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“Ontology, Metaphysics, Ethics and Nihilism. Essay on Nietzsche and Heidegger”

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Abstract: When one undertakes research on Nietzsche, a confrontation with Heidegger’s interpretation of his philosophy is almost unavoidable. Widely known, particular and influent, this interpretation is nevertheless problematic and its analysis, particularly of its occurrence in *Holzwege*, leads to a questioning of the generally admitted notions of ontology, metaphysics, ethics, and nihilism. These notions are an integral part of the philosophical vocabulary and never seem to pose a problem. I am claiming here that, although they might seem quite univoqual and clear, these terms do pose a problem, at least when one wants to analyse Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche.

I will divide this paper according to the following plan. I will begin by presenting Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche as it appears in *Holzwege*. This interpretation will lead us to the first question: how to define “ontology”, “metaphysics”, and “ethics” and how to relate them. From this question, and its tentative answer, I will move to the question of Heidegger’s possible nihilism. This discussion will lead us to another question: what is nihilism exactly? With my answer to this question, the circle will be closed and I will determine whether there is nihilism in Nietzsche, as Heidegger claims.

1 Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche

Before presenting Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche, it is important to present his definition of “metaphysics” and “nihilism” since he says that Nietzsche presents a metaphysical thought and since he accuses Nietzsche’s philosophy of being nihilistic.

According to Heidegger, metaphysics “denkt das Seiende als das Seiende” [Hei67, p. 195]. It

speaks only indirectly of *Sein*¹, never addressing it directly in its purity. In his introduction to “Was ist Metaphysik?”, he reviews Descartes’ tree of philosophy to illustrate the indirect relation between metaphysics and *Sein* [Hei67, p. 195-196]. This tree presents metaphysics as being the roots of the tree, physics its trunk and its principal branches as being medicine, mechanics, and morals. Heidegger argues that the metaphysical roots of the tree support him but that the tree itself does not lie on them but rather on the soil, the soil representing the domain of *Sein* underlying the *Seienden*. Philosophy thus takes its essence and its necessity from *Sein* and not from *Seienden* but *Sein* keeps hidden as the nurrishing soil does.

Metaphysics is thus a discourse on *Seienden*. But it is a two-branched discourse. In “Was ist Metaphysik?”, Heidegger uses Aristotle’s Metaphysics, and following it, distinguishes two discourses of metaphysics: 1- discourse on *Seienden* as *Seienden* in general, and 2- discourse on the *Seienden* of the divine² [Hei67, p. 207]. But neither acts as a foundation, *Sein* underlying both. Furthermore, says Heidegger, the metaphysical discourse has a double character: 1- it embraces totality, and 2- since it embraces totality, the questioner which is a part of this totality is himself taken into the question. That leads him to say that metaphysics is man’s nature, the foundation of human reality. In brief, metaphysics thinks *Seienden*, speaks only indirectly of *Sein* and is thus an active “forgetting of *Sein*”³ Let us see how

¹In the following I will use the german *Sein* and *Seiende* in place of Being wherever the differentiation is of importance

²But is not the divine supposed to be the supreme foundation? It seems to me that such an affirmation is to be understood from an epistemological point of view. Heidegger probably wants to say that we could know “better” the divine (foundation of *Seienden*) from its *Sein*. The true foundation of *Seienden* would not be in the *Sein* of the divine but rather in the *Sein* of the *Seienden* of the divine which could be found in a true thought about *Sein*. For the Aristotelian discussion of the discourse of metaphysics cf. *Metaphysics*, Γ, E, K.

³This may sound a little bizzare to say that metaphysics is a forgetting of *Sein*. Heidegger’s text, in “Brief über den Humanismus”, goes as follow: “das Wesen des Humanismus metaphysisch ist und das heißt jetzt, daß die Metaphysik die Frage nach der Wahrheit des Seins nicht nur

Heidegger defines nihilism. In “Die Überwindung der Metaphysik” the definition goes as follows: “Das seinsgeschichtliche Wesen des Nihilismus ist die Seinsverlassenheit,...” [Hei54, p. 91]. The field which thus seems the most liable to nihilism is metaphysics since it speaks only indirectly of *Sein* even though it is its foundation. He effectively says, in *Holzwege*, “Der Bereich für das Wesen und das Ereignis des Nihilismus ist die Metaphysik selbst.” [Hei63, p. 204] In Heidegger, we thus find the adequation metaphysics=nihilism.

From these Heideggerian definitions of metaphysics and nihilism, it is easy to see why he accuses Nietzsche of being a nihilist. According to Heidegger, even though Nietzsche tries to overcome metaphysics and nihilism⁴ his philosophy remains a metaphysics. Since any metaphysics “forgets” *Sein*, any metaphysics is nihilistic. Since Nietzsche’s thought presents a metaphysics, it is accordingly nihilistic.

But beyond Heidegger’s adequation between metaphysics and nihilism which leads him to his conclusion about Nietzsche’s nihilism, we find two elements in his analysis of the will to power which support his primary judgment. He first analyses the sense of the locution “will to power” and his conclusion about it is that what stands at the center of Nietzsche’s metaphysics is the power and it is this power which posits values, values comprising, beside others, the value of *Sein*. *Sein* is thus relegated to the rank of a “simple” value. The will to power, after its first slaying of God, commits the “radical slain”, that of *Sein*.

The second point comes with Heidegger’s misuse of a quotation out of the third dissertation of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. The quotation goes as follows: “...eher will er noch das Nichts wollen, als nicht wollen.”⁵ Heidegger uses this quotation without its context and concludes that Nietzsche here speaks of the will to power and that it means that the will to power wills reality but reality as nothingness, that the will to power wills nihilation.

nicht stellt, sondern verbaut insofern die Metaphysik in der Seinsvergessenheit verharret.” [Hei67, p. 175].

⁴ One should not however confuse Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s views of nihilism. We will see later how the distinction presents itself.

⁵Nietzsche, F., KSA 5, Dritte Abhandlung, § 1, p. 339.

But in consulting the context of Nietzsche’s utterance, we see how Heidegger is mistaken and we can reject his conclusion about the will to power.

Nietzsche says:

“... darin drückt sich die *Grundthat-sache des menschlichen Willens* aus, sein horror vacui: er braucht ein Ziel, - und eher will er noch das Nichts wollen, als nicht wollen.” Nietzsche, F., *ibid.*⁶

It is here clear that Nietzsche speaks about the human will and not about the will to power. These two things are radically different in Nietzsche. Human will is a manifestation of a will to power but should not be adequated with it. A will to power is always at the ground of the human will but the human will is not a pure expression of it. One should not take one for the other, a mistake Heidegger here commits.

The context of the quotation explains clearly what Nietzsche means by that. The third dissertation of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* is an analysis of the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche is highly critical toward this ideal and one of his reproach toward it is that the ascetic, nihilistic, man wills the nothing, nothingness.

“...einer unio mystica mit Gott ist das Verlangen des Buddhisten [the buddhist being one example of the ascetic man] in’s Nichts, Nirvâna - und nicht mehr!”⁷

But let us go back to Heidegger’s analysis in general. In *The Authority of Language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the Threat of Philosophical Nihilism* [Edw90], J. C. Edwards examines Heidegger’s analysis and shows that it is based upon two arguable assumptions: 1- any philosophy must contain (or be) a metaphysics and 2- any metaphysics is nihilistic. Edwards goes on to say that Heidegger’s first assumption leads him to do anything possible to make of Nietzsche a metaphysician by interpreting the philosophy of the will to power as a new metaphysics.

⁶My underlining.

⁷Nietzsche, F., KSA 5., Erste Abhandlung, §6, p. 266.

If Edward's analysis is right, and I think it is, it would seem sufficient to counter Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche to show either that 1- any philosophy is not necessarily a metaphysics, or does not contain one or if it takes as its ground a metaphysics, then it is not a metaphysics in the Heideggerian sense (this would have to be the case with Nietzsche's philosophy) or 2- that any metaphysics is not necessarily nihilistic (again, this would have to be the case with Nietzsche).

To decide of these questions, one would need to enter a detailed analysis of Nietzsche's thought and try to determine whether we are presented with a new metaphysics or not. The question being rather important and the specialists being far from an agreement on the matter, I will leave it aside. My interest being in the Nietzschean ethics, I do not want to enter an ontological debate on the validity of Heidegger's judgment. Why then, since this one springs out of an ontological point of view? Because I think that here lies the fundamental mistake of Heidegger, that is of having wanted to analyse a thought from a strict ontological point of view when this thought elaborates itself from another domain: ethics.

What does it mean? Do I want to say that ontology and ethics are radically separated fields in philosophy? Do ontology and ethics exclude each other in philosophy? The answer I will give here to this question can throw a light on my opinion that Heidegger's position is strictly ontological whereas Nietzsche's position is principally ethical and thus that Heidegger's critic is not located on the same level.

2 Ontology vs ethics; ontology vs metaphysics

In ontology, one tries to answer the question "what does exist?", "what is?". The fundamental question of ontology is the question about being. As the science of being (litterally: "discourse on being"), ontology is a fundamental discourse on reality. The task of ontology will thus be to determine what it is to "be" and thus to circumscribe the domain of being, reality. We could qualify this task as being essentially descriptive. For its part, ethics

tries to answer the question "what should I do?". The fundamental question of ethics is thus a question of ideal, of a model. As the science of doing, ethics proposes models, norms, and principles of action. The ethical task is thus normative.

But does an ethical question necessarily follow from an ontological question? It seems that, when we stick to the strict determination of the domain of being, no ethical proposition would *necessarily* spring out of it. In saying what being is, one does not say how it should be. One does not posit any norm for being, one only says what it is and what its domain is⁸.

Do we find the same phenomenon regarding the ethical question? Does an ontological question necessarily emanate from an ethical question? Does the question "what should I do?" contain the question "what is?". Should the question about being obligatorily be answered before formulating an ethical thinking?⁹

As a question of "ought-to-be" and as a question of "how-to-act", ethics addresses itself to the individual. Man is himself of the domain of being, either through his whole being or by the presence in him of the soul, of reason (according to what one holds as being part of being). After what we said earlier about the task of ontology, it would seem that the concept of man, as he is a participant in being, would receive its definition from ontology. Ethics, which proposes a normative model to man must at least have a certain notion of the individual it deals with. As ethics must have a concept of man, it would seem that the ethical reflexion needs the participation of ontology for this part of its reflexion: that of giving a definition of

⁸ But if we think about Aristotle, it would seem that a normative dimension is a part of ontology. According to him, being is such only when it accomplishes itself according to the norms which are its possessions (let us think here about the *Categories*).

⁹ Let us think again for a moment about the tree of philosophy presented by Descartes. The roots of the tree are constituted by metaphysics, the trunk by physics, and the main branches by mechanics, medicine, and MORAL. Following Descartes then, we should say that the ethical question is necessarily underlied by a metaphysical question. We will later see that the roots and the trunk, metaphysics and physics, can be understood as constituting, in their reunion, the domain of ontology. Which is to say that ontology necessarily underlies ethics.

the concept of man. But one must avoid positing an adequation between man and being. What is is not man and man is not what is. Being is a domain which embraces much more than man and which contains him only as a particular occurrence of being among many others.

But is that really the only participation of ontology to the ethical reflexion? Ethics addresses itself to man as an acting being. Action is not internal to man but is accomplished in the world. The question “what should I do?” implies an agent, man, and a domain in which action is accomplished and which comprises the objects affected by this action, the world. As ontology must give a definition of man, it must give a definition of the world as well.

We should therefore conclude that any ethical reflexion presents a concept of man and a concept of the world drawn from an ontology. One must have certain conceptions of what is before proposing a “what-to-do” in view of a “ought-to-be”. That is to say that the ontological question must be answered before the ethical questioning arises. But this does not mean that any ethical thinking must present an ontological reflexion. All that it means is that all ethical thinking contains ontological presuppositions. All an ethics in continuity with ontological tenants must respect, is the essential determination of being which is held.

Let us resume to make our conclusion clear. Traditionally, ontology does not only describe nature. The domain of ontology comprises the sensible world as well as the suprasensible world (God, the soul, etc...). Furthermore, in answering the question “what is?”, the ontological reflexion also answers to “how is it?”. As I said earlier, this question embraces the soul and thus man as he possesses one. From this point of view the ethical question would be a natural extension of the ontological question. From “what is and how?” we proceed naturally to “what should I do?”, in the sense that ethics proposes a normative ideal which in general, if not always, tries to bring the actual being of man to its being, its ontological nature. The ontological question is self-sufficient, it does not need to have any ethical presuppositions, but ethics must have ontological presuppositions in order to be formulated.

But here arises the question of the interchangeability of the terms “metaphysics” and “ontology”. In an article about the Heideggerian overcoming of metaphysics, Laurent Giroux points to what Heidegger says of metaphysics as a principal knowing of *Seienden* in its totality and concludes that, for Heidegger, “Thus understood, metaphysics is nothing else than traditional ontology.” [Gir75, p. 213]¹⁰. Should we follow Heidegger in using the terms as equivalents? This explains however the fact that Heidegger speaks of a metaphysics of the will to power and of the eternal return when I think we should rather talk about an ontology answering the question of being with the will to power and eternal return, ontology which would be the presupposition to the ethics of the *Übermensch*. Let us see how.

Let us first consider the etymology of the terms. “Ontology”, *ontos logos*, means: discourse on being. “Metaphysics”, *meta ta physica*, means: beyond physics, thus designating the suprasensible world. From an etymological point of view, it would thus seem that we cannot talk of an interchangeability of the terms. But as Heidegger indicates it in his text, “Was ist Metaphysik?”, we can identify two preoccupations of metaphysics if we refer ourselves to Aristotle, that is the domain of being in general and the domain of the divine¹¹. Would metaphysics be a reunion of physics and metaphysics? If this is admitted, we can talk about the equivalence between “metaphysics” and “ontology”.

But if we consider the evolution of the usage of the term “metaphysics”, we see that the metaphysical preoccupation has principally oriented itself toward the determination of the things of the soul and the divine. In considering the etymology of the terms as well as the evolution of the term “metaphysics”, I will then adopt the following definition of the metaphysical questioning: the questioning which considers the determination of the existence of the suprasensible (God, the soul, etc...) as this one is perceived as the efficient cause of the sensible world. By the same

¹⁰My translation of: “Ainsi comprise, la métaphysique n’est rien d’autre que l’ontologie traditionnelle.”

¹¹ Cf. section 1 of this paper, Heideggerian definition of metaphysics.

token, I adopt the second sense Heidegger finds in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, which is the sense developed by the philosophical tradition.

Taking this definition for granted, the conclusion follows that “ontology” and “metaphysics” cannot be equivalent but rather that metaphysics is a branch of ontology, most important branch since it considers the source of existence. A revision of Descartes’ tree of philosophy is thus necessary and goes as follow: the roots and the trunk are constituted by ontology (the roots being specifically metaphysics and the trunk specifically physics) and the branches are mechanics, medicine, and moral.

If metaphysics is only a branch of ontology, what can we say of the fact that Heidegger considers the thought of the will to power and of the eternal return as being metaphysical (for, let us not forget that this interpretation is at the basis of his argument on Nietzsche’s nihilism)? Are we dealing with metaphysics or with ontology in Nietzsche? Since the will to power and eternal return are foundations of reality, should we not say that we are here dealing with a metaphysics (understood as source of existence)? Or rather, are we dealing with an ontology (as will to power and eternal return are not understood as suprasensible by Nietzsche, but rather of “this world”)? Would not Nietzsche answer to his destitution of traditional metaphysics with a new ontology without a metaphysics instead of replacing it by a metaphysics with new components¹²?

Now we see a new possibility to counter Heidegger’s argument concerning Nietzsche’s nihilism. As Edwards tells us, Heidegger holds that any philosophy must contain a metaphysics and that all metaphysics is nihilistic. Considering the adequation Heidegger posits between “metaphysics” and “ontology”, we revise this by saying: any philosophy must contain an ontology. According to our earlier conclusion, we cannot but agree with this affirmation. The first Heidegge-

rian presupposition thus satisfies us. But what about the second, that which says that all metaphysics is nihilistic? Should we change the term “metaphysics” to “ontology”? Does Heidegger really mean that all ontology is nihilistic? It would seem rather contradictory to say that the science of being ends up in “nothingness”. I therefore think, for the moment, that one should read the two presuppositions as follows: any philosophy must contain an ontology and any metaphysics (considered as a branch of ontology oriented toward the suprasensible) is nihilistic. In examining the Nietzschean critic of the metaphysical tradition we would see that Nietzsche also considers traditional metaphysics as being nihilistic, even though his reasons for that are not the same as that of Heidegger.

What is then our counter-argument to Heidegger? Any philosophy contains an ontology. Granted. Any metaphysics is nihilistic. Granted. But Nietzsche’s philosophy does not produce a metaphysics but rather a new ontology without metaphysics. The will to power and eternal return are to be understood in the natural and sensible frame. One is not dealing here with the realm of absolutes and suprasensible entities but really with the sensible motor of the world itself. These two concepts would thus be a part of the branch “physics” of ontology and not of the branch “metaphysics”. To report ourselves to the image of the tree, the will to power and the eternal return¹³ are certainly foundations of reality but are not to be found in the roots but rather in the trunk of the tree. This makes of the thought of the will to power and of the eternal return an ontology without metaphysics and thus cannot be considered as being nihilistic, since we cannot apply the second Heideggerian presupposition to it¹⁴.

¹²The Nietzschean critic toward the metaphysical tradition is specifically oriented toward what I have indicated as the part of ontology which addresses itself to the suprasensible, since he considers that it is the notion of a division between sensible and suprasensible which places the suprasensible as normative ideal and domain of truth which is the cause of the alienation in which man finds himself.

¹³ I include the notion of eternal return only to counterweight Heidegger who considers both will to power and eternal return as going hand in hand. This is for me far from evident and the numerous attempts to interpret the eternal return as a physical principle are far from convincing to me. I rather think that we should consider the eternal return as a thought experiment necessary for the Nietzschean ethics, as an hypothesis. The text from aphorism 341 of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* indicates it in the formulation of the first sentence: “Wie, *wenn* dir eines Tages oder Nachts...” (Nietzsche, F., *KSA* 3, p. 570, my underlining).

¹⁴ But one can ask whether an ontology without meta-

I pointed earlier to the adequation Heidegger posits between "ontology" and "metaphysics". This has led me to reformulate the Heideggerian presuppositions in the following way: any philosophy must contain an ontology and any metaphysics (understood as a branch of ontology) is nihilistic. But does this mean that the entire ontology is nihilistic? Does the characterisation of a part, here metaphysics, determine the whole, here ontology? We can propose an answer in analysing the text "Was ist Metaphysik?" but as we will see, here arises a rather big problem for Heideggerians.

3 Heidegger a nihilist?

Let us examine "Was ist Metaphysik?" and *Holzwege*. The analysis of the first present compromising points for the analysis presented by Heidegger in the second, this keeping in mind the two presuppositions which guide Heidegger's argumentation in *Holzwege*. In this text, Heidegger proposes the interpretation of the will to power as being a will to nothingness [Hei63, p. 217f]¹⁵. The will to power being the foundation of the Nietzschean philosophy, of what Heidegger sees as the Nietzschean metaphysics, this philosophy has then a foundation which wills nothingness, which orients itself toward nothingness, which is itself nihilistic.

Let us consider certain affirmations brought by Heidegger in "Was ist Metaphysik?". We first find the following: "... das Nichts ist ursprünglicher als das Nicht und die Verneinung." [Hei67, p. 6]. How can we interpret this affirmation which seems, at first, rather trivial? We could interpret it as meaning that nothingness is primary. This brings us to the question: would not nihilism as will to nothingness (Heideggerian interpretation of the will to power) be then a will of the return to the primary?

We should not conclude too fast and consult what Heidegger has else to say about nothing-

physics is even possible. What is then left? Only physics? If this would be true, a physical theory which would correctly describe the universe would lead us to the elimination of ontology as a philosophical field.

¹⁵We saw in section 1 of this paper how he is wrong concerning the will to power.

ness. He says, "Das Nichts gibt nicht erst den Gegenbegriff zum *Seienden* her, sondern gehört ursprünglich zum Wesen [1949 edition: Wesen des Seins] selbst." [Hei67, p. 12]. This means literally that nothingness is at the beginning a part of *Sein*.

Heidegger goes even further. In the same article he affirms "Das reine *Sein* und das reine Nichts ist also dasselbe." Dieser Satz Hegels (*Wissenschaft der Logik*, I. Buch, WWIII, S.74), besteht zu Recht." [Hei67, p.17]. No mistake is possible here, Heidegger expresses his agreement with the Hegelian thesis of the adequation between nothingness and being.

What does this mean? Not only nothingness is a part of being, but more: it is the same as being. The return to being should then be a return to nothingness. If we add to this the following affirmation taken out of "Die Überwindung der Metaphysik",

"...daß die Metaphysik aus dem *Sein* selbst und die Überwindung der Metaphysik als Verwindung des Seins sich ereignet." [Hei54, p. 72]

we come up with the overcoming of metaphysics as being the acceptance of nothingness.

Following these complementary affirmations of Heidegger, we ask again: Would not nihilism as will to Nothingness (Heideggerian interpretation of the will to power) be the same as a will to return to the primary? Is not the overcoming of metaphysics as the acceptance of *Sein*/Nothingness exactly what Heidegger interprets as the will to power (will to Nothingness and acceptance of this one)? Where is the problem of the philosophy of the will to power if this one is effectively a will to Nothingness? Heidegger wants a return to *Sein*. Following what I noted in the preceding paragraphs one can ask: is not a return to Nothingness the same exact thing? Again, let us repeat it, where is the problem of the will to power's nihilism if a return to *Sein*/Nothingness is wished?

The problem I announced for the Heideggerians is the following. According to Heidegger, the big crime of metaphysics is to be an active "forgetting" of *Sein*, that is, not to have posited the question regarding *Sein*, to have talked only

about *Seienden*. He specifies that this seems to be the nature of metaphysics. He insists to say that thought must bring about the question of *Sein*, that we must return to *Sein*. The metaphysical tradition is nihilistic because it was not successful in bringing this question about, in returning to *Sein*. Is Heidegger's thought successful where the one of his predecessors failed? Is not the opening to *Sein* supposed to be brought by the fundamental ontology of Heidegger itself under nihilism? Not that it enters the metaphysical tradition (even though we could argue that way) but because, in its opening to *Sein*, it discovers the adequation between *Sein* and Nothingness. Fundamental ontology as a return to *Sein* is a return to Nothingness and is thus nihilistic.

According to Heidegger, nihilism is the negation of *Sein*. Does he not say that the Nothing is the radical negation of the totality of *Seienden*? Of course, *Seienden* is not *Sein* but does not *Sein* underly *Seienden*? Don't we talk about the *Sein* of *Seienden*? As negation of *Seienden*, Nothingness would then be a negation of the *Sein* of *Seienden* and thus a negation of *Sein*. Nothingness as negating itself. Nothingness nihilating. The foundation of reality would then be nihilation. Heidegger's fundamental ontology would then be nothing but the most complete nihilism presenting the foundation of metaphysics as lying in the domain of *Sein*/Nothingness, Nothingness negating *Seienden* and the *Sein* of *Seienden*: Nothingness nihilating itself and everything else with it since it is the foundation. The big result of the nihilistic tradition would then be the complete and radical nihilism of the philosophy of fundamental ontology which, contradictorily, gave itself the task of reaching *Sein* when it discovers in this reaching that *Sein* is in fact Nothingness. The foundation of reality being nihilation, not only is metaphysics nihilistic but, necessarily, any thought. Thought being human, human being being a *Dasein*, a part of the *Seienden* of *Sein*, having at its foundation the nihilation of Nothingness, this thought is necessarily then nihilistic.

What would then be the overcoming of the metaphysical tradition's nihilism if not a more complete, more radical nihilism, more nihilistic offered to us by the fundamental ontology which

posits the adequation between *Sein* and Nothingness? What is the overcoming of metaphysics if not the acceptance of Nothingness as foundation, of reality as nihilation? The great thought of *Sein* reveals itself as the most nihilistic thought.

And what should be said about the two Heideggerian presuppositions presented by Edwards? It is formulated this way: any philosophy must contain (or be) a metaphysics and any metaphysics is nihilistic. After our discussion of the link between ontology and metaphysics, and after our definition of metaphysics as a branch of ontology oriented toward the suprasensible, we reformulated these presuppositions in saying: any philosophy must contain (or be) an ontology and any metaphysics (as a branch of ontology) is nihilistic. What happens to this last formulation if we consider what we just exposed, that is the adequation Heidegger posits between *Sein* and Nothingness in "Was ist Metaphysik?"? We said that, in the end, following this adequation, the fundamental ontology is nihilistic since the foundation of reality is Nothingness. In the end, it would seem that we are authorised to change the term "metaphysics" to that of "ontology" in both presuppositions. This gives: any philosophy must contain (or be) an ontology and any ontology is nihilistic. And here, the stress must be placed on the second presupposition. Not only is any "traditional" ontology nihilistic but, in the end, Heidegger's own fundamental ontology is confronted with the discovery of Nothingness as being the foundation of reality. The fundamental ontology supposed to correct the traditional nihilism of ontology which did not posit the question of *Sein* falls itself in a more radical nihilism: it posits the question of *Sein* just to discover that this one is Nothingness.

Another important question here comes up. A very important concept was until now widely used but still remains vague: that of "nihilism". What do we mean exactly when we use the term "nihilism"? In what way does it operate? What is the purpose of nihilism, if it has any? To what does it attack itself and in which domains is it active? Those questions remain without clear and satisfying answers even though the term is widely used. We should then turn our attention toward this concept and try to bring explanations if not

direct answers.

4 What is meant by “nihilism”?

To consult an encyclopedia may seem scholarly but can be very helpful as a starting point to get to a definition of the concept of nihilism. In her article “Le nihilisme” [Ban90], Bannour presents different definitions of this concept. She tracks down the first steps of nihilism in the Greek Skeptics and Sophists. First as an epistemological nihilism in the Skeptics, it evolves into a practical nihilism in the Sophists who consider the word “virtue” as having no meaning. Bannour then presents another form of nihilism, that of Descartes and his *malin génie*: methodological nihilism. She then turns to the link between nihilism and language, expressed by certain writers as Proust, who express everything in saying nothing, to then examine the link between nihilism and aesthetics expressed in contemporary art and in the theater. Her review goes on with nihilism in moral, presenting Diogenes the Cynic as the most radical nihilist in terms of morals. To end her article, she considers ontological nihilism and presents Nietzsche’s enterprise as the apex of nihilism.

On his part, Müller-Lauter [ML84] presents the concept of nihilism following its different uses. In this way he points out the numerous domains and streams which are touched by nihilism. He even says that links between these examples are to be found, only he does not give them. From the descriptions he gives of nihilism we can suppose that he would agree with the definition I take out from Bannour’s historical presentation.

What comes out clearly of this historical presentation of the concept of nihilism and of its different manifestations, is the understanding of the term as “nihilation”, “negation”, rejection of a value, an institution, of something established and this, in all the domains where nihilism was active. Nihilism should then be understood simply as a negation, a rejection of established values. But is it sufficient to transpose the latin sense of *nihil* to obtain the richness of meaning of this term? [ML84, p. 846]. After this very large definition of the term as negation, many meanings can be added to this concept and these do not necessar-

ily go hand in hand. We find the expression of this in “Die Überwindung der Metaphysik” where Heidegger says that “Das *seinsgeschichtliche* Wesen des Nihilismus ist die Seinsverlassenheit.” [Hei54, p. 91, my emphasis]. Heidegger defines nihilism in a particular way and indicates by the same token that it is only a point of view. We could conclude that nihilism, according to the point of view from which it is considered, can be defined in different ways. We know Heidegger’s definition and its implications, let us see what Nietzsche has to say of nihilism.

From the Nietzschean point of view, nihilism is a complex phenomenon. There are many meanings and many degrees of nihilism. The only acceptable one for Nietzsche is that which goes to the end of the negation in order to bring a new affirmation, that is: complete nihilism. But we do not find only this complete nihilism in Nietzsche. There is also the incomplete nihilism of the metaphysical-religious tradition to which Nietzsche attacks himself. According to Deleuze, this form of nihilism is called by Nietzsche “the enterprise to negate life, to depreciate existence.”¹⁶ [Del62, p. 39]. He also stresses the point that *nihil* in “nihilism” signifies that negation is the quality of the will to power. Deleuze gives four distinctions of nihilism in Nietzsche: 1- negative nihilism where one recognizes the value of nothingness of life, 2- reactive nihilism in which comes into play reactive life and the man of resentment, 3- passive nihilism, that of the man who wants to perish, passive extinction of oneself (Christ, Buddha), and 4- complete nihilism, that of Nietzsche, the self-destruction through eternal return [Del62, 170-186].

In his small study on *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Héber-Suffrin [HS88] also distinguishes four meanings of nihilism in Nietzsche: 1- devaluation of this world in favour of a transcendent world, 2- depreciation of both worlds, 3- replacement of the metaphysical foundation of values by a human foundation, but without changing the values themselves, and 4- will to decline, to destruct old table of values in order to erect new tables. We see that Deleuze and Héber-Suffrin differ in their

¹⁶My translation of: “L’entreprise de nier la vie, de déprécier l’existence.”

classifications, but these are nevertheless linked by the distinction they each posit between complete and incomplete nihilism.

Let us consult other authors to see if we can expand the notion of nihilism further than that which comes out of Heidegger and Nietzsche. For G. Vattimo [Vat88], nihilism is defined strictly in Heideggerian terms. For Edwards [Edw90], nihilism is to be understood in different ways and in that he follows the differentiation posited by Héber-Suffrin and Deleuze in Nietzsche between complete and incomplete nihilism.

In his essay *L'homme révolté* [Cam51], Camus talks abundantly of the phenomenon of nihilism, of this “indifference to life which is the mark of nihilism” [Cam51, p. 19]¹⁷. His interpretation of what nihilism is seems very Nietzschean when he adds

“The nihilist is not the one who does not believe in anything but rather the one who does not believe in what is.”
[Cam51, p. 96]¹⁸.

He thus seems to identify nihilism to what Nietzsche calls incomplete nihilism, that of the metaphysical-religious tradition.

It seems that “nihilism” means only: “negation”, “rejection”, negation of the existence of something this something being, most of the time, an established value. But this definition is much too vague. I would say that the fact that nihilism is almost always defined through the presentation of examples of its occurrences is a sign that the concept gets its signification only through these examples, for these reveal nihilism’s activity in a special domain, in a precise historical and cultural context and with a certain purpose. “Nihilism” would then have to be understood as a term which denotes a contextual and an intentional phenomenon.

I explain right away what I mean by that. Nihilism is a contextual phenomenon since it is always active in a precise domain (i.e. metaphysics,

ethics, aesthetics, etc...), in a precise historical period and cultural circle. For example, metaphysical nihilism will never be the same as ethical nihilism; the epistemological nihilism of the Greek Skeptics cannot be the same as that of Descartes. According to the domain in which it is active, nihilism attacks itself to the highest recognized values of this domain. In ontology it attacks itself to Being (which comes back to Heidegger’s definition of nihilism). In ethics, it attacks itself to moral values, to the recognized reference for moral evaluations. The same goes for other domains.

But what is wanted through such a negation? Does nihilism want only destruction? Does it try to bring about Nothingness? To recognize the nothingness-value of everything? Nihilism is also an intentional phenomenon because it gets and modifies its signification when we consider what is its goal. In this, I want to distinguish three different levels of intention of nihilism. An extreme nihilism would be one which completely denies and rejects everything and does not recognize anything. A radical nihilism would be one that completely denies and rejects a value, an element of a domain, in order to put a new one in its place. A moderate nihilism would be one that denies the central place and importance traditionally granted to a value or an element of a domain in order to give it a new place, a new weight, in general through the adjoining of a new element. Moderate nihilism is then not so much a rejection phenomenon but rather a relativization-process.

I want to illustrate my proposition by means of three examples: ontological nihilism, ethical nihilism, and practical theory nihilism. In the case of ontology, an extreme nihilism would direct its action on Being and Nothingness, reject both and hold that there is nothing. A radical nihilism would act upon Being not only to devalue it, but to replace it by Nothingness as central value and primary fact. On its part, a moderate nihilism would only relativize Being, that is it would operate a devaluation of Being but only in order to put Nothingness at the same level. We could then speak of a monistic radical nihilism which recognize only one primary fact, i.e. Nothingness, and of a dualistic moderate nihilism which recognizes two primary facts, i.e. Being and Nothingness, as

¹⁷My translation of: “cette indifférence à la vie qui est la marque du nihilisme.”

¹⁸My translation of: “Le nihiliste n’est par celui qui ne croit à rien, mais celui qui ne croit pas à ce qui est.”

determinants of existence.

What about ethical nihilism? The tradition has imposed a moral type to man as well as a fixed and immutable reference for moral evaluations which had the characteristics of the Being of ontology. Being is what confers reality, existence to things and beings. In moral matters, the Good, or God, is the guarant of morality in this world. Would nihilism in moral matters be the attempt to recognize a certain value to the opposite of the Good, to "Evil"?

An extreme nihilism would be the destitution of the reference for moral evaluations to replace it by the reign of amorality, by a moral vacuum. A radical ethical nihilism would replace the Good by Evil, that is it would put in place the reign of immorality.¹⁹ What would then be moderate nihilism? A simple dualism like that of Manicheism? The question is more complex with regards to moderate ethical nihilism. Such a thing as a dualism Good/Evil as reference for moral evaluations is not a satisfactory answer. I think we should talk about a relativization process of the Good, that is the Good as being plurivoqual instead of univoqual. But I will keep the two possibilities in mind: Manicheism and a relative Good.

And what about action theory? What would be the correlates of ontological Being and Nothingness? The metaphysical-religious tradition has generally required that practical deliberation be ruled by reason alone (or the soul). Reason was then considered as having the highest value in man, as being the reference for the validation of actions under moral considerations. All pulsions, instincts, were considered as having no practical value whatsoever, these being even able to throw man in immorality, in "moral nothingness".

In this case, would then moderate nihilism be the attempt to grant these pulsions and instincts a value, a right of rule beside reason in practical life? As a moderate ontological nihilism wants to show that Being and Nothingness determine exis-

tence, so a moderate practical nihilism wants to show that the correlates of Being and Nothingness, reason and the instincts, determine practical life and are, in their reunion, the reference for the validation of actions under moral considerations. A radical nihilism would give value only to instincts and pulsions, there would be no place left whatsoever for reason. And what would be an extreme nihilism? The denial of any right of rule, the rejection of any direction in man with regard to actions.²⁰

Let us resume the proposition with the following table:

¹⁹ This distinction between extreme and radical nihilism in ethics corresponds to the differentiation between Evil considered as the absence of the Good and Evil considered as the contrary of the Good. Extreme nihilism holds Evil to be the absence of the Good and radical nihilism holds it to be the contrary of the Good.

²⁰ This seems to me quite hard to imagine even though it is the result of a straight transposition of the differentiation held under ontology and ethics.

Table 1:

	Ontology	Ethics	Action Theory
Metaphysical-religious tradition	Only fixed and immuable Being confers and determines existence.	The Good (God for religion) is the only validating reference of moral evaluations.	Reason is the reference for action. It is the part of man which has the most value from the moral point of view.
Extreme nihilism	Nothing is (neither Being nor Nothingness).	The Good and God are evacuated. There is no reference for moral evaluations. Reign of amorality.	Nothing governs the actions.
Radical nihilism	Being is evacuated. Nothingness is what exists. Nothingness is what supports and determines existence. ²¹	The Good is evacuated in favour of Evil. Reign of immorality.	Negation of the role of reason in governing practical life. Reign of immorality under the governing of pulsions.
Moderate nihilism	Being <i>and</i> Nothingness determine existence	Relativization of the Good (no more univoqual but equivoqual) OR Good and Evil reign together (kind of Manicheism).	Reason and the instincts determine practical life and are, in their reunion, the reference for actions.

After this definition²² of nihilism and the presentation of the distinction to make between extreme, radical, and moderate nihilism, we can now turn to the problem of Nietzsche's nihilism and come back to our discussion of Heidegger's nihilism.

5 Is Nietzsche's thought nihilistic? In what sense?

Nietzsche discovers a latent nihilism in the metaphysical-religious tradition and calls it incomplete nihilism. To overcome this nihilism, he proposes a complete nihilism through the reevaluation of values, the rejection of the metaphysical-religious tradition and of Christianity through the announcement of the death of God.

This big negation, this complete nihilism, is a nihilism in the general sense I gave earlier. But with what type of nihilism are we dealing? Is it extreme? Is Heidegger right in calling it a radical nihilism²³? Or is it rather a moderate nihilism? Let us review briefly Heidegger's judgment toward Nietzsche's thought.

Heidegger analyses "God is dead!" as signifying that the suprasensible has lost its existence, its validity, that a certain Nothingness takes place following the death of the suprasensible foundation of existence. Furthermore, he analyses the will to power and eternal return as a metaphysical thought which makes of *Sein* a value. The foundation of this metaphysics, the will to power, is perspective and grants value. But as we saw it, Heidegger is wrong about the will to power, He presents it as will to overcome but also, and here is his mistake, as will to Nothingness.

We presented Edwards' analysis of the Heideggerian argumentation. This has lead us to the discovery of two presuppositions which guide Heidegger: 1- any philosophy must contain (or be) a metaphysics and 2- any metaphysics is nihilistic.

Heidegger believes any metaphysics is nihilistic because any metaphysics "forgets" *Sein*. Because he considers the thought of the will to power and of the eternal return as a metaphysics and because any metaphysics is nihilistic, Nietzsche's thought is consequently nihilistic. Heidegger finds a further confirmation of this judgment in his analysis of the will to power as value-thought which places *Sein* at the rank of a simple value. Nietzsche's thought is really "forgetting" of *Sein*.

I proposed that the Heideggerian judgment could not be accepted because his starting point is ontology whereas Nietzsche's main preoccupation is ethics. I still think this is the case but I will nevertheless examine the question as to what kind of nihilism one finds in Nietzsche, following what we said about nihilism in the preceding section.

I proposed to consider Nietzsche's thought of the will to power and of the eternal return as a new ontology without a metaphysics and, accordingly, as a thought which does not correspond to traditional metaphysics, that which Heidegger considers nihilistic. Edwards goes even further and says: "Once a metaphysics cuts itself loose from the claim to provide a comprehensive and accurate representation of reality, it is not clear in what sense it remains a *metaphysics* at all... On this account, then, Nietzsche's metaphysics is either manifestly false, or else, impossible to assert as a metaphysics." [Edw90, p. 34]. Do I agree here with Edwards? I think that Nietzsche presents the will to power as a representation of reality, as the "most elementary fact", as he terms it.

In fact, it is not necessary to go as far as Edwards to counter Heidegger's argument of the radical ontological nihilism in Nietzsche. If we follow the distinction established between extreme, radical, and moderate nihilism, it would seem that Heidegger attaches the tag of radical nihilism to Nietzsche. According to him, *Sein* is evacuated since it is relegated to the rank of a value and Nothingness is what is since that is what the will to power wants²⁴.

²²This definition is not to be considered as complete and entirely satisfactory. It is an attempt to precise what is meant by "nihilism". The differentiations will need to be thought again and the dividing line between critique and moderate nihilism will be especially important to establish.

²³Even though he does not define it the way I do.

²⁴One could say that Heidegger is quite Platonic in this judgment. Why? The will to power has the characteristic of the Becoming and pretends to be the foundation of reality. Becoming, in traditional Platonic thought, is nothing but Nothingness. To make of Becoming the foun-

But is that really the case? Is *Sein* radically evacuated in Nietzsche? Is there no value left to *Sein*? How can one say that *Sein* has no more value when, at the same time, one grants it value? *Sein* is a value in the value-thought which makes of values and of their institution the most elevated act. In fact, is it not rather, in Nietzsche, a settling right of the most primary facts of life? Is not the point to recognize that

“Die Welt von innen gesehen, die Welt auf ihren ’intelligiblen Charakter’ hin bestimmt und bezeichnet - sie wäre eben ’Wille zur Macht’ und nichts außerdem.”²⁵

Is not the point to say that both Being *and* Nothingness (Becoming) determine existence?

I think we should understand the thought of the will to power to mean that Being is not the only thing to confer and to found existence but that becoming also enters into play in this determination of existence. This would signify that, ontologically, Nietzsche’s thought should be placed under a moderate nihilism which negates the central place traditionally granted to Being to join to it its traditional opposite as determinant of reality.

When one places himself from the same point of view as Heidegger, that of ontology, it then would be necessary to attenuate his judgment and say that Nietzsche’s thought does not present a radical nihilism, a “radical slaying”, a “forgetting” of Being but rather, a moderate nihilism which wants to give a correct account of life as movement, as will to power which wants to surpass itself perpetually, in adjoining Becoming to Being as determinant of reality. It is not a “forgetting” of Being, but a “putting into the right place of it”.

But let us go back a little bit. I advanced that Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s points of view are different. That of Heidegger is ontological whereas that of Nietzsche is mainly ethical. How is it with ethics? Do we find a nihilism? Even though Heidegger’s point of view is essentially ontological in his judgment concerning Nietzsche’s nihilism he

dation of reality, as Nietzsche does, is, consequently, the most radical nihilism.

²⁵Nietzsche, F., *KSA 5. Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, §36, p. 55.

still gives some indications concerning Nietzsche’s ethics since he talks about the death of God and about the symbol of the Nietzschean ethics: the *Übermensch*. Let us consider what he has to say on these.

“God is dead!” signifies that the conservating place of *Seienden* is now empty. Heidegger does not believe that the thought of the will to power tries to occupy this place nor that its representant (for he makes of the *Übermensch* the representant of the will to power) tries to occupy it. He rather says that this place can stay empty, for another place which corresponds to it metaphysically opens itself.

“... die Stelle, auf die das Wollen des *Übermenschen* eingeht, ist ein anderer Bereich einer anderen Begründung des *Seienden* in seinem anderen *Sein*. Dieses andere *Sein* des *Seienden* ist inszwischen - und das bezeichnet den Beginn der neuzeitlichen Metaphysik - die Subjektivität geworden.” [Hei63, p. 236].

Even though Heidegger does not give a precise judgment concerning the nihilism of Nietzsche’s ethics, let us try to see what would mean what I just reported according to the differentiation I brought in the preceding section. Extreme ethical nihilism signifies the evacuation of any reference for moral evaluations, the reign of amorality. But Heidegger tells us that what replaces God as a reference is subjectivity, which means that a reference for moral evaluations remains and, thus, that Nietzsche’s ethics would present either a radical or a moderate nihilism and no extreme nihilism. Let us see what kind of nihilism we definitely find.

Nietzsche presents a humanistic ethics having for symbol the *Übermensch*, the representant of the new man of the new ethics. This ethics reverses the traditional moral order. It has for foundation the rejection of the metaphysical-religious tradition. Nihilism is thus active at this level, at the level of the destitution of the reference for moral evaluation. We could then talk about an extreme nihilism in ethics. But is it really an extreme nihilism? Extreme nihilism demands the

destitution of the Good and God but it also demands the reign of amorality, the absence of any reference for moral evaluations. Is it the case with Nietzsche? On its part, radical nihilism demands the reign of Evil, the reign of immorality. Again: is it the case with Nietzsche?

It is not the case. There is actually a reference for moral evaluations in the new ethics of Nietzsche, only it is no more located in a realm of absolutes but in man himself²⁶. From an ethical point of view, we then find a moderate nihilism. Since subjectivity is now the reference for moral evaluations it follows that a process of relativization of the concept of the Good takes place from which a plurivocity of the concept results. It also seems to meet the definition of a moderate nihilism in action theory. I already said, in the preceding section, how this type of nihilism wants to show that reason *and* the instincts rule together over practical life. The *Übermensch* embodies this reunion of reason and instincts. He represents the new man who creates values according to his reunited being.

Nietzsche says that man is fragmented and that we must add the pieces together to obtain one man. The *Übermensch*, the representant of the new man of the new ethics is precisely this man of which one has reunited the different pieces. The *Übermensch* posits moral evaluations according to his added whole. Moderate nihilism wants precisely to show that the human whole determines practical life. We can thus say, from the point of view of his ethics, and of action theory, that Nietzsche presents a moderate nihilism rather than a radical nihilism. We thus see that we should attenuate Heidegger's judgment of the Nietzschean radical nihilism both concerning ontology and ethics.

We now come to the following question: is it not contradictory to talk about a humanistic ethics in the frame of a nihilistic thought? If one understands nihilism in the Heideggerian sense, as a "forgetting" of *Sein*, an abandonment of *Sein*, then a philosophy that would present a humanistic ethics would not be a contradiction. Heidegger says, in his "Brief über den jüdischen Humanismus", that humanism is metaphysical and that, consequently, it is nihilistic [Hei67, 145-194]. Furthermore, since

humanism makes of man the essence of reality, it follows that humanism is "forgetful" of *Sein* as well.

But I do not adopt the Heideggerian definition of nihilism because I believe that it is erected only in the view of his argumentation concerning fundamental ontology: anything which is not fundamental ontology is nihilistic. I hold to the definition I proposed in section 4. According to this one, the nihilism of Nietzsche's thought is a moderate nihilism that wants to show: in ontology that Being *and* Nothingness determine existence, in ethics, that a relativization process of the Good takes place, and in action theory that reason *and* the instincts determine practical life and are, in their reunion, the reference for the validation of actions under moral considerations.

If we consider nihilism from a general point of view, as being the rejection of what was considered until now as supreme values (God, the Good, reason, Being, etc...) we see that nihilism as rejection is not only present in Nietzsche but more, that it is the starting point for the elaboration of his constructive thought, that it is the foundation over which the new ethics represented by the *Übermensch* will be elevated. This sentence of Camus applies perfectly well to Nietzsche:

"What is a revolted man? A man who says no. But if he refuses, he does not renounce: it is also a man who says yes, from his first movement."
[Cam51, p. 27]²⁷.

Let us add this sentence by Héber-Suffrin:

"... since the dualistic metaphysics is in regression, the first step of Nietzsche will simply be to add to its decline... THE IDEA OF WILL TO AFFIRM IS PRIMARY TO THE WILL TO OVERCOME VALUES AND TO THE IDEA OF THE DEATH OF

²⁶ This constitutes the basis for the interpretation of Nietzsche's ethics as a humanism.

²⁷ My translation of: "Qu'est-ce qu'un homme révolté? Un homme qui dit non. Mais s'il refuse, il ne renonce pas: c'est aussi un homme qui dit oui, dès son premier mouvement."

GOD - it is from this one that the other follows.” [HS88, p. 47]²⁸.

That is because

“The most profound point of Nietzsche’s thought cannot be a refusal, Nietzsche has a positive reason to refuse.” [HS88, p. 47]²⁹.

What is this reason? Let us remember the Nietzschean judgement toward the metaphysical-religious tradition. It is nihilistic because everything comes from a realm of absolutes. In this traditional frame, all value is retired from the world, from life, from man as man. The only thing which has value in him is what comes from the realm of absolutes, namely: the soul, reason. This produces a fragmented man which must fight permanently against himself to live to the height of the exigencies that come out of the morality of Christianity and metaphysics. This exigency is out of reach for man because of his real being and because of the strength of his instincts. Man thus finds himself in a perpetual state of sin and no possibility is opened to him except for the passage in the realm of absolutes, in life after life. Man is alienated from himself and from life in this world.

How is it possible to remediate to this state of things? One must affirm the whole being of man, reject the division imposed on him by the metaphysical-religious tradition, give him back confidence in himself, in life, in the world, so that his hope will be in himself and in his present life in the world in which he lives, instead of lying in an illusory realm of absolutes. This constitutes the humanistic project of Nietzsche. But how can this end be reached without destroying the established order? Can we conceive such a reversal within the traditional frame of thought?

²⁸My translation of: “... puisqu’il se trouve que la métaphysique dualiste est en régression, la première démarche de Nietzsche sera simplement d’ajouter à son déclin... L’IDÉE D’AFFIRMATION EST PREMIÈRE PAR RAPPORT À CELLE DE RENVERSEMENT DES VALEURS ET À CELLE DE MORT DE DIEU - C’est de celle-là que suivent celles-ci.”

²⁹My translation of: “Le point le plus profond de la pensée de Nietzsche ne saurait être un refus, Nietzsche a une raison positive de refuser.”

The traditional frame of metaphysics and Christianity creates this division, makes of this division its foundation. In order to reconstitute man, to reunite him in his own being, and to give him back his central place, it is necessary to destitute this order of things. To come up with a humanistic ethics, one must reject these outer-worldly values which negate man as man. But let us see more closely how a definition of a humanistic ethics corresponds to a moderate nihilism.

I adopt André Clair’s definition of a humanistic ethics. He says that a humanistic ethics presents man as “... the ethical creator of his norms and values.” [Cla89, p. 342]³⁰. A humanistic ethics therefore implies the rejection of any justification or prescription coming from elsewhere than from the human being. The destitution of traditional metaphysics and Christianity which the Nietzschean nihilism operates corresponds to this characteristic. God and the Good are rejected as reference for the validation of moral evaluations. The realm of absolutes is no more the place of validation but rather it is the new man of the reevaluation of values which erects his own values. The moderate nihilism which rejects God and the Good for the benefit of the reunited man fulfill this humanistic exigency. Any justification and prescription now comes from the human realm.

We could define humanism in general as being a doctrine which takes man as fundamental value and which has confidence in his capacities for self-determination. This definition also corresponds to the moderate nihilism of Nietzsche. Man being now the creator of values, after the rejection of the metaphysical-religious tradition, it is evident that he is the fundamental value and that he determines himself under the new order which erects itself from the ruins of the ancient.

It can seem at first contradictory to inscribe a humanistic ethics within the frame of a nihilistic thought. But we clearly see that for a humanistic ethics to be possible, a nihilism must take place. Only the nihilism which rejects the man-negating tradition permits the rise of a humanistic thought. It is difficult to see how an extreme nihilism in ethics, which rejects any morality, could

³⁰My translation of: “... créateur éthique de ses normes et valeurs.”

produce a humanistic ethics or any ethics at all. Radical nihilism and its institution of immorality is as much a bad candidate. Only a moderate nihilism permits the erection of a new ethics after the destitution of the traditional moral order.

The moderate nihilism active in Nietzsche's thought permits the erection of a new ethics. Not only it permits it but it is necessary for the goal Nietzsche gives himself with the reevaluation of values: the erection of a humanistic ethics.

6 Conclusion

This paper has lead us to important questions and surprising conclusions. I demonstrated the mistake of Heidegger's interpretation by the revision of the concepts in play and by my analysis of his argumentation. Thus, far from presenting the end of all philosophy with a radical or even extreme nihilism, the Nietzschean thought opens up new horizons with its use of a moderate nihilism which permits the setting up of a reconstruction.

As for Heidegger, champion of the thought of Being, the man who presents himself as the denouncer of nihilism and who presents his own thought as the ultimate overcoming of nihilism, it appears in the end that he sinks himself in nihilism. Heideggerian nihilism, which has the characteristics of radical nihilism, does not open to anything, cannot open to anything, and constitutes itself as the end of philosophy with no possibility whatsoever for a reconstruction. Strange conclusion for a thought which proposed itself the exact contrary!

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