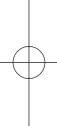
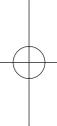




## *Chapter Eighteen*

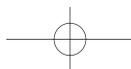
# **Giving Birth to Derrida's Mother: Philosophical Practice at the End of Philosophy**

Helen Douglas



This room is not large. On the tile floor are two woven rugs, one eggshell green and one pale yellow with a green geometric design. There are four chairs, a couple of cushions, and a small black table. There's a pot of found things: seeds, stones, a tiny bottle, porcupine quills, an esc key, dice, flakes from a tortoise shell, curling peels of bark. The yellow walls are hung with a few pieces by artist friends and a round slatted wooden light hangs from the ceiling. The window looks down a patched cobbled road toward the fishing harbor and the bay. Outside the door, tangled red and pink hibiscus branches are attended by little white-eyes, sunbirds, and Cape robins. By the gray garden wall, a rusty tin woman sits on her rusty tin swing. Right now, the first rain of the season is pouring down the brick steps and past the open door. This is where people come to talk with me about their lives.

When I began my philosophical counseling practice in 2002, I imagined it as a hostel for travellers who had become fatigued or disoriented. It would offer some shelter, companionship, local knowledge, and direction. A hostel is not a clinic. There is no doctor, no patient, no diagnosis, and no treatment, only engaged conversation about this person's life, about what is happening, what is to be done, and what it all means. In this way, philosophical practice offers both a salutary response to human suffering and a critical response to the professions of clinical psychology and psychiatry. In this chapter, I want to suggest that philosophical practice can also be a therapeutic and critical response to the profession of philosophy.



## THE END OF PHILOSOPHY

In 2010, physicist Stephen Hawking announced the death of philosophy:

What is the nature of reality? Where did all this come from? Did the universe need a creator? . . . Traditionally these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

No doubt this is so. Martin Heidegger saw it already fifty years ago. In “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” first published in 1964, he recognized that the “development of philosophy into the independent sciences . . . [is] the legitimate completion of philosophy,”<sup>2</sup> simply because Western philosophy has from the first been primarily concerned with metaphysics. With a broader perspective than Hawking’s, he sees this scientific-technological attitude extending into every field of knowledge. “Scientific” here signals a rational, objective methodology of “systematic observation, measurement and experiment, and the formulation, testing and modification of hypotheses.”<sup>3</sup> The end of philosophy isn’t just that scientists have become torchbearers; it’s that every truth must be scientific to be valid, and every knower must have scientific-professional credentials. Heidegger, like Hawking, approves of this:

[i]t suffices to refer to the independence of psychology, sociology, anthropology as cultural anthropology, to the role of logic as symbolic logic and semantics. Philosophy turns into the empirical science of man. . . . No prophecy is necessary to recognize that the sciences now establishing themselves will soon be determined and steered by the new fundamental science which is called cybernetics. This science corresponds to the determination of man as an acting social being. For it is the theory of the steering of the possible planning and arrangement of human labor. Cybernetics transforms language into an exchange of news. The arts become regulated-regulating instruments of information.<sup>4</sup>

Cybernetics (from Greek κυβερνητικός *kubernetes*, ‘steersman’) is “the science of communications and automatic control systems in both machines and living things.”<sup>5</sup> The traditional aims of social science—to predict and control—are cybernetic aims that require nothing more from philosophy.

The end of philosophy proves to be the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technological world and of the social order proper to this world. The end of philosophy means the beginning of the world civilization based upon Western European thinking.<sup>6</sup>

We are now living with that world civilization and its social order. For all its evident technological and scientific achievement, it has also yielded cruel inequalities of wealth and opportunity, and cascading social, economic, and environmental crises. All our institutions of state, civic, and religious order are plagued by various forms of corruption. Even so, the scientific attitude and technological character of this civilization cannot be questioned without the questioner appearing naïve or quaintly ‘philosophical.’ If our institutions are failing us, it must be that we have failed the institutions. Or perhaps we haven’t got the technology quite right. It’s a problem of leadership or design or regulation or skills. And yet. In this secular, rational, technological world, everything that was meant to serve society now serves to tear us apart. The cybernauts and technocrats shake their heads in perplexity.

Against Heidegger, I would suggest that, under the guise of scientific objectivity, our way of thinking has been depersonalized and dehumanized. In a word: corrupted. Along with philosophy, ethics and politics also end in technologies, rendering them either impotent and ineffective or produced through force and brutality. The rationality celebrated by Europe’s Enlightenment has been rolled out to justify the perpetration of slavery, imperialism, and other forms of mayhem across the world. More of the same—more cybernetic technology, more neoliberal capitalism, more social and institutional engineering, more cultural arrogance—will not provide a solution to this corruption and abjection. Only humans can save us now.

### THE TASK OF THINKING

There’s a certain inevitability that a philosophy that starts from ontological questions about being and the nature of things will end in the triumph of science. As Heidegger notes, “Each epoch of philosophy has its own necessity. We simply have to acknowledge the fact that a philosophy is the way it is.”<sup>7</sup> It’s not something broken that needs mending, a mistake to be corrected, or a disorder to be cured. We have arrived at our destination.

But doesn’t this also open the possibility for a new epoch, one whose necessary task will be to recover its humaneness? We don’t need more knowledge; we need the wisdom to understand what we already know. The end of philosophy thus does retain “a task for thinking,” as Heidegger puts it. We need to think differently, in a way that will dissolve the overwhelming dominion of scientific—and especially pseudo-scientific—rationalization.

I don’t know how to ‘think differently,’ but I have an idea that philosophical practice is one way to go about it. And even though Heidegger’s task of thinking—what he calls ‘the thinking in question’—is not the same as mine, it is not different either. This “same difference” suggests a link between philosophy and a philosophical practice.

Heidegger says his essay is driven by a persistent question “more primordial” than that of *Being and Time* about “what the matter of thinking is.”<sup>8</sup> My question, equally primordial, is about what being human signifies (and perhaps this is the matter of thinking). And it is the case for both questions that “[i]f the answer could be given it would consist in a transformation of thinking, not in a propositional statement about a matter at stake.”<sup>9</sup> Heidegger says we must look back to find something that was said at the beginning of philosophy and “even in virtue of that beginning,”<sup>10</sup> but which has “not been explicitly thought.”<sup>11</sup> I think so, too. If the task of thinking is to think differently, this different thinking has to be already present to philosophy, yet unacknowledged. It would be something we already know but don’t know that we know. “But above all,” writes Heidegger,

the thinking in question remains unassuming because its task is only of a preparatory, not of a founding character. It is content with awakening a readiness in man for a possibility whose contour remains obscure, whose coming remains uncertain. Thinking must first learn what remains reserved and in store for thinking to get involved in. It prepares its own transformation in this learning.<sup>12</sup>

Heidegger then looks to the philosophical tradition for guidance and finds “the call ‘to the thing itself,’”<sup>13</sup> which he traces from Plato through to Hegel and Husserl, who discern that the matter of philosophy is, in fact, subjectivity (variously “the subjectivity of consciousness,”<sup>14</sup> “absolute subjectivity,”<sup>15</sup> and “transcendental subjectivity”<sup>16</sup>): “[i]t is not the matter as such that is controversial for the call, but rather its presentation by which the matter itself becomes present.”<sup>17</sup> Using the image of a forest clearing, he notes that both light and an opening are needed for something to present itself to us. “Wherever a present being encounters another present being or even only lingers near it . . . there openness already rules, the free region is in play.”<sup>18</sup> He equates this opening of presence with ἀλήθεια (*aletheia*, ‘truth’<sup>19</sup>), Parmenides’ “untrembling heart of unconcealment.”<sup>20</sup> This opening cannot itself be thought, only experienced.<sup>21</sup> Unconcealment is itself self-concealing,<sup>22</sup> but it is the condition for the bond of “Being and thinking, that is, presence and apprehending.”<sup>23</sup> Reason cannot think this openness but openness is the ground of reason. In the closing paragraphs, where he will suggest that “Being and Time” gives way to “Opening and Presence” as the task of thinking,<sup>24</sup> Heidegger returns to the “technological scientific rationalization ruling the present age,” which justifies itself every day more surprisingly by its immense results. But this says nothing about what first grants the possibility of the rational and the irrational. The effect proves the correctness of technological scientific rationalization. But is the manifest character of what is exhausted by what is demonstrable? Doesn’t the insistence on what is demonstrable block the way to what is?

*Perhaps there is a thinking which is more sober-minded than the incessant frenzy of rationalization and the intoxicating quality of cybernetics. One might aver that it is precisely this intoxication that is extremely irrational. Perhaps there is a thinking outside of the distinction of rational and irrational, more sober-minded still than scientific technology, more sober-minded and hence removed, without effect, yet having its own necessity.*<sup>25</sup> (emphasis added)

My own thinking was not directed by philosophy's call "to the thing itself." It was first directed to philosophy by the sense that I had some responsibility to understand and to respond to the troubles of the world. This led me to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom "ethics"—one's inescapable and infinite responsibility for others—is "first philosophy." In a nutshell: "With the appearance of the human —and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal."<sup>26</sup>

Levinas's view of subjectivity is most comprehensively presented in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. I have explored it in depth elsewhere,<sup>27</sup> but here is a rough sketch. For Levinas, subjectivity is always relational and occurs on two levels: 'being' and 'ethics.' The subject is both a term of a relationship (in the common order of being) and the relationship itself (in the transcendent order of ethics). In the order of being, as *Dasein*, *conatus*, *cogito*, *homo oeconomicus*, I am a being that enjoys being and would like to carry on so. I live from the world and am the measure of all things. Things matter as they matter to me.

Then I discover that another person is not just another being for me. The other person breaks through this whatness to accuse me and command my responsibility, to call into question my place in the world. Levinas calls this the revelation of the Face of the Other: "the other man breaks through this composite precisely because his emergence as a Face, which is not just a plastic shape, but which is instantaneously a commitment for me, a call to me, an order to me, to put myself in the service of this Face."<sup>28</sup> This call doesn't come from brute force but through the other's authority—a peculiarly ethical authority that is simultaneously command, destitution, and vulnerability—such that the accusation is not alienating but as if originating from me, like a vocation, without me having done anything to deserve it.

The Face is "otherwise than being," a "non-phenomenon." "It escapes representation; it is the very collapse of phenomenality. Not because it is too brutal to appear, but because in a sense too weak, non-phenomenon because less than a phenomenon."<sup>29</sup> In fact, it acts very much like the self-concealing openness that Heidegger says is necessary for presence.

Levinas rightly speaks of the Face in world-shaking terms, but this exceptional relationship is evident whenever we simply do right by someone, without the *a priori* "because I should" mediation of reason or moral com-

mitments. Even if it's just to let the other pass first through a doorway or to refrain from eating in front of someone who may be hungry, Levinas refers to these moments when our relentless self-interest is brought up short by the appearance of another as "the little humanity that adorns the earth."<sup>30</sup> Turned to the face of the other, I get over myself and find myself in a different light. One can even notice a little gap there, between me-myself and me-I, between being for-myself and being for-the-other. This is the gap in which Levinas works and where he finds the ethical priority in our identity.

As Levinas tells it, if there were only one other person in the world, I wouldn't have a problem: I would just have to accommodate and serve this one. But I do have a problem because the revelation of the Face also reveals my responsibility for all the "other others," all of humanity accusing me with the same immediacy. In responsibility, I am suddenly concerned with justice and peace. I have to figure out who these ones are to me and to each other, and what is owed to each. All these uncertainties push me into consciousness, to thinking and to language, to social institutions, to science and technology, all of which then develop their own necessary substance and logic, and, in the process, cover over the transcendent goodness that inspired them. The movement from presentation to representation is a kind of necessary violence, the reduction of the infinite otherness of the Face to comparisons and categories and totalities: categories and totalities within which the others, each one unique and irreplaceable, continue to provoke and to signify, calling me and my institutions again into question. This interplay of the realms of *ethics* (the Face, infinity, non-indifference, responsibility) and *being* (matter, totality, interest, reason) is something like the *yin-yang* concept in Chinese philosophy: interconnected and interdependent as shadow and light, they continually give rise to and overcome each other, but the weak force, like water, always prevails against the strong. The Face, as Levinas says, is both "what's exposed to murder and what resists murder."<sup>31</sup>

In this way, Levinas's analysis sets out the task for thinking at the end of philosophy that Heidegger sought. The task is not concerned with "man's ecstatic sojourn in the openness of presencing,"<sup>32</sup> but with responding to what that presence reveals to me and about me. This thinking-of-the-other—the thinking in question—is present at and for the beginning of philosophy; it remains implicit to knowing yet cannot be known; it is, as Heidegger predicted, a thinking "accessible neither to philosophy as metaphysics nor, and even less so, to the sciences stemming from philosophy;"<sup>33</sup> it is precisely "a thinking outside of the distinction of rational and irrational, more sober-minded still than scientific technology, more sober-minded and hence removed, without effect, yet having its own necessity."<sup>34</sup>

By locating the Other at the center of subjectivity, Levinas's work rocks Western philosophy the way that Copernicus's heliocentric solar system did astronomy. The stars and planets still cross the heavens as they always have,

but their patterns now signify differently. People still go about their business, for better or worse, but it turns out we are oriented by the grace of love as fundamentally as we are by the gravity of self-interest. That is, if Levinas is right.

### PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

At the end of an era, we're looking for a way to think differently, to reason differently, to awaken "a readiness . . . for a possibility."<sup>35</sup> Levinas's exploration of thinking's subjective ethical origins opens a way to do that. But this thinking doesn't want to abandon reason or science or philosophy. It doesn't take anything on faith. So how can we test Levinas's findings? Not objectively in a laboratory. Not abstractly in a book. Only through direct practical experience. As in phenomenology, as in Goethean science, this thinking is not some sequestered interiority looking out at some object of knowledge. To use John Shoter's distinction, it is not "thinking-about" but "thinking-with."<sup>36</sup> We find ourselves and each other caught up in the midst of life. We participate. We take part.

My counseling practice has developed alongside a growing field of Levinas-inspired psychotherapy.<sup>37</sup> If Levinas is right, then we could expect that a civilization like ours, based on the idea that we are only isolated and self-interested beings, would certainly drive people to distraction and despair, and we could expect that relief might be found in a relationship that honored and relied upon our originary ethical inter-relatedness.

In a 2008 essay called "Levinas in Practice: Face-to-Face and Side by Side,"<sup>38</sup> I described my work as double-faceted, attentive to both realms of ethics and being. In the face-to-face relationship, welcoming the other is my immediate and ongoing concern. In the side-by-side work of conversation, we try to sort out together whatever needs sorting out. That paper ended with two questions. First was the professional-development question of what philosophical counselors should know in order to be useful to the people who consult us. "What tools should be in our toolbox, what provisions in our cupboard?" I asked, already realizing that it likely couldn't be standardized.<sup>39</sup>

This question has turned out to be an open one. Whatever one knows, it doesn't matter as much as knowing what one doesn't know. I don't know the other's world and what it means to her. I don't understand her. I surely don't know her better than she knows herself. I have to learn from her so that we might come to understanding together. That said, we also share this world and its realities, so I have to be able to draw on my own experience and sensibility, including what I've studied and tried to think through. The broader and deeper my resources, the more I can offer the other and the more I can

stir her up. As Gerd Achenbach wrote, “Only as a fellow thinker and fellow feeler is [the philosopher] able to liberate the visitor from his loneliness or forlornness, and by these means help him to change his opinions about life and his circumstances.”<sup>40</sup> We have to meet as equals.

In the last few years, by way of Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, I have reconceived my counseling practice as a practice of emancipation that is grounded in Levinasian ethics and carried out in conversation.<sup>41</sup> It offers conditions in which the other can “conceive of his human dignity, take the measure of his intellectual capacity and decide how to use it,” to quote Rancière.<sup>42</sup> As an ‘ignorant philosopher,’ I have nothing to teach my visitors except that I have nothing to teach them, and that they are perfectly capable of learning for themselves.

My second question asked what the practice of philosophical counseling would bring to the discipline of philosophy.

I would now say that there are several things the counselor could tell the academician: that philosophy didn’t begin just once, once upon a time in Greece. It begins anew with each person who is caught up in a question. It begins each time in restlessness, disappointment, frustration or wonder. Meaning is always meaning *to someone*. That the measure of the work is pragmatic: how useful it is for that person in terms of that question. Is it emancipatory? Does it cut through the tangles of confusion? Does it affirm our dignity? Does it enhance our ability to live, love, and work well? That there isn’t much call for abstract or universal terminology, but poetry comes naturally. In each relationship that struggles to name or express *this* particular experience, a fresh dialect (like lovers’ pillow talk) sprouts and shoots up. Even the most commonplace words generate layers of metaphor and meaning as they pass between us.

It isn’t yet philosophy proper—and may never be—but this is how philosophy begins: in practice, in relationship, in conversation, in desire and struggle. We come to our senses. We awaken and develop our ability to know for ourselves what is true and what is right and what is good. This work reconnects us to the ancient appreciation of philosophy as direct and personal, as a way of life, and of its importance for a life well lived and for the alleviation of suffering.

Beyond the one-to-one of philosophical counseling, this reconnection with Western philosophy’s perpetual beginning as a personal and human concern—and especially the theoretical and practical reconnection of knowledge to ethics (via Levinas)—opens a path toward another possibility for philosophy itself.

## THINKING DIFFERENTLY

All this talk of philosophy's proper dissolution into the "empirical science of man" refers only to the dominant mainstream of Western philosophy, which is also the philosophy of Western domination. If Levinas is right about goodness and Heidegger is right about the triumph of the cybernetic technology, and if this so-called 'scientific' attitude is actually dehumanized zombie-think, then we would expect to find animated human opposition and resistance to that corruption cropping up all over. As we do.

Since Heidegger's time, the academy has seen developments in interdisciplinary critical thinking, notably in feminist and gender studies, postcolonial studies, and critical race theory: different thinking by and for philosophy's historically excluded 'others.' Drawing resources from specific embodied identities and histories—*qua* black, *qua* woman, *qua* native—they work to restore the dignity and worth of forms of life and ways of knowing that have been misunderstood, misrepresented, and debased by 'European civilization.' Another line of critique comes from within, from philosophers who carry on the lineage of Western critical theory and Europe's own struggles for liberty, equality, and fraternity (which should not be forgotten). These theorists are busy stealing fire at the line drawn between center and periphery, pointing out crossovers and co-dependencies and exposing the workings of coercive force.

But, if Levinas is right, all this critical thinking in the realm of being—of politics, power, and interest—is also at risk of forgetting its latent origin in the responsibility of the one for the other. If we think that justice is a principle or an ideal to strive for, we are at risk of instituting further violence and injustice in our struggle against injustice. If we don't find a way to remember (to unconceal) that justice is first of all justice for the other, and first of all my responsibility, then this work will not take us all the way to a new thinking and to a human philosophy (rather than another philosophy of the human).

For Levinas, as a Jew and a philosopher, the Nazi Holocaust is "the key experience" of his life and his thought.<sup>43</sup> How could twenty centuries of European culture lead to Auschwitz? France Guwy gives a condensed answer:

Despite his respect and admiration for European civilization, the experience of fascism prompted Levinas's fundamental criticism of Western thought. Because, he says, Western thought places the Self in the middle of all things, [it] tends to become totalitarian by the very fact that it ignores the radical experience of the Other.<sup>44</sup>

In this interview with Guwy, Levinas describes his research:

as governed by what I consider to be an imbalance within this civilization between the basic theme of knowledge and the basic theme of the relationship with the Other. . . . But I don't think that the solution consists in a change in the principles of this civilization. I think that, within this civilization, by giving a central role to elements that were on the sidelines, there might be a solution.<sup>45</sup>

This is new thinking for the West, which thrives on the logic of dualism and identity, good and evil, black and white, A is not B. But if consciousness itself has its hidden origin in goodness, then all of our thought has to contain a trace of that, however corrupted or concealed.

Levinas suggests something similar in *Totality and Infinity*: "Like a shunt every social relation leads back to the presentation of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face."<sup>46</sup> And this, from *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*: "Philosophy is called upon to conceive ambivalence, to conceive it in several times."<sup>47</sup> Along with the logic of reason, there is also this ambivalence between being and otherwise-than-being, synchrony and diachrony, presence and proximity. Which is to say, there is nothing wrong with the pursuit of abstract or productive knowledge, but there is something wrong when it is out of balance with our concern and responsibility for others, and for the harm that is done to them. To correct the balance, we conceive ambivalence, trace our social relations back to the other, and bring to the center elements that have been sidelined. We put our thinking in question. It's a practice.

#### DERRIDA'S MOTHER?

I don't know what a human philosophy would be, but it starts with a sense of having lost our way. It starts with a call to responsibility, to think differently, to think for and with others, which means taking part, in person. It means coming to our senses. It calls for conversation and collaboration and solidarity, which means equality and respect. As good scientists, we will judge our truth by the effects of its application. As seekers, by where it leads us. "If the answer could be given it would consist in a transformation of thinking, not in a propositional statement about a matter at stake."<sup>48</sup>

Writing this chapter has provided an opportunity for appraisal. As a practitioner, I have learned to find my own way and I have helped others to do so as well. None of us, I would guess, has ended up where we would have predicted or by the most 'efficient' route, but we have kept company with ourselves and each other, and something deep and trustworthy has been learned.

As a philosophical thinker—and as a woman—I am intrigued to notice that this practice runs on qualities that are not celebrated in Western philoso-

phy: passivity, willingness, care, humbleness, discretion. Feminine qualities. Which is to say, qualities that the fathers of philosophy assigned to Woman, qualities scorned and dismissed as ‘slave morality.’ But when people come to this small hostel, when they are beside themselves with hurt and fear and confusion, it is these soft virtues that allow me to be present usefully and without harm.

What would it mean to give these elements a central role in philosophy? Is the task for thinking “women’s work” (no matter who does it)? When Levinas proposed that the Feminine is philosophy’s Other or when he described the basis of ethical subjectivity as radical passivity and Passion, I wonder if this isn’t what he was indicating. Jacques Derrida had a similar idea in deconstruction, which was also mobilized in the name of justice. Derrida was once asked which philosopher he would like to have been his mother. I will close with his charming reply, as an invocation of that “possibility whose contour remains obscure, whose coming remains uncertain”:

A philosopher couldn’t be my mother . . . Because the figure of the philosopher is, for me, always a masculine figure . . . All the deconstruction of phallogocentrism is the deconstruction of what one calls philosophy which, since its inception, has always been linked to a paternal figure. So, a philosopher is a Father, not a Mother. So the philosopher that would be my mother would be a post-deconstructive philosopher . . . An inheritor. A woman philosopher who would reaffirm the deconstruction. And consequently, would be a woman who thinks. Not a philosopher. I always distinguish thinking from philosophy. A thinking mother—it’s what I both love and try to give birth to.<sup>49</sup>

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13. *Ibid.*, 379.
14. *Ibid.*, 381.
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