circle, and August Derleth’s reinterpretations; Version 2.0 extends to all works of “Lovecraftian” or “cosmic horror” across literature, media, and popular culture, whether influence is explicit or implicit; and Version 3.0 shifts attention towards self-reflection and intertextual critique of the earlier versions, rather than further expansion.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the well-established tradition in the West, where the Cthulhu Mythos has evolved from its literary origins into a comprehensive framework for ritual, play, and subjunctive world-building<sup>3</sup>, the Cthulhu tradition in China has long remained at the margins of subcultural activity, known only to a minority within the fantasy literature community. In 2010, a Chinese translation of *At the Mountains of Madness* appeared in *Science Fiction World (Translation Edition)*, and in 2012 Chongqing University Press published a collection of Lovecraft’s classic stories, including *The Call of Cthulhu*. Subsequently, online creative works incorporating Mythos elements began to emerge. Among the most influential was the writer “oobmab”, whose 2013 story *The Herd of Ba Hui* (巴虺的牧群) drew inspiration from *The Call of Cthulhu* but reimagined the deities as totems within the folk culture of Sichuan and

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<sup>1</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” *The Recluse*, no. 1 (1927): 23–59.

<sup>2</sup> Jozefa Pevčíková, “Cthulhu Mythos: History of H.P. Lovecraft’s Monstrous Presence in Popular Culture,” *Literatura i Kultura Popularna* 29, no. 1 (2023): 317. <https://doi.org/10.19195/0867-7441.29.19>.

<sup>3</sup> Justin Mullis, “Playing Games with the Great Old Ones: Ritual, Play, and Joking within the Cthulhu Mythos Fandom,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 26, no. 3 (2015): 512.

Chongqing. In 2016, he revisited this concept in *Black Tai Sui* (黑太岁), set in Qingdao, which accumulated more than 180,000 views. However, since his works were published solely on the forum-based website “The Ring of Wonder”, their circulation remained limited.

A turning point arrived in 2018, when Qidian Chinese Network, China’s largest commercial online literature platform, launched the novel *Lord of Mysteries*. The work achieved extraordinary popularity, with more than 35 million recommendations, and quickly became a cultural phenomenon in the Chinese online literary sphere. The novel recounts the story of Zhou Mingrui, an ordinary programmer who, through a ritual of fortune, is transported into a steampunk world imbued with eerie supernatural forces, inhabiting the body of Klein Moretti, a man who has recently committed suicide. Through Klein’s consolidated social networks and personal ties, the protagonist is swiftly drawn into a range of strange changes that occur in a manner reminiscent of role-playing scenarios. The enormous success of *Lord of Mysteries* is comparable to releasing a boulder into a lake, which surged into action and generated a long-lasting wave of Cthulhu-inspired cultural production in China.

Unlike the globally popular Cthulhu fan fiction or games, these Chinese revivalist Cthulhu writings are difficult to strictly categorize as emerging works within the three phases summarized by J. Pevčíková. Instead of retaining the original Mythos, Chinese online literature often employs its motifs as narrative devices by incorporating them into well-known tropes, such as time-traveling adventures or tailored storytelling traditions. *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal*, for instance, merges Western Cthulhu horror with indigenous religious beliefs and folklore. A distinctively so-called “Chinese-style Cthulhu” (中式克苏鲁) story is written from the perspective of Li Huowang, a socially ill narrator who often steps between the “real world” and a bizarre, horrible otherworld. Readerships for works like *Lord of Mysteries* and *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal* far outweigh China’s comparatively small Cthulhu fan base. Their popularity results in a shared online cultural moment, less a triumph of subcultural fandom, but more a resonance between particular Mythos traits and the anxieties and desires of contemporary Chinese youth.

The revival of Lovecraftian fiction reflects a change in narrative structure within the broader tradition of Chinese online literature. For years, under the dominance of developmentalist ideology, novels characterized by heroic and conquering narratives have been the social mainstream. In recent years, however, shifting social conditions have undermined the relevance of rationalist narratives. In 2018, *Lord of Mysteries* challenged this tradition by drawing on Lovecraft’s aesthetics of indescribable terror, grounding its imaginative world in absurdity, chaos, and suffering. This marked a

departure from the triumphalist trajectory of the upgrading narrative.<sup>4</sup> The contemporary Lovecraftian wave in China thus represents not merely the accumulation of subcultural interests but also a cultural microcosm of broader societal transformations.

This paper, therefore, seeks to explain why Lovecraftian literature has experienced a renaissance in China and to identify the specific social contexts underlying this development. The discussion unfolds in two parts:

- 1) The state of speechlessness in Lovecraftian protagonists is connected with the concept of muteness in event philosophy. This link demonstrates that Chinese Lovecraftian fiction emerges as a collective psychological response to historical moments of immense, ineffable social or technological change — moments that resist articulation and assimilation through existing linguistic or epistemological frameworks, thereby displacing anxieties and fears into horror narratives.
- 2) Following speechlessness, the subsequent madness of Lovecraftian characters is examined as a distinctive mode of emotional expression, one that enables new forms of literary innovation and opens the possibility of ethical reflection.

## 2. CHINESE SOCIETY BEHIND CTHULHU FICTION THROUGH SPEECHLESSNESS

The core dynamics of Chinese society may be further analyzed from the perspective of event philosophy. Žižek points specifically to a well-known detective novel as one example at the start of the Event. Two trains briefly cross a small station in Agatha Christie's *4.50 from Paddington*. As she lauds a quiet afternoon, a wealthy woman mysteriously watches a man brutally swallow a woman in the opposing carriage. This sudden, violent eruption breaks her peaceful daily routine. What returns from the platform as she panics and tries to help is an even less striking, disjointed jumble of chaotic impressions.

Žižek captures precisely that this woman's speechlessness is the pivotal element of the case. The police officer may tackle and assess the murder exclusively on the other train in a routine case. Nevertheless, this violent intrusion belongs entirely to a woman who makes a deep sense of belonging within the closed, secure, and quiet middle class. Due to her linguistic and cognitive frameworks, she is unable to articulate or clearly represent what she has experienced.<sup>5</sup> A sudden, terrifying rupture that arises without warning and repeatedly disrupts daily life without any apparent cause is termed an event.

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<sup>4</sup> Xueqian Zhang, "The Demystified 'Cthulhu' and 'Time Travel': The 'Transition' Narrative in Fantasy Online Novels," *Chinese Creative Writing Studies* no. 1 (2023): 233–241.

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 2–3.

This failure of the symbolic order and collapse of discursive systems in the face of an “event” constitutes the core motif of Lovecraftian literature. When protagonists — investigators or scholars — through ancient manuscripts, anomalous constellations, or forbidden rituals, catch a glimpse of the nameless Outer Gods lurking in the cosmos, their reactions mirror that of Christie’s lady: language dissolves into powerless screams, rational frameworks collapse, and humanity’s fate veers either toward grotesque bodily destruction or descent into madness and disintegration. From a philosophical perspective, Lovecraftian tales function as repeated prefigurations and simulations of an ultimate event.

As a cultural product rooted in particular historical-psychological contexts, Lovecraft’s writing also casts a shadow over the “event”. This psychological state arises at historical junctures when societies collectively confront immense and ineffable social or technological transformations that cannot be expressed or assimilated within existing linguistic and epistemic frameworks. Anxieties and fears are then projected and mystified in the form of horror fiction. Looking back at Lovecraft’s era, similar conditions prevailed. Since Kant proposed the nebular hypothesis in 1755, astronomical discoveries in the 19th and early 20th centuries expanded explosively, heightening the sense of the universe’s vastness and humanity’s insignificance. This confrontation with the “cosmic sublime” and its associated “supernatural dread” provided fertile soil for Lovecraft’s invention of “cosmic horror”. Although his most well-known works were authored in the 1920s and 1930s, they gained notoriety primarily after 1943, notably during the postwar paperback revolution. There was no accident here. Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* examined how rationality integrated the “irrational” other, which developed itself in the midst of the rapid technological advancements and geopolitical upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>6</sup> The prevalent fear of the unknown beyond reason at that time constituted a powerful resonance in this discourse. The Cthulhu Mythos’ popularity thereby echoed and intensified the cultural psychology of that historical time.

What brand-new, wholly frightening, and ineffable entities or phenomena does it intend to solve and convey in the contemporary resurgence and reshaping of Lovecraftian literature in China?

Some hints are found in China’s recent development. The State Council created a national strategy for developing big data in 2015, as outlined in the State Council’s Action Plan. In 2017, it released the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan, positioning AI as a strategic priority and igniting waves of capital, enterprise, and research investment. That same year, the so-called “Four New

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2001).

Inventions” — high-speed rail, mobile payment, shared bicycles, and e-commerce — became widely celebrated. Among them, the ubiquity of mobile payments (Alipay, WeChat Pay) reached unprecedented heights, rendering a cashless society. These “new inventions” became bound up with nationalist pride, often treated as a form of political correctness.

However, the implementation of these technologies relies on the collection and management of citizens’ personal data. Given the country’s unwavering support for technological advancement, do Chinese citizens feel secure about the widespread adoption of these technologies? In response to cases of “big data price discrimination”

(大数据杀熟), widespread personal data leaks, and addictive recommendation algorithms, many people think that algorithms mainly provide corporate gain rather than consumer fairness. When such things happen, platforms employ algorithms that boost revenue, the state intervenes for social governance, and the people are urged to choose between political exploitation and exploitation. Citizens often feel trapped in a triangular relationship between the individual, the market, and society.

Additionally, sociological concerns about autonomy, trust, and fairness are raised by these circumstances. Many people continue to debate whether opaque systems, which Foucault may refer to as a novel form of governmentality, ultimately restrict the online choices of individuals or, conversely, are the very mechanisms that facilitate them. Meanwhile, Chinese citizens are beginning to recognize the issues of information silos and algorithmic black boxes. Ultimately, these concerns reveal a shifting digital social contract among Chinese citizens, who balance convenience with the risks of surveillance, inequality, and declining agency.

Although China is often considered emblematic of “compressed development”, technological acceleration has precipitated wide-ranging social transformations — a phenomenon far from unique to China. Against the broader global backdrop, technology is reshaping human civilization with unprecedented speed and depth, becoming a central problem for all societies. Long before the full advent of the digital society, Deleuze, in his famous Postscript on the Societies of Control, foresaw the shift from Foucault’s disciplinary society to the control society, and the corresponding transformation from subject to individual.<sup>7</sup> This trend of change has continued to the present day, and Katherine Hayles observed that automation increasingly supplants human autonomy.<sup>8</sup> Under global capitalism, technological cognitive systems have acquired ever-stronger autonomy, their expanding, quasi-intentional agency posing challenges to traditional notions of decision-making. Human decisiveness appears to

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3–7.

<sup>8</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 45.

wane; complex systems self-operate and make decisions without human intervention. In short, the logic of technological evolution and its social consequences have already become an event beyond traditional frameworks of cognition and language — an overpowering force whose trajectory neither individuals nor collectives can foresee.

While such acceleration may often remain imperceptible to the general public, in China, pandemic control measures and algorithmic systems have starkly exposed citizens to the speechlessness and powerlessness produced by technological encroachment. This disempowerment embodies a deep contradiction: technology symbolizes national pride but does not necessarily enhance personal freedom. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Alibaba first developed an Enterprise Health Code in January 2020 to manage employees. Following a major outbreak, the Hangzhou Party secretary proposed a “citizen health code”, which was soon adopted in hundreds of cities nationwide, becoming indispensable for mobility. These codes tracked individuals’ movements over 14 days, assigning green (free passage), yellow (seven-day quarantine), or red (fourteen-day quarantine) status. Yet the criteria for color changes remained opaque, leading to countless inexplicable shifts and public frustration.

Meanwhile, algorithmic systems penetrated everyday life and industry. In food delivery, the widely read 2020 feature “Delivery Riders Trapped in the System” (*Renwu*, 人物) revealed that between 2016 and 2019, delivery time limits were steadily shortened. Riders, forced to speed to avoid penalties, not only fueled traffic accidents but also provided the algorithm with shorter data, which in turn optimized times further, trapping them in a vicious cycle of perpetual algorithmic tightening. The riders were, in effect, “trapped in the system”.<sup>9</sup>

Whether in health codes or delivery platforms, these cases reveal a microcosm of Chinese technological society: system algorithms have reconfigured the architecture of biopolitical power, forging complicity across the internet ecosystem — algorithm design, software development, platform control, and user interfaces. The tensions have worsened further as a direct result of the rise in individual survival pressures and the post-pandemic economic downturn. On the one hand, people are susceptible to complex, opaque systems, such as algorithmic dispatch and health codes. On the other hand, as a result of a collapsed employment and a shaky livelihood, they are exhausted and helpless. Lovecraft’s theme of speechlessness resonates with this dual situation when confronted with overwhelming, inexorable forces. Language, reason, and action falter. From

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<sup>9</sup> Lai Youxuan, “Takeout Riders, Trapped in the System,” *Renwu* (人物), last modified September 9, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Mes1RqIOdp48CMw4pXTwXw>

readers, Lovecraft's universe is filled with apocalyptic dread, which signifies both unmanageable algorithmic systems and a volatile, unknown world.

People can perceive the systems and oppression shaping their lives, even as they find themselves unable to examine them thoroughly in an accelerated, algorithm-driven reality. This is a result of contemporary social psychology, not just a literary device. The entanglement of social exhaustion and technological advancement within this unfathomable gap is expressed by apocalyptic and sickening imagery. In response, the concept of "speechlessness" is explored in literature and philosophy, shedding light on the challenges that subjects pose in relation to meaning, language, and action during the era of algorithmic influence.

### 3. MADNESS AS A PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

As previously noted, the motif of madness in Lovecraftian literature has been grafted onto the time-travel narrative structure of Chinese online literature. Consequently, unlike in traditional Lovecraftian tales, protagonists in contemporary Chinese Lovecraftian online novels often awaken in alternate worlds as traversers through various inexplicable coincidences. At this point, the temporal and spatial framework of the Cthulhu Mythos points toward a "post-rational world" characterized by an all-encompassing and pervasive atmosphere. *Lord of Mysteries* draws on late nineteenth-century London to construct a steampunk world after the First Industrial Revolution, while *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal* plunges directly into a chaotic alternate realm blending Daoist, Buddhist, and folk superstitions. The fusion of Lovecraftian horror with time-travel narrative further dismantles the singular, linear, progressivist conception of time, thereby destabilizing the rational order built upon it. The narrative device of time travel itself functions as a profound fissure, tearing apart the technocratic realism upheld by neoliberal ideology.

The theme of madness progressively comes into focus within this narrative framework. The dichotomy between the "original world" and the "new world", which is a recurring theme in Lovecraftian fiction, is highlighted in time-traveling tales. Prosecutors hurry because they reside simultaneously in two distinct worlds and identities, not only because of their fear of supernatural beings in strange new worlds, but also because of their own internal conflicts. In *Lord of Mysteries*, the gods are depicted as fragments of an ancient creator's fractured mind, with madness serving as the foundation of the universe. The protagonist is confronted with a dual dilemma from the beginning: to brilliantly humiliate others while maintaining his authentic self-awareness, despite being switched and inhabiting another person's body. The protagonist of *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal*, Li Huowang, alternates between a terrifying alternate world and a mental hospital. His madness is remedied as a peculiar

choice that lets him alternate between two completely different realities, and only as a disease that receives treatment.

Due to the deterministic progression of linear time, the protagonists are forced to comply with a nonlinear, multi-possibility space-time. This temporal-spatial dislocation stimulates their psychological disintegration. In the digital era, the conventional insane asylum has become polarized and rationalized within the fractious, hybrid realm of cyberspace. Instead, it does not exist as a physical, isolated structure. This typifies the digital era in particular. Contemporary Chinese Lovecraftian fiction stands out from the typical canon because it employs madness as a central plot point. It has been restored and awoke in the digital era. In another of Lovecraft's original works, the protagonist's madness or death signifies the tragic demise of the narrative and is the inevitable result of a cosmic "event". In Chinese Lovecraftian online works, the themes of madness and death frequently form the basis for narratives. The world's currents, which are defined by information overload and intertwine between the virtual and real worlds, are deeply impacted by this. Essentially, individuals experience a Cthulhu-like epistemic state in which reality seems fragmented, truth appears multiple, conflicting, and cognition is in constant flux.

In other words, the madness and fear depicted in contemporary Chinese Lovecraftian fiction are no longer exceptional states requiring isolation or scrutiny, as Foucault suggested, but are instead embedded within the texture of everyday digital existence. To a certain extent, this has become part of the daily life experience of many, particularly the digitally immersed generation. Addressing this emerging form of mental disorder, Mark Hansen offers a non-pathological account of cognitive decline under contemporary "socio-technical-psychological" conditions.<sup>10</sup> This state refers to cognitive disarray and existential anxiety arising from the profound confusion between the physical space defined by organic bodily coordinates and the representational space constructed by digital information. This is precisely the *zeitgeist* that Chinese Cthulhu-inspired fiction has captured with accuracy.

This collapse, which occurs as a perpetuated generational gap and profound helplessness, is often reflected and expanded upon by the reality of the narratives. For instance, a mother might want her son to return to a secular, stable, and happy world. At the same time, her protagonist is perpetually locked in a conflicted space-time where virtual and real intertwine and is unable to give in. In China's online community, a discourse known as "madness literature" (发疯文学) emerged at the same time. (This is a collective term for a uniquely contradictory, neurotic, and delirious popular writing style prevalent on Chinese social media during this period.)

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<sup>10</sup> Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

When people post hordes of illogical, babbling-like comments, this well-known social media language is used as a vent for emotions. These absurd outbursts genuinely reveal the pathological strains of the faster-paced digital era, displaying the decline of traditional subjectivity as a direct result of the constant demands of algorithms.

Chinese online literature significantly crosses the conventional binary dichotomy of technological fear and worship by portraying dual virtual and real spaces. Producers seldom experience active madness in later chapters of these narratives. They begin to aggressively examine and adapt to the fusion of virtual and real worlds, seeking common ground between them rather than fully adhering to binary distinctions between truth and falsehood. In this situation, madness operates as a space for the formation of new symbolic orders; however, it shifts from a sign of forced endurance into an active mode of survival.

Instead of grand narratives or forcing structures, what emerges entirely arises from evolving discussions and negotiations between individual agencies and vast, transpersonal technological networks. This fully typifies the performative nature of network and automation technology. While practically completely defining the world, technology physically generates and shapes reality. As a result, the constitution of the subject has shifted from that of a fully rational and self-assured thinker to an actor who navigates technological events through practice, giving rise to an emerging identity.

In *Lord of Mysteries*, the protagonist demonstrates openness to the unknown, learning about the world by “role-playing” different identities and engaging with diverse teams. *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal* expresses the unknown with greater tenderness. Even as Li Huowang traverses bizarre, non-human scenes in the supernatural world, he does not, like his master, devour the supernatural entity Black Tai Sui in order to achieve immortality. Instead, he adopts this twisted monster as his daughter. Once, exhausted to the extreme, Li Huowang sees a stranger offering him three steamed buns fresh from the steamer. Filled with gratitude, he suddenly finds the environment shifting, realizing that he is in fact “biting into a mud ball”, a trick he has witnessed countless times before. Yet, unwilling to disappoint the girl’s kindness, Li Huowang helplessly shakes his head and continues nibbling the mud ball until it is completely consumed.<sup>11</sup>

Just as the protagonist of *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal* stands alongside the Black Tai Sui and forges kinship with monsters, Chinese Cthulhu-inspired online novels are not merely pessimistic cautionary tales. Rather, they exemplify an active, mediated

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<sup>11</sup> Foxy’s Quill, *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal* (道诡异仙). Qidian Chinese Network (起点中文网), serialized 2021–2025, accessed October 11, 2025, <https://www.qidian.com/book/1031794030/>, chap. 311.

cultural practice. Literature, as humanity's second nature, engages in playful negotiations between technological rupture and the construction of meaning, seeking to reconstruct symbolic order. It guides readers to search, arduously yet courageously, for new possibilities of rebuilding ethics and goodness within a space that is no longer purely representational but performative, fractured, and uncertain. This suggests that, in confronting technological events, the true path forward lies neither in returning to an idealized innocent past nor in fully embracing an uncontrollable future, but in learning how to dance with the monster, rediscovering rhythm and direction in the dance itself.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The resurgence of Lovecraftian narratives within Chinese online literature demonstrates how global cultural forms are not merely transplanted but actively reinterpreted through the specific socio-technological conditions of the digital age. As this study has shown, motifs of time travel and madness serve as central vehicles through which Chinese writers negotiate the disintegration of rational, linear temporality and the collapse of stable subjectivity. In *Lord of Mysteries* and *Dao of the Bizarre Immortal*, madness is no longer a terminal point, as in Lovecraft's canon, but a productive mode of survival and adaptation within fractured virtual-real environments. Here, madness itself becomes a philosophy of action, enabling protagonists to navigate between competing realities and offering readers an allegory of how to live within the hybrid, unstable terrains of cyberspace.

The popularity of Lovecraftian horror in China, however, is not an isolated phenomenon. It intersects with broader critiques of neoliberal globalization and technological encroachment, collectively sketching a chaotic vision of a post-rational world order. The revival of Lovecraftian literature may thus be read as the lingering presence of the specter of the event within the cultural sphere. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, both Chinese society and global publics have demonstrated an intensified sensitivity to stories of uncertainty, unknowability, and uncontrollability, raising the prospect that there may have been no single historical rupture as its cause. The simultaneous development of genres like "madness literature" (发疯文学) results in a collective effort to counter diffuse, inscrutable forces. Furthermore, this resurgence occurs at the same time that technology began to transform every facet of life, triggering severe stress and dislocation. Based on recent market data, horror

novel sales rose by 54% year-over-year in 2024, with new works exploring issues of war, politics, and disillusionment, as *The Guardian* observed.<sup>12</sup>

Together, these developments illustrate that the revival of Cthulhu-inspired narratives in Chinese online literature goes beyond genre testing. Rather, they utilize the epistemic and existential crises of the digital era as a cultural test. These works express literature's profound capacity to establish a balance between technological rupture and human meaning-making through their reworking of time travel, madness, and hybridity. They offer fresh, ethical options for living in a world where rational thought is diminished. At the same time, imagination works to create alternative symbolic orders, urging readers to resist disorientation and cultivate resilience.

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<sup>12</sup> Ella Creamer, "Horror Novel Sales Boomed during Year of Real-World Anxieties," *The Guardian*, last modified September 22, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/apr/04/horror-novel-sales-boomed-during-year-of-real-world-anxieties>.

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**Simon Angerer**

University of Vienna, Austria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1034-2129>

[simon.angerer@univie.ac.at](mailto:simon.angerer@univie.ac.at)

## DELIVERED WORLD. THE ONTOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE EVENT IN GÜNTHER ANDERS' CRITIQUE OF TELEVISION\*

**Abstract:** As one of the earliest theorists of television, Günther Anders postulated a so-called 'co-substantiality' of man, technology and media almost ten years before Marshall McLuhan did. According to Anders, television has remodelled human's *way of being* (*Seinsweise*) and established new modes of experience, unfolding far-reaching consequences for the degrees of reality of different spheres of being itself. These effects result from the characteristics of broadcast TV images, which are simultaneously present and absent and can therefore be described as phantoms. Hence, they are characterized by a peculiar 'ontological ambiguity', which also concerns the metaphysical, ontological, phenomenological, and socio-critical dimensions of the event. In Anders' understanding, television as a media technology plays a key role in the transformation of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) and the formation of a cultural environment that he labels as a post-ideological land of milk and honey (*post-ideologisches Schlaraffenland*), an argument that is quite prophetic considering subsequent media-historical developments. When Anders argues that events only become socially significant in their form of reproduction, this points to a change in the dynamics of the cultural-technical production and distribution of events. Furthermore, this very change points to an equally worth investigating coupling of a certain mediality with the criterion of eventfulness, whereby conventional forms of being of the event are displaced. This is because the matrix performance (*Matrizenleistung*) of broadcast events has comprehensive anthropological consequences. This article intends to shed light on the formation of Anders' concept of the event in its relation to that of *media-events* in its media-historical and philosophical contexts.

**Keywords:** *Günther Anders, media-event, television, 1950s, ontology*

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1.

Theoretical discourse on *media events* begins with Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream*, first published in 1962.<sup>1</sup> Its main argument revolves around the concept of the 'pseudo-event', which is not a sudden and unforeseen occurrence, but something planned, planted, or incited: "Its occurrence is arranged for the convenience of the reporting or reproducing media",<sup>2</sup> making 'pseudo-events' self-fulfilling prophecies.<sup>3</sup> Due to these characteristics their newsworthiness and eventfulness is already inscribed in their pre-planned appearance. They have a template-like character that determines their reception in advance.<sup>4</sup> Exactly this character makes their reality value become ambiguous,<sup>5</sup> leading Boorstin to describe the emerging difference between pseudo-events and 'real' events as sudden occurrences as a "tantalizing difference between man-made and God-made events".<sup>6</sup>

His remarks refer to a specific historical context, namely, early American television. In the United States, television had been commercially significant since 1941 and established itself as the new main medium during the 1950s.<sup>7</sup> By the mid-1950s, half of all US households owned a television set.<sup>8</sup> Although Boorstin's analysis covers various mass media and formats such as newspaper reporting on celebrities, TV debates and the broadcast of MacArthur Day, as well as the abridgement practices of Reader's Digest, television is the central media-historical reference for his theorisation of media events. The so called "flood of pseudo-events"<sup>9</sup> got significantly boosted by the real-time medium of television, which delivered a continuous stream of images into people's living rooms.<sup>10</sup> Evidently, staged events have always existed historically, but in the context of television, they are designed to address an audience that is physically absent. This highlights the key difference between televised events and those attended in person. Given the growing focus on planning events for television broadcast, Boorstin argues that television

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Christina Bartz, *Handbuch der Mediologie: Signaturen des Medialen* (München: Fink, 2012), 176–177.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ibid., 12.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ibid., 19.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ibid., 10–13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ibid., 13.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Steve Allen and Robert J. Thompson, "Television in the United States," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified July 21, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/art/television-in-the-United-States/additional-info>.

<sup>9</sup> Boorstin, *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream*, ix.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bartz, *Handbuch der Mediologie*, 177.

should be regarded rather as a co-organiser of events than as a neutral communication channel. Based on this premise, he poses the question whether events as unforeseen and unplanned occurrences can even continue to exist in a culture formed by widespread television-use.<sup>11</sup> It is then exactly this question, which links Boorstin's reflections on pseudo-events in the context of early American television with Günther Anders' media theory and the concept of event developed therein.

Anders fled Germany of the National Socialists in 1933 and after three years in Paris he emigrated to the USA and lived in New York, California, and again New York from 1936 to 1950. In 1950 he returned to Europe and settled in Vienna. In 1956, six years before Boorstin's *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream* appeared in the USA, the first volume of Anders' magnum opus, *The Obsolescence of the Human*, was published by the German publishing house C.H. Beck Verlag. It was received mainly in German-speaking Europe and, therefore, historically became situated mainly in contexts of European intellectual history: For example, his relations to critical theory, phenomenology, Heidegger, or philosophical anthropology.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, his thinking has been connected to other media theories, but only on a general theoretical level and without much consideration of the historical context of early American TV and its American critique. Since the establishment of TV as the main medium took longer to catch on in Europe than in the USA, in 1956, when the first volume of *The Obsolescence of the Human* appeared and at a time where half of all US households owned a television set, in West Germany only 4 percent of the population would have access to a television set. However, this percentage would dramatically increase over just a couple of years to 24 percent in 1960.<sup>13</sup> Anders' theses and diagnoses imply a much higher level of

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lorenz Engell, *Fernsehtheorie zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2012), 68.

<sup>12</sup> For example, cf. Christian Dries, *ad Günther Anders. Exerzitien für die Endzeit* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2023); cf. Christian Dries, 'Von der Weltfremdheit zur Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Günther Anders' negative Anthropologie,' in *Günther Anders. Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen*, ed. Christian Dries (München: C.H. Beck, 2018), 437–535; cf. Babette Babich, *Günther Anders' Philosophy of Technology. From Phenomenology to Critical Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022); cf. Babette Babich, 'Geworfenheit und prometheische Scham im Zeitalter der transhumanen Kybernetik. Technik und Machenschaft bei Martin Heidegger, Fritz Lang und Günther Anders,' in *Die Neugier des Glücklichen*, ed. Christoph Streeckhardt (Weimar: Bauhaus Universitätsverlag 2013), 63–91; cf. Marcel Müller, *Von der Weltfremdheit zur Antiquiertheit. Philosophische Anthropologie bei Günther Anders* (Marburg: Tectum, 2012); cf. Werner Reimann, *Verweigerter Versöhnung. Zur Philosophie von Günther Anders* (Wien: Passagen, 1990); cf. Peter Schmitt, *Medienkritik zwischen Anthropologie und Gesellschaftstheorie. Zur Aktualität von Günther Anders und Theodor W. Adorno* (Paderborn: Fink, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 'Verbreitung der Fernsehnutzung,' *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, last modified November 22, 2016, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/medien-journalismus/medien-politik/190492/verbreitung-der-fernsehnutzung/>.

medialization than the existing one in the German-speaking parts of Europe in the 1950s. This points to the fact that Anders' media theory refers primarily to American circumstances, trying to make a prediction on future medial historical developments in Europe. He experienced the American media environments that his media theory dealt with during his exile in the USA and continued to follow them from afar after returning to Europe. Therefore, early American television culture should be treated as an important historical context of Anders' thinking.

Adorno and Horkheimer, in their chapter on the so-called culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, discuss a 'cultural lag' between Europe and the USA. They argue that the commercialisation of society and the resulting 'tendency towards cultural monopoly' was much more advanced in the USA than in Europe.<sup>14</sup> This 'cultural lag' also shapes the perspective of exiled Weimar intellectuals, such as Anders and representatives of critical theory, on the US media environment. This lag can therefore be seen as one of the reasons for the media-theoretical convergences between Anders and the Frankfurt School. In addition to this historical factor, Anders' philosophical methodology necessitates situating him within the context of early American television and comparing his reflections on the subject with US television criticism. He refers to the philosophical method he has pursued since the early 1940s as *philosophy of occasion* (*Gelegenheitsphilosophie*). Anders states that Philosophy is an act of orientation and that the concept of orientation refers as much to the position of a subject within a domain as to the domain itself. As a consequence, he considers the positions within a domain, from which questions are being asked as the occasions of philosophical thinking.<sup>15</sup> His reflections are sparked by objects and phenomena in their contingent historical context as they are encountered in everyday life. These occasions serve him then as starting points for further philosophical considerations. Therefore, it is necessary to consider US television and related contemporary studies of the 1950s and 1960s like the book of Boorstin as such occasions. It is the same occasion that connects them, although Anders' thinking stems

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2006), 140.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. ÖLA 237/04/W116. On the method of Anders' philosophy of occasion, cf. also Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: C.H. Beck, 1987), 8–12; Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution* (München: C.H. Beck, 1980), 411–429; cf. Christian Dries, 'Günther Anders' philosophischer Okkasionalismus: Methoden, Voraussetzungen, Ziele,' *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 72, no. 4 (2024): 543–563; cf. Max Beck, *Günther Anders' Gelegenheitsphilosophie. Exilerfahrung – Begriff – Form* (Wien: Klever, 2017), 45–88.

from a predominantly European genealogy, and due to biographical circumstances it is highly unlikely that he and Boorstin were aware of each other's work.

## 2.

However Anders and Boorstin discuss the same forms of media-usage and even cite some of the same examples, such as the use of make-up in the 1960 television debate between Nixon and Kennedy.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the historian Boorstin, Anders focuses on the cultural-practical consequences of watching television on a philosophical level, making him one of only few philosophers of television.<sup>17</sup>

And with this, we have arrived at our topic. Besides creating the mass-hermit and transforming the family into a miniature audience, *the truly revolutionary effect of radio and television lies in their capacity to bring the mountain to the prophet and the world to the human. Events* — be they football matches, church services, nuclear explosions — *now come to us*; and they do not just reach us as reports or in the form of news — we are visited by the real thing.<sup>18</sup>

Following this line of thought, the defining feature of broadcast images is that they are delivered to people's homes just like commodities, and the most significant consequence of this feature is the effect it has on the way humans relate to the world. Anders states that television images amputate the reciprocity of this relationship and make it unilateral instead:

Hasn't this relation been severed? Hasn't it become *unilateral*, in other words — transformed into a situation in which *one listens to the world while remaining imperceptible to it*? "Don't talk back" — isn't this what the listener has been categorically condemned to? Does such inability to speak not equate to powerlessness? Hasn't the omnipresence we have been gifted with installed a state of unfreedom? The unfree — those without a voice, those treated as nothing but air — aren't they absent?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Boorstin, *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream*, 42–43; cf. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*, 252.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Engell, *Fernsehtheorie zur Einführung*, 210.

<sup>18</sup> Günther Anders, *The Obsolescence of the Human*, transl. Christopher John Müller (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2025), 98 [Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: C.H. Beck, 1986), 110].

<sup>19</sup> Anders, *The Obsolescence of the Human*, 114–115 [Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 130].

According to Anders the immersion in such a world, a being-in-the-broadcast-world so to speak, makes it impossible to actively relate to the world in the way Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world assumes.<sup>20</sup> Television images are merely presented for passive consumption – any other form of participation is rendered impossible. Anders states that this transformation is happening, or will happen, everywhere since the same media technology is, or will be, used nearly everywhere.

The motive of passivation links the media-theoretical passages of Anders' *The Obsolescence of the Human* to the philosophy of technology also developed therein and with Anders' criticism of his former teacher Martin Heidegger. This includes the accusation that Heidegger's thinking did not take into account the workings of modern machines and their effects on humans and society, but merely remained within an archaic world of craftsmanship, drawing all its examples from the rural cobbler's workshop.<sup>21</sup> Some of this criticism would eventually be invalidated by Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*, which deals primarily with modern technology. However, the text does not address television, even though shaping opinions through media (*Meinungsherrichtung*<sup>22</sup>) is explicitly discussed there and radio broadcasting is also mentioned. This omission would certainly be a target for Anders, even though there are otherwise clear convergences in their philosophical and critical reflections on technology, such as the idea that technology cannot be understood as a merely neutral means.<sup>23</sup> According to Heidegger, technology is a predetermined way of interpreting the world.<sup>24</sup> This points to a tendency towards passivity,<sup>25</sup> which is also inherent in Anders' concept of technical predetermination (*technische Vorentscheidung*). This means that users are determined to certain uses and denied of others simply due to the way devices are constructed and designed.<sup>26</sup> This danger of passivity through technically implemented preliminary decisions still resonates in Heidegger's thoughts on an essential, meaningful and situation-appropriate approach to technology: "For man becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006), 41–63; cf. Engell, *Fernsehtheorie zur Einführung*, 211.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Günther Anders, *Über Heidegger*, ed. Gerhard Oberschlick (München: C.H. Beck, 2001), 80.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2000), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Peter Schmitt, "Vom Wesen der Technik. Eine kritische Analyse des technischen Denkens im Anschluss an Martin Heidegger und Günther Anders," *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift* 3, (2024): 32–50.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Florian Grosser, "Die Frage nach der Technik," in *Heidegger-Handbuch*, ed. Dieter Thomä (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2013), 239.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 2.

who listens and hears [*Hörender*], and not one who is simply constrained to obey [*Höriger*].”<sup>27</sup> Anders employs a similar play of words between ‘*Hörend*’ and ‘*Hörig*’ when characterizing the television viewer as a completely passive figure. The television viewer of the future must be “a type of human who no longer has a say, since it no longer speaks; a type who does nothing but listens and is merely a ‘*serf*’ [*Höriger*], always obedient, always at the call of another”.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Anders considers television to be a technical prefiguration, the effects of which form the focus of his media theory.

One of these effects of passive television consumption would be an impoverishment of language and a reluctance to use it. With a distinctly cultural pessimistic undertone Anders ascribes this impossibility of talking back to an impoverishment of experience, interrelating the richness and subtlety of inner life to the richness and subtlety of speech.<sup>29</sup> He attributes this loss to the media technical feature of television as a real-time medium. While it can broadcast real events, it is technically impossible to actively react to such events while watching television. According to Anders, the decisive novelty of the television-image arises exactly from this aspect: Its ontological status, which is made possible by its characteristics as a real-time medium:

The world is delivered home to us; events are paraded in front of us. But *what* are they paraded as? *As* events? Or just as representations of events? Or as news reports about them? To answer this question, the guiding question of this section, we will first translate it into a slightly different language and ask: In what way are broadcast events *present* with their recipients? In what way is their recipient *present* at them? Is the recipient actually present? Seemingly present? Absent? Present or absent in what way?<sup>30</sup>

These questions illustrate the importance of ontological argumentation in Anders’ media theory. He states that broadcast events are neither present nor absent, and therefore phantom-like. Following this thought, it is then precisely this indecisiveness between absence and presence that distinguishes TV-images from other types of images. Broadcasts of parades, football matches and political debates in fact do not provide images of these events, nor news about them. What gets transmitted to the

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, transl. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 25.

<sup>28</sup> Anders, *The Obsolescence of the Human*, 97 [Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 109].

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 109.

<sup>30</sup> Anders, *The Obsolescence of the Human*, 114 [Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 129].

living room happens simultaneously. There is no time lag between the image and its motif; the degree of football-fan's involvement and party-supporters watching television is a different one from that of the observer of a painting. For this reason, according to Anders, television images cannot be considered aesthetic appearances, because it is the real events, which are presented for viewing. Therefore, they are truly present. But since there is no potential interaction in the situation of watching television, they can also be regarded as absent.<sup>31</sup> This leads Anders to characterize TV images as "pure synchrony" on the one hand and active interaction with the living-environment as "living presence" on the other hand.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.

In his characterization of television images Anders differs from Adorno's thoughts in *Prolog zum Fernsehen* and *Fernsehen als Ideologie*. Anders does not consider television images to be aesthetic appearances due to their peculiar ontological status. Adorno highlights the illusory nature of television images and their ideological function as their central characteristics. He describes the effects of television images with psychoanalytical vocabulary, stating that their circulation within the mechanisms of the cultural-industry is a process of repression. The 'real' world is repressed and prevented from showing itself by the circulation of TV images that fulfil an ideological purpose.<sup>33</sup> Anders adopts a different stance on the argument of repression. He states that television images, due to their real-time nature and unilateralism, open up a new ontological dimension that could not exist without television's media technology. According to him, the 'real' world is not therefore repressed by a system of delusion (*Verblendungszusammenhang*); rather, the broadcast world becomes real due to its media format, rendering ideology obsolescent as television images have become the world itself.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the supply of real events through television results in an effect, which blurs the boundaries between different spheres of reality. Anders argues that said effect makes the real seem phantom-like and the fictional seem real. Since broadcasts of real events and fictional shows are being delivered in exactly the same form, namely as TV images, both have the same reality index. According to him this

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 142–144.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 132–134.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Eingriffe: neun kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 69–80.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 195–196.

eliminates the difference between being and appearance and between reality and image.<sup>35</sup> As examples of such blurring, Anders cites the mass panic triggered by Orson Welles' radio play *War of the Worlds*, the case of a housewife who falls in love with a character in a TV series — whose actor received death threats from the housewife's husband — and the case of grandmothers who knitted jackets for a baby that existed only in a television series and sent them to the production company.<sup>36</sup> Apart from such drastic and comical examples, the blurring of reality and the phantom-world of TV has another effect that is much more consequential in everyday life. Said effect can be tied with Boorstin's observations, who writes:

Vivid image came to overshadow pale reality. Sound motion pictures in color led a whole generation of pioneering American movie-goers to think of Benjamin Disraeli as an earlier imitation of George Arliss, just as television has led a later generation of television watchers to see the Western cowboy as an inferior replica of John Wayne. The Grand Canyon itself became a disappointing reproduction of the Kodachrome original.<sup>37</sup>

Where Boorstin, like Adorno, argues that film and television images overlap the real world, Anders takes it a step further. Following his thesis, TV-images do not only overshadow reality, but rather serve as its model. Reality itself would therefore comply with its televisual reproduction, a process which results in a congruence of the real world and the model. This constellation produces the effect that the world is being shaped by its own reproductions and the reproductions come to precede their originals,<sup>38</sup> unfolding imprinting forces which constitute the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). Anders calls this development matrix-performance (*Matrizenleistung*): "If an event is socially more significant in its reproduced form than in its original occurrence, the original must adjust itself to suit its reproduction. The event must turn into a matrix, a mere template for its own reproduction."<sup>39</sup> The centrality and prevalence of the concept of reproduction in Anders' work highlights a close relationship between his reflections and Walter Benjamin's text *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. In relation to film, Benjamin writes that those artworks could not be adequately described using traditional aesthetic categories, as they were unable to

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>37</sup> Boorstin, *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream*, 13–14.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 165. Here, Anders anticipates many aspects of Baudrillard's concept of simulation. Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Anders, *The Obsolescence of the Human*, 99 [Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 111].

capture the effects of increasingly perfected technical reproducibility. He also discusses the incomparably greater reach of new technical reproduction processes<sup>40</sup> and historical changes in human perception grounded in media-technical developments of new reproduction techniques.<sup>41</sup> Coming from and thinking through the same premises, Anders interprets the advent of television as a permanent turning point in the history of human perception. The ability to reproduce real events and transmit them simultaneously raises questions about the relationship between the original and its reproduction that Benjamin could not have anticipated, as the intrusion of the apparatus into reality<sup>42</sup> has reached a completely new level through television's distribution capabilities. This is also the reason why Anders argues that traditional aesthetic categories cannot grasp television images and broadcast events in their ontological specificity, since no aesthetic appearance is processed in television viewing situations. In order to function, it's required that the broadcast matrix appears plausible and realistic: "The highest level of pseudorealism is, of course, reserved for TV-phantoms, which can convince their consumers that they aren't representations of reality but reality itself. How could reality itself, or so the consumer mindlessly believes, ever be unrealistic? How could it ever testify against itself?"<sup>43</sup> Six years later, Boorstin expresses a very similar thought, stating that "we have become so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality. We demand them. And we demand that there be always more of them, bigger and better and more vivid. They are the world of our making; the world of the image."<sup>44</sup> According to Anders and Boorstin the world presented on television screens is therefore always a pre-shaped one. Broadcast events are for example always prefigured in advance by the selectivity of the camera that produces TV-programmes, including live broadcasts. As pseudo-events they would then remodel the everyday lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*).

#### 4.

What kind of television did Boorstin and Anders had in mind can be exemplified by an empirical sociological study conducted by Kurt Gladys Engel Lang that was published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1953. It examined how participants

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1989), 38–40; 42–45; 49–52.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Anders, *The Obsolescence of the Human*, 148 [Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, 168].

<sup>44</sup> Boorstin, *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream*, 5–6.

experienced and perceived the MacArthur Day parade in Chicago as physical attendees in comparison to its televised version. Present attendees complained, for instance, that they were missing out on the event precisely because of their physical presence, like Observer 30, who noted: “This turned out to be a lousy spot. I should have gone home. I bet my wife saw it much better over television.”<sup>45</sup> This implicates that the best spot to perceive the event is at home in front of the television, leading the study to relate television-watching habits directly to the disappointment that participants reported in relation to their physical attendance:

‘We should have stayed home and watched it on TV’, was the almost universal form that the dissatisfaction took. In relation to the spectatorship experience of extended boredom and sore feet, alleviated only by a brief glimpse of the hero of the day, previous and similar experiences over television had been truly exciting ones [...].<sup>46</sup>

Expectations shaped by television-watching were disappointed by the live attendance of the event and favourable allusions to television, according to Lang and Lang, were frequent in this respect. Therefore, the study links the sentiment of missing out by being physically present to the “technical possibilities of the medium”,<sup>47</sup> a formulation, that can be tied to Anders’ concept of technical predetermination (*technische Vorentscheidung*). The broadcast event can become more real than reality itself because of certain technical means which prestructure the perceptual possibilities: “The television perspective was different from that of any spectator in the crowd. Relatively unlimited in its mobility, it could order events in its own way by using close-ups for what was deemed important and leaving the apparently unimportant for the background.”<sup>48</sup> It seems rather striking that the conclusion of the empirical study by Lang and Lang shares the premises of Anders’ and Boorstin’s findings: “It has been claimed for television that it brings the truth directly into the home: the ‘camera does not lie’. Analysis of the above data shows that this assumed reportorial accuracy is far from automatic.”<sup>49</sup> Exactly the same insight can be found in Boorstin’s book:

An innocent observer might have expected that the rise of television and on-the-spot telecasting of the news would produce a pressure to report authentic spontaneous events exactly as they occur. But, ironically, these, like earlier

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<sup>45</sup> Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, “The Unique Perspective of Television and Its Effect,” *American Sociological Review* 18, no. 1 (1953): 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

improvements in the techniques of precise representation, have simply created more and better pseudo-events.<sup>50</sup>

Said flooding of the living environment with pseudo-events and their formative effects on everyday life was precisely the occasion that sparked Anders' philosophical thought in his US exile. Also, the methodical approach of his *philosophy of occasion* explains the synergies with Boorstin's reflections, despite that they apparently did not take note of each other's research. Following their shared lines of thought, television images blur representation and original, highlighting the enduring effects in the tangible world of televisions' production of pseudo-events. Since representations precede the original, the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) is modelled by the so-called matrix performance (*Matrizenleistung*) according to broadcast events and images, making them more real than reality itself.

One can evaluate this phenomenon with cultural pessimism, like Anders and Boorstin, or rather benevolently, like the best-renowned book about media events.<sup>51</sup> But regarding the conceptual logic of the event in Anders' media theory, this question of evaluation is rather secondary. In view of the ontological ambiguity of broadcast events in their form of television images, it is crucial that they render all previously known aesthetic concepts of images obsolete. Dealing with a historically new cultural phenomenon, Anders was one of the first thinkers to claim that these images demand new categories for their description and critical analysis. Not only has television changed the perception of events and the reception of what is perceived as eventful permanently. Its form of mediation changed the ontological status of broadcast events, introducing a new category of events, which have become 'more real' than reality itself due to their specific way of mediation. Viewing habits shaped by the technical possibilities of television will then also determine the perception of events in the lifeworld, reshaping it in accordance with the delivered phantom world.

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<sup>50</sup> Boorstin, *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream*, 26.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

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**Charlotte Reihs**

*University of Vienna, Austria*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8063-3974>

[charlotte.reihs@univie.ac.at](mailto:charlotte.reihs@univie.ac.at)

## HAUNTED MEDIA: MOBILIZING RADIO DURING THE NOVEMBER REVOLUTION\*

**Abstract:** Media technologies constitute an integral part of social events and play a significant role in modeling political and cultural transformations and interventions. The implementation of new mass media, such as the development of radio technology in the late 1910s, fundamentally changed modes and methods of mobilization of the public sphere. Radio was the first technological device that enabled live transmission of acoustic material and was able to simultaneously reach multiple recipients in different places. Thus it profoundly modified knowledge production and forms of protest. The emergence of new forms of media protests and mobilization strategies will be traced by focusing on one specific event of revolutionary unrest in the German Empire which used radio technology years before public broadcasting officially began: The so-called *Funkerspuk* (Haunting of Broadcasting). This ‘haunting’ event occurred in 1918 during the November Revolution, a period of drastic social, political and economic upheaval, when former soldiers, now organized as revolutionary Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils, occupied the central news bureau of the German Empire and made use of the former military radio systems to proclaim the victory of the socialist revolution and to coordinate further political actions. From November 1918 to February 1919, they appropriated the state’s means of communication technology and were able to effectively challenge the state’s news monopoly by transmitting their own messages as well as alternative reports on current events. The revolutionaries used multiple media (broadcasts, telegrams, magazines, street rallies) as tools and techniques for socio-political agitation and extended the previous frameworks for mass mobilization both in practice and in theory. The presentation aims to shed light on a heterogeneous discursive network highly interconnecting media activism and governmental critique of power. Centering *Funkerspuk* as a media event allows the reconstruction of early media usage and ideological history of German radio during the interwar period — and beyond.

**Keywords:** *radio history, radio experimentation, media archaeology, amateur broadcasters, Funkerspuk*

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## 1. THE EMERGENCE OF RADIO

The implementation of new media, such as the development of radio technology in the late 1910s, precipitated a fundamental shift in the modalities and methodologies employed for the mobilization of the public sphere. The term ‘radio telegraphy’,<sup>1</sup> derived from the Latin *radius* (meaning ‘ray’), underscores the novel way the medium enabled communication with the public through the circular emission of sound waves.<sup>2</sup> Radio technology enables live acoustic message transmission from one sender to multiple recipients in different places simultaneously. Radio technology thus bridges time and space of message transmission more quickly and efficiently than before, thereby overcoming previous limitations of information transfer.<sup>3</sup> The advent of broadcasting technology can be traced back to the early 1900s, with its initial application being for the purpose of maritime communication, facilitating the coordination of trade. The period during which radio experienced its first peak of mass usage was the First World War.<sup>4</sup> When the war ended in 1918, a novel form of radio usage emerged during the collapse of the German Empire in the context of the November Revolution, as revolutionaries used radio telegraphy to orchestrate their own actions. Their utilization of radio as a communication system independent from the state was characterized by the term *Funkerspuk* (Haunted Broadcasting).<sup>5</sup> During the course of the November Revolution, a transitional period characterized by drastic social and political upheaval, the monarchy of the German Empire was impeached and transformed into the democratic Weimar Republic. In this period, radio technology was appropriated by the revolutionary Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils.<sup>6</sup> Radio emerged as a pivotal tool and agent of the revolution, demonstrating a unique capacity to achieve both a wide spatial reach and a ‘live’ mobilizing power that significantly exceeded the previously established limits of message transmission. During the revolutionary unrest, the episode of *Funkerspuk*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the history of the term ‘radio’ see Wolfgang Hagen, “Der Radoruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks,” in *HardWar/SoftWar: Krieg und Medien 1914 bis 1945*, eds. Martin Stingelin and Wolfgang Scherer (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1991), 243.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dominik Schrage, *Psychotechnik und Radiophonie: Subjektkonstruktion in artifizieller Wirklichkeit 1918–1932* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001), 216.

<sup>3</sup> Hagen, “Der Radoruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks,” 243. For a concise media history of German radio history see Winfried B. Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels* (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the development of the first radios, see Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels*, 23f.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hagen, “Der Radoruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks,” 256.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Friedrich Knilli, *Deutsche Lautsprecher: Versuche zu einer Semiotik des Radios* (Stuttgart: Metzler 1970), 102. For more in-depth information with a focus on historical science, see Volker Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/1919* (München: C. H. Beck, 2018).

functioned as a subsequent rupture because it became evident that communication technology via radio could not only be employed for military purposes but also had the potential to be utilized by revolutionary groups. Thus in 1918, when radio technology was still in its early stages, in a “media archaeological incubation phase”,<sup>7</sup> and radio had not been determined for one definitive use as public broadcasting had not yet been established, revolutionary groups used the medium for their communication and mass mobilization.

This paper examines how former military personnel and amateurs appropriated broadcasting systems during the revolution in order to intercept state-led communication. Furthermore, it will be analyzed how the government reacted to this form of uncontrolled communication and which legislation followed the event. Utilizing the methodological framework of media archaeology,<sup>8</sup> the material and logical preconditions of the experimental radio infrastructure during the revolution will be traced.<sup>9</sup> Even though the acoustically transmitted messages of *Funkerspuk* have not been archived — the live oral transmission, without a storage technology posed a significant advantage in terms of revolutionary communication, but proves to be disadvantageous for research of the event — other sources have been preserved. With contemporary newspaper reports, broadcasting regulations published by ministries of the state, and diary entries from contemporary witnesses of the revolution unfolding, the episode of alternative radio usage can still be reconstructed. By centering the mediated event of *Funkerspuk*, both early forms of participatory media usage and the ideological history of German radio during the interwar period can be traced. Furthermore, these newfound possibilities of message distribution, independent from the state, influenced how public radio came to be installed from 1923 onwards.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. RADIO AND REVOLUTION

The impact of radio in the context of the November Revolution can only be fully understood when the history of radio development and utilization is taken into consideration: The catalyst for substantial advancement of radio technology was the First World War. Telegraphy and telephony had already been established as means of rapidly transmitting electrical signals; although these forms of communication still

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Ernst, “Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the Age of Media Mobilities,” *Media Theory* 2, no. 1 (2018), 165f.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 166.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 166f.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Kathrin Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2018), 128.

relied on cables.<sup>11</sup> However, radio technology represented a significant advancement, offering the advantage of wireless message transmission via electromagnetic waves. This invention's usage of radio waves as its base for transmission rendered it highly pertinent for the First World War, as it facilitated novel strategies for the coordination of warfare.<sup>12</sup> The new communication technology could also be used for the disruption of enemy information transmission, rendering interception as crucial as message transmission in warfare. The development of mobile transmitters and receivers commenced in 1916 with the objective of facilitating the coordination of warfare in an even more synchronized and efficient manner. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan later described the evolution of such ubiquitous media infrastructure as "electronic devices [that] create rooms without walls and media fields"<sup>13</sup> Hence the First World War was not solely structured by battle fields, but also by media fields. The temporal and the spatial dimensions of message transfer and coordination of troops became equally important and were organized extensively by media technology.<sup>14</sup> Wireless technology suddenly allowed for live transmission and real-time reception: A previously unknown temporalization of time itself, later described in 1934 by Heidegger as "*Zeitigung der Zeit*".<sup>15</sup> Because of the acceleration of information transfer, the medium radio is capable of modifying and expanding the sensory, psychological, and physical apparatus of human beings.

Furthermore, the increased significance of radio usage for military operations is evidenced by the substantial augmentation in the number of German soldiers employed as radio operators. The number of such operators had increased twentyfold from 10,000 in 1914 to around 200,000 in 1918.<sup>16</sup> When the war ended, those radio operators found themselves suddenly unemployed. However, they still retained extensive expertise in radio usage and possessed considerable technical knowledge regarding the not yet regulated radio devices. After the First World War massive looting of previously army-owned radio equipment took place, consequently, former military radio operators persisted in utilizing the broadcasting technology of the German Empire for their own experimental transmissions. This theft of state-owned equipment made the event of *Funkerspuk* possible, or, as media scholar Friedrich

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Friedrich Kittler, "Rockmusik – ein Missbrauch von Heeresgerät," in *Short Cuts*, eds Peter Gente and Martin Weinmann (Frankfurt/Main: Zweitausendeins, 2002), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Marshall McLuhan in a letter to the NAEB director Harry Skornia, December 16, 1958, quoted in Ernst, "Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the Age of Media Mobilities," 170.

<sup>14</sup> Hagen, "Der Radoruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 253.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), 380.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kittler, "Rockmusik — ein Missbrauch von Heeresgerät," 17; see also Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 131.

Kittler characterized it, the revolutionary event was accomplished by the “abuse of military equipment”.<sup>17</sup>

The event of *Funkerspuk* took place in the early days of November in 1918, during a period of widespread protest and industrial action by soldiers and workers against the war and the resulting food shortages. In the midst of the prevailing chaos and disorder that characterized the early stages of the Coup d'État, Workers' and Soldiers' Councils emerged as spontaneously formed self-organizing entities, drawing inspiration from the Councils movement of the Soviet Revolution of 1917.<sup>18</sup> Despite utilizing the same term of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils for their own revolutionary unrest, the German Councils exhibited more moderate ideological positions and demands in comparison to their Soviet predecessors. This can be attributed to the composition of the councils, which consisted both of moderate reformers and a smaller fraction of revolutionary socialists. Their common ground of aspiration was the desire to exercise an influence on the restructuring of political, social and economic life within the newly forming German state.<sup>19</sup> On the 9th of November the monarchy under the reign of Wilhelm II. was overthrown and subsequently the first democratic state, the Weimar Republic, was installed. The new state was proclaimed on two separate occasions on the 9th of November, as both the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann and the Socialist Karl Liebknecht articulated their respective conceptions of the novel democratic republic to the assembled crowds in Berlin. Theodor Wolff, editor-in-chief of the *Berliner Tageblatt* described the revolutionary unrest in the following way:

From the editorial office window, I can see large crowds of people carrying red flags marching down Leipziger Strasse. My colleagues come in and tell me that officers are having their cockades torn off everywhere. There are no longer any police officers, the city has changed completely, the trams have stopped running, Wolff telegraph bureau has been occupied by revolutionaries, and the red flag is flying at the Brandenburg Gate.<sup>20</sup>

The news of Emperor Wilhelm II. forced abdication and the proclamation of a new state was initially disseminated by word of mouth in Berlin. By the evening larger parts of the German population became aware of those developments through various

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<sup>17</sup> Kittler, “Rockmusik — ein Missbrauch von Heeresgerät”, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Theodor Wolff, *Tagebücher 1914–1919: Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Entstehung der Weimarer Republik in Tagebüchern, Leitartikeln und Briefen* (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 1996), quoted in Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/1919*, 34.

media, including posters displayed on advertising columns, leaflets in post offices and printings from newspaper offices.<sup>21</sup> However, the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were most interested in occupying *Wolffs Telegraphisches Bureau* — the central telegraphy news service of the German Empire, which was responsible for all wirelessly transmitted messages throughout the nation. Thus it was primarily the novel media communication technology that was considered as extremely important for the installment and coordination of their own revolutionary movement as well as for the distribution of their own positions to the public.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. HAUNTING RADIO: MESSAGES 'TO ALL'!

During the period of unrest that ensued following the overthrowing of the German Empire, former soldiers who had become members of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils occupied the strategically important telegraph bureau in Berlin. Following the successful occupation of the news agency building, the entire telegraphy news service of the nation had gotten beyond the control of the War Ministry. This development enabled the revolutionaries to gain access to a new medium of distribution, previously unknown to the civilian population. The impact of technology becomes evident at the point of disruption and utilization outside of the state. During the era when radio was restricted to being utilized for military applications, its functionality was exclusively within the domain of trained radio operators. From a Heideggerian perspective, the mediums' *Zuhandenheit*<sup>23</sup> rendered it imperceptible to the public, when it served its initial military deployment. Media theorist Wolfgang Ernst elaborates further on this notion and highlights: "It is only in adverse circumstances, which Heidegger describes as 'Störung des umsichtigen Besorgens', that a tool loses its transparency and emerges",<sup>24</sup> It is only when a novel application emerges in the hands of new users that the radio becomes a catalyst for the emergence of a new social movement. During their first transmission from the Telegraphy Agency, the revolutionaries utilized the former military radio systems to — albeit erroneously — announce the triumph of the Socialist Revolution. While Philipp Scheidemann's Social Democrats were instrumental in effecting the transition from the German Empire to a democratic republic, the revolutionaries instead elected to broadcast their own interpretation of the events of the 9th of November. Emulating

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ullrich, *Die Revolution von 1918/1919*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Hagen, "Kulturinstrument Radio. Zur Genealogie der medialen Katastrophe der Weimarer Republik," in *Populärkultur, Massenmedien, Avantgarde: 1919–1933*, eds. Jessica Nitsche and Nadine Werner (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2012), 80.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfgang Ernst, "Harte Arbeit am Begriff. Medienarchäologische Antworten auf die Frage nach der Technologie," *Mechane. Journal of Philosophy and Anthropology of Technology* 1, no. 1 (2020), 116.

Lenin's famous "radio telegraphy message to all!"<sup>25</sup> from 1917, they did not accurately convey the overthrow of the government that was unfolding; instead, they conveyed the desired sequence of events, via the telegram agency: "To all! Here, the revolution has achieved a brilliant, almost entirely bloodless victory. The control of the Wolff bureau now rests in the hands of the comrades."<sup>26</sup> This public address, aimed simultaneously to all and at the new nation as a whole, was expressed in order to influence the course of the revolution and strengthen one's own movement. This address marks a decisive shift in the realm of radio communication: The capacity for a medium to propagate messages to 'everyone' had never been achieved before, and moreover, this was achieved by entities that were independent from the state. The advent of instantaneous communication has implications for both technological and psychological processes, it has suddenly become possible to observe in real time how a revolutionary movement is formed and begins to coordinate itself via "electronically mediated human communication".<sup>27</sup> The Workers' and Soldiers' Councils thus appropriated the primary issue that radio transmission posed for the military: The possible reception of broadcasts by all, including enemies, within the transmission area, provided the devices were not encrypted. The universal message transfer from one sender to multiple recipients via radio waves was no longer regarded as an obstacle, but was instead employed intentionally and used productively for their own purposes.

From November 9th onwards the Councils initiated a series of political actions, employing wireless information transfer as a primary means of communication. Revolutionary ideas and intervention should be disseminated in a manner that does not rely exclusively on oral communication or printed materials such as leaflets and magazines. The content of broadcasted information transfer no longer consisted of military orders from the state but rather focused on the coordination of a Councils' movement. Because radio technology surpassed newspapers and leaflets in terms of speed and spatial range of distribution, a novel mediation between the private and public spheres was achieved. The Councils did not operate from a singular center, such as the occupied telegraphy agency in Berlin, rather it was from a variety of locations, which were in exchange with each other, as every station was equipped with a radio apparatus and a council member could potentially receive and transmit messages. Radio created a 'global village' thereby allowing the Councils' members to interact with each other, despite their geographical dispersion throughout German territory. The Workers' and Soldiers' Councils orchestrated their own mobilization in approximately forty cities through their radio broadcasts. At that time, radio was

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>27</sup> Ernst, "Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the Age of Media Mobilities," 170.

still far from being a domestic medium, but rather it was an expensive military device whose morse messages could only be decoded by radio operators. The practice of listening to the radio was not confined to domestic settings; rather, it occurred in community centers. This shift in listening habits can be understood as a form of ‘attunement’, whereby the act of listening became a collective activity in public spaces.<sup>28</sup> In addition to radio’s highlighted ability to bridge great distances, it is also a powerful tool to bring people together and organize them. Consequently, demographic groups that had previously been marginalized and excluded from active political participation found themselves increasingly engaged in state affairs, manifesting as grassroots democratic organizations at a local level. Due to the absence of just one center of power and instead having multiple radio equipment stations available across the nation, it was made difficult to monitor and suppress the Councils’ message transfer and to enforce the ban on their specific transfer of information.

By mid-November, the councils had established their own *Zentralfunkleitung*, a radio control center, that operated its information transmission independent from the state. They controlled all forty former military stations and covered a message transfer distance of several hundred kilometers. The form of communication enabled the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils to organize their units in different cities whilst still maintaining a collective body.<sup>29</sup> The absence of a clearly defined center or a static form posed a strategic advantage for the rapidly evolving revolutionary movement, as it enabled the experimental utilization of the radio apparatus to its benefit. It is evident that technical media establish their own internal logic and novel temporal structures of information transmission. A fundamental shift in media infrastructure invariably gives rise to a concomitant shift in the manner in which events are conducted, with consequences for the geographical location and temporal parameters of such events.<sup>30</sup> New media are effecting a paradigm shift in the manner in which people perceive the world, or, to use Walter Benjamin description: „*Die Art und Weise, in der die menschliche Wahrnehmung sich organisiert — das Medium, in dem sie erfolgt — ist nicht nur natürlich sondern auch geschichtlich bedingt.*“<sup>31</sup> Consequently, novel mobilization strategies are emerging, thereby facilitating the

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Carolyn Birdsall, “Radio,” in *Handbuch Sound*, eds. Daniel Morat and Hansjakob Ziemer (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), 356.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Georgia Lummert, “Radio speaks to us. Kollektive Einstimmung auf die zeitlose Revolution in Angela Rohrs *Moskauer Demonstration im Radio*,” in *Sprachmodalitäten: Das gestimmte Wie des Sprachlichen*, eds. Hajnalka Halász and Csongor Lőrincz (Darmstadt: wbg, 2021), 207.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Ernst, “Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the age of media mobilities,” 169.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” [1935], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 439.

emergence of alternative modes of governmental critique of power. The medium functioned as a conduit for the revolutionaries, representing an early form of non-commercial exchange of messages. It served both as a platform for wireless experimentation and as an emergency communication system. This represented a significant milestone in the realm of wireless communications, as it marked the first occasion on which a claim to a communication system had been successfully asserted outside the jurisdiction of German state authorities. From November 1918 to February 1919, the Councils effectively challenged the state's news monopoly by appropriating the state's means of communication technology. By transmitting their own messages and furthermore surveilling the state's proceedings and intervening in them.

The Councils recognized the potential of this technology and made efforts to achieve a "reorganization of German radio broadcasting".<sup>32</sup> The Worker's and Soldier's Councils sought to fundamentally reorganize the radio system with their new, non-governmental central station. The objective of this initiative was firstly, to coordinate their own political actions, and secondly, to gain a communication tool to address the public. Perhaps surprisingly, the third objective was to help themselves as former military radio operators to gain work in a technical civilian, bureaucratic profession. The introduction of radio as a medium for the masses was perceived as an opportunity for the emergence of new professional activities. It is evident that the Councils pursued both their own civilian interests and democratic goals. For instance, they charged themselves with the supervision of the activities of the newly formed administrative and military authorities. Bertolt Brecht's assertion from 1930,<sup>33</sup> that radio should evolve into a communication device rather than a mere distribution device thus already became reality for the short period of a few months in 1918. It was the endeavors of former soldiers and amateur radio operators that enabled the transformation of every conventional receiver into a transmitting apparatus. What Brecht imagined around 1930 as an alternative to radio broadcasting had therefore long been a reality at the time of his writings but had since become impossible again.

#### **4. BANNING THE GHOSTS: HAUNTED PRINTING PRESS AND GOVERNMENT**

Both the government and the printing press were equally 'haunted' by these developments and therefore coined the term *Funkerspuk* to describe this period of radio technology under the control of the Councils. From the end of November onwards, the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and the newly installed government

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 131.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Bertolt Brecht, "Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat" [1932], in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 18, ed. Elisabeth Hauptmann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 129.

fought for the control of the radio communications. The bourgeois printing press openly sided with the government in this dispute. The newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* defamed and discredited the Councils' central radio station as operated by "ghostly soldiers with war-torn nerves, foaming at the mouth, babbling with excitement! Demagogues emerged from the darkness, bearers of evil thoughts and wild desires."<sup>34</sup> Military and civil authorities alike reacted harshly, trying to restrict the self-governing Councils drastically. Their physical gatherings, such as assemblies and demonstrations, were banned, community centers closed, and newspapers such as the newly founded 'spartacist' medium *Rote Fahne* were prevented from being published.<sup>35</sup> The moderate Social Democratic Party, together with supporters of the monarchy and German nationalist conservatives, all opposed the Councils' experimental use of former military equipment.<sup>36</sup> The new government's shared and urgent goal was to prevent further unrest and to avert the socialist demand of a council-led socialist republic. An emergency decree on radio use was therefore agreed upon, stating: "The number of secret radio stations seriously endangers the security of the state and public order, as they offer subversive circles the opportunity to create a comprehensive secret communications network that, in cases of danger, seriously jeopardizes the implementation of measures by the constitutional government."<sup>37</sup> All radio broadcasting outside of the state jurisdiction was to be strictly prohibited. Nevertheless, from November 1918 to February 1919, the councils retained control and appropriated radio technology as a means of mass communication. This non-governmental initiative and the emergency communication system it established, frightened military commanders, the social democratic government and bureaucratic agents alike. While the military and civil servants at the *Reichspost* had previously shown little or no interest in the new medium, this changed drastically following the actions of *Funkerspuk*.<sup>38</sup> In January 1919, the newly founded state-run Radio Commission intensified its efforts to strip the Councils of their power. Hans Bredow, a former radio pioneer who would become the minister primarily responsible for this development, launched his attacks on the *Zentralfunkleitung*, stating that only the *Reichspost*, with its "outstanding forces of scientists, technicians, and administrative officials [who]

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Angela Schwarz, "Der 9. November 1918: Die deutsche Revolution," in *Tage deutscher Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Dirk Blasius and Wilfried Loth (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 37.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 131.

<sup>37</sup> As quoted in Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland: Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels*, 99–100.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern. Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 131.

were available in the state's telegraph administration",<sup>39</sup> would be able to build a functioning public radio network. He defamed the Council's control centre, claiming that it "consisted almost exclusively of people from all kinds of professions who, without relevant specialist training, had learned nothing more than how to operate a Morse key and to record telegrams in the military".<sup>40</sup> In collaboration with the influential Ministry of Economics, radio was reorganized once again, this time into a 'state-supporting' medium. From February onwards, the government regained complete control of radio, eliminating all traces of revolution.<sup>41</sup>

This reorganization of broadcasting had far-reaching consequences, as it considerably restricted the possibilities for free news production and distribution.<sup>42</sup> Bredow secured the Councils' agreement by promising to implement their demands for a state-independent radio network and 10,000 civil service posts for former military radio operators as soon as they would hand over their communication system to the state.<sup>43</sup> These promised secure civil service positions pacified the idealistic revolutionaries. Although Bredow did not keep these promises, he was able to successfully eliminate all further radio-related issues. The first democratic administration of the Weimar Republic did not perceive autonomous radio broadcasts as a potential conduit for increased democratic participation; rather, they were regarded as a threat of potential revolutionary overthrow of the recently instated republic. Thus *Funkerspuk* — the inaugural albeit illegal episode of 'public broadcasting' — had a formative influence on the great need for control during the subsequent development of public broadcasting. The November Revolution 'haunted' politicians and bureaucrats alike, who feared a collapse of the fragile government and its administrative structures. Paradoxically, it was the fear of uncontrolled revolutionary masses that necessitated the implementation of an orderly public radio, which was realized in 1923. As Friedrich Kittler concisely summarized: "Simply to prevent further anarchist abuse of army radio equipment, Germany got its entertainment radio."<sup>44</sup> A deliberate effort was made to ensure that the public entertainment broadcasting system was devoid of any political influence. This system was established with the intention of regulating the content broadcast to the public through the implementation of advisory councils and censorship. The regulatory

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<sup>39</sup> Hans Bredow, *Funk im Ersten Weltkriege: Entstehung des Rundfunks* (Stuttgart: Mundus, 1954), 40–50.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>41</sup> Hagen, "Der Radoruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 262.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 132.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Hagen, "Der Radoruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks," 255.

<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Kittler, "Protected Mode," in *Draculas Vermächtnis: Technische Schriften* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993), 213.

framework encompassed more than mere technical restrictions on radio sets; it also included restrictions such as a complete prohibition on all amateurs operating transmission equipment and the requirement to obtain an expensive license for radio reception.<sup>45</sup> In order to prevent another revolutionary occupation of radio technology, technical seals and legal obstacles were installed.

In contrast to the practices in the USA, where both military and amateur radio operators had been communicating via wireless transmission technology since the mid-1910s, German broadcasting started only in 1923.<sup>46</sup> It was subject to stringent restrictions imposed by the Interior Ministry of the Republic. Mass communication transmitted by radio was only permitted when the state controlled it, with the primary focus being on mere reception rather than interception.<sup>47</sup> Throughout the 1920s, private broadcasting by radio amateurs was considered a subversive threat to the security and order of the state. The state feared the potential of mass media to politicize citizens and thus implemented bans and censorship measures. The state pursued the goal of providing the nation with access to public radio as a form of entertainment, while eschewing any political mobilization.<sup>48</sup>

In 1918, the notion of broadcasting being a catalyst for nation-building was a prevalent contemporary radio theory. According to Rudolf Arnheim, a renowned theorist in the field of early film and radio, broadcasting had the potential to foster the establishment of an “organic national community”.<sup>49</sup> One of the primary functions of media is to establish new worlds, to create new collectives and communities — or even nations. The potential of radio, namely its ability to observe society and elevate political issues to general social issues by providing context and commentary, that the participants of the *Funkerspuk* tried to establish from November 1918 onwards, was prevented by Bredow and his ministry colleagues from February 1919 onwards.<sup>50</sup> The four-month period of *Funkerspuk* demonstrates an alternative to state-controlled radio infrastructure. The state-led broadcasting system that was implemented instead *ex negativo* highlights a missed opportunity for broadcasting for and from everyone. The process of *Gleichschaltung* of broadcasting by the National Socialists in 1933, which occurred fifteen years after *Funkerspuk* and ten years after the introduction of

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Hagen, “Kulturinstrument Radio. Zur Genealogie der medialen Katastrophe der Weimarer Republik,” 77.

<sup>46</sup> See Wolfgang Hagen, “Vorwort”, in *Das Radio: Zur Geschichte und Theorie des Hörfunks – Deutschland/USA* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005), XXf.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Hagen, “Der Radoruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks,” 253.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 126.

<sup>49</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Rundfunk als Hörkunst* (München/Wien: Suhrkamp, 1979), 48.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern: Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 137.

public broadcasting, was relatively straightforward. This was primarily due to the fact that Weimar broadcasting had always been a state apparatus, and thus relatively minor modifications were required to adapt it for use by a totalitarian dictatorship.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The event of *Funkerspuk* is indicative of the manner in which radio technology in 1918 temporarily evaded state control, thereby facilitating democratic mobilization during a pivotal juncture in German history. This phenomenon transpired when state oversight of communication had momentarily collapsed. Thus *Funkerspuk* provides an insight into the role of technology in shaping political possibilities, modes of public address, and the structures of media governance. The technological repurposing of radio revealed the latent potentials of a medium that was still in its ‘incubation phase’,<sup>51</sup> thus unregulated and open to multiple futures. Radio, with its capacity for live, decentralized and wireless transmission, enabled new forms of immediacy and mass participation that disrupted traditional hierarchies of information flow. For a brief period, radio was not yet defined by the logics of entertainment, state authority, or passive consumption. Instead, it became an active and participatory instrument for political mobilization and experimentation. *Funkerspuk* is of particular significance as it was not merely a media event, but rather a media rupture. This event presented a potential turning point in the evolution of the medium, wherein its infrastructure, form, and function could have been organized along radically different lines. By repurposing the military’s centralized communication apparatus to serve as a tool for democratic agitation, *Funkerspuk* underscored both the emancipatory potential and perceived threat of unregulated media. *Funkerspuk* demonstrated that events which are mediated are inextricably linked to political desires, institutional power, and historical contingency. As Heidegger and Benjamin have suggested, the emergence of a medium has the capacity to reorganize perception and restructure social time and space. In this sense, radio was not merely a means to distribute revolutionary messages, it was itself constitutive of the revolution’s very structure, facilitating the emergence of a novel form of political subjectivity that was collective and attuned to real-time developments across space.

This revolutionary appropriation of military radio infrastructure by the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils — themselves a fragmented coalition of moderate and radical forces — was short-lived, as it was met with suspicion, suppression, and counter-organization by both the government and the press. The term ‘*Funkerspuk*’ itself reflects the profound anxiety experienced by state officials.<sup>52</sup> The state’s promulgation of emergency decrees and the eventual monopolization of broadcasting

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<sup>51</sup> Ernst, “Tracing Tempor(e)alities in the Age of Media Mobilities,” 165f.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Hagen, “Der Rádioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks,” 256.

reveals how thoroughly the new government feared the decentralization of radio technology, mass coordination, and, crucially, immediate public discourse communication technologies outside their control.

The consequences of *Funkerspuk* also elucidate the reasons why radio under the National Socialists regime was so readily shaped into an instrument of authoritarianism.<sup>53</sup> The state monopolization of broadcasting in the aftermath of 1919 cannot be regarded as a neutral administrative reorganization, rather it constitutes an ideological intervention. *Funkerspuk* revealed the intricate interweaving of political power and media infrastructure. It also demonstrated the influence of fear surrounding unregulated broadcasting and how this would shape the future of public communication in Germany through censorship, licensing and state monopolization. The exclusion of precisely those alternative media practitioners who had once demonstrated the participatory and collective potential of the medium, established the foundation for a broadcasting system that was designed for passive consumption and national unity as opposed to a tool for pluralistic engagement or critical discourse.

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Dreckmann, *Übertragen und Speichern. Mediale Ordnungen des akustischen Diskurses 1900–1945*, 137.

- [7] Hagen, Wolfgang. "Der Radoruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks." In *HardWar/SoftWar: Krieg und Medien 1914 bis 1945*, edited by Martin Stingelin and Wolfgang Scherer, 243–273. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1991.
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