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The Limits of Transcendence

RICHARD MATTHEWS

There are two worrying elements in both Nietzsche and Heidegger—the devaluation of commonsensical everyday senses of truth, and the bracketing of the specific details of moral experience of particular communities. For Nietzsche truth is an illusion or mask. In one memorable passage truth is a mobile army of metaphors that have become firm and worn out. It is only through habit and lack of reflection that we confuse them for a reality (Nietzsche 46-7). Hence facts and logical truths belong in the domain of the uncreative. Truths, moral principles, norms, and beliefs are functions of a kind of herd animal struggling to survive in a quasi-Darwinian world. They have never been “true” in reality, but rather are pragmatic instances of will-to-power.

In Heidegger, a variant on the same theme arises in his distinction between everyday and genuine senses of truth. In *Being and Time* the everyday sense of truth is a clue. It has no intrinsic philosophical value, but is something to be transcended in favour of the genuine sense of truth as *aletheia* or unconcealment. Rigorous philosophical reflection on the everyday allows us to awaken anew the question of the meaning of Being, but the everyday is not itself philosophical. In the *Beiträge zur Philosophie* Heidegger disparages the demand for clarity as the suicide of philosophy and describes those committed to facts as idol worshippers (435). Reflection on *aletheia*, on the emergence of forms of understanding into the lighting of Being is alone the appropriate subject for philosophical reflection. Consequently the specific events of

everyday moral experience are not a relevant subject for philosophical reflection. Nor is there any philosophical significance to moral principles or to standard logical inference. All of these have to do with the pragmatics of everyday living, perhaps, but are too anthropological for philosophy.

This is not to say that Heidegger pays no attention to contemporary history. But where he refers to current events, it is striking that his analysis always functions at the level of the primordial and never investigates specific moral principles or empirical concerns. He cares about seizing control of university institutions to enable the necessary transformation of German *Dasein* during the National Socialist era (Heidegger, "The University" 45), but not about the deliberate and widely known use of street violence to achieve power in the very early 1930's. The anti-Semitism of National Socialism does not count as a reason for him to refuse to sign a decree prohibiting Jewish and Marxist students from university privileges (Schneeberger 137). In 1936 it gives him no reason to doubt that Hitler and Mussolini are among those who have introduced a genuine counter movement to European nihilism (Heidegger, *Schelling: Vom Wesen Der Menschlichen Freiheit* 40-41).

In his attempts to understand violence, the significant issue is not that churches are burned, that people are tortured and murdered, or that policies such as capital punishment are morally terrible. Indeed, in one passage in particular he emphasizes that the sense of violence that concerns him is perfectly compatible with a utilitarian utopia.

Devastation is more than destruction. Devastation is more unearthly than destruction. Destruction only sweeps aside all that has grown up or been built up so far; but devastation blocks all future growth and prevents all building. Devastation is more unearthly than mere destruction. Mere destruction sweeps aside all things including even nothingness, while devastation on the contrary establishes and spreads everything that blocks and prevents ... the devastation of the earth can easily go hand in hand with a

guaranteed supreme living standard for man, and just as easily with the organized establishment of a uniform state of happiness for all men (Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* 29-30).

This is not an incipient environmental ethic. Devastation is here perfectly compatible with a well-regulated and sustainable ecosystem and planet in which species are maximally preserved. Destruction of the cod stocks, habitat loss for polar bears, and the like, are instances of destruction, not devastation. They are cases of tragic empirical events, but they are not cases of devastation since, for Heidegger, devastation is equally compatible with their preservation. The existence or non-existence of cod is a question of a possible destruction and not philosophically relevant. It is not an “unearthly” matter.

Heidegger investigates the essence of violence. But the essence of violence is nothing violent, just as the essence of the tree in “The Question Concerning Technology” is not itself a tree (Heidegger, “Die Frage” 1). Violence in the preceding citation is related to “devastation” which Heidegger understands not as war, torture, and death, but with the prevention of emergence and creativity. Devastation is the preventing of the possibility of all building. On the question of ordinary suffering and death it is completely neutral. No event in the world could make a difference to violence and devastation as Heidegger believes they are properly understood. That is to say, except as an impetus for reflection, there is no internal philosophical value and such events are philosophically irrelevant.

The question for me is, given that we share their sense of the uniqueness, particularity, and strangeness of human experience, how do we reject these conclusions about the *philosophical* irrelevance of logic, of facts, and of environmental destruction, torture and murder. How can we mount an argument against these specific directions in Nietzsche and Heidegger while preserving other more valuable features of their work?

It is here that Albert Camus has something particularly important to offer, because I take his work to be a speculative attempt to provide that argument. His writings provide a set of reflections on the limitations of a range of philosophical views including those of Nietzsche and Heidegger. The use of the word “limitation” is of course not accidental, as the theme of the limit is a dominant feature of his postwar work. His criticism of Heidegger and Nietzsche, however much Camus genuinely felt their thought to be “great adventures of the mind” (Camus, “Pessimism and Courage” 58), is that they do not respect crucial historical and moral limits and in consequence become nihilistic.

I do not mean to imply that there are any explicit or implicit arguments for murder and suffering in either Nietzsche or Heidegger. The problem that concerns me is quite different—the complete absence of philosophical remarks about or interest in specific historical cases, as well as an absence of philosophical opposition to oppression and suffering. In Heidegger’s case in particular we initially find uncritical enthusiasm for violent transformation, and then later an effective silence.

This paper outlines Camus’ position and shows how it is possible to construct a good argument for the philosophical necessity of everyday truth and the facts of everyday moral experience. They are not merely anthropological and not merely a consequence of a world-view or a function of the contingent practices of discrete human communities at specific times, but rather ought to be some of the backbones of moral philosophical analysis. They are limits that we should not transcend—at least not if in transcending them we asymmetrically privilege reflection over the experiences upon which reflection depends. If we take Camus seriously, then metaphysical reflection owes a debt to everyday moral experience—a debt not to deny the reality

of individual empirical suffering or to treat it as merely a normative and non-philosophical matter.

Camus borrows a great deal from Nietzsche and Heidegger. He shares their sense of contingency. The rebel is marked by a recognition of the strangeness of things and consequently of the necessity of human solidarity. References to the ambiguity of human existence abound throughout his work. For example, consider the repetition of the phrase “doubtful case” in *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, and *The Fall*. The critique of metaphysics and ideology as embodying a totalitarian will to dominate echoes both the Nietzschean analysis of Will to Power and Heidegger’s reflections on En-framing.

But there is a crucial and striking difference: the specificity or concreteness of ordinary human experience and the sense that the moral constitutes its own philosophically independent sphere of reflection. For Camus there is nothing oxymoronic about a philosophical journalism, whereas this could have no place in either Nietzsche or Heidegger. For both, journalism would be paradigmatic of the worst kind of everyday non-philosophical empty chatter.

Indeed, perhaps the defining difference is Camus’ refusal to devalue or ignore deductive reasoning, specific historical facts and situations, and the everyday concrete experiences of suffering, violence, and humiliation that condition people’s lives. There is a level of abstraction to Nietzsche and Heidegger of which Camus is quite critical. They rely on a sense of the asymmetrical privilege of speculation. In Nietzsche’s case this has to do with consideration of the nature of will to power. For Heidegger it is transcendental reflection on the question of the meaning of Being. In both cases the priority is attached to a sense of philosophy that assigns second place at best to ordinary practical reasoning. This inevitably leaves no philosophical

means to oppose or even comment upon specific experiences of violence, humiliation, and suffering.

I. Asymmetrical Privilege and Transcendence

Since it is a central concept of this paper, I want to briefly define the notion of an asymmetrical privilege. To privilege authentic reflection presupposes the identification of philosophy with transcendental reflection; it also assumes its priority over mundane experience. Philosophies are asymmetrically privileged when they restrict philosophy solely to transformative reflection about that which is. Furthermore they see the value of empirical facts, mundane senses of truth and historical events as non-philosophical. At best they are a clue to authentic reflection. The asymmetry occurs in the judgment of the relative importance of the philosophical and non-philosophical spheres. Heideggerian and Nietzschean philosophy is asymmetrically privileged because the everyday sphere is in various ways inferior *a priori* to genuine reflection. The everyday requires the revisions provided by philosophical reflection, but contains no resources within it to limit the creative philosophical acts of transformative thinkers.

In asymmetrically privileged reflection, the point is to transcend the limitations of experience, not with a view to final escape (since that is impossible) but rather with a view to novel philosophical reflection and the more or less abrupt emergence of a new everyday community or world. What makes the reflection asymmetrical is that there is no reverse obligation on the part of the philosopher to treat those contingent details as themselves constituting limits that the transformative thinker ought to respect. Philosophies are asymmetrically privileged when they treat the metaphysical speculation as the priority, when they display an insouciant, dismissive attitude towards commonsense reasoning, towards truths,

and most importantly, when they treat the specific truths, historical experiences, sufferings, and violence experienced and inflicted by individuals and communities as philosophically secondary if not utterly irrelevant.

This attitude is widespread and cuts across philosophical traditions. It characterizes positivist eliminations of moral and aesthetic norms, beliefs and propositions from the cognitive sphere as much as the Nietzschean move from herd morality to the transformation of values instantiated by the *Übermensch*; the norms and practices of the herd out of which he emerges are no constraint on his creativity. His reflection is understood to be already beyond legitimation by the norms of the herd. In Heidegger, we see an analogous privilege in the move from ontic to ontological and beyond to the primordial conditions of emergence of a novel transformation in a community's understanding of the meaning of Being. The community following to which he grants resistance (better its "independent power" or *Eigenkraft*) is a community that listens to transformative thinkers and statesmen; it neither criticizes nor opposes. Its role is to understand, not to resist (Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University" 38).

The problem is that nothing counts as a limit on what can be said except the so-called matter for thinking itself, whatever that might be. Since that matter is defined as beyond the normal ken of a given human community, the specific experiences, norms and practices of that community have nothing really to contribute to philosophical understanding and hence are bracketed *a priori*; a thinker must neither account for nor respond to them. In consequence, concepts of individual rights and freedoms are barriers to creative activity, a conclusion that Heidegger explicitly draws in his 1936 lectures on Schelling. Heidegger asserts that the freedom of choice that underpins modern liberalism is an illusory doctrine that plays havoc in morality and law (Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* 15-16).

By effectively defining genuine philosophy as transcendental, we lose a sense of the beauty and ethical significance of the specific and historically conditioned. One of Camus' many virtues is that the complex features of concrete historical experience constitute the limiting conditions on what might legitimately be said and thus constitutes an element of an argument, not against metaphysics (for Camus' work is deeply metaphysical) but against asymmetrically privileged metaphysics.

Here I should emphasize the problem does not lie with abstraction by itself. Philosophy and ethics cannot proceed without abstraction. However to acknowledge the necessity of abstraction in no way entails ignoring empirical and normative specificity. The worry with Heidegger's account of devastation, for example, is that there is not even the remotest reason to ask questions about the nature of torture or of other specific forms of human suffering. For Heidegger there are no interesting philosophical questions about why a specific instance of death happens. That is solely an anthropological question for historians or scientists to consider. Heidegger is concerned only with the "essence" of death, and not with the moral issues that pervade specific historical cases. Deaths, rather than "Death," are just things that happen in consequence of some prior given manifestation of Being.

Everywhere there are massive needs, countless horribly undying deaths—and yet the essence of death is everywhere hidden from man. Man is not yet the one who can die. Immeasurable suffering creeps and races across the earth. The flood of suffering increases. But the essence of pain conceals itself (Heidegger, "Die Gefahr" 56; my translation).

The same is true about evil. Heidegger is not interested philosophically in specific cases of evil and their morally problematic features. He studies its essence, which in his view is ontologically different to such an extent that specific occurrences are irrelevant. In "*Abendgespräch zwischen*

einem Älteren und einem Jüngeren im Kriegsgefangen Lager” (“Evening conversation between an older and a younger man in a prisoner of war camp”), Heidegger says the following:

That which is of the kind of evil is that which is tumultuous, which is based in fury such that this fury in a certain sense conceals its inner fury but simultaneously continually threatens with it. The essence of evil is the inner fury of the tumult which never wholly breaks out and which, when it breaks out, still disguises itself and in its hidden threatening often is as if it were not (Heidegger, *Feldweg Gespräche* 207-8; my translation).

The clue here is the uncertain existence of his sons in a prisoner of war camp in Russia later in the war. It incites Heidegger to reflection, but the issues of specific injustices are not what is philosophically significant. He wants to understand what evil is. In all of these cases, genuine philosophical reflection aims at the essence of the matter, at how it emerges or prevails in a given context. There is no room for moral philosophical reflection on their conditions of treatment or other wrongs that they may experience. Heidegger has nothing philosophically to say about this.

Perhaps another way to shed light on this problem is to recognize that there is no place for applied ethics in Heidegger. Biomedical ethics and its concerns with fair resource distribution, doctor-patient relations, prohibitions against medical participation in torture, and similar problems simply do not count as philosophical. Nor, if one is faithful to Heideggerian philosophical style and insight, will such analysis be forthcoming. It is only possible to do this if we follow the route Hans Jonas and similar figures take, of integrating Heideggerian reflection with concern for specific political and moral practice. Camus is interesting because he provides a philosophical case for doing this.

II. Camus on Limits

“Limit” is the central concept of *The Rebel* and underpins much of his work. So what might Camus mean by a limit? In a remarkable analysis of Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*, Camus argues that what distinguishes modern murder is not the fact that it takes place at all, but that we legitimate it, or think that they are justified in terms of some further end (Camus, *The Rebel* 11). The problem of *The Rebel* is that of legitimation. Limits are justification concepts, and so are intimately connected to questions of logic. But they are not simply logical, because they have an intrinsically moral quality that is crucial in generating the philosophical solidarity with the downtrodden and opposition to oppression that characterizes Camus’ later work. But the connections to logic mark standard logical truth and historical facts as two crucial moral limits.

In “Socialism of the Gallows,” Camus distinguishes between absolute and historical truth and defends the latter (167-8). This is not a distinction between objectivity and relativism. Absolute truths have to do with the putative epoch-transcendent verities affirmed by philosophers and political groups whether of the right or the left. Camus has in mind, for example, Hegelian, Marxist and social Darwinist accounts of the nature of the universe—deep metaphysical claims that the universe and human history are of a certain kind.

Camus’ position is that even if there are such truths, no finite human being has them. Historical truths are objective and real, but local. They have to do with contingent facts about the historical behaviour of persons, collectivities, institutions and countries. They concern loves and hatreds, acts of solidarity and conflict, the joys and the sufferings of discrete individuals and communities. This is not relativism. Historical truths are not so because some group agrees that they are. Quite the contrary, relativism identifies truth with individual preference or subjectivity. All this achieves is the reduction of truth to expediency, which Camus vigorously rejects

(“Socialism of the Gallows” 168). There is nothing positivist about his views on truth—suffering and oppression are as real as any fact about gravity, and at least as philosophically significant.

Just to stress the significance facts and truth has for Camus, consider the following:

A press or a book is not true because it is revolutionary. It has a chance of being revolutionary only if it tries to tell the truth. We have a right to think that truth with a capital letter is relative. But facts are facts. And whoever says that the sky is blue when it is grey is prostituting words and preparing the way for tyranny (“Socialism of the Gallows” 168).

To be genuinely revolutionary, a text has to be sensitive and honest about the historical facts of a given time and place. Absolute truths are ideologies and express the contingent beliefs of individuals in contexts in which they may be using those ideologies as legitimating features for various actions. In a sense, absolute or transcendent ideologies are dishonest because they fail to recognize the sense in which they are limited by local historical conditions and circumstances. They are sceptical failures that make a false claim to transcend natural human limitations.

However, we do not have access to transcendent truths. But facts are different. There are factual truths, an indeterminately large set of them, and they are crucial for judgment and behaviour. Furthermore it is possible for us to know them, even if we are likely to be uncertain in any given case. If we give up on truth, on logic, on facts, then we create the conditions for violence and tyranny.

For Camus even an utterance as trivial as a true predication of the colour of the sky is morally important and it is morally essential that we be able to assert it. To appreciate this, consider Winston’s struggles to preserve his knowledge while undergoing torture in *1984*. Winston has seen proof that the evidence against three men who had been executed for treachery was false. In particular there was a crucial photograph.

“It exists!” he cried.

“No,” said O’Brien.

He stepped across the room. There was a memory hole in the opposite wall. O’Brien lifted the grating. Unseen, the frail slip of paper was whirling away on the current of warm air; it was vanishing in a flash of flame. O’Brien turned away from the wall.

“Ashes,” he said. “Not even identifiable ashes. Dust. It does not exist. It never existed.”

“But it did exist! It does exist! It exists in memory. I remember it. You remember it.”

“I do not remember it,” said O’Brien (Orwell 248).

Winston seeks to preserve his knowledge of that evidence. The truth matters to him and his commitment to it is precisely what O’Brien seeks to destroy at this point in the torture session. O’Brien seeks to control language and to shape it for his political ends. O’Brien relativizes truth to his own specific political ambitions and ties truth to the historical movement to which he is loyal. He has both an absolute historical narrative, and a belief in the relativity of specific mundane truths. Opposing an O’Brien presupposes that he lies, hides truths and destroys evidence, or spins truth claims into vacuity. To resist an O’Brien requires a commitment to historical truths. O’Brien is a classic case of the kind of absolutist that Camus most fundamentally rejects—the individual who allows his absolute historical narrative to legitimate torture and murder. But to resist such people we can neither be absolutist nor relativist. Whatever possibilities of moral resistance there are depend at least partly on recognizing the way in which violence and evil-doing are real specific events about which lies are told. Opposition to them both requires us to be able to recognize that they happen and the ability to expose lies as they are told. In both cases, truth is essential.

In part the issue concerns the ability to distinguish between truth and political spin. Consequently those who speak euphemistically of “extraordinary rendition” instead of “kidnap and torture” prepare a tyrannical O’Brien space. As the Orwell example demonstrates, considerable violence is concealed behind vagueness, semantic cynicism and insouciance

towards historical truth. For Camus failure to treat facts and mundane truth with appropriate moral and philosophical seriousness undermines our ability to distinguish between truth and lie or between truth and spin.

The distinction between absolute and historical truths has consequences. It requires that we acknowledge that the violence done to individuals when they are tortured or murdered is not a general or abstract phenomenon, but that it happens to the minds and bodies of historical individuals. It may happen to them in virtue of class membership of some kind. But individuals are always the bearers or victims of suffering. Oppression has its specificity that may neither be denied nor sublated in the interests of expediency or for the sake of more general philosophical analysis.

For Camus, what is philosophically essential is not that people, as a class, are murdered, although of course this is far more significant than it would be in Heidegger or Nietzsche, but that a René Leynaud is executed (Camus, “The Flesh” 46-54), that five Spanish republicans have been sentenced to death (see his response to some criticisms raised by Gabriel Marcel [Camus, “Why Spain?” 79]), that a Madeleine, an Odette or a Violette Sczabo, is tortured to death. He is not at all opposed to metaphysical generalization—*The Rebel* is a metaphysical generalization, albeit a provisional working hypothesis and, he insists, not the only one (*The Rebel* 16). But any generalizations have an obligation to respect the specificity and concreteness of suffering, torture, and murder, and have to be able to support resistance to such events in their specificity. It can never, for Camus, treat those as philosophically irrelevant or as of derivative interest.

Note the philosophical and moral commitments here. In order to oppose suffering, violence and murder, we have to accept that these are real and not simply functions of interpretation. They cannot be reducible to interpretive spin or defined out of existence, even if

cultural background and interpretation itself may change how individuals and communities experience suffering. Rather the reverse is true—oppression and suffering are constraining moral and philosophical limits on interpretation. If definition and interpretation are prior to the historical phenomenon, then problems vanish with redefinition. To avoid this it is crucial that interpretation be adequate to the relevant state of affairs. If we are to be correct in understanding and interpreting an act of violence, it has to be the case that the violence was real (or not) in that specific case. This means we also need the ordinary and everyday Aristotelian notion of truth, in particular the specific version that insists we be able to say of that which is, that it is, and of that which is not, that it is not (Tarski 333).

It also means, as Camus emphasizes throughout his writings, that we need ordinary deductive and inductive reasoning. Furthermore, it requires philosophical fidelity to such events, i.e. a refusal to transcend such facts where the transcendence results in their sublation. For suppose that we do not insist upon such truths, facts, and fidelity to the experiences—in such a case, we really would have a nihilism in which any interpretation would be as good as any other, and in which violence would be nothing more than a function of the beliefs of a given perceiver—truly a Thrasymachean position if ever there was one. Camus opposes the desire to stand above and transcend the norms and experiences of one's epoch with the desire to understand them on their own terms and as worthy of explanation and interpretation in their own right.

The combination of moral fact, logic, honesty, and fallibilism is essential. Hence Camus notes that although the experience of the absurd is essential to recognizing the impossibility of the possession of absolute truth, nonetheless, respect for deductive reasoning means that it cannot entail nihilism. Nihilism simultaneously entails both killing and not killing and thus infers

a false proposition (Camus, *The Rebel* 15). By any standard account of deductive reasoning nihilism is unsound. In “Towards Dialogue” he notes that the fight against absolutist ideologies can only be carried out using the limited historical reason that respects ordinary logic and the facts of oppression (137).

For Camus this suggests that we cannot oppose torturers without being able to say: 1. that it is a fact that they torture; and 2. that it is a fact that torture is a moral wrong. We must be able to say both that “The torturer carried out these acts at these times to these specific individuals” and that “it is wrong for him/her to have done so.” Moreover, if we do not treat these facts as philosophically fundamental, then we will undermine, if not destroy, our ability to oppose them. At best, our opposition will become provisional—subject to philosophical or political expediency. Alternatively we will become silent about them altogether on philosophical grounds. They will not be significant because there would then not be any such moral facts or truths. Either the theory of truth and the facts will be undermined in favour of some other kind of reflection, or the theory of truth and some sense of facts will be preserved, but moral truths will be excluded from consideration.

In saying this I wish to emphasize that I make no claims about epistemic certainty. The point is not that we know for certain the specific moral truths with which we have to deal. Rather, we have to be able to justifiably assert or deny them. In other words, a bivalent account of truth matters for moral practice, regardless of how certain we are capable of being about any specific truths that we assert. Since Camus is a fallibilist, recognizing this disjunction between knowledge and truth is important. There are historical truths, but this is perfectly compatible with fallibilism. So my claim is not that certainty is a condition of ethics. If that were required, then

ethics would be impossible. It is rather that ethical behaviour presupposes truth and the wrongness of certain historical practices and events.

Since we are finite, Camus infers that the assertion of transcendental or absolute knowledge of history inevitably involves a lie—that we know or see what in fact we do not know or see—and more importantly that this particular lie will inevitably lead to the devaluation of the truths that we do know in favour of those that we do not. This is the risk of asymmetrical privilege. In particular, it will lead to the silencing of certain moral truths in the name of expediency, or to general silence about them. Humility, a sceptical sense of our limitations with respect to our knowledge, requires us to pay careful attention to the historical truths that confront us. This in turn requires that we always operate in such a way that we can recognize falsehoods when they occur and thereby that we respect the ordinary facts and truths that constitute historical truth.

Camus' analysis depends on the way human limitations oblige us not to claim the possession of transcendent absolute truths. Most importantly, it entails that we never devalue the particular historical truths and our reasoning about them in the name of "larger" supposedly transcendent values. Truth and fallibilism, which we might also call a kind of alethic humility, require that we philosophically respect the ordinary. This is what, in Camus' view, a responsible intellectual must do—be a witness to the reality of suffering, violence, and oppression and speak out on behalf of and in solidarity with the oppressed. The intellectual must also respect the rebel mantra that "I revolt, therefore we are" (Camus, *The Rebel* 29). My act of refusal of injustice to me is simultaneously a refusal of injustice to anyone. A philosophy adequate to moral experience must be able to do this.

A priori transcendent philosophical reflection has nothing to say about everyday cases of oppression, suffering, and violence. More disquietingly, there is nothing that it could say. It rules out any reference to the specificity of oppression by defining historical facts and truths as part of the sphere of activity from which genuine philosophical reflection must escape. So Heideggerian thinking is carefully rigorous in refusing to allow the echoes of the ordinary moral revulsion that violence and suffering produce because there is no way for it to have any philosophical significance. It is bracketed in advance. In defining facts, logic, and everyday norms as a starting point for philosophical reflection, but in themselves simultaneously constituting a barrier which genuine thought must overcome, it is no longer possible for Heidegger to adopt an engaged stance towards oppression or violence. In Nietzsche, philosophically valuing the mundane is a sign of an uncreative mind. In either case their reflection remains so general as to offer us little useful by way of understanding and opposing concrete acts of violence.

In the context of the distinctions developed by Camus, both Nietzsche and Heidegger abandon the notion of an absolute truth, but they also abandon the philosophical significance of historical truths as well, performing a dangerous relativization that leaves the philosopher with nothing to say other than that they are not genuinely philosophical. Or worse, as in Heidegger's case, the existing historical truths require a radical transformation of German *Dasein* in spite of widespread street violence and vicious anti-communist, anti-Semitic and anti-liberal rhetoric of the regime that he at least briefly supported. These truths certainly gave him no cause for doubt.

Whereas Camus sees historical truths as occupying an important intermediate position between a nihilistic relativism and a destructive and dogmatic absolutism, and thereby having crucial philosophical significance precisely because they are true and demand an engaged political stance, for Nietzsche or Heidegger they are ultimately relativist in the bad sense,

constituting local regimes of control that themselves require reflective transformation. In consequence, we just do not find opposition or criticism of specific policies, events, and other historical experiences. There neither is, nor could there be, anything for them to say.

The merit of Camus' position is that it creates space for a philosophical opposition to violence that yields practice: always to speak on behalf of, and in solidarity with, the community of the oppressed. His paradigmatic moral rebel "disclaims divinity in order to share in the struggles and destiny of all men" (*The Rebel* 270). It does so by recognizing, in a way that Nietzsche and Heidegger cannot, that the collapse of classic European metaphysics strengthens the importance of standard truth claims and the moral and aesthetic facts of particular human experience. Absolute truths and asymmetrically privileged metaphysics are pernicious. Furthermore, abandonment of grand metaphysics need in no way entail the insignificance of local historical truths. We do not need to choose between Hegel and Nietzsche, between Marx and Heidegger. Camus' discussion of limits and of historical truths in particular, offers at least one alternative. The extent to which an asymmetrically privileged metaphysics can legitimate violence itself constitutes a reason for suspicion and disagreement. But philosophical silence is as bad an option. In either case, there is a failure to recognize that there are limits to what we should say and think, and to when we are entitled to remain silent. The recognition of the reality of suffering and oppression as concrete specific phenomena that occur in particular historical locations to specific individuals and groups is a philosophically crucial concern; it is and ought to be a fundamental limit on thinking.

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