

Heidegger and the Possibility of an “Originary” Ethics

REMMON E. BARBAZA
ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY
QUEZON CITY, PHILIPPINES



In view of the fact that speaking of Heidegger and ethics in the same breath provokes rejection, even derision, among those who hold that none of his explicit concerns fall, in a conventional sense, under the rubric of “ethics” (more especially if they regard him an “unrepentant Nazi”), Hannah Arendt’s advice to “leave him alone” and pay attention instead to his thought (which in any case should not be ignored by anyone concerned about the “danger” posed by its supposed concatenation to Nazism), is well taken. For when he does, the inquirer is presented with the groundwork for an “originary” (*ursprünglich*) — not an ordinary — ethics, operating upon a register prior to the do’s and don’ts of systems and of the principles that govern them.

Since of crucial importance here is the concept of “dwelling,” let us turn to *Being and Time* where Heidegger states for the first time that for humans, “to be” is “to dwell.”

‘In’ stems from *innan-*, to live, *habitare*, to dwell. ‘An’ means I am used to, familiar with, I take care of something. It has the meaning of *colo* in the sense of *habito* and *diligo*. We characterized this being to whom being-in belongs in this meaning as the being that I myself always am. The expression ‘*bin*’ is connected with ‘*bei*.’ ‘*Ich bin*’ (I am) means I dwell, I stay near... the world as something familiar in such and such a way. Being as the infinitive of ‘I am’: that is understood as an existential, means to dwell near... to be familiar with... *Being-in is thus the formal existential expression of*

*the Being of Dasein which has the essential constitution of being-in-the-world.*¹

The “formal existential expression of the Being of Dasein,” then, is “to dwell,” that is, to be situated within a frame delineated by one’s lines of familiarity with, one’s nearness to, things. “Dwelling,” as such, is not simply one (rendering is not the central one), of the many activities humans engage upon. Indeed, everything a human does, everything he or she is concerned about, belongs to that dwelling.

But even if this key insight is possible to date to the earliest phase of Heidegger’s thought, not until two decades following the publication of *Being and Time* that, in a remarkable series of lectures from the early 1950’s — “The Thing” (1950),² “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1951),³ “...Poetically Man Dwells...” (1951)⁴ — does the philosopher work out its implications. In them he proposes two ideas: “dwelling... is the basic character the Being in keeping with which mortals exist,”⁵ and dwelling occurs within the “fourfold” unity of “earth” and “sky,” “mortals” and “divinities.”⁶

These ideas involve quite an advance beyond his original insight that being human is “being-in-the-world,” and that “being-in” is “dwelling.” Regarding the “fourfold” of “earth” and “sky,” “mortals” and “divinities,” within the frame of which “dwelling” is claimed by him to occur, he asserts it is not an objectivity; it is not something; it is not a “what” that someone could come up to and empirically identify. Rather, it is the sum of the most essential dimensions of human existence which, even as they remain four, can only be thought of as one, for whenever one comes up for consideration, the other three present themselves as well. They need to be present in a human existence as a unity, for that existence to be human at all. We now take each in turn.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 51.

² Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

³ Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, “...Poetically Man Dwells...” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

⁵ Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 160.

⁶ See “Building Dwelling Thinking,” “The Thing,” and “...Poetically Man Dwells...”

"Earth" is not the planet Earth known to science, with a determinate place (meaning a fixed orbit around, and distance from, the Sun, etc.) in the solar system. It is not the Earth geologists know with their data pertaining to its layers of soil and rock, its tectonic plates, etc. "Earth," rather, is the earth we know "initially and for the most part,"⁷ prior to any scientific knowledge we could develop of it. We stand on this earth. We root our lives in it, establish our cities, our homes upon it, even as it sustains us with a rich yield of fruit, vegetables, trees, water, fish, and meat. It rubs against the soles of our feet when we tread on it, and leaves an unmistakable trace of its textures whenever we scoop up a bit of it in our hands.

"Sky" is not known to science at all since, strictly speaking, it can account, not for a sky, but only layers of atmosphere, and galaxies, and solar systems, etc. Yet everyone is deeply acquainted with the sky who has seen the seasons turn, or been caught in a sudden and heavy downpour that disrupts his plans for the weekend, or seen his crops devastated in a storm, or experienced the merciless heat of the sun, turning everything into a dry wasteland. Sky is that under which we stand, and over which we have no control.

The "gods" or divinities are not the deities of this or that religion. They express, rather, the primordial experience of the sacred, possibly akin to the *sensus divinitatis* Calvin asserts is present in every human being.

Can we now attempt to restate the meaning of this fourfold dwelling in ethical terms?

Dwelling on earth. There is a radical difference between viewing the earth as a mere repository of exploitable resources, and viewing it as that which sustains us even as we establish our lives upon it. The "fourfold" suggests a stance towards the earth, not of domination and exploitation, but of humility and stewardship — one that could spell the difference between acquiescing to destruction or pushing creation. The one who views nature as "a gigantic gasoline station,"⁸ simply wishes to assault and encroach upon it, whereas the one who experiences the

⁷ "Zunächst und zumeist" is an expression that Heidegger uses in numerous instances in *Being and Time*, indicating the human being's pre-philosophical and pre-scientific experience of the world and the things found within such world.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 50.

earth for what it is — the source of his or her life and the ground of all life — feels responsible for it and wishes to care for it. The battles we have waged, to a greater or a lesser extent, have been over the earth's resources — gold or spices, oil or water. But they also have been about the defense of the land of one's birth, of one's ancestors, and of the generations still to come.

Dwelling under the sky. While one can say that we humans depend on earth in the same way that we depend on the sky, in that the earth provides us with its fruit, and the sky with its rain and sunlight, there is a real and important sense in which our relationship to the earth is different from our relationship with the sky. We cultivate the earth, but we do not cultivate the sky. We plant on the earth and harvest its fruits, but we never plant in the sky or harvest anything from it. We have heard, of course, of cloud seeding, but it is not a normal occurrence; it differs radically from the act of sowing seeds in the farm's good earth. Yet what difference is there is tied, not to the activity *per se*, but to the extent that control and manipulation have crowded out participation. All forms of farming, from the primitive to the most technologically advanced, from the exploitative to one that is sustainable and respectful, involve certain levels of control, manipulation and participation. The simplest form of irrigation is a form of control and manipulation, as water gets diverted into this rather than into that path. But when we stand under the sky, with that simplicity of mind and heart that allows us to experience things as they are and on their own terms, we are at once filled with a sense of awe owing to an awareness of how small we are in comparison with the vastness of the sky the movements of which we can in no way control, and the changing of seasons, and the inclemency of the weather.

To dwell under the sky involves the renunciation of the will to control and manipulate especially what is over and above us. It involves submitting to the course of the heavens, allowing one's life to be shaped by it, thereby attaining to an inner peace and freedom. This is illustrated by the farmer who, following long months of difficult labor out on the field, watches as his crops get devastated in a powerful typhoon, until he is left with hardly anything to harvest. As much as the experience may unnerve him, he does not curse the heavens. How could he direct insults to the very same heavens that many times over had blessed him with rain and sunshine? So he composes himself and awaits the

next season, when he can plant again. The sun, he knows, will once again shine benevolently upon the good earth, following the dark days brought on by a violent storm.

Dwelling as mortals. The manner in which we enfold the fact of our mortality into our experience of living shapes the way in which we live: how we see ourselves and our lives as a *whole*, how we relate to people, how we treat the things of our world. It was mentioned above that to stand on earth under the sky involves developing dispositions of humility, responsibility, and gratitude for blessings received from the earth and the sky. It involves growing in the awareness of the fact that we are not in control of many things in our lives; that we are at the mercy of the heavens, of the changing of the seasons, of the blessings of sun and rain, but also of their wrath. It involves the renunciation of the will to control; it is an act of letting go.

It is one thing, however, to renounce control over earth or sky, and quite another thing to renounce control over our lives to the extent that we lose them. The ultimate act of letting go, the ultimate renunciation, consists in the simple and humble acceptance of one's dying. Losing this or that thing, something else is left for us to hold on to, to provide us with continuing support. Our lives, however, are the only lives we have — the only ones we have and know — so that should we lose them, there would be nothing left for us to cling to. The prospect of death is indeed a most terrifying thing, one that has somehow forced many a writer and many a poet to confront both its reality and mystery. Yet this terrifying experience of letting go of things to the point that nothing is left for one to hold on to, presents one with the possibility of attaining to the highest level of freedom. One is most free when one is left unencumbered, ready to renounce even that which is dearest to one.

The controversy and debate surrounding the issue of human cloning, for instance, is not simply a question of science or ethics in the customary sense. At bottom it has something to do with our essence as human beings. Jean Baudrillard, for instance, sees that what lies behind cloning is really the desire for immortality.⁹ And what else could lie behind the desire for immortality but the inability or refusal to accept

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, "The Final Solution: Cloning Beyond the Inhuman and Inhuman," in *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 3.

our own mortality?

Dwelling before the divinities. When Heidegger points to the divinities as one of the four in the fourfold, he is effectively claiming that life cannot be truly called human without the element of the divine, without the dimension of the sacred. As in every philosophical claim, this one can only be offered in itself, without any possibility for proof or justification, but for that nagging, deep down feeling, that allows us to distinguish the human from the inhuman, the divine from the profane.

Dwelling before the divinities means not only accepting the realm of the divine in our lives, but also letting the divinities *be* on their own terms, leaving them to decide when to appear and when to withdraw. Alas in the modern technological age, in which nearly everything imaginable can be created (the prospect of creating human life in the case of human cloning seems to be viable within the imaginable future) and made available in any form anywhere and at any time, even the gods have been commodified (we hear, for example, that “prayer works,” that is, God can be made to deliver the desired goods by the recitation of the necessary formulas).

In the Philippines, for example, Mass is celebrated in shopping malls on a regular basis, yet no one questions the propriety of appearing to have God adjust to our (shopping) schedule, instead of the other way around. Jesus, on the other hand, angrily drove the merchants away from the Temple, not because he was contemptuous of trade and business (he himself traded in the products of carpentry and mingled with other tradesmen), but because these people had so flattened out the fundamental elements of human experience that no discernible difference existed anymore between the human and divine, the sacred and profane, allowing for the sacred to be set aside in favor of the profane. The word “profane” is itself instructive. The Latin word *profanum* means “before” (*pro*) the “temple” (*fanum*). Just as people in a marriage do not normally bring the pressures they experience at work into their bedroom (the site of loving intimacy that belongs to just the two of them), so too humans would be expected to leave everything that is merely mundane outside the temple, preparatory to going in and communing with the Holy. Yahweh, for this reason, asked Moses to take off his sandals before proceeding into a holy ground. In contrast, the temple (if indeed it can still be called such) nowadays seems to have

been force-squeezed into shopping malls and other places of commerce. I suspect if Mass-going shoppers had to choose between worship or shopping, they would choose the latter; the few who choose the former might then have to be driven out of the mall.

We now come back to the question raised at the onset. Can something like an originary ethics arise from the thought of Heidegger? If so, what would it be like? We stated at the outset that it would not be susceptible to description by means of the term, "ethics." No principles (e.g., reason, universality, utility, fairness, etc.), could be found to "ground" a system of do's and don'ts attached to it. It would arise, rather, from a concrete awareness and acceptance of *who we are*, and from *the way we are*, from our *being* as human beings. If we accept what Heidegger appears to be saying, that our being as humans is essentially a dwelling within the fourfold unity of earth and sky, mortals and divinities, then we can make two initial assertions. First, the full unfolding of human life cannot happen without all these four dimensions of human existence. Second, one cannot live a life that is truly human with only one of these dimensions; each of the four dimensions necessarily draws the other three together in a unity.

Can human experience attest to the foregoing assertions? One way to answer this question would be by means of human exemplars, great souled women and men who lived truly ethical lives. These exemplars are likely to have embraced death in simplicity and humility, whether by way of personal sacrifice, or by dying a good death (truly, those who "grow old gracefully" die a good death, following a good life). They are likely to have had a profound debt of gratitude to the earth, a profound respect for it. They are likely to have known and submitted themselves to the course of the heavens, the changing of the seasons, the rhythm of life. They are likely to have cultivated and carefully husbanded their sense of the sacred.

The unity of the fourfold also would tell us that it would be unimaginable for someone to claim to be "religious" or "holy" or "a man of God" and at the same time be destructive of the earth. Such a claim would most likely be called hypocrisy, which does not do justice to both God and the earth. A profound respect for the earth almost necessarily goes hand in hand with the sense of the sacred. Indeed the earth itself is sacred. Likewise, it would be unimaginable for someone to have a profound respect for the earth and at the same time be unable

to accept the changing of seasons, or to humbly and patiently await rain or sun. Finally, it would be unimaginable for someone to be profoundly respectful towards the earth or to be aware of the realm of the holy yet at the same time be resistant to one's own ageing and dying.

The essential relation between ethics and human dwelling is actually already indicated by a thinker from the Greek antiquity. In the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle brings to our attention the essential relation between *ethos* (habit) and *ēthos* (moral virtue), which sound almost the same.¹⁰ That *ethos* is rendered in English by the Latin-derived word "habit" (*habitare*, to dwell) is no coincidence. To be in the habit of doing things in a particular way means at the same time to be used to doing things in a way that becomes familiar. Familiarity, as we saw earlier in *Being and Time*, precisely belongs to dwelling. What Aristotle caught a glimpse of, Heidegger further unfolded. To dwell then is the first and highest ethical demand. Is it any wonder then that John the Evangelist, in describing the event of the Incarnation, of God become man like us, writes: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us"?¹¹

The primordial or originary character of the ethics that might arise from Heideggerian thought means that a host of so-called ethical dilemmas or debates are simply precluded. To give just one concrete example, the ethical problem surrounding human cloning or even stem cell research, which invariably leads to the debate on when exactly human life begins (a question that even in the case of abortion has long been raised), could not even be thought to arise if one assumes the fundamental stance of humility and gratitude, a stance that is made possible by the acceptance of and living out of one's being as a mortal who dwells on earth, under the sky, and in communion with the divinities. Such debates (like the one involving the determination of the point at which human life begins, whether from the embryo or before) are not only futile but also absurd, indicating perhaps how far we have fallen out of the gathering event of our being as ones who dwell, a gathering that only happens in the fourfold dwelling on earth

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a18-19. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, revised Oxford translation. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Vol. 2. Trans. W. D. Ross, rev. J. O. Urmson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

¹¹ John 1,14.

and under the sky, as mortals and before the divinities.

In the end, an awareness of our dwelling as mortals, on earth and under the sky, and in communion with the divinities, allows us to grow in the spirit of humility and gratitude. Humility, in that we recognize in simplicity our dependence on earth and our lack of control over the essential aspects of our lives, and in that we embrace in simplicity the fact that our lives as we know them are inescapably headed towards death and, finally, in that we call to the gods for deliverance, for the completion of our otherwise incomplete human lives. Gratitude, in that precisely in recognizing our dependence on earth and our standing under the sky, as mortals in communion with the divinities, we realize that everything — and I mean everything — is gift, that nothing whatsoever that we had or have or will have can be said to be something that we entirely or even partially earn or deserve to have. Such a fundamental awareness of the complete giftedness of our lives — proceeding as it is from a simple yet profound experience of Being, the experience of *es gibt*, of both the giving of and givenness of life — precludes all thought of harm and evil. Within the context of this fundamental comportment towards life and all that is, one can see how something like a primordial or originary ethics can arise, which precedes all ethics as customarily conceived.

How much of human misery and suffering originate from our compulsion to dominate and possess the earth? How many of our human pathologies, psychological or otherwise, are brought about by our refusal to accept the course of the heavens, the whole rhythm of life? Up to what extent is our lack of moral compass a result of our rejection of the sacred? How much of all human follies can be traced from our negation and defiance of our own mortality?

We run too fast and ahead of ourselves and we think in an abstract way when we think of ethics simply in terms of principles and systems of do's and don'ts. We need to step back, back to our concrete origin (*Ursprung*) as dwellers.

Everything else will be added — given — unto us.