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Article

Rethinking a Heideggerian Normative Ethics

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Abstract: The latter Heidegger pointed out in his "Letter on 'Humanism'" that prevailing ethical theories are all products of Western metaphysics, but there is in fact an "original ethics" before them. He claimed that the "original ethics" is better than the former but offered no further explanation. After previously attempting to establish a Heideggerian normative ethics based on authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) as virtue, and discovering its inherent difficulties of voluntarism, I try to ponder in this article another kind of normative ethics based on his concept of releasement (*Gelassenheit*) as a virtue in order to interpret a Heideggerian "original ethics." The virtue of releasement doesn't force Being as such to present itself and is able to make Dasein open to Being of the Other and let it be itself. To highlight the characteristics of this virtue ethics, this article will attempt to explore its possible content by comparing it with the previous version of ethics, namely the virtue ethics based on Heidegger's early concept of authenticity.

Keywords: Heidegger, authenticity, normative ethics, releasement

Building on the concept of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit)* in *Being and Time*, Heidegger proposed an existential "solipsism" in order to grasp the most primordial Being of Dasein ontologically. Starting from this conception, I have sought to explore the possibility of developing a normative ethics that could be compatible with the early Heidegger's philosophy. In an earlier study,[1] I argued that Heidegger's notion of authenticity possesses an ontological value and suggested that the own most potentiality-for-Being (*eigenstes Seinkönnen*)—as articulated within this existential "solipsism"—can be reinterpreted as an ought-to-be (*Seinsollen*). On this basis, I proposed that an ethical framework could be constructed from this ontological grounding.

[1] W.-D. Tsai, "The Ownmost Potentiality-for-Being as Ought-to-Be," in *Kritike*, 16:3 (2023), 142–155.

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In a subsequent paper,[2] I further argued that such an ethical theory cannot be deontological or utilitarian in nature, since Heidegger explicitly criticizes both as products of Western metaphysics. If we are to develop a viable ethical theory rooted in the early Heidegger's thought, the most promising candidate may be a form of virtue ethics. This Heideggerian virtue ethics would treat the own most potentiality-for-Being as the virtue of human Dasein, and thus as a good worthy of pursuit. However, because this ethics is grounded in existential "solipsism", it fundamentally differs from Aristotle's virtue ethics. In this context, authenticity is pursued as a personal good, and it does not necessarily aim toward the realization of the common good or the good of the polis, as in Aristotelian ethics.

However, since the later Heidegger no longer emphasizes the concept of authenticity, it becomes clear that the virtue ethics based on existential "solipsism" outlined earlier is no longer applicable in this revised philosophical context.[3] While he still maintains that Dasein should pursue the most primordial mode of Being, he no longer foregrounds existential "solipsism," presumably due to its voluntaristic implications. If we are to follow Heidegger's own revision of his early thought, then the existential virtue ethics developed from authenticity must likewise be reconsidered and reformulated. This raises a crucial question: can we identify any alternative elements in his later philosophy that might serve as criteria to guide human action — to help actors make appropriate choices and comport themselves appropriately in praxis? Undoubtedly, the notion of primordiality continues to play a significant role here. For the later Heidegger, the primordial state of Being remains ontologically superior to its derivative states. However, he no longer equates the primordiality of Dasein with the authentic selfhood that requires resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*). In contrast to his earlier position, Dasein no longer needs to willfully achieve authenticity in order to disclose the Being of entities and Being as such. Heidegger now discerns that

[2] W.-D. Tsai, "試論一種有可能從早期海德格思想推演出的倫理學 (On a kind of ethics which could be developed from early Heidegger's thought)," in *NCCU Philosophical Journal*, 50 (2023), 49–87.

[3] There is a fundamental continuity between Heidegger's early and later thought, rather than a radical rupture. The present article does not seek to offer a systematic account of the similarities and differences between these two periods; for a detailed argument in this regard, see W.-D. Tsai, *Die ontologische Wende der Hermeneutik: Heidegger und Gadamer* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), especially Chapters 3 and 4. Instead, this article aims merely to highlight **differing emphases** in Heidegger's early and later philosophy mainly through a comparative discussion on the concepts of authenticity and releasement. Therefore, even though these two concepts (and other related concepts) may be used in both of Heidegger's periods, this does not prevent us from observing that there was indeed a shift in emphasis in the later period of Heidegger. Such a comparison should thus not be understood as suggesting that these two concepts are **mutually exclusive**, nor as implying that the complex development of Heidegger's thought across these periods can be **exhaustively captured** by this conceptual pair.

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voluntaristic self-determination could force entities to manifest themselves according to human will and thus harm their Being itself. Therefore, the later Heidegger particularly emphasized the concept of releasement (*Gelassenheit*), which is to let entities show themselves as they are, rather than to reveal them by force. If we are to conceive of a virtue ethics that is compatible with the thought of the later Heidegger, it must now exclude voluntaristic self-determination. In other words, we must seek a form of virtue ethics that does not center on the "will to power"—to use Nietzsche's term.

In order to construct such ethics, our current task is to outline some possible constituent conditions for it. First and foremost, it is important to clarify that conceiving normative ethics without emphasizing self-determination does not entail the exclusion of all acts of will. As a practical framework concerned with Dasein as a moral agent, any type of normative ethics must propose a set of guiding values that help agents determine how to act appropriately. It requires the moral agent to make his own judgements, to select from among various possible actions in light of those values, and to apply them to concrete situations. In doing so, the moral agent inevitably engages in a process of self-identification—that is, he must reflect on and decide what kind of person he wishes to become. This decision-making process is of course impossible to separate from the activity of will; otherwise, it would construct an extreme version of ethical theory, similar to the virtue theory of existential solipsism—but in a different direction—namely, a kind of quietism. Therefore, we must introduce a further specification or limitation to our ethical project. What is to be excluded here is not volition as such in the moral agent, but his self-determination in the mode of "enframing" (*Gestell*)—that is, the technological domination and manipulation of his nature. In short, acts of will remain involved, but they must be exercised in a manner that does not override the principle of releasement. Thus, in such a Heideggerian ethical theory, the agent's will is to perform an action of letting-be, rather than an action of forcing-into-Being. Under these conditions, an action possessing primordial morality does not derive from a domination or command over an entity, for that would harm the entity's primordial Being.

However, while the appeal to releasement means not forcibly determining the Being of an entity, it also doesn't mean allowing the entity to be however it wants, otherwise this would lead to the conclusion that whatever is is ethically justifiable. If this were true, then we would no longer need ethics, and could simply be satisfied with discussing ontology. Thus, the primary concern here is to let the entity manifest itself as it primordially is, i.e., to allow the entity to reveal its most primordial mode of Being and to regard the latter as a primordial good. To let be is, therefore, to be willing to "achieve" a certain primordial good in some way.

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It is also important to clarify that in his later writings, Heidegger refers to this self-manifestation of an entity as "appropriation" (*Ereignen*), and the most primordial state of Being that emerges from this process as "the Event" (*Ereignis*). However, the process of appropriation is for Heidegger never a purely unilateral unfolding of the entity itself; it always simultaneously involves a kind of withdrawing, which Heidegger calls "expropriation" (*Enteignen*). In other words, the primordial Being of the entity is a unity of revealing and concealing. Viewed from the perspective of revealing, the Event highlights the self-manifestation (*Er-eignis*) of the entity; from the perspective of concealing, it highlights its self-withdrawal (*Ent-eignis*). They are originally unified and ontologically inseparable. However, the unity of these two is not static, but a dynamic whole formed in the process of their mutual conflict. Based on the above explanation, we can conclude that: If releasement is to mean allowing an entity to manifest itself in its most primordial way, then a letting-be needs to include both self-manifestation and self-withdrawal of the entity. This is a core claim in Heidegger's later thought, and therefore an essential point that any ethics attempting to incorporate Heidegger's later philosophy cannot avoid.

Since the later Heidegger regards releasement as a more appropriate way to approach Being as such ontologically, our task is to ponder what a normative ethics developed from the concept of releasement would look like, and why it would be more persuasive than the existential-solipsistic virtue ethics—even though both may be considered non-mainstream ethical theories in academia. This article only attempts to provide some preliminary clues for pondering this question, rather than offering a complete answer. One of these clues comes from our brief examination of existential-solipsistic virtue ethics. We treat it as an object of theoretical comparison and will briefly explain its core content in order to more clearly highlight the possible content of the upgraded version of Heideggerian normative ethics based on releasement.

The early Heidegger's existential "solipsism" attempted to reveal the meaning of Being through Dasein's pursuit of its personal excellence (authenticity), which methodologically focused on the relationship between Dasein and itself. However, this deliberate pursuit of authenticity tended to neglect Dasein's relationship with other people ontically. [4] From this primordial existential dimension of Dasein, we can develop a normative ethics of private virtue at most. Anyone who advocates this kind of virtue ethics in the name of pursuing the meaning of Being will—as long as her or

[4] To avoid hasty misunderstandings by readers, it is important to emphasize here that in *Being and Time*, the early Heidegger explicitly stated that Dasein necessarily coexists with other people in the world. Therefore, when he mentioned existential "solipsism," he never referred to solipsism in the metaphysical sense, but rather to an ontic state of solitude.

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his theoretical position is consistent – adopt an attitude similar to Nietzsche's, that is: to promote "master morality" and to show little concern for "slave morality" or any kind of public virtue. Yet, once this form of authenticity is recognized as inadequate for letting Being reveal itself as it truly is, the justification for persisting in such a virtue theory will collapse. Consequently, it is no longer necessary for us to restrict the ethical dimension of Dasein to its self-relation alone; rather, its ethical dimension can now reopen toward the Other. In this context, abandoning authenticity as the primary virtue for Dasein means no longer aiming at self-interest, but instead prioritizing the interests of the Other. However, it is important to mention that this shift does not equate to a shift to the slave morality of Nietzsche; it simply means prioritizing the primordial Being of the Other. After all, the Other is an ontologically necessary element for Dasein to be Being-in-the-world, and therefore the ontic state of the other should also be included in Dasein's ethical considerations. In this regard, the virtue ethics of releasement is clearly more convincing, since it at least does not ignore the Other and is willing to "help" the Other achieve its Being – although it is not so proactive as the existential-solipsistic virtue ethics. Another point to note is that when the later Heidegger abandoned the idea of authentic resoluteness, his philosophy also leaned towards a kind of non-anthropocentrism. Therefore, the Other here refers not only to human beings, but also to all natural things—in the terms of *Being and Time*, not only to Dasein-with (*Mit-Dasein*), but also to the entity within-the-world (*das innerweltliche Seiende*).

In order for the primordial Being of the Other to manifest itself as it is, Dasein undoubtedly needs to impose a certain degree of restriction on its own will. Now, Dasein no longer makes arbitrary self-determination, and thus limits its previous voluntaristic tendency. In releasement, Dasein will not actively interfere with the Being of the Other. More precisely, Dasein will not force entities to reveal themselves according to its own will and regulations. The entities can thus come forth and withdraw more freely, which further enables Dasein to access their most primordial state of Being better. In short, it is Dasein that sets this restriction on itself, allowing the Other to freely manifest its primordial Being to Dasein. I hereby refer to this self-imposed restriction as self-restraint. For ethics that takes releasement as its core virtue, its constituent elements must include the self-restraint of Dasein and the letting-be of the Other. In contrast, the existential-solipsistic ethics, which emphasizes authenticity, is constituted by the self-determination of Dasein and the forcing-into-Being of the Other. Through this comparison, we can more clearly distinguish the core difference between these two versions of ethics: other-centrism versus egocentrism.

The concept of letting-be has been briefly explained above, namely: to make the true Being of the Other, which is both revealing and concealing,

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accessible to Dasein. As for the more precise meaning of self-restraint and the extent to which this act can be performed, that remains to be examined. Undoubtedly, self-restraint involves withdrawing from all active intervention in the Other ontically. In this respect, it is a relatively passive type of behavior, just like letting-be. However, it should be emphasized that neither of these is entirely inactive. Self-restraint is understood as a self-imposed restriction on the Being of Dasein, undertaken for the sake of letting the Other be accessible as what it truly is. In the later Heidegger's view, constantly forcing the Other to reveal itself would actually harm its Being, making it impossible to maintain its true Being. Therefore, the self-restraint of Dasein is not only about allowing the other to manifest itself, but also to withdraw itself. However, self-restraint should not be undertaken too far, otherwise it will harm the Being of Dasein and may even lead it into a state of self-denial. The self-restraint of Dasein must be merely a voluntary and limited restriction of its self, and should not develop to the point of self-harm or self-denial, because that would in turn cause Dasein to cease to be what it truly is. In short, self-restraint in releasement must be moderate. We can say that this is a passive intervention of Dasein in its self ontically.

The two aforementioned characteristics of releasement—self-restraint of Dasein and letting-be of the Other – offer a preliminary account of how Dasein can access the primordial Being of the Other ontologically. If we are to develop a normative ethics compatible with the later Heidegger's philosophy, it seems feasible to consider releasement as a normative guideline for such an ethical framework. Accordingly, Dasein can develop releasement as its virtue, and under the other-centered spirit, it no longer indulges its own will to dominate the Other ontically but allows the Other to achieve its true Being.

But are these two characteristics of releasement sufficient to ground a persuasive normative ethics? We know that any persuasive ethics must at least be practical and able to explain how a moral agent can actually achieve a better and desirable goal. So, the question we face next is: if Dasein can passively intervene in itself (self-restraint of Dasein) and at the same time not actively intervene in others (letting-be of the Other) ontically, will the Other spontaneously reach its most primordial Being ontologically? If not, what conditions do we need to add to the virtue ethics of releasement?

Let us consider an ethical scenario to look for possible clues: As a moral agent committed to cultivating the virtue of releasement, I encounter a person who is dying nearby. Should I simply allow him/her to die? If left unaided, this person will soon cease to exist. If the releasement of a moral agent is understood merely as a behavior that passively intervenes in oneself but completely refrains from interfering in others, then it might appear reasonable for me here not to intervene. After all, as mortal beings, humans

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are destined to die by nature, so it seems theoretically possible that I can just stand by and watch others die. But can it truly be considered virtuous to stand by and watch someone die without offering any help? Can such inaction genuinely count as an ethical manifestation of virtue? This scenario makes us reflect more deeply on the extent to which a person who embraces releasement as a virtue may, or even ought to, engage in some kind of intervention. The main issue here is whether it is theoretically permissible for Dasein to passively intervene in others. It invites a reconsideration of what kind of action is ethically justified or even demanded under the name of releasement.

In reflecting on this ethical scenario, it is necessary to introduce a more nuanced distinction, since the moral quality of "allowing someone to die" appears to vary depending on the specific circumstances. For example, to let a thoroughly wicked criminal—who has mistakenly ingested poison—die from the poisoning, and to let an innocent child—who has been shot by the criminal—bleed to death, are clearly not morally equivalent. In the former case, we might feel a sense of satisfaction, whereas in the latter, we are likely to feel compassion and sorrow. As long as we experience different emotional responses to these two cases, it suggests that these two persons carry different meanings for us. We may think the former "deserves to die," while the latter "does not deserve to die"—even though both are beings-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). What is at stake here, then, is not merely the fact that their time of death has arrived. More fundamentally, it concerns the overall quality of their Being, namely: whether their whole Being is beautiful—or to put it in modern way, meaningful — and thus worthy of continued life.

Now, since the virtue ethics of releasement aims to allow the Other to be what it truly is, this ethical thought experiment invites us to consider two further situations: whether the true Being of a person we are promoting through self-restraint is any possible contingent state he/she currently finds itself in, or whether it also includes some outstanding state he/she could potentially achieve or maintain in the future. If our case concerns the former situation, then we do not need to intervene in the Being of that person at all and letting he/she die out on his/her own would be a moral action. But this is obviously an odd result, because any fatalist could easily do this without being considered virtuous. If an action that can be performed without resorting to any virtues is nevertheless considered as the achievement of a particular virtue, then "virtue" in this sense is too trivial to be considered as a genuine excellence (*aretē*) of the moral agent. Therefore, normative ethics that takes releasement as its central virtue should not be satisfied with merely taking the current state of the person as his/her true Being. If our case is concerning the latter situation, some kinds of intervention in the person seem to become necessary—for it would be difficult for the person in question to

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transcend his/her present near-death condition on his/her own, thus leaving no opportunity for him/her to actualize other better possibilities of Being. However, as the concept of releasement suggests, it implies deliberately refraining from active intervention. So, it is clearly neither reasonable nor in line with the spirit of releasement to intervene without considering the differences in someone's current state of Being simply because he/she has the potential to achieve a better state. What we need to further consider is the timing and conditions for intervention—if passive intervention is permissible.

In this thought experiment, our different emotional responses to a deserving criminal and an innocent child victim are partly due to whether their tragic state of Being (i.e., near-death) is self-inflicted. Therefore, when someone's unfortunate situation is consistent with his/her voluntary wrongdoing, we tend to stand idly by; while when someone is involuntarily trapped in an unfortunate situation caused by others, we tend to offer help. Within the framework of the virtue ethics of releasement, the innocent child in our case is most likely to receive help from a moral agent. However, when we decide to intervene, our goal is at most passively to allow the child to return to one's original state, that is, to restore them to a relatively better state of being. Furthermore, this intervention in others should not be excessive. When the child's condition does not improve, we should let go in time, allowing that individual to return to the ultimate possibility—death. The moral agents can only do their best and leave the rest to fate.

From the analysis above, we arrive at the third characteristic of releasement as a supplementary condition: passive promotion of the Other. This third characteristic implies that the virtue of releasement demands something more. Releasement does not entail total inaction. It requires not only a passive action of self-restraint, but also an active action to a certain degree concerning an other-centric goal: the true and beautiful Being of the Other. In conclusion, the virtue ethics of releasement is an ethics that passively desires others to become outstanding, rather than an ethics that actively pursues one's own excellence – like the virtue ethics of authenticity. But does this action toward an other-centric goal introduce a self-contradiction into a virtue ethics grounded in releasement? This is a question I intend to explore further in future work.

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