The Calls of Conscience and Calculation: Heidegger on Responsibility

Shalini Satkunanandan
Department of Political Science
University of California, Davis

*This is only a draft. Please do not cite or circulate it without permission. All comments are most welcome - ssatkunanandan@ucdavis.edu. Thank you!

Background Note: This paper is the third chapter of my draft book manuscript, titled Extraordinary Responsibility: Politics Beyond Calculation. In Extraordinary Responsibility I uncover an important shared concern in Plato, Kant, Nietzsche, Weber, and Heidegger. They each show how morality views responsibility as a series of debts or duties capable of being identified in advance, reckoned-up, negotiated, and discharged. According to these thinkers, “calculable responsibility” is not simply an understanding of responsibility; it is also a profoundly impoverished way of seeing the world. Calculable responsibility only illuminates what is amenable to calculation, directs our attention to bookkeeping our duties, and thereby allows us to evade the more open-ended dimensions of our world and our responsibility. Most importantly, calculable responsibility relieves us of our inexhaustible and substantively un-specifiable responsibility to thoughtfully respond to an ever-unfolding world - the very responsibility these thinkers variously present as constitutive of our humanity. Yet, they say, calculable responsibility is so insistent that only an experience akin to a conversion can allow us to see beyond its worldview.

I draw on these conversion narratives to explore what a non-moralized, but responsible, political bearing or “ethos” might look like. I argue that the phenomenon of calculable responsibility is fundamental to moralism’s dynamic. Moralism is usually understood as a vengeful, petty, self-righteous, misguided, undue or thoughtless obedience to moral rules. I argue that the picture of responsibility as capable of being reckoned-up, balanced-out and discharged is precisely what makes responsibility seem amenable to capture in a rule. Therefore calculable responsibility underlies morality’s fall into moralism. I am more sober in my appraisal of how far politics may free itself from moralism than many contemporary critics of moralized or “applied ethics” approaches to politics and political theory. Calculable responsibility is both an ineradicable incident of our finitude and part of our most compelling understandings of justice and political order. I argue that, at best, a political ethos may strive to keep calculable responsibility in its place.
CHAPTER TWO

The Calls of Conscience and Calculation

Everydayness takes Dasein as something ready-to-hand to be concerned with – that is, managed and reckoned. ‘Life’ is a ‘business’ (Geschäft) whether it covers its costs or not. (SZ, §59 [289])

Heidegger’s discussion of morality and articulation of a non-moral constitutive responsibility in Being and Time occurs during his investigation of the ordinary way human beings orient themselves in the world. He undertakes this investigation in order to shed light on the larger question of being (das Sein). Heidegger’s chief concern here is not morality itself. Any moral or ethical implications are indirect. Heidegger famously avoids any systematic engagement with morality or ethics. He believes that a concern with

1 “SZ” stands for Sein und Zeit (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1984). In all references to Sein und Zeit, the first number refers to the relevant paragraph of Sein und Zeit, and the second number refers to the page number of the standard German edition. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Heidegger’s work are my own.

2 The English “being” can be misleading because “being” can be employed as both the gerund of the verb “to be” and the participle of the verb “to be.” A gerund refers to the activity of a verb. While German does...
morality or ethics perpetuates a misguided focus on beings (das Seiende) rather than being (das Sein).²

In this chapter I hope to show the benefits of Heidegger’s indirection. His indirection allows us to stay longer with the question of what morality conceals without diverting the inquiry to the question of what would enhance morality. In contrast, as we shall see, Plato and Kant seek to rectify our ordinary relation to responsibility by revealing what grounds morality. Their concern for rectifying grounds leaves their accounts of responsibility vulnerable to technical interpretations consistent with calculable responsibility. Plato is said to provide eternal standards for morality. Kant provides a procedure for generating moral rules. Heidegger does speak of what grounds morality - like Plato and Kant he identifies a constitutive non-moral responsibility - but he is wary of tailoring what grounds morality to the human needs around morality. He does not want to, he would say, reduce being (das Sein) to the ground of beings (das Seiende).

While Heidegger refrains from providing a recognizable ethical or moral theory, he still has insight to offer about our ordinary relation to responsibility and the possibility of modifying this relation. One of my hopes in this chapter is to show that Heidegger’s portrayal of our ordinary relation to responsibility describes our captivation by calculable responsibility. In order to reveal Heidegger’s underlying concern with calculable responsibility I connect the “call of conscience” (Gewissenruf) sections of Being and Time

² The English “being” can be misleading because “being” can be employed as both the gerund of the verb “to be” and the participle of the verb “to be.” A gerund refers to the activity of a verb. While German does not have a specific verb-formation for the gerund, it can employ the infinitive (sein) as the gerund (das Sein - “the to be”). German can thereby keep das Sein, as the gerund, distinct from das Seiende (“what is,” “beings,” “the being”), the substantive use of the participle. The distinction between das Sein and das Seiende becomes especially important when we consider Heidegger’s thought. Throughout the present study, where helpful, the German words translating the English “being” are supplied.
(Sein und Zeit) (1927) to Heidegger’s two later essays, “The Question concerning Technique” (“Die Frage nach der Technik”) and “The Turn” (“Die Kehre”) (1949). I thereby bring together his early engagement with our ordinary experience of morality, and the possibility of a conversion in which one may embrace a responsibility beyond morality, with his later consideration of the tenacious sway of calculative thinking in modernity. In Being and Time Heidegger does give phenomenological importance to the calculable-responsibility frame as a mark of our ordinary relation to responsibility but he does not offer any sustained analysis of this frame. Accordingly it is easy when reading Being and Time to focus on the habitual and rule-bound aspect of our ordinary approach to responsibility and pay scant attention to our preoccupation with calculating our responsibilities. Heidegger’s later work on the immense difficulty of thinking other than technically in modernity offers more insight on the character of the calculable-responsibility frame and the challenge of seeing responsibility otherwise. He also explicitly engages the possibility of a conversion away from technical or calculative thinking in “The Turn.”

In his later work Heidegger offers an account of the responsibility constitutive of our humanity in language different from (though not inconsistent with) Being and Time. In Being and Time he presents our constitutive responsibility as our ongoing responsibility to always respond to the possibilities into which we are thrown. Even as we respond to our possibilities they always unfold into further possibilities. In our constant lagging behind

---


2 This is not to say that Heidegger’s earlier work did not also raise such themes. Stuart Elden offers a helpful overview of the earlier engagements with the theme of calculability in Heidegger’s thought in Speaking Against Number: Heidegger, Language and the Politics of Calculation (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
our possibilities we are “primordially guilty.” Heidegger’s later account of our constitutive responsibility is tied to the reign of technical thinking itself: we have a responsibility to care for the possibility of ways of thinking other than technical thinking. To neglect this responsibility is to threaten the distinctive human role in how the world is disclosed in different ways — in how the world appears in different lights. Thus, for Heidegger (like the other thinkers in this study), seeing past calculable responsibility and assuming the responsibility constitutive of being human are two deeply entwined tasks. Heidegger worries that it is increasingly difficult to see the world other than in a technical fashion and technical thinking threatens to become the only way of thinking. Indeed, he argues that even Nietzsche’s critique of morality bears the mark of technical thinking and his analysis of Nietzsche does much to reveal how concealed (and concealing) the calculable-responsibility frame can be.

Drawing on Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” I show that he conceives of the assumption of our constitutive responsibility as a way of dwelling the world — what he calls an “ethos” — in which we are ever attuned to the sway of calculation. Heidegger’s unique treatment of “ethos” offers a useful point of contrast to how “ethos” is often deployed by contemporary political theorists. “Ethos,” while seemingly an alternative to an “applied ethics” approach to ethics and politics, can itself manifest calculable responsibility in its appropriation by political theorists. Stuart Elden’s illuminating study Speaking Against Number shows how Heidegger’s work offers a wide-ranging critique of calculative politics, including the Nazi program, which was the site for Heidegger’s own deeply troubling foray
into politics. In this chapter I focus on how Heidegger’s critique of technical thinking explicates the fraught relation between morality and responsibility and speaks to the question of an ethos or an appropriate bearing for politics.

**Primordial Guilt**

As with many engagements with Heidegger, we must begin with “being” or das Sein. Das Sein is the way that beings (das Seiende) appear. Das Sein is not a property or a quality of a being (ein Seiendes). Nor is das Sein something aside from beings that lifts a curtain from beings. Instead, das Sein is the disclosure of beings.\(^6\) It names how beings become intelligible and appear in certain ways rather than others. Human beings are never outside of das Sein. They are always within a certain disclosure of beings. “Dasein” - “literally “being-the-there,””\(^7\) - names the way of being of human beings. “Da” is another way of saying “the world.” Dasein’s way of being is “being-in-the-world.” We always already find ourselves absorbed in a world in which we know our way around. Beings always already matter to us in particular ways and not in others (SZ, §§12-18 [52-88]). We are always already absorbed in a world that we ourselves help to disclose through our own understandings. So we are never outside of world, as subjects relating to an object. We always have a certain overarching understanding of ourselves and our world that inflects our lives and we are never without such an interpretation (SZ, §5 [15]). This way of being is what Heidegger calls “existence” (SZ, §4 [12]).

---

5 Elden, *Speaking Against Number*, 72-184.

6 The principle of the ontological difference states the difference between das Sein and das Seiende: “The to-be (das Sein) of being (des Seienden) ‘is’ not itself a being (ein Seiendes)” : “Das Sein des Seienden ‘ist’ nicht selbst ein Seiendes.” SZ, §2[6].

7 While Heidegger repudiates some of his earlier terminology, he never explicitly repudiates “Dasein.”
Since we always dwell within a certain understanding of ourselves and our world it is possible to make our way of being a question to ourselves, yet ordinarily we do not do so. Instead, we preoccupy ourselves with the concerns of “das Man,” literally “the one.” *Das Man* describes who we are when we do “what is expected of one.” We take our overarching understanding of ourselves and our world from established expectations: “*Dasein* has grown up both into and in a traditional (überkommene) way of interpreting *Dasein*. From this it understands itself primarily and, within a certain radius (*Umkreis*), constantly” (SZ, §6 [20]).

When we fail to make ourselves a question to ourselves and simply absorb received ways of interpreting ourselves and our world we allow *das Man* to conceal what Heidegger calls our “primordial being-guilty” (*ursprüngliche Schuldigsein*). This guilt is constitutive of our way of being – it is our ontological condition. As a human being, I am always already thrown (*werfen; geworfen*) into possibilities that I did not choose. I have no pre-given essence but I must provide a ground (*Grund*) for myself by projecting (*entwerfen*) upon the possibilities into which I am thrown. While I must be a ground for myself, my “thrownness” means that I can “never have power over [my] ownmost being (*eigensten Sein*) from the ground (*Grund*) up.” I always lack mastery over my possibilities. The possibilities that I project upon unfold into further, unpredictable possibilities. Moreover, I have to tolerate leaving behind certain possibilities: to project upon one possibility is to say “no” to others. Thus I always “lag[] behind [my] possibilities.” I always *owe* a response to my possibilities. I am never unencumbered by possibilities except at my death. Further, I am *indebted* to my possibilities for my existence – I am always already thrown into certain
possibilities. In this constant falling short and indebtedness, I am primordially guilty (SZ, §58 [284-5]). My primordial guilt is also my freedom: while I am thrown into my possibilities it is given to me to respond to them. Indeed, my responsibility to respond to my possibilities can be understood as the responsibility constitutive of being human.

Let’s turn to exactly how das Man conceals my primordial guilt (and so my freedom, my constitutive responsibility). Das Man takes over and decides upon my possibilities:

With Dasein’s lostness (Verlorenheit) in das Man, that closest factual capacity-to-be (Seinkönnen) which is closest to it - the tasks, rules, and standards, the urgency and reach, of concerned and solicitous being-in-the-world (besorgend-fürsorgend In-der-Welt-seins) - has already been decided upon. Das Man has always already kept Dasein from taking hold of these possibilities of being (Seinsmöglichkeiten). Das Man even hides the carrying-out of the tacit relief of [Dasein] from the explicit choice (ausdrücklichen Wahl) of these possibilities. It remains indefinite (unbestimmt) who has ‘truly’ (eigentlich) chosen. This indiscriminate (wahllose) getting-carried-along by nobody, through which Dasein entangles itself in impropriety (Uneigentlichkeit), can only be reversed in such a way that Dasein solely (eigens) brings itself back to itself from its lostness in das Man. (SZ, §54 [268])

Das Man conceals the genuine possibilities before me and my responsibility to respond to these possibilities. Das Man decides on my possibilities for me through the inertia of habit and the ease of slipping into established roles and following established “rules and standards.” Heidegger directly connects das Man’s focus on impersonal rules to calculable responsibility: “The common sense of the “they” knows only the satisfying of manipulable rules and public norms and the failure to satisfy them. It reckons up infractions of them and tries to balance them off” (SZ, §58 [288]). Das Man’s preoccupation with rules that are susceptible to casuistic calculation reveals its commitment to a picture of responsibility as calculable. Das Man seeks to settle moral accounts and does not admit a falling-short that is
not amenable to bookkeeping. Thus das Man inhibits recognition of primordial guilt – a guilt that cannot be reckoned-up, negotiated, or discharged.

The Call of Conscience

I only embrace my primordial guilt if I turn away from the distractions of ordinary moral conscience in response to the non-moral “call of conscience” proper – the call to my constitutive responsibility. Ordinary moral conscience, I argue, is in the grip of calculable responsibility, while the call of conscience proper calls us to embrace the incalculable dimensions of responsibility and cannot itself be understood as calculable (i.e. predictable and amenable to our willful ordering).

When I hear ordinary moral conscience it speaks to me as instruction. It is an inner court that deliberates over and declares moral judgment, and its deliberations include and invite my own counter-arguments. Within ordinary moral conscience I concern myself with “reckoning up ‘guilt’ and ‘innocence’ [‘Unschuld’] and balancing them off” (SZ, §59 [292]). Ordinary moral conscience, which belongs to das Man, is how I ordinarily and dimly experience the call of conscience proper. The call of conscience must speak and be heard in a way different from the speaking and hearing of das Man, if it is to call Dasein away from the chatter of das Man (SZ, §60 [296]). The call of conscience proper calls “in the mode of keeping silent” and so distinguishes itself from the voice of das Man (SZ, §57 [278]; §56 [273]). Although the call is a mode of speech (Rede), it is not a “sounding” (Verlautbarung). Instead, the call of conscience is a “giving-to-understand” (das zu-verstehen-geben) (SZ, §55 [271]). When Dasein hears the call there is nothing to say or argue, not
because the call is forceful, but because “this hearing appropriates (sich zueignet) the sense of the call (Rufgehalt) uncoveredly (unverdeckt)” (SZ, §60 [296]). If I genuinely hear the call of conscience proper, then, evasive casuistry is not a possible response.

What does the call of conscience proper give me to understand? The call offers no ontical directives and offers no “currently useful instruction with respect to available and calculable sure possibilities of ‘action’”(SZ, §59 [294]). Any expectation that the call might offer such practical counsel arises from the everyday way of interpreting the world that is preoccupied with ‘what is to be done’ and “that compels Dasein’s existence under the idea of a regulable course of business (Geschäftsgang)” (SZ, §59 [294]). Instead, the call of conscience discloses my ontological condition. My ontological condition is that of primordial guilt; an inexhaustible responsibility to respond to my possibilities. If the call gave practical maxims for action then it would deny “the possibility of taking action” (SZ, §59 [294]) – it would not free me to respond to my possibilities. The call simply “calls (aufrufen) Dasein to existence, to its ownmost capacity-to-be-its-self (eigensten selbstseinkönnen).” (SZ, §59 [294]). The call of conscience proper, then, discloses a responsibility that cannot be identified in advance, reckoned-up and discharged.

Heidegger understands the call of conscience proper as somehow issuing from oneself: in the call, I call myself back to myself from my lostness in das Man. But importantly, Heidegger strives to disentangle the call of conscience from any implication of being willed or planned: “the call is indeed precisely not and never is by we ourselves planned nor prepared for, nor deliberately performed. ‘It’ calls (“Es” ruft) contrary to expectations and against one’s will.” The “Es” here makes “what calls” impersonal (similarly, when we say
“It is raining” there is no identifiable subject that is raining). Dasein who is called says, “The call comes from me and yet from beyond me and over me”\(^8\) (SZ, §57 [274-275]). Dasein as caller and Dasein as called are the same Dasein, but Dasein is “there” in different ways. Dasein, as one who is called, is Dasein insofar as Dasein is lost in das Man. Dasein, as caller, is Dasein insofar as Dasein is not at home in das Man.\(^9\) Dasein, as caller, is in a proper relation to being, or das Sein. That is, das Sein calls. The call invites Dasein to be bound to what Dasein is always already bound to (though in an improper way), namely das Sein. As caller, das Sein does not become familiar. The caller (Rufer) resists “becoming known” (Bekanntwerden) and has an “indeterminateness and indeterminability that is proper to it” (eigentümliche Unbestimmtheit und Unbestimmbarkeit). The caller’s aloofness makes known that the caller “is only (einzig) involved in the call to... (Aufrufen zu...), that it is heard only as such, and further that it will not let itself be wheedled (beschwatzen)” (SZ, §57 [274-275]). The call of conscience proper is so unfamiliar and so indeterminate that it forecloses any response of negotiation or sophistry.

The separation of the call of conscience from any kind of planning or mastery becomes more evident from the fact that the call is only ever heard from within a “fundamental attunement” (Grundstimmung). Heidegger makes clear in Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik (1929-1930)\(^10\) that attunements are ways of being (Sein): “the fundamental ways

---

\(^8\) “Der Ruf kommt aus mir und doch über mich.”

\(^9\) “The caller is in its who “worldly” determinable through nothing. It is Dasein in its unhomeliness (Unheimlichkeit), the primordial thrown being-in-the-world as “not-at-home,” the bare “that [it is]” in the nothing of the world. The caller is to the everyday one-self (Man-selbst) unfamiliar as something like an alien (fremde) voice. What could be more alien to das Man, lost in the concerned, manifold “world,” than the self thrown into the nothing, the self individualized (vereinzeln) itself in its unhomeliness (Unheimlichkeit)?” (SZ, §§57 [276-77]).

(Grundweisen) in which we find ourselves such and such.” An attunement is not “a consequence or side effect of our thinking, doing and acting, but – speaking crudely – it is the presupposition (die Voraussetzung) for them, the ‘medium’ in which they first happen” (GM, §17 [101]). An attunement is a standing in a disclosure of das Sein. We are never without an attunement (GM, §17 [103]). An attunement may belong more to certain ages than others. Das Sein may call in different ways at different times.

The call of conscience may be heard in the fundamental attunement of anxiety or Angst. The attunement of Angst in its very substance inhibits any felt mastery. In this attunement I find myself “not-at-home” (Un-zuhause) in the world of das Man. The everyday world comes to have the character of “Unheimlichkeit,” unhomeliness. Unheimlichkeit captures how, in Angst, the ordinary becomes estranging. I can no longer be unthinkingly absorbed in das Man. If I open myself to Angst, the call of conscience leads me to a moment of insight - a “glance of the eye” (Augenblick) - in which I confront my primordial guilt. In the Augenblick, I see the utter groundlessness of my existence: I see that my own being is a question for myself. I see that I must always provide a ground for

references to Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik, the first number refers to the relevant paragraph(s) of Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik, and the second number refers to the page numbers of the Gesamtausgabe volume.

11 Heidegger’s account of an attunement seeks overcome the metaphysical distinction between feeling and thought. For Heidegger the intellect is sensible.

12 In Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik Heidegger suggests that profound “boredom” (Langweile) is the attunement that prevails in modernity. Heidegger does not explicitly speak of “technique” but the modernity he sketches has the mark of technique. See Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik, §18 and §38. Similarly, in Beiträge zur Philosophie of the mid-thirties Heidegger indicates that boredom is the attunement that is most characteristic of scientific modernity. See Beiträge zur Philosophie, in Gesamtausgabe, vol. 65, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1989), §76, [157]. Espen Hammer identifies the connection between boredom and technique made by the Beiträge in “Being Bored: Heidegger on Patience and Melancholy,” British Journal for the History of Philosophy, 12 (2004): 277-295.
myself. In the attunement of anxiety nothing feels familiar and therefore nothing is predictable anymore. The world itself loses the appearance of calculability that das Man assumes.

Even as I am absorbed in the world I am never at home in it – the possibilities before me are never properly my own. I am thrown into them and it is up to me to make them properly my own: to thoughtfully respond to them and make a home. But ordinarily I follow the lead of das Man even though I may make “tactical” alterations to das Man’s scripts. By deferring to das Man I flee Angst. When I somehow become receptive to Angst, my stance is characterized by “Entschlossenheit.” In ordinary German Entschlossenheit says “resoluteness.” However, Heidegger gives Entschlossenheit the literal sense of “unclosedness” (Ent-schlossenheit). Heidegger seeks to emphasize that Dasein does not open itself to Angst through some kind of determined action, but rather by “letting itself be called (Sich-aufrufen-lassen) out of its lostness in das Man” (SZ, §60 [299]). So although “resoluteness” can sound akin to the willful stance I take vis-à-vis a new year’s resolution – to make myself predictable with respect to a specific course of action – Heidegger gives it an almost opposite valence. Resoluteness instead involves letting myself remain to open to anxiety – an attunement that actually undermines the picture of life as “a regulable course of business.”

By alerting me to my responsibility to respond to my possibilities, the call of conscience brings the particular situation, which I find myself within, properly before me. I now see

---

13 In this discussion of the call of conscience and Angst, I have focused on the issues of guilt and calculability and have bracketed discussion of the role of being-towards-death in openness to Angst; nor have I addressed Heidegger’s related treatment of temporality as what bestows an encompassing unity upon the human way of being.
the unique “Situation,” rather than the “general situation” (allegemeine Lage) known by das Man. Through the call of conscience I see the genuine possibilities before me, the possibilities ordinarily concealed by das Man. Thus when I turn away from das Man’s way of being, I do not become at home in the world by mastery of the world. Rather, I recover the world in all its complexity, depth, and unsettledness (SZ, §60 [298-300]). I see what is given; that what is given demands a response; that the world keeps giving even as I respond to what is given; and that I am never done responding to what is given.

If the call of conscience brings me before my own situation then it cannot be interpreted as a universal claim - in the way moral conscience, which is the voice of das Man, presents itself as “universally' binding” or as a “world –conscience” (SZ, §57 [278]). Rather, the call speaks differently to each human being, even though it is an element of a formal fundamental ontology shared by all human beings. The call does not disclose “an ideal, universal capacity-to-be” (ideales, allgemeines Seinkönnen). The call discloses a capacity-to-be that belongs to a single Dasein (SZ, §58 [280]). The call of conscience proper discloses my own responsibility to respond to my own possibilities - a responsibility that in its specifics is different for each Dasein. Similarly, although what the call discloses is “unambiguous” (eindeutig) - it discloses primordial guilt - each Dasein interprets it according to Dasein’s own “possibilities of understanding” (SZ, §56 [274]).

Our freedom to respond to the possibilities into which we are thrown is ultimately what makes us answerable for what we do and allows human beings to be morally good or evil. So while Heidegger does not seek the ground of morality, he does show that our primordial guilt is a condition of the possibility of morality: “The primordial being-guilty
(Schuldigsein) cannot be determined by morality (die Moralität), since morality already presupposes (voraussetzen) it [Schuldigsein] for itself.” Moreover, this primordial guilt - which includes Dasein’s indebtedness to das Sein’s disclosure of beings - is also the precondition for the different historical manifestations of morality (SZ, §58 [286]).

Thus Heidegger does not rest Dasein’s answerability upon any ability of Dasein to wholly determine itself and “have power over its ownmost being (eigensten Sein) from the ground up.” Dasein’s thrownness is precisely what gives rise to its answerability. Here we see a crucial difference between Heidegger’s and Kant’s accounts of responsibility and freedom. Kant rests human responsibility upon the human will and freedom; that is, on a human being’s capacity to be the cause of himself or herself. In this way, Kant disregards human thrownness (though as we shall Kant does acknowledge a kind of inexhaustible responsibility to respond to the world).

The final way in which Heidegger distances the call of conscience proper from the calculable responsibility frame is his effort to describe it without the subject-object distinction. Although Dasein does not “explicitly” perform the call, it does not follow that the caller is something with a character other than Dasein. Heidegger says that characterizations of the “call of conscience” as an “alien power by which Dasein is dominated” give the call an ontological character that is inappropriate to the human way of being: “being-in-the-world.” The call is made something whose way of being is “presence-at-a-hand” (Vorhandenheit); that is, an object of which human beings can attain detached

---

\(^{14}\) Some readings of Heidegger’s account of the “call of conscience” cast this account primarily as an account of the ground of ethics. For example, see Rebecca Kukla "The Ontology and Temporality of Conscience", Continental Philosophy Review 35 (2002): 1-34. I think Heidegger does provide a ground for ethics, but this is not his main concern.
knowledge. In their everyday encounters human beings rarely experience beings (das Seiende) as present-at-hand; instead human beings almost always encounter beings embedded seamlessly within a world (SZ, §57 [276]). These inappropriate characterizations of the call, Heidegger says, do not stay with the phenomenon of the call “long enough” and arise from “too low an estimate of Dasein’s being...” (SZ, §57 [278]).

The Call of Calculation

Heidegger’s most important engagement with the sway of calculative thinking and the possibility of its overcoming occurs in his later essay “The Question Concerning Technique” and its companion essay “The Turn.” In Being and Time, Heidegger focuses on the ways human beings are turned away from das Sein - the ways they are thoughtless about das Sein. This is evident in Heidegger’s treatment of the “call of conscience.” Our primordial guilt is comprised of our indebtedness to das Sein and our responsibility to respond to das Sein. Heidegger presents the call of conscience as one way that das Sein may reveal itself to us if we become properly open to das Sein. From 1930 onwards Heidegger attends to the distinctive ways das Sein conceals itself (and conceals its own concealment). In other words, Heidegger’s later work attends to das Sein’s turn away from human beings. Heidegger’s account of technique is part of this later stage. The shift in Heidegger’s thought is a deepening of, rather than a departure from, his earlier work.15 With this shift, Heidegger sharpens his account of the turn or conversion in which a human being responds to das Sein’s call. Any turn involves two turns. A human being must turn and das

---

15 This is Heidegger’s own interpretation of the shift in his thought. See Heidegger’s preface to William J. Richardson, Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967) (2nd Ed), xxii-xxiii.
Sein must turn. Indeed, only if das Sein turns, can a human being turn. The shift in Heidegger’s thought is often called Heidegger’s “turn” (die Kehre). The conversion that is the focus of this chapter is different from the turn in Heidegger’s own thought. But the latter enriches our understanding of the former.

Heidegger names the dominant, insistent, and impoverished way that all beings appear in modernity “technique.”16 Technique is the prevailing way that das Sein discloses beings in modernity. Under the sway of technique objects lose their character as objects (Gegenstände) – what stands against us with continuity of presence. Objects become “Bestand”: fungible, disposable, changeable energy that stands in reserve for whatever purposes we human beings decide upon (T, 15). When there are no longer any objects but everything is Bestand, we have the illusion of mastery; everything is transparent to us and appears as our own doing (T, 26-27). Technique is the will to order (bestellen) “for the sake of ordering.”17 It seeks the overarching orderablit (Bestellbarkeit) of human existence (T, 22).

Technique does not refer to the proliferation of means to ends that human beings have at their disposal in modernity: “the essence of technique is nothing technical” (T, 5). Technique is not technology. Instead, technique is an almost inescapable manner of thinking. Heidegger names the “summoning claim” (herausfordernde Anspruch) that

---

16 See “Die Frage nach der Technik” (“The Question concerning Technique”) in Die Technik und die Kehre. Although the standard translation of Heidegger’s essay says “technology” instead of “technique,” “technique” better captures what is at stake here. First, while technologos literally says the “truth regarding techne,” technique is what hides itself as a way of unconcealing. Second, technique captures the sense of “manner” – technique is the manner in which truth appears for us – and is further away from a misunderstanding of technique as “mere means.”

summons man to order beings as Bestand, “Gestell.” In ordinary German “Gestell” has the sense of “equipment”; Gestell could be a stand, a rack, a framework, a chassis. Heidegger’s modified use of “Gestell” points to technique’s misleading self-presentation, while distinguishing technique from mere technology. The coupling of “ge” with “stell” also signifies the completeness of a setting in place, Stellen. For Heidegger, Gestell names the essence of technique as what summons us to order beings: “Gestell is the gathering of this putting (Stellen) that puts (stellt), i.e. summons (herausfordern) man to unconceal the actual in the way of ordering (Bestellen) as Bestand” (T, 20). Gestell is a claim (Anspruch) that das Sein lays upon us. As a way that das Sein draws us to unconceal, Gestell is a “destiny” (das Geschick) for us (T, 24).

Technique is different from other ways of disclosure in that its very logic denies that beings might be disclosed in any other way. Whenever das Sein unconceals beings (das Seiende), das Sein always conceals itself. Indeed, in order for beings to appear at all, das Sein must withdraw. With technique this withdrawal is even more complete. As technique, das Sein denies its essence as disclosure (K, 40). Technique hides that it is only one way of unconcealing beings. Technique denies that it has any metaphysical presuppositions, presents its way of ordering as self-evident, and so threatens that it will be the only way that beings are unconcealed (T, 23, 27, 34).

Heidegger appears to describe the phenomenon of technique specifically in the language of calculation in the “Postscript to What is Metaphysics?” which was first published in 1943.

---

18 Heidegger says this in many different ways; for one instance see “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes” in Holzwege (Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klosterman, 1950), 42-43.
All calculation (Rechnen) lets what is countable (Zählbar) be resolved into something counted that can then be used for subsequent counting. Calculation refuses to let anything appear except what is countable. Everything is only whatever it counts. What has been counted in each instance secures the continuation of counting. Such counting progressively consumes numbers, and is itself a continual self-consumption. The calculative process of resolving beings into what has been counted counts as the explanation of their being. Calculation uses all beings in advance as that which is countable, and uses up what is counted for the purposes of counting. This use of beings that consumes them betrays the consuming character of calculation. Only because number can be infinitely multiplied, irrespective of whether this occurs in the direction of the large or the small, can the consuming essence of calculation hide behind its products and lend to calculative thinking the semblance of productivity – whereas already in its anticipatory grasping, and not primarily in its subsequent results, such thinking lets all beings count only in the form of what can be set at out disposal and consumed. Calculative thinking compels itself into a compulsion to master everything on the basis of the consequential correctness of its procedure. It is unable to foresee that everything calculable by calculation – prior to the sum-totals and products that it produces by calculation in each case is already a whole, a whole whose unity indeed belongs to the incalculable (Unberechenbaren) that withdraws itself and its uncanniness (Unheimlichkeit) from the claws of calculation.”¹⁹ (my emphasis)

Calculation only sees what is countable. Everything appears in a form that can be counted.

Since calculation is concerned with counting it cannot brook the differences that would prevent equivalences. Counting requires commensurability. Calculation’s counting is in the service of the mastery of all that is. Beings only count (and are counted) insofar as they can be ordered and factored into human planning. Calculation does not allow for the “incalculable” – namely being (das Sein), which allows beings to appear masterable in the first place.

When Heidegger describes the predominance of calculative thinking in modernity he presents calculative thinking as an impoverishment of reason – where “reckoning” comes

to dominate what we understand as reason. He points out that the Greek “logos” has a much richer understanding of reason: *logos* has the senses of reason, language, thought, and calculation. The translation of *logos* into the Latin *ratio* signals a drift from the richness of *logos*. For Heidegger the great turning point in the sway of calculability occurs in the age of Descartes. Descartes’s interpretation of nature as *res extensa* (as extension in length, breadth and depth) is a significant enhancement of the scope of the calculable. With Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am” all being comes to be grounded in human subjectivity.20 “What is” is so far as it can be measured by us. We experience the world as subjects relating to objects (rather than as beings who are both constituted by and also disclose the world they are always already in). Technique constitutes a further development in the apparent calculability of the world as now objects lose their character as objects and simply appear as disposable energy.

It is somewhat usual in explications of technique to use examples of the human domination of nature, as Heidegger himself does in the essay on technique, to show how all beings are now disclosed as disposable energy. To show the sway of technique I would like to raise an example that is more relevant to particular arc of this study. Heidegger’s critique of Nietzsche’s reliance on the language of values reveals the sway of technique in Nietzsche’s thought and – I would add – the mark of calculable responsibility in Nietzsche’s attempt to think beyond morality.

Heidegger finds that Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism is a completion of nihilism rather than an overcoming of nihilism. In one of the aphorisms collected within the collection

---

20 For a detailed synthesis of Heidegger’s discussions of Descartes’s place in the expansion of calculative thinking see Elden, *Speaking Against Number*, 130-144.
titled *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes: “The point-of-view of ‘value’ is the point-of-view constituting the *preservation-enhancement conditions* with respect to complex forms of relative duration of life within becoming” (emphasis is Heidegger’s).\(^21\) For Nietzsche values are “the preservation-enhancement conditions” for a being posited by its will to power. And a value - Heidegger emphasizes - is only valuable insofar “as it is posited as that which matters.” Nietzsche does not attend to being (*das Sein*) as what discloses beings. Instead, beings are disclosed through the will to power and its valuations. For Heidegger, then, Nietzsche’s vision of an ultimate revaluation of values remains within the framework of traditional metaphysics. Nietzsche preserves a subject (a bearer of the value-positing will) - a being - that is the ground of objects, just as traditional metaphysics had the idea of the good, the creator God, or the Cartesian subject. With the will to power the value-positing will is the ground of all that is.\(^22\) Everything appears as an effect of the value-positing will and in the light of what it has posited as mattering. Further, Heidegger writes, the value-positing will is necessarily a calculating will: “Value means that which is in view for a seeing that aims at something or that, as we say, reckons upon something and therewith must reckon with something else. Value stands in intimate relation to a so-much, to quantity and number. Hence values are related to a “numerical and mensural scale.””\(^23\) As Philippe Nonet notes, values are “instruments of calculable worth.” They do not allow anything to have incalculable worth: “nothing is inviolable, and hence nothing truly binding, everything


usable and disposable at will.”

Heidegger’s statement “against values” in his “Letter on Humanism” is especially germane here:

To think against “values” (Die Werte) is not to maintain that everything interpreted as “a value” – “culture,” “art,” “science,” “human dignity,” “world,” and “God” – is valueless. Rather, it is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as “a value” (Wert) what is so valued is robbed of its worth (Würde). That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for human estimation. But what a thing is in its being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid – solely as the objects of its own doing. The bizarre effort to prove the objectivity of values does not know what it is doing. When one proclaims “God” the altogether “highest value,” this is a degradation of God’s essence. Here as elsewhere thinking in values is the greatest blasphemy imaginable against being. To think against values therefore does not mean to beat the drum for the valuelessness and nullity of beings. It means rather to bring the clearing of the truth of being before thinking, as against subjectivizing beings into mere objects.

Values do not allow us to encounter beings as anything other than products of our ordering and as such do not allow any genuine attribution of worth. By remaining within the language of values, then, Nietzsche’s thought is not sufficiently affirmative of this world. It does not let this world appear as anything other than a product of, or a site for, the human will - as an object to our willing subject - and so has no worth other than for our constant ordering and re-ordering. Such a framework cannot offer a genuine “yes” to life.

---

26 Heidegger also identifies technique at the heart of Nietzsche’s conception of the will to power as command. Willing is not mere striving it also involves commanding oneself: “Will is gathering oneself for the given task.” So when I will, I do not only strive after what I do not have, I also will my power to will. I only remain master so long as I am able to continually enhance my power (to have power is to constantly surpass the level of power I already have) (77-78). I must constantly will the conditions of my willing: “That
Yet, as Heidegger emphasizes, Nietzsche’s reliance on the language of values is not a “fault” of Nietzsche. Technique, it bears repeating, is not a means in human hands. Nihilism is not of our willing and cannot be overcome by our willing. As Nonet puts it: “The essence of nihilism is not that man neglects being, but that being abandons beings, so that man ceases to wonder at the wonder of being.”27 Being calls us to disclose all that is as calculable energy. We do not employ the language of values simply because we decide to so. The claim of language is the claim of being: “Language is the house of das Sein. In its house man dwells.”28 Through language being draws us on ways of disclosure. The original “claim” (Anspruch) of das Sein upon human beings is through language, and through language human beings may first correspond (entspricht) to that claim (K, 40). Thus das Sein’s claim upon us has the character of a saying, and we may name it a “call” (Ruf).

Heidegger’s writings on technique, then, also identify a call to calculation. Although both calls issue from our ‘relation’ to das Sein, the call to calculation obscures the call of conscience proper. Instead, we hear ordinary moral conscience, which presents our responsibility in a calculative frame.

---

**Das Gesetz and the Turn from Technique**

When Heidegger discusses the possibility of turning away from the sway of technique he offers a further elaboration of our constitutive responsibility, which in *Being and Time* he presents as the ongoing responsibility to respond to our possibilities. In his later essays Heidegger links the possibility of turning away from the sway of technique to an acknowledgement of our guardianship of being (das Sein). As guardians of being we are to care for das Sein as disclosure – as what allows beings to appear – so that technique does not become the only way that beings might appear.

To make clear exactly why human beings have the guardianship (though certainly no mastery) of being it is necessary to spend time with the ‘relation’ between human beings and das Sein. I hesitate to use the word “relation” since Heidegger is clear that human beings are never outside das Sein, say as subjects relating to objects. For the subject-object relation to appear at all there has to be a prior disclosure by das Sein. Das Sein’s disclosure always involves human beings: das Sein always draws human beings on ways of unconcealing. Dasein always has an understanding of what it is for Dasein to be: “It belongs to its [Dasein’s] ownmost being (eigensten Sein) to have an understanding (Verständnis) [of that being (Sein)] and to already hold itself in each case in a certain interpretedness (Ausgelegtheit) of its being (Sein)” (SZ §5 [15]). But Dasein’s understanding of its being also involves “an understanding of the being of all beings” which are other than Dasein (SZ §4 [13]).

So Dasein itself is a site in which beings appear. Dasein “is itself the clearing” (SZ

---

§28 [133]).

Heidegger names the mutual belonging of human beings and *das Sein*, “*das Ereignis*.” He connects the noun *Ereignis*, which is ordinarily used in the sense of “event,” to the verb *eignen* - to belong to, to be fit for. *Das Ereignis* is the happening in which *das Sein* draws human beings into a way of disclosure; it is the happening of truth as unconcealedness – the happening of the clearing. Now Heidegger says “*Das Ereignis* is the law (*das Gesetz*), insofar as it gathers mortals in their belonging to (*das Ereignen*) their essence, and holds them therein.” From this law arises an account of justice or our highest responsibility that eclipses (even as it grounds) ordinary morality.

Since I myself am the clearing, in everything I do – not simply in what falls in the realm of the moral – I have the possibility of giving being (*das Seiende*) what is owed to it. I must seek the truth of being (*das Seiende*) and, in this way, give being (*das Seiende*) what is owed to it. Here lies justice proper. Justice proper does not simply pertain to relations between human beings; it pertains to being-as-a-whole (*das Seiende im Ganzen*). But in order to let every being be what it is, I must always guard the openness of the clearing – the world - in which beings appear. In order to do justice to being (*das Seiende*) I must not let technique’s way of unconcealing exhaust what a being (*ein Seiendes*) is. I must guard the openness of *das Sein* as disclosure. Heidegger calls my obligation to *das Sein* “the keeping-in-trust” of *das Sein* as disclosure. This is my highest obligation and it arises from my share in the disclosure of

---

30 “The clearing” (die Lichtung) is the opening of an open space of unconcealment in which beings become intelligible and appear in certain ways rather than others.

31 *Das Ereignis* is the “relation of all relations” (*das Verhältnis aller Verhältnisse*). Heidegger, “*Der Weg zur Sprache*,” in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen, Neske, 1959), 267. Strictly speaking *das Ereignis* is not a relation. Human beings do not relate to *das Sein* as though they are somehow apart from *das Sein*.

32 Once again, our language may be misleading. Strictly speaking, *das Ereignis* is not a happening. Only on the ground of Ereignis can anything happen. *Das Ereignis* is the origin of time.

33 Strictly speaking *Das Ereignis* is not a happening. Only on the ground of Ereignis can anything happen. *Das Ereignis* is the origin of time.

being (T, 32-33; K, 39). The vastness of this responsibility is breathtaking – in all that I do I must be aware of myself as a site for the disclosure of beings. I myself am a light in which beings appear. I am always partaking in world-disclosure and there is no part of my action, thought, word, deed that is without this responsibility. It cannot be specified in advance and it is inexhaustible.

This incalculable constitutive responsibility also coincides with a confrontation with the sway of calculation more generally. We guard das Sein as disclosure by recognizing the pervasiveness of the sway of calculation. Although we cannot will ourselves out of technique, Heidegger says that it is open to us to attend to the sway of technique – we can constantly hold technique (and technique’s threat to world) before us and keep recognizing it (T, 25, 33). When we correspond to the claim (Anspruch) of das Sein, we are always “looking in the outermost peril”: that Gestell may become the only way that beings are unconcealed (T, 33). When we properly recognize Gestell as a “destiny of unconcealment,” we find ourselves under a “claim that frees.” As a “destiny of unconcealment,” Gestell is not an unalterable, compulsory “fate” (Schicksal). Gestell now appears as one way (though, the now prevailing way) that we may be summoned to unconceal (T, 25). We do not leave technique behind or destroy technique, but let technique be present as technique.

Heidegger says that technique is not “overcome” (überwunden) by human beings. Nor does technique, as das Sein, become transparent. Instead technique is “gotten-over (verwunden) in its still concealed truth.” And, “[t]his getting-over (Verwinden) is similar to what happens in the human domain when a pain (ein Schmerz) is gotten-over” (K, 38–39). The sense of “getting-over” cannot be the forgetting of a loss. To forget technique would
amount to entrapment in technique. Another way we might get over a loss is to allow what has been lost to come into a kind of presence. We may hold a lost loved one constantly before ourselves. The loved one remains a part of our lives and continues to enrich our lives. Similarly, we get-over technique by always keeping sight of it. We never allow it to fall into oblivion. We do not get rid of it, but we are no longer captive of it. In recognizing technique as technique, we see that technique is only one way that beings might be disclosed and we thereby keep open the possibility of other ways that beings might be disclosed. As Heidegger puts it, we must stay on the “look-out” for the “growth of what saves” (T, 33). By staying on the look-out for other ways of unconcealing we rise to our responsibility to guard the openness of das Sein as disclosure.

So for Heidegger a turn away from technique is not a destruction of technique or a getting rid of technique. Rather, it is a recognition of technique as a claim before us. Heidegger even says that it may only be when the peril of technique is greatest - when it seems that beings can only appear as Bestand - that we can finally recognize technique as one way beings may be disclosed. Das Sein’s turn against the truth of its essence may finally reveal technique as the loss of other ways of unconcealing. It may be that “the forgottenness (Vergessenheit) of the essence of das Sein so turns itself (sich wendet), that with this latter turn (Kehre) the truth of the essence of das Sein properly turns-in amidst beings” (K, 40). In its withdrawal, das Sein announces itself. When, finally, all beings seem reducible to Bestand, we may recognize the sway of technique. In this recognition we

---

35 Art is one possible site for what saves. Art is a way that other kinds of unconcealing may be brought to light (T, 34-35).
encounter the essence of das Sein as disclosure. So the peril of technique harbors the grace of the turn – the peril is “what saves” (K, 41).

Ethos Anthropo Daimon

In his “Letter on Humanism” Heidegger responds to an inquiry about whether he will provide an “ethics.” His response is wide-ranging and speaks quite directly to the themes of this chapter and indeed this study as a whole. We have already drawn on his comments on “values” and the claim of language from the “Letter.” Heidegger does not endorse a politics or an ethics – though he says it is understandable that people should ask for prescriptions.36 Instead, of providing a politics or ethics, he puts forward an understanding of “ethos.” Heidegger reinterprets Heraclitus’s saying, “ἦθος ἄνθωπῳ δαίµων.”37 This fragment is often interpreted as: “A man’s character is his fate.” The usual interpretation emphasizes moral character. But Heidegger understands the fragment as “The human being dwells, insofar as he is a human being, in the nearness of god”; the proper dwelling of human beings is with the gods. Here Heidegger draws on the sense of ethos as “abode” and or “accustomed place.”38 Ethos also has the senses of “custom, usage”; “disposition, character” (such as moral character arising from “habit”); “outward bearing” and “delineation of character,” but Heidegger avoids these more “moral” senses.39 With his interpretation Heidegger points to human beings’ constitutive guardianship of being (das Sein): if we are to rise to our humanity then we must live in nearness to the extraordinary

38 Ibid. 269-272.
that makes possible the ordinary and always give thought to being (das Sein) as what discloses beings. Heidegger’s ethos is about attending to how beings appear and to what is concealed in every unconcealment. Given the sway of technique – of calculation – ethos demands ever-vigilant attention to the sway of calculation. This ethos asks us to always attend to the manner in which all that we encounter is disclosed to us and to always bear in mind the possibility of other ways of disclosure; of seeing in a different light. And while this way of dwelling in the world may not appear obviously “practical” Heidegger regards such thinking to be the highest form of action and to precede both theoretical contemplation and action. Only by attending to being (das Sein) might we see what is fit for contemplation and the particular situation that is the context for action.

I want to compare Heidegger’s approach to ethos to that of contemporary “ethos theorists.” These theorists look to ethos for an approach to politics that is non-technical and that captures the dispositions – the “micro-politics” – that play a vital role in politics, even though politics is often defined by its larger structural and institutional dynamics. I too draw on ethos in a similar fashion. However, the danger that plagues such a line of theorizing is that the inclusion of ethos in political theory simply offers another site for calculation. Ethos itself may become a new, fresh site for our willing and ordering. I am not saying that contemporary ethos theorists always commit this error, but I do think there are signs that they do not pay attention to this peril and leave extensions of their theories vulnerable to this peril.

---

I doubt ethos theorists would disagree about the perniciousness of calculable responsibility in politics. Their writings speak against the “sovereign subject,” politics as “applied-ethics,” and moralism in politics and ethics, and thereby often traverse the terrain of a critique of calculable responsibility. They question the sovereign subject as one who seeks universalizable moral rules; they emphasize the unpredictable, contingent character of human life – a character that cannot be specified or regulated in advance; and speak of the inexhaustible unfolding of human identities that resist fixed categories. However, they tend not to isolate or foreground the phenomenon of calculable responsibility. Of course, no scholarly engagement can be exhaustive. Still, I think there is a significant loss accompanying the neglect of calculable responsibility. Ethos theorists do not adequately explore the difficulty and the perils accompanying any attempt to move beyond moralism and its political manifestations. In contemporary theory we have many thoughtful descriptions of a political bearing that has in some way left behind the will to sovereign mastery of the world. But there is much vagueness with regard to exactly how and in what manner calculable responsibility might be left behind. So, even though the critique of the sovereign subject almost seems like old news, I think we are not done critiquing the sovereign subject. We have not yet properly explored its calculable responsibility frame.

I want to explore the neglect of the sway of calculability in “ethos” theory and the dangers arising from this neglect by engaging Stephen White’s *The Ethos of a Late Modern Citizen*. White’s clear and synthetic approach, including his identification of a coherent group of “ethos theorists,” allows a fruitful comparison with Heidegger and a helpful

---

41 White identifies a group of theorists whose “efforts might usefully be comprehended as different ways of portraying the idea of an ethos of “presumptive generosity” toward the other. Examples would include
entry into the larger question of political ethos. Many of the features of White’s ethos have a Heideggerian flavor and vocabulary but ultimately diverge from Heidegger in ways that suggest more attention is due to the problem of calculation and its entanglement with a moralized politics.

White’s *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* is directed “toward justifying the exemplary character of a particular ethos for citizens of the wealthy Western democracies” and also “toward introducing the notion of ethos and providing some sense of why its usage in contemporary political discourse has been growing” (104). White sees his articulation of a particular ethos as his “more important” task but his more general statements about ethos are especially helpful to the present study. He notes that “[t]he usage of ethos has been growing over perhaps the last twenty-five years or so, at least since Michel Foucault’s highly visible adoption of it in the early 1980s” (2, footnotes omitted). Foucault’s account of ethos, White notes, seems “to parallel Heidegger’s in regard to its critical stance toward mainstream, modern understandings of both ethics and practical reason” (114, n10). Foucault uses ethos to indicate “skepticism of both universalizing neo-Kantian reason and the idea that a substantive political position can be derived merely from the application of that reason to a given historical situation” (2). Herein lies part of the appeal of ethos to theorists like White. Ethos also (relatedly) appeals because it allows an acknowledgement of the passionate dimensions of politics: “the notion of ethos helps to persistently draw our

“critical responsiveness” (Connolly); “fundamentally more capacious, generous and ‘unthreatened’ bearings of the self” (Butler, in work after *Gender Trouble*); “hospitality” (Derrida); “receptive generosity” (Romand Coles); and “opening ourselves to the surprises” of engagement with the other (Patchen Markell)” (31, footnotes omitted).
attention toward the aesthetic-affective dimension that is always involved in the dynamic
process of fashioning our identity” (7).

For White an ethos – generally defined - is “a distinctive spirit” which is:

animated by a given set of ontological “figures.” A constellation of such figures sustains an ethos in the sense of prefiguring its cognitive perspective, moral bearing, and aesthetic-affective sensibility. And that ethos, in turn, provides us with an orientation, or disposition, toward everyday life and the ethical and political problems we encounter there. (4)

“Ontological figures” are:

figures of self, other, and the beyond human, as well as some basic conceptualizations of how those figures interrelate in terms of language, finitude, natality, and the articulation of our deepest “sources of the self.” One’s ontology in this sense is that to which one is most fundamentally committed. (3-4, footnote omitted)

In White’s preferred ethos one is committed to these ontological figures but not with “absoluteness of conviction.” Instead, the “exemplary late-modern individual carries her most fundamental commitments in a “weak ontological fashion” (3). Even in White’s more general definition of ethos one’s ontological commitments only “prefigure” one’s “cognitive perspective, moral bearing, and aesthetic-affective sensibility.” Thus even as an ethos is backed by fundamental commitments these commitments are never immediately determinative for one’s thoughts and actions. It is in this lack of substantive determination that “ethos” resists the model of ethical and political action where one simply applies one’s most fundamental commitments to determine one’s thought and action. An ethos inflects, infuses, and attunes but it does not determine. An ethos merely provides an “orientation” or “disposition” towards ethics and politics. In this way, ethos (hopefully) allows for a non-technical politics.
White’s articulation of a “late-modern ethos” is in many ways a response to the critique of the modern sovereign subject:

Let me start with a very rough characterization of the modern moral-political subject as it stands at the bar of late-modern judgment: He is conceived as disengaged from his social background and oriented toward a mastery of the world that confronts him; nevertheless, he can discover, by the light of reason, universally applicable principles of justice, grounded in some foundationalist account of God, nature, progress, or human communication that can become the basis of a constructive political consensus with other individuals. This complex of characteristics (or, more typically, some subset) has been the target of a variety of twentieth-century thinkers from Heidegger to feminism, from Carl Schmitt to Foucault and postmodernism, from Horkheimer and Adorno to Charles Taylor. (33-34)

White refers to “the unsettling asymmetry between the systematically developed character of many of the critiques of modern subjectivity, on the one hand, and the subsequent, rather vague quality of affirmative thinking in the aftermath, on the other” (35). His engagement with ethos is an attempt to make this affirmative thinking more specific. He employs “ethos to refer specifically to affirmative ways in which we can engage more reflectively the distinctive challenges of late modern life” (2). But the quote above is representative of how, although White emphasizes the modern subject’s commitment to universal rules, he does not extend his analysis of the sovereign subject’s rule-boundedness into an analysis of the grip of calculation. While White does note that the ontological figure of sovereign mastery will be an “insistent one” coexisting with the figures of our finitude (which he proposes), and that it will be difficult to cultivate and sustain his preferred ethos, he never explores the extent of the difficulty with any specificity. In contrast, Heidegger’s larger critique of the sway of calculability nudges us to ask how our approach to ethos itself – our seeming savior from a technical approach to ethics and
politics – might itself be tainted by the will to calculability, as a key aspect of the will to sovereign mastery.

In his discussion of ethos White suggests that ethos can be deliberately cultivated. Indeed, in an article that expands some of the insights of his book, White tries to connect conversion experiences – what he calls “depth experiences” - to political ethos. He strives to articulate a “non-theistic” framework for interpreting depth experience, and argues that depth experience, if interpreted through his non-theistic framework, could help reinforce or form a salutary, albeit minimalist, affective orientation to politics – an ethos that befits a late-modern citizen in an affluent democracy. He hopes that appropriately cultivated depth experience could (among other things) temper the modern will to sovereign mastery, nudge us to be open to otherness and inclusion, and encourage a generosity that can stretch beyond nation-state borders. He provides an account of how “depth experience” might be cultivated in ways that enhance political life, without introducing dogmatism or mystification into politics or reinforcing oppressive power structures. He even raises the possibility of “planting” relevant ontological figures in our cultural landscape so that they can be found by others and thereby precipitate appropriately life changing (i.e. awareness - of-finitude enhancing) “depth experiences.”

I don’t want to go so far as to say that any attempt to cultivate an ethos manifests technique. But surely, if we are concerned with the will to mastery, we should properly explore whether and to what extent a non-willful ethos can be deliberately cultivated. We should consider at what point deliberate cultivation becomes or expresses technique. A

---

43 Ibid. 806-807.
technical approach to politics is no less technical because it works on dispositions rather than institutions. It is possible that our hopes for ethos might shift the applied ethics approach to politics from macro-politics to micro-politics. Might ethos simply be a new site for our will to mastery? Jane Bennett acknowledges the danger that a focus on ethos, with its link to the affective dimension of ethics, “draws perilously close to the project of sensuous manipulation and to media, state, cultural, or corporate forms of disciplinary power.” But her response to this concern suggests that she is not deeply concerned about the re-instantiation of technique: “as long as affect remains an indispensable part of human life, it makes more sense to discipline it into a magnanimous sensibility than to try and ban it from ethical life.”

In contrast, Heidegger’s wariness of technique marks his treatment, in *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, of how we might come to be properly attuned to our constitutive responsibility – we do so by “letting [an attunement] be awake, guarding (behüten) it from falling asleep.” This task of “letting an attunement be awake,” he says, is not as easy as it seems. It is, after all, easier to wake somebody up – by a “shock” - than to stop somebody from falling asleep (GM, §19 [118]). Indeed the delicate task of “letting-an-attunement-be-awake” requires that we somehow become a “mystery” (Geheimnis) to ourselves (GM §39, [255]). Such a task is inherently resistant to the will. Since a core claim of this study is that a departure from a calculative view of the world is an essential component of an non-moralized ethos appropriate to politics, the option of overlooking the question of whether

---

an ethos appropriate to politics is susceptible to deliberate cultivation is simply not available.\footnote{White and Connolly draw directly from Foucault. And Foucault imagines practices of self-cultivation - “arts of existence” - as a site for an ethical practice appropriate to modernity. See Michel Foucault, The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume 2, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Michel Foucault, The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality, Volume 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); Michel Foucault Fearless Speech, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, Ca.: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2001). Alexander Nehamas’s work on philosophy as a literary art of living also emphasizes practices of self-transformation as an ethical practice in The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). These writers, like Connolly and White, also do not sufficiently attend to the question of how far such transformation - a new ethos - can be willed or deliberately cultivated - or the extent to which self-cultivation’s success is contingent on non-willed factors. The question that I want to ask is the extent to which the attainment of ethos itself is viewed as a matter of technique.}

The absence of a sustained engagement with the sway of calculability becomes a problem in White’s argument in favor of an “ethos of presumptive generosity,” which draws upon and augments the work of William Connolly. In articulating this ethos as one that “does justice to being” White seems to draw upon Heidegger. White nods to Heidegger’s own phrasing in the “Letter on Humanism,” when he quotes Connolly’s suggestion that we should think of ourselves “as shepherds of being, more than masters of the rest of nature” (93).\footnote{White cites Connolly “White Noise,” Hedgehog Review, 7:2 (Summer 2005): 33. See Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 252.} And some aspects of White’s descriptions of modern subjectivity are reminiscent of Heidegger’s account of technique: “Agency constituted solely in terms of its powers to frame a life plan has, as its primary orientation to the world, a disposition to encounter all entities as potentially manageable material” (65). However, White does not speak of something akin to being’s withdrawal in the age of technique. Rather, in White’s descriptions, being’s disclosure of beings seems to remain rather rich in late-modernity, and our failure to look at the world other than as a sovereign subject is simply that – our failure.

In this manner, White perhaps confirms rather than upsets our sovereignty.
Let me quote a few paragraphs from White’s treatment of an ethos of presumptive generosity to make this point.

For the modern disengaged subject, identity has typically not been a central problem. The unobtrusiveness of identity is crucial to envisioning life as a self-controlled project initiated from a disengaged stance. The need to maintain a smooth, secure sense of self demands that one quickly shuffle aside experiences that call this stability into doubt, especially those that undermine our urge to mastery of the world around us, as well as those that enhance the anxiety we feel about our finitude. In short, we treat being as if it were designed to be endlessly pliant to our projects. But if we understand being, as Connolly does as a persistent and never fully manageable presencing of “identity/difference” [i.e., where identity is produced and reproduced by difference], then this imperious demand for security will appear to be self-deceptive. As I previously noted, many, social, linguistic, and psychic pressures feed this demand; and yet, if we embrace an ontology of a rich and fugitive play of “identity/difference,” then simply conforming to these pressures puts us deeply at odds with the character we have attributed to being. This relation of congruence provides a reason to resist such pressures. Of course, for that reason to carry any force for us, we must assume that we prefer to imagine ourselves and our social world in some sort of congruence or attunement, with our deepest commitments regarding being. Such an assumption does not seem to be implausible or unreasonable.

Having made this assumption, we would aim to conduct ourselves so as to do justice to being, to more actively witness it, to put ourselves in a mimetic relation to it. But in what spirit does one take up this task? Connolly would have us experience the “nonteleological excess of being over identity” as a richness, or abundance; in Heidegger’s terms, it is a “giving,” the Es gibt of being. When the originary energy and display of life is taken in this sense, it can evoke sentiments of reverence, enchantment, and gratitude. Now there is nothing certain about these sentiments; being does not guarantee them. To the contrary, one must cultivate them assiduously, for often that originary energy of presencing deals us hard blows; and, within Connolly’s ontology, it is to these sentiments that above all one must look for sustenance at such times.

In our relations with others, such sentiments can manifest themselves as an ethos of “generosity and forbearance” toward that presencing of difference that continually unsettles one’s identity. As was shown in the preceding chapter, Connolly speaks here of “critical responsiveness,” by which he means that one engages the “play of identities, institutions, and principles with the aim of “rendering them more responsive to that which
exceeds them, more generous and refined in their engagement with difference.” (42-43, footnote omitted) (my emphasis in bold)

White’s ethos manifests “reverence” and “gratitude” for, and “enchantment” by the abundance of being but does not acknowledge how being withdraws under the sway of technique – except indirectly by noting the sovereign subject’s insistent “demand for security.” White does not discuss how we are called to see the world in a technical manner, or how being (das Sein) denies its own abundance, or how the modern subject is itself being’s disclosure of human beings. In arguing that White insufficiently acknowledges the sway of technique, I do not mean to claim that there is no abundance of being whatsoever and that the world has been completely rationalized. But I do think that appearances of being’s abundance – in the sense of non-technical disclosures of beings - are increasingly rare and that the experience of the abundance of being is not as responsive to our deliberate seeking as White hopes.

I suspect it may be that I have an empirical disagreement with ethos theorists. I see the sway of calculation as perhaps more complete and more insistent in late modernity than they do. In effect, in this study, I am offering what Jane Bennett calls a “disenchantment tale” – a tale about how the late modern world is succumbing to the process of “rationalization” where every aspect of our lives seems calculable and as a result of which life lacks “enchantment.” Bennett resists such tales. She still finds sites of enchantment.

---


48 Bennett’s definition of enchantment has many similarities to some of the attunements or moods that are identified by the thinkers in this study in which we become open to the incalculable dimensions of life: “To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and everyday”(4). “The mood I’m calling enchantment involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more unheimlich (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-
in modernity. But she then seeks, quite explicitly, to harness these episodes of 
enchantment in the service of reenergizing and sustaining an ethos of presumptive 
generosity (the same ethos proposed by White and Connolly).

I want to believe Bennett. Yet I still see the sway of calculation in her thought and that worries me and suggests that 
we need to be a little more hesitant about how we approach ethos and its cultivation. Bennett is very careful to say that she is not seeking to willfully re-enchant modernity. She 
points to existing sites of enchantment in modern life (and she works hard to show how 
enchantment need not only arise in relation to some sense of the divine or sacred).

It is telling that Bennett uses the language of “energy” when she turns to the revitalizing 
potential of experiences of enchantment for political ethos. For example, speaking of the 
generosity at the heart of her preferred political ethos, Bennett asks “Under what 
circumstances can such magnanimous sentiment or fullness of will arise? From what 
internal and external sources can such energy be generated, borrowed, captured, or 
redeployed?” Similarly, as we just saw in the long quotation above from White, he 
describes being as “originary energy.” I do not want to be a stickler but I do think that the 
language here is telling. Paying attention to language is crucial to being on the look out for 
the call of calculation and to paying attention period. Paying attention to being is paying

intellectual disposition. The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a 
sense of having had one’s nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged – a shot in the 
arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life,” Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, (5).

49 Ibid. 12.
50 Ibid., 8 and 91 and see Chapters Five and Six and Seven generally for the sites of modern 
enchantment (including even an argument for the possibility of an enchantment by commodities that is 
distinguishable from “commodity fetishism”).

51 Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 80. Also see Bennett’s Chapter Seven titled “Ethical 
Energetics” (131-158).
attention to language (“language is the house of being”). This is a theme I will return to in the conclusion to this study.

Bennett and White and other ethos theorists tie their versions of ethos closely to ethics in the sense of what we owe to others and how we comport ourselves in our relations with others. Heidegger’s ethos is concerned with a broader kind of attentiveness not directly tied to what we would ordinarily recognize as ethical concerns. In Plato and Kant we shall see the claim that a broader attentiveness can (albeit incidentally or indirectly) lead to fulfillment of more substantive, readily recognizable ethical demands. This indirect route to ethics is less technical. It seems less about direct cultivation; say, about somehow channeling episodes of “enchantment” or “depth” into a disposition to generosity. It is more about allowing those episodes, in which life suddenly becomes more vivid and less routine, do what they themselves tend to do, namely deepen our attention to the world. And careful attention surely makes us more responsible. Ethos theorists are already to some extent proposing an indirect or non-applied approach to ethics within politics. I am in sympathy with their project but I want to consider whether an even more indirect approach – an approach that is barely an approach - is perhaps in order. I want to consider the possibility that ethical dispositions like “presumptive generosity” might arise as an incident of a broader attentiveness to the world and might in fact be more likely if we did not try to cultivate them deliberately and directly. If I am concerned to be generous, my attention is in some sense devoted to my being generous rather than to being attentive. Heidegger suggests that the thinking that belongs to the ethos he imagines is an “originary ethics” and is “neither theoretical or practical” but is prior to this distinction; it simply “lets
being – be.”52 In a similar (and related) way, the ethos I will ultimately argue for in this study is prior to the more substantive ethos proposed by contemporary political theorists.

Elements of a Conversion from Calculable Responsibility

This study as a whole is an attempt to fill the lacuna that I have found in contemporary efforts to articulate an ethos appropriate to politics, namely the absence of a sustained consideration of what it would be to release one’s attention from the hold of calculable responsibility. In the readings of Plato, Kant, and Weber that follow I will be training a very narrow lens on what they say about calculable responsibility, and about the possibility and character of a conversion away from calculable responsibility. Nietzsche’s treatment of the phenomenon of morality and its interconnection with calculable responsibility is much more extensive than Heidegger’s briefer treatment in Sein und Zeit, but Heidegger’s discussion of the “call of conscience” in Sein und Zeit offers a more systematic treatment of the possibility of a turn away from morality. In order to help the reader recognize the more implicit treatments of a conversion away from calculable responsibility in Plato, Kant, and Weber, I will now draw on Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit to identify the bare elements of the phenomenon of a turn from calculable responsibility. The outline I offer is sufficiently broad and sparse to encompass the narratives of a release from calculable responsibility that I have reconstructed in Nietzsche and will reconstruct from Plato, Kant, and Weber;

52 Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 270-272. In these passages Heidegger also relinquishes the language of “ontology” that he employs in his earlier work because he believes that it “fails to recognize that there is a thinking more rigorous than conceptual thinking” and “does not yet succeed in retaining the essential help of phenomenological seeing while dispensing with the inappropriate concern with “science” and “research.” Heidegger’s later work emphasizes attention to language as the essence of thinking: thinking is care for the use of language.
and to include elements from Heidegger’s later essays on technique. I speak of a turn rather than a conversion to limit religious overtones. I will begin with an analysis of the simplest phenomenon that bears the name of a “turn” in order to systematically build up to the phenomenon of a turn from calculable responsibility.

1. A turn is a movement that is a change in the direction of a prior movement. In this movement, I change the direction in which I look. Put differently, my attention shifts elsewhere.

2. In the turn an original direction is abandoned and a new direction is taken. Every direction has a “wherefrom” and a “whereto.” In the turn, I turn away from common sense. I ordinarily dwell within common sense. Common sense always already determines my possibilities, my self-understanding, and my understanding of all that is. Common sense is the wherefrom (the past) of my original direction, and opens the whereto (the possibilities) of my original direction.

3. Calculable responsibility – a view of responsibility as capable of being specified in advance, reckoned-up, balanced-out and discharged – belongs to common sense and so also to morality (our ordinary approach to responsibility). Calculable responsibility filters what I ordinarily see of the world. It is not simply a relation to my responsibilities. Calculable responsibility is a particular way of directing and diverting my attention. Indeed, calculating my responsibilities (or indebtedness, guilt, or penalizable fault) often stands in for paying attention to the world and dwelling in the world in a careful, thoughtful manner.
4. Common sense is also the wherefrom of the new direction. As in any turn, the new
direction must, in some way, be defined by the original direction. Thus the turn may have
different instantiations depending the particular, commonsense world that I turn away
from.

5. What is the origin of my movement towards the new whereto? I turn from common sense
in response to a “call.” The call does not affect me like some external, causal force.
Rather, I am already disposed to hear the call: the call is an already binding claim that I
have not properly recognized. The call issues from the new whereto. The new whereto
calls me toward it. The call is a beckoning; a compelling invitation. As an invitation, the
call is not immediately determinative for me. I must respond to the call. Indeed, I must
allow myself to be determined by the call, rather than by the determinations of calculable
responsibility. In the turn, the call draws my attention away from calculable
responsibility toward “what calls” (the new whereto).

6. I hear the call through an “attunement” to the world. An attunement is a susceptibility
to the call; a mood in which I may hear the call. The call can only reach me if I am
properly attuned to the call. I am always already attuned (just as I am always already
called), though an attunement may not be fully awake. While I may, in some way, open
myself to an attunement, whether I hear the call is not entirely a matter of will.
Ultimately, the hearing of the call is a gift. The language of attunement should not be
taken to imply that the turn is simply a subjective psychological or private happening.\footnote{This is the way the phenomenon of “conversion” is understood in the literatures of psychology. Thus William James says the following about those who are susceptible to a conversion experience: “The psychological basis of the twice-born character seems to be a certain discordancy or heterogeneity in the native temperament of the subject, an incompletely unified moral and intellectual constitution.” See The...}
say a subjective effect of a process of socialization. For each thinker, the turn is a specific possibility of being human and this possibility arises from the nature of truth, freedom, and responsibility.

7. When I respond to the call, I come to encounter “what calls.” It is the world that calls. I am always already claimed by the world - it has a continuing claim on my attention, though I do not properly recognize or care for this claim. While “what calls” - the world - always already binds me, I do not ordinarily see this claim or dwell properly within it. This claim is what makes responsibility possible: it is the ontological ground of the necessity of responsibility.

8. The call that calls me away from calculable responsibility is an unrelenting call to attend to the world. This call to attentiveness is a call to the responsibility that is constitutive of my humanity. My constitutive responsibility to always give my attention to the world offers me no material direction on what I ought to do. Nor can this responsibility be specified in advance, reckoned-up, and discharged. My humanity simply demands that I must always respond to the ever-unfolding world and it provides no script for my responses.

9. Even if I have encountered my incalculable constitutive responsibility, it is part of my finitude that I remain vulnerable to calculable responsibility. Calculable responsibility eases the terrific burden of my freedom and remains tied to a compelling vision of justice. It is only perhaps episodically that I rise to the fullness of my constitutive responsibility. Still, I may dwell in the world in such a way that I remain ever open to my constitutive responsibility.

responsibility – if only by watching out for the ways that calculable responsibility effaces my constitutive responsibility. With this shift in my attention away from reckoning my responsibilities to a broader attentiveness to the world, I am better able to respond to the detail and nuance of the situations in which I find myself. I do not then become irresponsible simply because I leave behind the ordinary approach to responsibility.

This bare outline of a conversion has an odd, almost unscholarly, ring to it. As I noted in the introduction to this study, it is difficult to write about conversion and what is incalculable without sounding as if one has taken flight into the mystical. Yet there is a difference between mysticism and allowing for mystery. Here it is worth recalling that, according to Heidegger, we must become a mystery to ourselves, if we are to leave the thrall of calculable responsibility behind. Indeed, even if we are to begin to think through the possibility of a turn we must be open to the mystery of what it is to be human. Otherwise, it is impossible to stay with the phenomenon of the turn long enough to see what the turn might reveal about responsibility. To begin to think about an alternative to calculable responsibility we need to release the hold that technique has on what counts as thinking.