Mortality and the Foundations of a Phenomenological Ethics


Werner Marx, who is perhaps best known for *Heidegger and the Tradition*, a work of classic importance in coming to grips with Heidegger's thought, offers us with this volume, not so much an interpretation of Heidegger, as an impressive attempt to further Heidegger's thinking (*Weiterdenken*) in a direction which Heidegger himself has not taken. Marx seeks a norm or measure (*Mass*) for responsible human action, i.e., for differentiating between good and evil and for preferring the former to the latter. His book is a work of "ethics" in the "foundational" sense that he is looking for a founding or grounding of these ethical ultimates. Nonetheless—and this reflects his Heideggerian point of departure—Marx seeks a "non-metaphysical" foundation. The first and title essay in the book is the longest, most central study. The remaining five essays, two of which appeared previously, supplement the thesis.

The title of the book, of course, derives from a line from Hölderlin which runs, "Is there a measure on earth? There is none . . . " For Hölderlin this was an essentially religious sentiment which looked to the divine for a measure, a sentiment shared by few today, however, in an age of waning religious faith and waxing secularity. Adapting Hölderlin to his own needs, Heidegger agrees that there is no earthly measure, but this means for him no measure available to us on the basis of human subjectivity. Instead, as "mortals," we must take our measure from above, from the heavens and the gods (although it is not clear, Marx thinks, whether Heidegger intended to take the gods in particular, or the Four-fold as a whole, as the measure). But since this "measure" is every bit as much a "play," a groundless ground, Marx argues, Heidegger does not provide us with a measure in any normal sense, that is, in any directly
useful sense that would help us out in our daily commerce and responsible interaction with one another. Whence Marx takes as his task to establish just such a measure, using Heidegger's work as a point of departure, but with the aim of providing an ethical norm for those who neither hold a religious faith nor are satisfied with Heidegger's leap into the groundless.

The ground of ethics which Marx thus seeks is to be neither religious (given modern secularism), nor metaphysical (given Heidegger's critique of metaphysics), nor late-Heideggerian (given the groundless and mysterious play thematized in the later works). Such a ground Marx locates in a fundamental phenomenological experience of mortality. The experience of mortality, he proposes, nourishes ethical life, which he characterizes as a life of brotherhood and fellowship (Nächstenethik), of brotherly love (Nächstenliebe, p. 50), of compassion, love and mutual recognition.

The problem which Marx sees in the later Heidegger—and this goes back to the closing pages of Heidegger and the Tradition—lies in the ambiguity, or two-sidedness, of Heidegger's notion of Being and hence of the direction which it can provide. Being is just as much concealment as revelation, just as much Nothingness as Being, lethe as a-letheia. In A Letter on Humanism this ambiguity takes on an ominous turn—which Marx conjectures is stimulated by Heidegger's interpretation of Schelling on the dark side of God's nature (17-18). If Being is the saving, whole, holy (Heil), it is also the unholy (Unheil), the wrathful (Grimm). As something essentially contested and contestable (das Strittige), the words of Being cannot simply be heeded unquestioningly, in simple obedience. For we can be driven into evil by Being's address just as easily as we can be led to the saving. Both the saving grace and raging discord are equally "Being."

What Heidegger learns from Schelling is the two-foldedness of Being, its inhabitation by an Ungrund or abyssal principle, which puts it at odds with the traditional metaphysics of light. But in Schelling this dark nature in the divine is held in check by the divine will and is apt to lead into evil only in the finite human will. Heidegger, on the other hand, by both allowing a primal disturbance and play within Being itself, on the one hand, and by criticizing human willing, on the other hand, puts man at the beck and call of Being and hence at the mercy of this disturbance (51-53).

Such a measure, in which the Heil and the Unheil are equal partners, in which error and mystery are essential ingredients, is no fit guide for human conduct (19-21). The nomos which issues from Being itself cannot be a "measure" in any humanly practical sense.