

The Ethic of Truths: Construction and Potency

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I would like to defend here four essential theses:

1. As regards the question of truth, the Heideggerian edifice leaves no solution other than the poem.

2. To undo this edifice, and find another solution, we must certainly not return to the process that Heidegger examines. On the contrary, we must assume, against the analytic tradition, that the essence of the truth remains inaccessible if its question is enclosed in the narrow form of the judgement, or of the proposition. But neither must we concede to Heidegger his melancholic vision of the loss of unveiling.

3. We must conceive of a truth both as a *construction* of the fidelity to an event and as a generic *potency* of the transformation of domains of knowledge.

4. All the categories through which the essence of the truth can be submitted to thought are negative: undecidability, indiscernibility, the generic 'not-all' (*pas-tout*), the unnameable. The ethic of truths resides entirely in the measure taken of this negative, which is the same as saying: in the limitation of the potency of truth by the *alea* of its construction.

We shall select three references from within the Heideggerian doctrine of truth.

The first quotation: "In becoming a property of the proposition, truth does not only displace its locus; it transforms its essence".

This must be understood as meaning that the entire effect of the decline of thought, which is also the decline of being, is manifested in the fact that truth is presented, after Plato, as localizable in the proposition. This localization is also an essential de-naturing. Nothing of the truth, in its authentic sense, is accessible if we admit that the phenomenon of truth is the proposition.

The second quotation. To situate it we must only remember that

Heidegger asks what the major points of meditation must be if one wishes to capture in thought the distress of Europe. This distress, we know, has as its essential events: the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the vulgarisation of man and the preponderance of the mediocre. But to understand its meaning, Heidegger tells us, one thing is decisive. This is, and I quote: "Mutation interpreting spirit as *intellect*, this last being understood as the simple faculty to reason correctly in the theoretical and practical consideration, and the estimation, of things already presented".

It is clear that the spirit can only be interpreted as intellect insofar as it manipulates truth in the form of a proposition. A proposition which is effectively the linguistic phenomenon of any estimation of things, insofar as they are things already presented. Consequently, the de-naturing of the essence of truth, which localizes it in the proposition, is the condition of possibility at the origins of Western distress.

The third quotation concerns what can be said about an access to truth freed from the phenomenal form of the proposition. What is a language that expresses the truth otherwise than in the scientific or logical form of the proposition? A language that is related, not to things already presented, but to things not yet come? There is no doubt about the answer. This language is the poem. I quote: "In poetry which is authentic and great, an essential superiority of the spirit reigns over everything that is purely science. A superiority in virtue of which the poet always speaks as if the being was expressed and called upon for the first time".

Thus, for Heidegger, if the declining destiny of being is to de-nature the truth in the proposition, if the proposition, commanding the interpretation of the spirit as pragmatic intellect, governs the ravage of the earth, then the only real recourse lies in the poem. And the poem in its turn is explicitly opposed to the mathematical. Because, for Heidegger, the mathematical is nothing other than the transparent triumph of the propositional form of the true. When the proposition reigns, when the intellect reigns, then he says, "the Being of the being becomes thinkable within the pure thought of the mathematical".

My sole aim will be to acknowledge that truth remains unthinkable if we attempt to contain it within the form of the true proposition. But also that conceiving truth as a historic process requires neither that the thesis of Platonic decline be upheld, nor that poetry be attributed an essential superiority over the mathematical, or over any other type of truth procedure.

Our epoch is most certainly the epoch of a rupture with all that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has shown to depend on the motif of mimesis. One of the forms of this motif, which explicitly attaches truth to

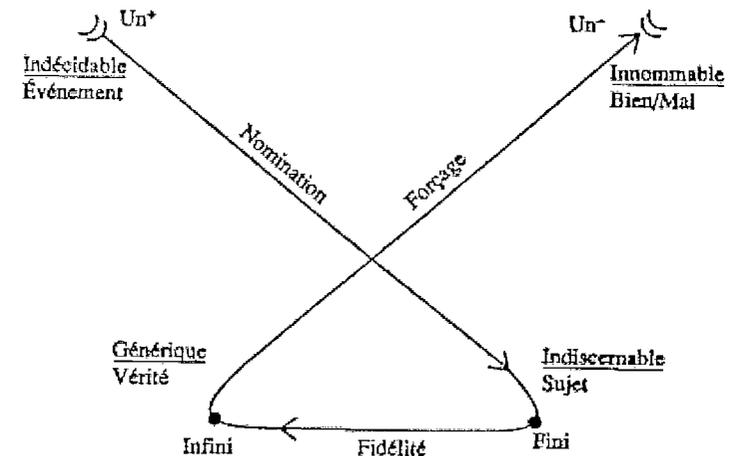
imitation, is to conceive of truth as a relation. A relation of appropriateness between the intellect and the thing 'intellected'. A relation of adequation, which always supposes, as Heidegger very well perceived, that the truth be localizable in the form of a proposition.

Modern philosophy is a criticism of truth as adequation. Truth is not *adequation rei et intellectus*. Truth is not limited to the form of judgement. Hegel shows that truth is a path. Heidegger suggests that it is a historic destiny.

I will start from the following idea: a truth is, first of all, something new. What transmits, what repeats, we shall call *knowledge*. Distinguishing truth from knowledge is essential. It is a distinction which is already made in the work of Kant: the distinction between *reason* and *understanding*. It is a capital distinction for Heidegger: the distinction between truth, *aletheia*, and cognition or science, *techne*.

If all truth is something new, what is the essential philosophical problem pertaining to truth? It is the problem of its appearance and its "becoming". A truth must be submitted to thought, not as a judgement, but as a process in the real.

The schema below represents the "becoming" of a truth. The aim of this talk is to explain the schema.



For the process of a truth to begin, something must happen. What there already is, the situation of knowledge as such, only gives us repetition. For a truth to affirm its newness, there must be a *supplement*. This supplement is committed to chance. It is unpredictable, uncalculable. It is beyond what is. I call it an event.

A truth appears, in its newness, because an eventful supplement interrupts repetition.

Examples: the appearance, with Aeschylus, of theatrical tragedy; the irruption, with Galileo, of mathematical physics; an amorous encounter which changes a whole life; or the French Revolution of 1792.

An event is linked to the notion of the *undecidable*. Take the utterance: "This event belongs to the situation". If you can, using the rules of established knowledge, decide that this utterance is true or false, the event would not be an event. It would be calculable within the situation. Nothing permits us to say: here begins a truth. A *wager* will have to be made. This is why a truth begins with an *axiom of truth*. It begins with a decision. The decision to *say* that the event has taken place.

The fact that the event is undecidable imposes the constraint that a *subject* of the event must appear. Such a subject is constituted by an utterance in the form of a wager. This utterance is as follows: "This has taken place, which I can neither calculate, nor demonstrate, but to which I shall be faithful".

A subject is, to begin with, what fixes an undecidable event, because he takes the chance of deciding it.

This engages the infinite procedure of the verification of the true. It's the examination, within the situation, of the consequences of the axiom which decided the event. It's the exercise of fidelity. Nothing regulates its course, since the axiom which supports it has arbitrated outside any rule of established knowledge. It is then a hazardous course, or a course without a concept.

But what is a pure choice, a choice without a concept? It's obviously a choice confronted by two *indiscernible* terms. Two terms are indiscernible if no effect of language permits their distinction. But if no formula of language distinguishes two terms of the situation, it is certain that the choice of having the verification pass by one rather than the other can find no support in the objectivity of their difference. It is then an absolutely pure choice, free from any presupposition other than that of having to choose, with no indication marking the proposed terms; the choice by which the verification of the consequences of the axiom will first pass.

This means that the subject of a truth demands the indiscernible. The indiscernible organizes the pure point of the subject in the process of verification. A subject is what disappears between two indiscernibles. A subject is the throw of the dice which does not abolish chance, but accomplishes it as a verification of the axiom which founds it. What was decided concerning the undecidable event must pass by *this* term, indiscernible from its other. Such is the local act of a truth. It consists in a pure choice between two indiscernibles. It is then absolutely finite.

For example, the world of Sophocles is a subject for the artistic truth that Greek tragedy is, a truth initiated by the event of Aeschylus. This work is creation: pure choice in what, before it, was indiscernible. And it is a finite work. However, tragedy itself, as artistic truth, continues unto infinity. The work of Sophocles is a finite subject of this infinite truth.

In the same way, the scientific truth decided by Galileo is pursued unto infinity. But the laws of physics which have been successively invented are finite subjects of this truth.

We continue with the process of a truth. It began with an undecidable event. It finds its act in a finite subject confronted by the indiscernible. The course of verification continues; it invests the situation with successive choices. Little by little the contour of a sub-set of the situation is outlined, in which the eventful axiom verifies its effects. It is clear that this sub-set is infinite, that it remains interminable. Yet it can be stated that if we suppose it to be ended, it will ineluctably be a sub-set that no predicate unifies. An untotalizable sub-set. A sub-set that can neither be constructed nor named in language. Such sub-sets are called generic sub-sets. We shall say that a truth, if it is supposed to be terminated, is generic.

How in fact can a succession of pure choices engender a sub-set which can be unified under a predication? The course of a truth would have to be secretly governed by a law, or the indiscernibles where the subject finds its act would have to be, in reality, discriminated by some superior understanding. But no such law exists. Invention and creation remain incalculable. So the path of a truth cannot coincide in infinity with any concept at all. And, consequently, the verified terms compose, or rather will have composed, if we suppose their infinite totalization, a generic sub-set of the universe. Indiscernible in its act, or as subject, a truth is generic in its result, or in its being. It is withdrawn from any unification by a unique predicate.

For example, there does not exist, after Galileo, a closed and unified sub-set of knowledge that we could call "physics". There exists an infinite and open set of laws and experiments; even if we suppose this set

to be *terminated*, no unique formula of language could resume it. There is no law of physical laws. So “the physical” is a generic set. Both infinite and indistinct. That is what the *being* of physical truth is.

In the same way, after the 1792 Revolution, there were all sorts of revolutionary politics. But there is no unique political formula which totalizes these revolutionary politics. The set called “revolutionary politics” is a *generic* truth of the political.

What happens is that we can always *anticipate* the idea of a completed generic truth.

The generic being of a truth is never presented. A truth is uncompletable. But we can know, formally, that a truth will always have taken place as a generic infinity. Thus the possible fictioning of the effects of its having-taken-place. The subject can hypothesize a universe wherein this truth, of which the subject is a local point, will have completed its generic totalization.

I call the anticipating hypothesis for the generic being of a truth, a *forcing*. Forcing is the powerful fiction of a *completed* truth.

Starting with such a fiction, I can *force* new pieces of knowledge, without even *verifying* this knowledge.

Thus, Galileo could hypothesize that all nature can be written in mathematical language; which is the hypothesis of a *complete* physics. From this anticipation, he *forces* his Aristotelian adversary to abandon his position.

In the same way, someone in love can say “I will always love you”, which is the anticipating hypothesis of a truth of integral love. From this hypothesis, he forces the other to come to know him and to treat him differently.

The *construction* of a truth is made by a choice within the indiscernible. It is made locally, within the finite.

But the *potency* of a truth depends on the hypothetical forcing. It consists in saying: “If we suppose the generic infinity of a truth to be completed, *then* such or such piece of knowledge must imperatively be transformed”.

The problem is knowing whether such a potency of anticipation is *total*. Whether we can *force* all the pieces of knowledge concerned. It’s the romantic problem of absolute love; the “scientific” problem of science as integral truth; the political problem of totalitarianism.

This problem can simply be expressed thus: can we, from the finite Subject of a truth, *name* and *force into knowledge* all the elements that this truth concerns? How far does the anticipating potency of generic infinity go?

My answer is that there is *always*, in any situation, a real point that *resists* this potency.

I call this point the *unnameable* of the situation. It is what, within the situation, never has a name in the eyes of truth. A term which consequently remains *unforceable*. This term fixes the limit of the potency of a truth.

The unnameable is that which is excluded from having a proper name, and that which is the only thing to be so excluded. The unnameable is then the proper of the proper. So singular that it does not even tolerate having a proper name. So singular in its singularity that it is the only one not to have a proper name.

The unnameable is the point where the situation in its most intimate being is submitted to thought; in the pure presence that no knowledge can circumscribe.

The unnameable is something like the inexpressible *real* of everything a truth allows to be said.

Let’s take an example. The mathematical is pure deduction. We always suppose it contains no contradiction. But Gödel showed that it is impossible to demonstrate, *within* a mathematical theory, that this theory is non-contradictory. A mathematical truth cannot then *force* the non-contradiction of mathematics.

We will say that non-contradiction is the unnameable of the mathematical. And it is clear that this unnameable is the *real* of the mathematical; for if a mathematical theory is contradictory, it is destroyed.

Consequently, a reasonable ethic of mathematics is not to wish to force this point. To accept that a mathematical truth is never *complete*.

But this reasonable ethic is difficult to hold. As scientism or totalitarianism show, there is always a desire for the omnipotence of the true. Therein lies the root of evil.

Evil is the will to name *at any price*.

Usually, it is said that evil is lies, ignorance, deadly stupidity. The condition of evil is much rather the process of a truth. There is evil only insofar as there is an axiom of truth at the point of the undecidable; a path of truth at the point of the indiscernible; an anticipation of being for the generic; and the forcing of a nomination at the point of the unnameable.

If the forcing of the unnameable exclusion is a disaster, this is because it affects the entire situation, by pursuing singularity itself, of which the unnameable is the emblem. In this sense, the desire in fiction to suppress the unnameable frees the destructive capacity contained in all truth.

The ethic of a truth resides, from then on, entirely in a sort of caution as far as its powers are concerned. The effect of the undecidable, of the indiscernible, and of the generic, or else the effect of the event, of the subject, and of truth, must admit the unnameable as a *limitation* of its path.

Evil is finally the desire that (the) all can be said. To contain evil, the potency of the true must be *measured*.

What helps us is the rigorous study of the *negative* characteristics of the path of truth.

The event is undecidable. The subject is linked to the indiscernible. Truth itself is generic, untotalizable. And the halting point of its potency is unnameable.

This gives us four negative categories. Their philosophic study is capital.

This study can be nourished by all the thought-events which shape our times.

The undecidability of an event, and the suspension of its name, are features of politics that are particularly active today. It is clear for a French man or woman that the events of May 1968 continue today to comprise an unattested or anonymous promise. But even the 1792 revolution or the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 remain partly undecided as to what they prescribe for philosophy.

The theory of indiscernibles is in itself an entire mathematical theory, from the Galois groups to the indiscernibles of the theory of models. But we can also say that one of the aims of contemporary poetics is to found in language a point of indiscernibility between prose and poem, or between image and thought.

The theory of the generic lies at the heart of the ultimate forms of the logic of sets, following on from Paul Cohen's theorem. But the modern politics of emancipation, freed from the dialectic scheme of classes and parties, has as its aim a "generic" democracy, a promotion of the commonplace, of equality abstracted from any predicate. And a whole field of prose, such as Samuel Beckett's, tries by successive subtractions to designate the naked existence of a generic humanity.

Finally, the unnameable is the central motif for a thinking of the political that wishes to submit Nazism to thought: just as it is for the poet who explores the limits of the force of language; for the mathematician who looks for the indefinables of a structure; for the person in love tormented by what love comprises of the sexual unnameable.

Thus the ethic of truths, relation or dis-relation between the construction of a truth and its potency, is that by which we take the measure of what our times are capable of, as well as what our times are *worth*. Which is, in a word, the very task of philosophy.

Translated by Thelma Sowley