

# Ethics and artificiality

Wolfgang Schirmacher<sup>1</sup> and Daniel Theisen<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This essay interrogates the *place* of ethics, which needs to be located in philosophy alongside studies of being. Ethics is not an omniscient field of study: there is a room outside ethics, and yet there *is* ethics. The question here is: of *what*

*kind* is this ethics? We cannot resort to nature in our search for an ethical stance. References to evolution or constraints of instrumental technology in themselves do not suffice to argue for ethical positions. Neither can we rely on extrahuman forces, such as theologians and metaphysicians do in their ethical ruminations. Rather, we need to fully acknowledge our *art of life*. When we undertake a phenomenological study of our life *as environment* we study “how life lives”. Crucial to such an endeavour is a close observance of a highly complex form of *responsibility*: we need to fully face up to our failures and successes in order to fully grasp the sufferings brought on to other species through animal testing, or the questions posed by our encounter with AIDS. We need to be able to face death while we interrogate the possibility of life, love and love of life.

**Keywords:** ethics; phenomenology; art of life; responsibility; animal testing

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**Correspondence:** Torgeir Fjeld,  
inscriptions@tankebanen.no

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## I. Disappearing authority and the ethics of dwelling

The augurs tell us we are living in the age of postmodernity. Whatever stand one may take toward this fashionable new word, one cannot ignore the phenomenon of fundamental change to our world manifest in the concept of postmodernity. Nowhere is this as evident as in the complete and irreversible collapse of the authoritative power of ethics. Whether it is grounded deontologically, on utilitarian principles or on those of natural law, ethical behaviour in practice follows personal convictions which can be neither predicted nor effectively influenced. When politicians in election campaigns demand “new values” or such theoreticians as Hans Jonas or Daniel Bell place their hopes in a “new religiosity” as the way to salvation, it means only this: in today’s industrial nations there exist neither values nor religious strictures with any claim to universal validity! The idea of authority itself, which no

ethics seems to be able to do without, has gone missing – just like that. For in postmodernity, authority is not a point of debate; it is not subject to doubt, there are no plans for its replacement.

The fact of the matter is this: authority with its order-giving function has disappeared. As an idea it did not survive Auschwitz, and as far as present-day technologies are concerned, they obviously have no need of it. Lyotard

<sup>1</sup> European Graduate School.

<sup>2</sup> European Graduate School.

demonstrated this life-praxis weaned of authority, applied to thinking, in his analysis *The Postmodern Condition* (the title of the German translation, translated into English, is *Postmodern Knowledge*<sup>3</sup>), but an evening spent watching television would suffice to impart the same insights. “We are amusing ourselves to death,”<sup>4</sup> Neil Postman complained prematurely, in defence of modernity. Yet what has become antiquated is merely the authority of language, of criticism, of morals, of domination. Even the authority of raw violence, the Uzis in the hands of teenagers, is turning frail and is written off as a mere risk of urban life. No doubt, ethics designers are nevertheless experiencing a boom, but their normative program is strictly focus-group-oriented and is manufactured on demand.

So was Heidegger completely justified when he stubbornly refused to trade his “inquiry into the truth of being” for an ethics? “Who could overlook the emergency?” he conceded in “Letter on Humanism” (p. 183), but Heidegger nevertheless withstood the pressure to become ethical in the face of the immense problems of the present day.<sup>5</sup> Levinas famously interpreted this as misanthropy and love-of-being. But if one is to attempt a fair and competent judgment of Heidegger’s contribution to ethics, one must not hold to a traditional understanding of ethics as a philosophical discipline. In “Letter on Humanism” and many other places as well, Heidegger carries off a masterful demonstration of the process of a phenomenological ethics, even and especially when he rejects the term and the expectations traditionally associated with it, and instead investigates its (linguistic) origins. The Greek word “ethos” addresses  $\hat{A}$  – according to Heidegger – the “open region” “where man dwells,” and in Heraclitus’ words (and anew in Heidegger’s interpretation), man “dwells, to the extent that he is man, in the proximity of God” (p. 185). This proximity, Heidegger’s “clearing of being,” affords the “safe and sound” (“*das Heile*”) as well as “evil” (p. 189) and determines every “primordial ethics” (p. 187). Is it misanthropy to credit man with being the locus of the presence of good and evil? Would not every ethical norm be well advised to take “to be, not to have” (Erich Fromm) as its basis? Could there be any greater authority than being itself?

Yet with Heidegger, one must read more carefully. The pre-existing knowledge of being would represent the greatest betrayal of being and could not help but to smother any inquiry that would lead us into the open and toward the non-determined. But how can the absent God, the concealed being, the unknown nothing ever exercise authority? If nothing is known, then nothing can be said, nothing can be deduced, nothing can be grounded. Was Levinas right after all when he said that Heidegger placed being over man and thwarted our need for answers and direction, so as not to approach and become familiar with the openness of being? “One must first learn to exist in the nameless,” Heidegger answered (p. 151). Nameless norm, unfounded ethics, nonprescriptive morality – this sounds self-contradictory, and yet this is where one must seek the connection from Heidegger to Schopenhauer and also to postmodernity. A phenomenological ethics is not norm-oriented, nor does it flow from any authority, but constitutes itself as a phenomenology of lived ethics.

We perceive ethical phenomena and their sphere in the present life-world. In the age of technology with its sphere of artificiality, certain phenomena strike us as particularly important and show themselves to be ethical by sparking controversies about right and wrong behaviour. Phenomenologically, I need not share in this act of self-showing, but it suffices to occasion a description rich in perspectives, one that postpones judgment. Heidegger’s ethics of dwelling avoids beginning with a Should (and in so doing, avoids the admission that it is not so). In “dwelling,” which encompasses a familiar togetherness as well as the considerate “sojourn with the things,” an oftconcealed fundamental trait of ethics is touched upon. We concern ourselves with ethics because we seek to lead a more humane life, an existence we call “dwelling” in an emphatic sense.<sup>6</sup> The promise of ethics is as intimate as it is public: a fulfilled life and nothing else, whether ethics is grounded in God, the general welfare, or personal advantage. To be sure, authorities have so often lied to us and deceived us that we no longer concede even their possibility. In Baudrillard’s words, they have become “hyperreal.” Yet we still experience dwelling – in each fulfilled moment of our own lives. It is the disappearance of authorities that has made the inconspicuous success of an ethics of dwelling perceptible at all.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge* (Minneapolis: 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: public discourse in the age of show business* (New York/Frankfurt: 1986/1988).

<sup>5</sup> The page numbers in the following refer to Martin Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus,” in *Wegmarken (Gesamtausgabe Bd. 6, Frankfurt am Main: 1976)*, translated into English as “Letter on Humanism” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: 1977), 193-242.

<sup>6</sup> See also Wolfgang Schirmacher, “Bauen, Wohnen, Denken,” *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 89, no. 2 (1982), 405-410.

## II. Life philosophy of the human: the new face of ontology?

But who dwells? We do. I alone. With such an ethics of dwelling, we seem to be inevitably thrown back upon ourselves; at the end of the powerful subject, back onto the powerless ego. Back upon myself and not upon some centre (for this perspective obviously leads nowhere at all). We are “nomads,” and our “meaning” is in complete accordance with this: concrete and yet always in a state of departure; an intermediate existence without yearning for the tree of knowledge – anti-Oedipus, as Deleuze-Guattari pretended.<sup>7</sup> The question remains: “Who am I?” – a question, or is it already posed wrong? A philosophy of human life in this day and age cannot appear in the role of an anthropology, for we are neither part nor whole. How does man live? How does life live? How are we given to ourselves? How do we live humanely and inhumanely? Ontological inquiries into the essence, limits, and proportions of man – do they herald a new multiplicity in man’s self-image and a rebirth of humanism?

The objection to anthropocentrism is one of the most convincing traits of today’s critical thought. It is all too evident that man as the self-appointed centre of the world has brought the environment as well as ourselves into a miserable situation. Against a new humanism – from Marx to Sartre – Heidegger argues forcefully that it would entail the determination of man with reference to an already fixed “interpretation of nature, of history, of the world, of the ground of the world (*Weltgrund*), i.e., of the being in the whole” (p. 153) and hence, that all of these declared anti-metaphysicians labour under the spell of a metaphysics whose pride (and whose fault) is knowing too much about things that are inaccessible to our knowledge. So is the answer then “not-knowing,” and is the solution to immerse ourselves in the “stream of life”?

New Age was already in fashion in intellectual circles even before the Second World War. Esoterics and life-reformers are but two sides of the same coin. Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysical answers and of the belief in the “person” as panacea has retained its validity unchanged. What we evidently must do without is the answer as a form of securing the world. Instead of constructing the “fixed point,” a centre, a form, a knowledge, we could learn to exist as blueprint, as project, on the way to that which this creative openness makes possible. In his inquiry, Heidegger has ceaselessly encircled the process of enownment, the never-ending finding of world, and has named it in various ways: overcoming metaphysics, releasement, and finally, finite enownment. None of these turns of phrase can be taken as an answer, but they provide a means of expression for that which the shimmering concept of philosophy of life tends to obscure. The “primordial streaming” (Husserl’s term is “*Urströmen*”) of life is unsuitable for use as a fundamental philosophical concept, for this would take the freest of movements and rigidify them as biological science or antisocial prejudice. Yet as the experience of becoming and as the closeness to death, life gives us an hint of how we are – before all interpretation. The key question of bioethics – How does life live itself humanely? – is in this sphere neither anthropocentric nor biologicistic. Man’s philosophy of life, which today bridges anthropology and ontology, can remain pertinent only as inquiry, when it effortlessly and selfoperatively reworks its own findings.

## III. Bioethics: on the art of living humanely

After the illusion of the powerful subject, with its belief in progress, has faded away, we discover what has always held true: we live as environment; we have been bios from the beginning. The ecology movement only applies a corrective to something that has impaired, as a blind spot, our art of life. Departure from anthropocentrism entails a rediscovery of “being-in-the-world,” a discovery of the richness of our existence and the responsibility that is bound up with it. We are the artificial ones of nature – that is, neither the self-fabricated ones nor the new gods. In today’s usage, “artificial” has been degraded to the opposite of “natural,” as if human arts did not merely carry out human nature and were not thus the most decisive confirmation of the human way of existing as nature. To live artificially means to be versed in the art of life, to be human without having to take a stand against other ways of nature. In bioethics one can find examples from the praxis of humanity (horrid examples as well), for our behaviour toward our fellow creatures is just as second-rate as our reaction to a scourge like AIDS. We are as we treat animals, and AIDS is

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Ödipus* (Frankfurt: 1977), translated into English as *AntiOedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: 1983).

the most relentlessly honest mirror of our selfconception we have today. As the artificial ones, we do not pass off responsibility, neither to extrahuman forces nor to the constraints of instrumental technology, but face up to the failures and successes of our art of life.

### 1. Animal testing: can a value be placed on life?

It was the humanist Schopenhauer, wrongly labeled a misanthrope, who recognized animals' ability to feel pain. He would occasionally, and only half in jest, proclaim his esteem for his poodle over the alltoo-human bipeds of his time. Schopenhauer's ethics of pity encompasses all suffering creatures! In the 150 years since Schopenhauer, the connection between humanity and love of animals is well documented. The more sensitive a person is toward his fellow humans, the more his feelings tend to extend to other forms of life as well, above all to creatures closely related to humans biologically. No doubt, disappointment with one's fellow humans often deepens the love for animals. But as we know, only those who have hoped too much can be disappointed: those who eventually grow into misanthropes are those who loved too much. As the disinclination grows to treat one's fellow humans as mere means and perceive oneself as mere social role, a corresponding transformation of our behavior toward animals can be observed. To be sure, dogs are still seen as the cheapest psychiatrists and the general appetite for Wiener schnitzel has hardly receded, yet nevertheless we now see animal protection activists defending the rights of animals with unprecedented militancy. Particularly radical people are driven by their love for animals to join the rapidly-growing numbers of hobby terrorists, who represent a novel and dangerous threat to the political order.

The magazine images of mice, cats, and monkeys subjected to inventive tortures in the service of science have torn away the white lab coat and shown the species-egotistical murderers in their nakedness. Anyone who in the face of the pitiless reality of animal experimentation can still praise man as the "top of the food chain" and justify claims to dominance with the complexity of our nature can claim but little humanity. Is it not shameless that man with his capacity for ethics can refer to the other nature with its supposed law of "eat or be eaten?" Can the presumption of innocence in animals apply to us, as creatures of reason? But it is reason itself that is upheld as a justification of animal experimentation. Does it not accord with reason to save a human life by destroying another one? What parents would not sacrifice a baby orangutan for the chance to save their own child? Is a cat supposed to have a greater right to life than I?

Such rationalization always provides its own immediate answers. The murderer mindset that places its own welfare thoughtlessly over all else and is not willing to deny itself any means, is masking itself as humanity. But the truth is, the constraints made to serve as arguments are constructed with the tools of instrumental reason, whose operations forget their origins, limit variation, and reckon with a fixed horizon. In a situation framed in these terms, only a saint, acting out of pity, will dare to take up the cause of his fellow creatures. But the process of life has nothing in common with the scenario of the anthropomorphic instrumentarium! The general criteria of viability and sensitivity to pain apply not only to humans. Anything that has life has the same right to life, and anything that can experience pain must not be injured. Is this idealistic ethic of Albert Schweitzer's (influenced by Schopenhauer), the "respect for all life," suitable topic for a Sunday sermon though it may be, never followed during the week? Will people really stop using animals to test toxic substances for their danger to humans?

A phenomenological ethics is not interested in casuistry. "What would be if and according to which criteria" is the game of analytical philosophy. An ethics that finds its sphere in the life-world in which it finds itself needs concrete guidelines. The sphere of today's life-world is without a doubt modern technology. Modern technology, however, is to a large extent still perceived within the sphere of manual trades and industry, as readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*), or else within the sphere of scientific knowledge, as objectivity (*Vorhandenheit*). Thus do fatal constraints arise, "real, existent suffering" is constructed, which is supposed to make it imperative to address problems immediately, to "tackle" them. But such long-obsolete (from the perspective of the life-world) perspectives as readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and objectivity (*Vorhandenheit*) no longer have any formative power. The sphere of modern technology is artificiality, and this art of life laughs at the transparent maneuver of ontologizing the sufferings and conflicts brought about by political and economic systems and by the systematic ignorance of the sciences. For this all-too-historical stupidity and power hunger have no right even to define for us what a problem is and which sufferings should be recognized. At best, science, state, and economy are the problems they pretend they are trying to solve!

How does this bear on the issue of animal testing? If one does not fall for the fallacy of a “value-free search for knowledge” or the myth of the devices that will help us along in a practical way, then it is soon evident how our knowledge of the world has violated the art of living. Driven by selfish economic interests, in flagrant ignorance of the current state of research, researchers perform on living beings experiments marked by absurd secrecy and a ridiculous obsession with “originality,” experiments whose contribution to the advancement of knowledge is at best marginal. Has an animal experiment of the past 40 years contributed anything “new” to our knowledge? The billions of tortured creatures were sacrificed for the sake of variation in the known world, for the sake of a more economical application of available fundamental knowledge, for the sake of repeated assurance. The most groundbreaking inventions of the present day, from information technology to biotechnology, were possible without any animal experimentation whatsoever. It is time we learned from them! The most decisive concept here is that of simulation (as it is in post-modernity, not coincidentally). The premodern penchant for the “real,” intensified in modernity to the extreme for the purpose of exploiting and exhausting nature must in accordance with our responsibility to life be overcome and replaced with simulation in the sphere of artificiality. What we need for a humane life is information alone, not as bytes, but in the strict sense of knowledge that affects us. It is from this vital information (all other information belongs to the category of environmental pollution) that our life-world is built, and made depictable in the computer as well.

To put it concretely: it should be mandated by law that all knowledge, whether acquired privately, by governments, or for economic purposes, should be deposited in the world database, so as to change constantly our depiction of the environment. Every person may retain the right to squander his or her time and means, and pursue inconsequential information or imagined pleasures. As we know, the very gods themselves struggled against stupidity. But no one has the right to encroach upon the rights of living creatures. Let the artificial cats die! Mentors can serve as mediators between the laboratory and the public to ensure that no experiment with living beings is carried out that is not sanctioned by our species’ right of self-defense. (A more detailed elucidation of the mentor concept can be found in my essay “Homo generator.”)<sup>8</sup>

It is characteristic of scientists’ everyday anthropocentrism that the horror at knowledge acquired by atrocity only then dawns when humans are affected. Recently, a controversy arose in the US about whether it could be ethically justified to make use of knowledge about human behavior acquired through ghastly concentration camp experiments.

A more mundane example is the dilemma brought about by blind clinical trials. From cancer to AIDS, researchers tested experimental drugs by deliberately withholding from a control group these potentially lifesaving medications in order to test their efficacy for future use in medical practice. What the dying cancer patients quietly endured for decades, namely their fate as guinea pigs, the AIDS patients refused to put up with for long. With the help of the gay civil rights movement, they were able to bring about the discontinuation of the control-group experiments and ensure that every patient gets the drugs that come fresh from the laboratory, whether they have been approved or not. AIDS, the new plague, has decisively changed our behaviour here as well. The end of the sexual revolution, which according to Foucault was only one of the discourses about sexuality, is just as marked by AIDS as is the beginning of a fundamentally altered understanding of death. War and premature meaningless death, which seemed to have been turned into mere television news items, returned to the midst of life.

But are such observations not mere self-reflections of the First World, that cartel of exploiters that call themselves the “developed countries?” What do the 100 million rotting children care about animal testing or even AIDS, children whose wretched lives of begging and prostitution end before the age of 20? Perhaps these victimized children envy their 40 million fellow sufferers who starve to death every year, because the developed world can offer only donations, but not the chance of survival. Has humanity not always been a monopoly of the ruling classes? The vast majority of the rest has experienced life – to use Schopenhauer’s words – as “business that does not cover its costs.” A negation of the will to live, an asceticism that avoids future suffering, the voluntary extirpation of the human species, according to Schopenhauer, would be the only realistic cure. Or should we keep hoping for history and its progress, for this masquerade with always the same actors? To take leave of anthropocentrism and experience death anew seems the more reasonable solution.

<sup>8</sup> See Wolfgang Schirmacher, “Homo Generator,” in *Eingriffe in das Leben*, ed. H.M. Gardner (Innsbruck: 1986), 9-19.

## 2. AIDS: enthusiasm for death vs. fear of life

The still-incurable disease AIDS has given a new reality to love and to death. The reactions to AIDS have been correspondingly hysterical, swinging between cries of “End of the world!” and a persistent denial of the individual peril to life. Some want to isolate all those infected with AIDS, while others, at the other extreme, refuse to acknowledge this sickness unto death at all, dismissing it as a metaphor. The fear of death is thrown into sharp relief by the confrontation with AIDS. How do we live? Who are we? A definition cannot grasp the person, but observing how we react to AIDS can deepen our understanding. The demand is made that death must be conquered (and up to a point, science promises this). Yet fear for one’s own life is the worst counsellor. Fear of death, as we know, causes life to atrophy; security constricts us, caution prompts us to become petty. It is not a life anymore if one constantly must ensure its safety.

On the contrary: death is integral to the art of life. “Running ahead to one’s own death,” a death that one can never die, intensifies life. It is as the artificial ones that we remain mortals: it is never about conquering death, it is only ever about having the power to die. Death brings solace; it is “the secret transmuted” (Albrecht Goes), the “friend who comes not to punish” (Matthias Claudius). According to Schopenhauer, however, death does not arrive; it has long since arrived at our birth. Heidegger called the death we need the “mountain range of being,” the measure of authenticity from which the “destining of Being” (*Seinsgeschichte*) are only released. Bataille taught enthusiasm for death<sup>9</sup> since death in life is to be greeted with joy and laughter.<sup>10</sup> A releasement-engendered vitality has left the lust for life behind, and an openness that is lived embraces death with joy. For one’s own death, just as is the other’s death, is only ever simulation for us, Baudrillard’s Simulacrum, an earnest play of possibilities. AIDS has made love essential once again, that most intimate path to one’s own and to the other self, which had degenerated into throw-away sex. He who fears death should not love, for every new lover can be the angel of death! From those infected by AIDS we learn: I recognize most clearly that I will die when I know when I will die. For then, the artificiality of human life becomes irrefutable, and I discover the responsibility that no theory has been able to derive. All the wasted hours and boring people who have kept me from essential life! The certainty, so seductive and so false, that I shall live forever and that there is still time to realize all my plans vanishes in view of my death. A life, my responsibility, this death – they show me how ethics in the sphere of artificiality is.

AIDS has brought back that great teacher of life, death.

Würzburg 1991.

## Authors’ contributions

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<sup>9</sup> Georges Bataille, *Die Aufhebung der Ökonomie*. (München: 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Die fatalen Strategien* (München 1985), translated into English as *Fatal Strategies* (London 1999).