# The Machine Question

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# 3 Thinking Otherwise

## 3.1 Introduction

Moral philosophy has typically, in one way or another, made exclusive decisions about who is and who is not a legitimate moral agent and/or patient. We have, in effect, sought to determine the line dividing who or what is considered a member of the community of moral subjects from who or what remains outside. And we have done so by, as Thomas Birch (1993, 315) explains, assuming "that we can and ought to find, formulate, establish, institute in our practices, a criterion for (a proof schema of) membership in the class of beings that are moral *consideranda*." It is, for example, no longer news that many if not most of the Western traditions of ethics have been and, in many cases, continue to be exclusively anthropocentric. At the center of mainstream Western ethical theories—irrespective of the different varieties and styles that have appeared under names like virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontologism, or care ethics—has been a common assumption and virtually unquestioned validation of the ἄνθρωπος (*anthropos*)—the ἄνθρωπος who bears a responsibility only to other beings who are like him- or herself, that is, those who are also and already members of the community of ἄνθρωποι. This operation, from one perspective, is entirely understandable and even justifiable insofar as ethical theory is not some transcendent Platonic form that falls fully realized from the heavens but is rather the product of a particular group of individuals, made at a specific time, and initiated in order to protect a particular set of interests. At the same time, however, these decisions have had devastating consequences for others. In other words, any and all attempts to define and determine the proper limit of *consideranda* inevitably proceed by excluding others from participation. "When it comes to

moral considerability," Birch (1993, 315) explains, "there *are*, and *ought* to be, insiders and outsiders, citizens and non-citizens (for example, slaves, barbarians, and women), 'members of the club' of *consideranda* versus the rest."

Ethics, therefore, has been and remains an exclusive undertaking. This exclusivity is fundamental, structural, and systemic. It is not accidental, contingent, or prejudicial in the usual sense of those words. And it is for this reason that little or nothing actually changes as moral theory and practices have developed and matured over time. Even when membership in the club of *consideranda* has, slowly and not without considerable resistance and struggle, been extended to some of these previously excluded others, there have remained other, apparently more fundamental and necessary exclusions. Or to put it another way, every new seemingly progressive inclusion has been made at the expense of others, who are necessarily excluded in the process. Animal rights philosophy, for instance, not only challenged the anthropocentric tradition in ethics but redefined the club of *consideranda* by taking a distinctly animo-centric approach where the qualifying criteria for inclusion in the community of moral subjects was not determined by some list of indeterminate humanlike capabilities—consciousness, rationality, free will, and so on—but the capacity to suffer, or "the ability to not be able," as Derrida (2008, 28) characterizes it.

This effort, despite its important innovations, still excludes others, most notably those nonmammalian animals situated on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder; other living organisms like plants and microbes; nonliving natural objects including soils, rocks, and the natural environment taken as a whole; and all forms of nonnatural artifacts, technologies, and machines. And even when these excluded others—these other kinds of others—are finally admitted into the club by other "more inclusive" lists of qualifying criteria that have been proposed by other moral theories, like environmental ethics, machine ethics, or information ethics, exclusions remain. There is, it seems, always someone or something that is and must be *other*. The sequence appears to be infinite, or what Hegel (1987, 137) termed "a bad or negative infinity": "Something becomes an other; this other is itself something; therefore it likewise becomes an other, and so on *ad infinitum*" (ibid.). Ethics, therefore, appears to be unable to do without its others—not only the others who it eventually comes to recognize as Other but also those other others who remain excluded, exterior, and

marginalized. In the final analysis, ethics has been and continues to operate on the basis of a *fraternal logic*—one that defines and defends its membership by always and necessarily excluding others from participation in its exclusive and gated community.

Exclusion is certainly a problem. But inclusion, as its mere flip side and dialectical other, appears to be no less problematic. Despite the recent political and intellectual cachet that has accrued to the word, "inclusion" is not without significant ethical complications and consequences. "The inclusion of the other," as Jürgen Habermas (1998) calls it, whether another human being, animals, the environment, machines, or something else entirely, always and inevitably runs up against the same methodological difficulties, namely the reduction of difference to the same. In order to extend the boundaries of moral agency and/or patiency to traditionally marginalized others, philosophers have argued for progressively more inclusive definitions of what qualifies someone or something for ethical consideration. "The question of considerability has been cast," as Birch (1993, 314) explains by way of Kenneth Goodpaster, "and is still widely understood, in terms of a need for necessary and sufficient conditions which mandate practical respect for whomever or what ever fulfills them." The anthropocentric theories, for example, situate the human at the center of ethics and admit into consideration anyone who is able to meet the basic criteria of what has been decided to constitute the human being—even if, it should be recalled, this criterion has itself been something that is arguably capricious and not entirely consistent. Animal rights philosophy focuses attention on the animal and extends consideration to any organism that meets its defining criterion of "can they suffer?" The biocentric efforts of some forms of environmental ethics go one step further in the process, defining life as the common denominator and admitting into consideration anything and everything that can be said to be alive. And ontocentrism completes the expansion of moral consideration by incorporating anything that actually exists, had existed, or potentially exists, and in this way, as Floridi (1999) claims, provides the most universal and totalizing form of an all-inclusive ethics.

All these innovations, despite their differences in focus and scope, employ a similar maneuver. That is, they redefine the center of moral consideration in order to describe progressively larger and more inclusive circles that are able to encompass a wider range of possible participants.

Although there are and will continue to be considerable disagreements about who or what should define the center and who or what is or is not included, this debate is not the problem. The problem rests in the strategy itself. In taking this particular approach, these different ethical theories endeavor to identify what is essentially the same in a phenomenal diversity of individuals. Consequently, they include others by effectively stripping away and reducing differences. This approach, although having the appearance of being increasingly more inclusive, "is rather clearly a function of imperial power mongering," as Birch (1993, 315) describes it. For it immediately effaces the unique alterity of others and turns them into more of the same, instituting what Slavoj Žižek (1997, 161) calls the structure of the Möbius band: "At the very heart of Otherness, we encounter the other side of the Same." In making this argument, however, it should be noted that the criticism has itself employed what it criticizes. (Or to put it another way, the articulation of what is the matter is itself already and unavoidably involved with the material of its articulation.) In focusing attention on what is essentially the same in these various forms of moral centrism, the analysis does exactly what it charges—it identifies a common feature that underlies apparent diversity and effectively reduces a multiplicity of differences to what is the same. Pointing this out, however, does not invalidate the conclusion but demonstrates, not only in what is said but also in what is done, the questionable operations that are already involved in any attempt at articulating inclusion.

Exclusion is a problem because it calls attention to and fixates on what is different despite what might be similar. Inclusion is a problem, because it emphasizes similarities at the expense of differences. Consequently, the one is the inverse of the other. They are, as Michael Heim (1998, 42) calls them, "binary brothers," or, to put it in colloquial terms, two sides of one coin. As long as moral debate and innovation remain involved with and structured by these two possibilities, little or nothing will change. Exclusion will continue to be identified and challenged, as it has been in the discourses of moral personhood, animal rights, bioethics, and information ethics, by calls for greater inclusiveness and ethical theories that are able to accommodate these previously excluded others. At the same time, efforts to articulate inclusion will be challenged, as they have been in critical responses to these projects, as "imperial power mongering" (Birch 1993, 315) and for the reduction of difference that they had sought to respect and accommodate in the first place.

What is needed, therefore, is a third alternative that does not simply oppose exclusion by inclusion or vice versa. What is needed is an approach that is situated and oriented otherwise. In thinking otherwise, we will not be interested in taking sides or playing by the existing rules of the game. Instead we will be concerned with challenging, criticizing, and even changing the terms and conditions by which this debate has been organized, articulated, and configured. Precedent for this kind of alternative transaction can already be found in both the continental and analytic traditions. It is, for example, what poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida propose with the term "deconstruction," and what Thomas Kuhn endeavors to articulate in his paradigm changing work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. But the practice is much older. It is, for instance, evident in Immanuel Kant's "Copernican revolution," which sought to resolve fundamental questions in modern philosophy not by lending support to or endeavoring to prove one or the other side in the rationalist versus empiricist debate but by rewriting rules of the game (Kant 1965, Bxvi).

But thinking otherwise is even older than this innovation in modern European thought, having its proper origin in the inaugural gesture attributed to the first philosopher, Socrates. It is, as John Sallis points out, in Plato's *Phaedo*, a dialogue that narrates among other things the final hours of Socrates's life, that the aged philosopher remembers where it all began. "In the face of death Socrates recalls how he became what he is: how he began by following the ways of his predecessors, the ways handed down through the operation of a certain tradition, the way of that kind of wisdom called *περί φύσεως ίστορία*; how this alleged wisdom repeatedly left him adrift; and how, finally taking to the oars, he set out on a second voyage by having recourse to *λόγοι*" (Sallis 1987, 1). As long as Socrates followed the tradition he had inherited from his predecessors—asking the questions they had already determined to be important, following the methods they had prescribed as being the most effective, and evaluating the kind of evidence they would recognize as appropriate—he failed. Rather than continue on this arguably fruitless path, he decides to change course by proceeding and thinking otherwise.

### 3.2 Decentering the Subject

Although not a Platonist by any means or even a philosopher, the roboticist Rodney Brooks supplies one effective method for pursuing the

alternative of thinking otherwise. In *Flesh and Machines: How Robots Will Change Us*, Brooks describes, by way of an autobiographical gesture that is not unlike the one Plato has Socrates deploy, the "research heuristic" that was largely responsible for much of his success: "During my earlier years as a postdoc at MIT, and as a junior faculty member at Stanford, I had developed a heuristic in carrying out research. I would look at how everyone else was tackling a certain problem and find the core central thing that they had all agreed on so much that they never even talked about it. Then I would negate the central implicit belief and see where it led. This often turned out to be quite useful" (Brooks 2002, 37).

Following this procedure, we can say that one of the common and often unacknowledged features of the different formulations of both moral agency and patiency is the assumption that moral considerability is something that can and should be decided on the basis of individual qualities. This core assumption is clearly operational in, for example, the question of moral personhood, where the principal objective is to identify or articulate "the person-making qualities" in a way that is nonarbitrary and nonprejudicial; demonstrate how something, say, an animal or a machine, does in fact provide evidence of possessing that particular set of qualities; and establish guidelines that specify how such persons should be treated by others in the group. Even though there remain considerable disagreements about the exact qualities or criteria that should apply, what is not debated is the fact that an individual, in order to be considered a legitimate moral person, would need to achieve and demonstrate possession of the necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion in the club. Instead of continuing in this fashion, arguing that some other individuals also clear the bar or making a case to revise the criteria of inclusion, we can proceed otherwise. Specifically, we can challenge or "negate," which is Brook's term, the basic assumption concerning the privileged place of the individual moral subject, arguably a product of Cartesian philosophy and the enlightenment's obsession with the self, with a decentered and distributed understanding of moral subjectivity. We can, in effect, agree that the center always and already cannot hold and that "things fall apart" (Yeats 1922, 289; Achebe 1994).

One such alternative can be found in what F. Allan Hanson (2009, 91) calls "extended agency theory," which is itself a kind of extension of actor-network approaches. According to Hanson, who takes what appears

to be a practical and entirely pragmatic view of things, machine responsibility is still undecided and, for that reason, one should be careful not to go too far in speculating about the issue: "Possible future development of automated systems and new ways of thinking about responsibility will spawn plausible arguments for the moral responsibility of non-human agents. For the present, however, questions about the mental qualities of robots and computers make it unwise to go this far" (ibid., 94). Instead, Hanson, following the work of Peter-Paul Verbeek (2009), suggests that this problem may be resolved by considering various theories of "joint responsibility," where "moral agency is distributed over both human and technological artifacts" (Hanson 2009, 94). This is an elaboration of the "many hands" concept that had been proposed by Helen Nissenbaum (1996) to describe the distributed nature of accountability in computerized society.

In this way, Hanson's "extended agency" introduces a kind of "cyborg moral subject" where responsibility resides not in a predefined ethical individual but in a network of relations situated between human individuals and others, including machines. For Hanson, this distributed moral responsibility moves away from the anthropocentric individualism of enlightenment thought, which divides the world into self and other, and introduces an ethics that is more in line with recent innovations in ecological thinking:

> When the subject is perceived more as a verb than a noun—a way of combining different entities in different ways to engage in various activities—the distinction between Self and Other loses both clarity and significance. When human individuals realize that they do not act alone but together with other people and things in extended agencies, they are more likely to appreciate the mutual dependency of all the participants for their common well-being. The notion of joint responsibility associated with this frame of mind is more conducive than moral individualism to constructive engagement with other people, with technology, and with the environment in general. (Hanson 2009, 98)

A similar proposal is provided in David F. Channell's *The Vital Machine*. After a rather involved investigation of the collapse of the conceptual differences customarily situated between technology and organisms, Channell ends his analysis with a brief consideration of "ethics in the age of the vital machine." "No longer," Channell (1991, 146) argues, beginning with a characterization that deliberately negates the standard approach, "can the focus of the theory of ethics be the autonomous individual. No longer

can ethical judgments be based on a simple distinction between the intrinsic value of human beings and the instrumental value of technological creations. The focus of the ethics of the vital machine must be decentered." This decentering, however, does not go for all machines in all circumstances. Instead, it is contextualized in such a way as to be responsive to and responsible for differences in particular situations: "In some cases, with the use of traditional tools, the interactions may be very simple and the 'center' of ethics will be more on the side of the human, but in other cases, with the use of intelligent computers, the interactions may be quite complex and the 'center' of ethics will be more or less equally divided between the human and the machine" (ibid.). To respond to these apparent shifts in the 'center' of moral consideration, Channell proposes "a decentered ethical framework that reflects a bionic world view" (ibid., 152), what he calls "a bionic ethic" (ibid., 151).

This idea is derived from a reworking of Aldo Leopold's (1966) "land ethic." "While the land ethic of Leopold focuses on the organic, and in fact is usually interpreted as being in opposition to technology, it does provide a model for including both the organic and the mechanical into the expanding boundaries of a new ethic. In point of fact, Leopold often explained the interdependence of the biotic elements of nature in terms of engine parts or wheels and cogs" (Channell 1991, 153). Although often distinguished from technological concerns, Channell finds Leopold's land ethic to provide articulation of a moral thinking that can respect and take responsibility for nonliving objects, not only soils, waters, and rocks but also computers and other technological artifacts. For Channell, connecting the dots between these different concerns is not only a matter of metaphorical comparison—that is, the fact that nature has often been described and characterized in explicit mechanical terms—but grounded in established moral and legal precedent, that is, in the fact that "inanimate objects such as trusts, corporations, banks, and ships have long been seen by the courts as possessing rights"; the fact that some "writers have suggested that landmark buildings should be treated in a way similar to endangered species"; and the fact that "objects of artistic creation . . . have an intrinsic right to exist and be treated with respect" (ibid.).

In taking this approach, however, Channell is not arguing that inanimate objects and artifacts, like machines, should be considered the same as human beings, animals, or other living organisms. Instead, following

Leopold, he advocates a holistic ecological perspective, something that is called, borrowing a term from Richard Brautigan, "a cybernetic ecology." "The idea of a cybernetic ecology," Channell argues, "does not imply that machines should be given equal standing with humans or with animals, plants, rivers, or mountains. Even within nature, there is a hierarchy of living things, with some species dominant over others. A fundamental element of any ecological system is the 'food chain.' Throughout the environment the continued survival of one species is dependent on its being able to eat (or in more general terms transfer energy from) another part of the environment" (ibid., 154). The main issue, therefore, is figuring out where the various technological artifacts fit in the "food chain" of this "cybernetic ecology." Although this is, for now at least, still a largely undecided issue, what Channell proposes is a much more holistic approach and understanding of the moral landscape. For him, the issue is not simply who is and who is not part of an exclusive club, but rather how the different elements of the ecology fit together and support each other in a system that includes not just "deers and pines" but also "computers and electronics" (ibid.). "Within an ecological system, all elements have some intrinsic value but because of the interdependence within the system every element also has some instrumental value for the rest of the system. Each part of the ecology has a certain degree of autonomy, but in the context of the system, each part plays some role in the control of the entire ecology" (ibid.). What Channell advocates, therefore, is a shift in perspective from a myopic Cartesian subject to a holistic ecological orientation in which each element becomes what it is as a product of the position it occupies within the whole and is granted appropriate rights and responsibilities in accordance with the functioning and continued success of the entire system.

This decentered, systems approach to deciding questions of moral considerability sounds promising, but it has problems. First, this new cybernetic holism (and it should be recalled that cybernetics, from the very beginning, was to have been a totalizing science covering both animals and machines), which leverages the land ethic of Leopold, inherits many of the problems typically associated with environmental ethics. Although it challenges and deposes the anthropocentric privilege that human beings had traditionally granted themselves in moral philosophy, it still, as Birch (1993, 315) points out, locates a center of moral concern and organizes

and regulates its system of ethics according to this new moral subject. Despite significantly challenging the anthropocentric perspective, this shift in focus is still and cannot help but be centrist. It simply redistributes what is considered to be the center of the moral universe. So for all its promise to decenter things, Channell's bionic ethic is just one more in a long line of competing and more inclusive forms of centrisms. Like Floridi's IE, it is clearly more universal and more inclusive, but it is, on this account, just more of the same.

Second, there is, in all of this, a problem with subjectivity. This comes out in the final paragraph of Channell's text, where he ends on an arguably optimistic if not utopian note: "In a cybernetic ecology both technology and organic life must be intelligently conserved. The entire system might be worse off without the peregrine falcon or the snail darter, but it also might be worse off without telecommunications and much of medical technology. On the other hand we might not want to conserve nuclear weapons or dioxin, but we might also be better off if the AIDS virus became extinct. In the end, we will build a new Jerusalem only if we can find a harmony between organic life and technology" (Channell 1991, 154). What remains unanswered in this optimistic assessment is: Who or what is the subject of this passage? Who or what is marked with the pronoun "we?" Who or what speaks in this conclusive statement? If the first-person plural refers to human beings, if it addresses itself to those individual humans who read the text and share a certain language, community, and tradition, then this statement, for all its promise, seems to sneak anthropocentrism in the back door. In this way, the cybernetic ecological perspective would become just another way of articulating, preserving, and protecting what are, in the final analysis, human interests and assets. And this conclusion seems to be supported by the examples Channell provides, insofar as the AIDS virus is something that adversely affects the immune system and integrity of the human species.

It is also possible, however, that this "we" refers not to human beings but to the vital machine and the entire cybernetic ecology. But then the issue must be who or what gives Channell, presumably a human being, the right to speak on behalf of this larger community. By what right does this individual, or anyone else, for that matter, write and speak on behalf of all the members of this community—human, animal, machine,

or otherwise? Who or what grants this authority to speak, in this particular idiom, on behalf of this larger whole? This is of course the problem with any form of religious discourse, in which a particular human individual, like a prophet, or group of human beings, like a church, speaks on behalf of the divine, articulating what god wants, needs, or desires. Doing so is clearly expedient, but it is also a decisive imposition of power—what Birch (1993, 315) calls "imperial power mongering." Consequently, if Channell's "we" is human, it is not enough. If, however, his use of this term refers to the vital machine or the whole cybernetic ecology, it is perhaps too much. In pointing this out, my goal is not to fault Channell for getting it wrong but to point out how trying to get it right is already constrained and limited by the very system against which one struggles. Proposing an alternative, therefore, is neither simple, complete, nor beyond additional critical reflection.

An alternative thinking of decentered ethics is proposed by Joanna Zylinska (2009, 163), who advocates "a Deleuzian-influenced notion of 'distributive and composite agency.'" This form of "distributive agency" is proposed in direct response to and as an alternative for contemporary metaethical innovations that, although critical of the anthropocentric tradition, unfortunately do not go far enough. Zylinska, for instance, argues that the apparently groundbreaking work of animal rights philosophers, like Peter Singer, succeeds in "radicalizing humanist ethics by shifting the boundaries of who counts as a 'person'" while it "still preserves the structural principles of this ethics, with an individual person serving as the cornerstone" (ibid., 14). According to Zylinska, therefore, Singer merely remixes and modifies traditional anthropocentric ethics. He questions who or what gets to participate but ultimately preserves the basic structure and essential rules of the humanist game. In contrast, a concept of "distributive agency" recognizes and affirms the fact that an "individual person," however that comes to be defined, is always situated in and already operating through complex networks of interacting relations.

"Human agency," Zylinska argues with reference to the cyborg performance art of Stelarc, "does not disappear altogether from this zone of creative and contingent evolution, but it is distributed throughout a system of forces, institutions, bodies, and nodal points. This acknowledgement of agential distribution—a paradox that requires a temporarily rational and self-present self which is to undertake this realization—allows for an

enactment of a more hospitable relationship to technology than the paranoid fear of the alien other" (ibid., 172). In this way, then, "distributive and composite agency" or what Zylinska also calls an "agency of assemblages" (ibid., 163) goes beyond the "many hands" thesis of Nissenbaun, Hanson's "extended agency theory," or Channell's "bionic ethic." Whereas these other theorists advocate the decentering of agency within a network of actors, Zylinska uses this distribution as a way to develop a distinctly Levinasian-inspired form of hospitality for others—one that can remain open to a completely different and alien other. In other words, where other forms of a decentered ethics inevitably focus attention on some other center—relying on the very structural gesture and approach that they had wanted to contest in the first place—Zylinska proposes a radical decentering in which nothing is a center of moral concern but everything can potentially be subject to ethics. What makes Zylinska's decentering work is its attention to the exorbitant other and other forms of otherness. This alternative way of looking at things ultimately concerns and will need to be referred to a reformulation of the question of moral patiency. In fact, this alternative approach seems to make patiency the privileged term rather than a derived aspect of some predefined notion of moral agency. Someone or something becomes a moral agent only after first being admitted into the fraternity of moral subjects—only after and on the condition that some other is recognized as Other.

### 3.3 The Ethics of Social Construction

A decentered approach recognizes the way moral responsibility is often not constituted by an individual subject but instead comes to be distributed across a network of interrelated and interacting participants. But this is not the only way to proceed. Other alternatives focus not on a decentering of the moral subject by tracing its distribution within the social fabric of a network but consider how the moral subject, whether conceptualized as an agent, patient, or both, has been socially constructed, regulated, and assigned. One such alternative is advanced by Bernd Carsten Stahl under the concept of "quasi-responsibility." In the article "Responsible Computers? A Case for Ascribing Quasi-Responsibility to Computers Independent of Personhood or Agency," Stahl effectively skirts the question of agency and personhood by reformulating the entire approach: "Instead of

engaging in questions of agency or personhood and the analysis of when computers can become subjects of (moral) responsibility, [this] paper introduces a different type of responsibility. This quasi-responsibility encompasses only a limited sub-set of traditional responsibility but it is explicitly applicable to non-human subjects, including computers" (Stahl 2006, 212).

Instead of trying to answer or even give serious attention to the seemingly irresolvable question concerning machine moral agency and personhood, Stahl, following the precedent and strategy modeled by Alan Turing, changes the question by limiting inquiry to "quasi-responsibility." This term, which Stahl recognizes is not very elegant, "follows Ricoeur who suggested a 'quasi-agency' for historical collectives such as states or nations who can be described usefully as agents even though they are not traditional agents" (ibid., 210). Accordingly, "quasi-responsibility" is characterized as a socially constructed attribution of agency that takes place independent of any traditional consideration of agency or personhood:

> The term "quasi-responsibility" indicates that the speaker intends to use the idea of a social construction for the purpose of ascribing a subject to an object with the aim of attributing sanctions (the heart of responsibility) without regard to the question of whether the subject fulfills the traditional conditions of responsibility. It shows that the focus of the ascription is on the social outcomes and consequences, not on considerations of agency or personhood. The concept was developed using computers as a main example but there is no fundamental reason why it could not be extended to other non-human entities, including animals. (Ibid.)

Stahl, therefore, advocates an alternative conceptualization of moral responsibility that is "a social construct of ascription" (ibid.), completely disengaged from and not concerned with the customary debates about and questions of moral agency and personhood.

Anne Foerst takes this innovation one step further, by contesting the location of agency and the way it is (or is not) assigned, and she does so by revisiting and significantly revising the concept of person. "'Person,'" Foerst explains in an interview, "is an assignment, given to each one of us by our parents and our closest community right after birth. It is given to us by God in the first place, and we are free to assign it to others. But we are also free to deny it to others" (Benford and Malartre 2007, 162–163). According to Foerst, the defining feature of personhood is not something discovered within the metaphysical fabric or psychological makeup of an individual being. It is not something that individuals possess as their

personal property and then can exhibit to others in some kind of test or demonstration, which would presumably be grounds for either including them in or excluding them from the community of moral subjects. Instead, the concept "person" is a social construct and assignment that is conferred (or not) by others through explicit decision. In this way, then, the question of personhood, as Hilary Putnam (1964, 691) wrote with regard to the question of artificial life, "calls for a decision and not a discovery." And this is, Foerst argues, how things actually work: "Each of us only assigns personhood to a very few people. The ethical stance is always that we have to assign personhood to everyone, but in reality we don't. We don't care about a million people dying in China of an earthquake, ultimately, in an emotional way. We try to, but we can't really, because we don't share the same physical space. It might be much more important for us if our dog is sick" (Benford and Malartre 2007, 163).

When asked directly whether this subject position can be legitimately assigned to machines, Foerst answers in the affirmative: "I think a machine can definitely be a person. The more social our machines get, the more interactive they are, the more they learn out of interaction with us, the creators, and the more we interact with them. For me there is no question that at some point they will be persons like anyone else. They will not be humans because they are different material, but they will be part of our community, there is no question in my mind" (ibid.). According to Foerst's argument, one is not first defined as a moral person who then subsequently engages in actions with others. Instead one is assigned the position of moral person (whether that be an agent, patient, or both) as a product of social relations that precede and prescribe who or what one is. And a machine can come to occupy this particular subject position just as easily as a human being, an animal, an organization, and so on.

This substantially reconfigures the field of inquiry. "What we should be arguing about," R. G. A. Dolby writes in "The Possibility of Computers Becoming Persons," "is not the possibility of machine souls or machine minds, but whether robots could ever join human society. The requirement that must be met by a robot is that people are prepared to treat it as a person. If they are, they will also be prepared to attribute to it whatever inner qualities they believe a person must have" (Dolby 1989, 321). Consequently, personhood is not decided on the basis of the possession of some occult metaphysical properties that remain for all our efforts beyond

epistemological grasp but is something that is socially constructed, negotiated, and conferred. It is not the case that someone or something first shows evidence of possessing the predefined qualities of moral subjectivity and then subsequently engages in intersubjective relationships that are determined to be more or less morally correct. The order of precedence is reversed. Someone or something that is already engaged in some particular interaction with others is responded to and accorded the status of moral subjectivity in and by the process of the interaction. The moral *subject* is literally thrown behind or under the interaction as the source and support of the interaction from which it is initially derived. In this way, the moral subject is something that is "(presup)posited" (Žižek 2008a, 209).

This means that the moral person is not some predefined, stable, and well-established ontological position but is, as Dennett (1998, 285) describes it, a "normative ideal." In other words, "the concept of a person is only a free-floating honorific that we are all happy to apply to ourselves, and to others as the spirit moves us, guided by our emotions, aesthetic sensibilities, considerations of policy, and the like" (ibid., 268). Understood in this fashion, moral personhood does not require a Turing test or similar demonstration. All that is necessary is evidence that someone or something has been (for whatever reason) considered a person by others within a particular community. This is precisely the argumentative approach employed by Leiber's fictional complainant: "The arguable question is whether they [the chimpanzee Washoe-Delta and the computer AL] are indeed persons and hence we should begin with that. We say that Washoe-Delta and AL interacted with, and were recognized by, the human crew as persons" (Leiber 1985, 5). To be a person, in other words, it is enough that one be addressed and treated by others as a person. Or, to borrow a statement from Donna Haraway (2008, 17), "the partners do not precede their relating" but become who and what they are in and through the relationship.

According to the alternative approaches of Foerst, Dolby, and Stahl, someone or something becomes a moral subject with legitimate ethical standing not on the prior determination and demonstration of his/her/its agency or the possession of some psychological properties that are considered to be "person-making" but by being situated, treated, and responded to as another person by a particular community in concrete situations and encounters. This means that "person" is not, as Foerst concludes, some

"empirical fact"; instead it is a dynamic and socially constructed honorarium or "gift" (Benford and Malartre 2007, 165) that can be bestowed (or not) on others by a particular community in a particular place for a particular time. For this reason, "person" (assuming it is decided to retain this word) is never something that is absolute and certain but is always and already a relative term, the assignment of which has its own moral implications and consequences.

This other approach, which situates the ethical relationship with others prior to and not dependent on or derived from a predefined ontological decision is promising. Despite its promise, however, these alternatives are not without their critics. "There are so many oddities," Christopher Cherry (1991, 22) writes in direct response to Dolby's article, "on so many levels":

> What can it mean to talk of machines "join[ing] human society," being "treated," "accepted," as persons, and so forth? Dolby thinks we should start (not end) by awarding colours. We can then, but only if we feel the need, hang on them sentient "qualities"—in my words, see sentient states in them. Here there are vulgar parallels with the theologian's injunction: act in order to believe, and believe in order to understand. At the best of times this is puzzling advice: on this occasion it is unappealing as well, intimating that our very humanity is a metaphysical fancy to be indulged. (Ibid.)

For Cherry, the alternative way of explaining personhood is not only threatening to human dignity but "deeply incoherent" and philosophically deficient. Or as Jay Friedenberg (2008, 2) describes it, admittedly using something of a caricature of the position, "the idea of a person being a person because someone else thinks they are is unsatisfying from a scientific perspective. Science is an objective endeavor and would like to be able to find some crucial human physical property that can be measured and detected."

The real problem in all this, however, is that it just reverses things, making moral personhood a product of the relationship and not the other way around. Although a promising intervention, inversion is not enough; it never is. In turning things around, it still operates according to a logic that is oriented and controlled by the very system that is inverted. Instead of being the origin of the relationship, the individual moral subject is now its product. This approach, therefore, is still organized and regulated by a centrist logic. Consequently, this innovation, although promising, is not

sufficient to break with the individualistic tradition; it is only its negative and inverted form. Although recognizing that the club of moral *consideranda* is socially constructed and that we are responsible for deciding on its membership, this method still operates on the grounds of a questionable fraternal logic. We are still organizing, to deploy a phrase popularized by Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), "special people clubs" and deciding who is and who is not special. This may provide for a more honest understanding of the way these decisions are made, but what it does not account for is the fact that this decision is itself an ethical matter with its own assumptions and consequences. There is, then, a kind of morality before morality. Before something is decided to be either a moral agent or moral patient, we make a decision whether to make this decision or not. Or as Søren Kierkegaard (1987, 169) described this redoubled moral decision, "rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out."

### 3.4 Another Alternative

When it comes to thinking otherwise about others, especially as it relates to the question concerning ethics, there is perhaps no scholar better suited to the task than Emmanuel Levinas. Unlike a lot of what goes by the name of "moral philosophy," Levinasian thought does not rely on metaphysical generalizations, abstract formulas, or simple pieties. Levinasian philosophy not only is critical of the traditional tropes and traps of Western ontology but proposes an ethics of radical otherness that deliberately resists and interrupts the metaphysical gesture par excellence, that is, the reduction of difference to the same. This radically different approach to thinking difference is not just a useful and expedient strategy. It is not, in other words, a mere gimmick. It constitutes a fundamental reorientation that effectively changes the rules of the game and the standard operating presumptions. In this way, "morality is," as Levinas (1969, 304) concludes, "not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy." This fundamental reconfiguration, which puts ethics *first* in both sequence and status, permits Levinas to circumvent and deflect a lot of the difficulties that have traditionally tripped up moral thinking in general and efforts to address the machine question in particular.

First, for Levinas, the problems of other minds[1]—the seemingly irresolvable fact that one cannot know with any certitude whether the other who confronts me either has a conscious mind or not—is not some fundamental epistemological limitation that must be addressed and resolved prior to moral decision making but constitutes the very condition of the ethical relationship as an irreducible exposure to an Other who always and already exceeds the boundaries of the self's totalizing comprehension. Consequently Levinasian philosophy, instead of being derailed by the standard epistemological problem of other minds, immediately affirms and acknowledges it as the basic condition of possibility for ethics. Or as Richard Cohen succinctly describes it in what could be a marketing slogan for Levinasian thought, "not 'other minds,' mind you, but the 'face' of the other, and the faces of all others" (Cohen 2001, 336). In this way, then, Levinas provides for a seemingly more attentive and empirically grounded approach to the problem of other minds insofar as he explicitly acknowledges and endeavors to respond to and take responsibility for the original and irreducible difference of others instead of getting involved with and playing all kinds of speculative (and unfortunately wrongheaded) head games. "The ethical relationship," Levinas (1987, 56) writes, "is not grafted on to an antecedent relationship of cognition; it is a foundation and not a superstructure. . . . It is then more *cognitive* than cognition itself, and all objectivity must participate in it."

Second, and following from this, Levinas's concern with/for the Other will constitute neither an agent- nor patient-oriented ethics, but addresses itself to what is anterior to and remains in excess of this seemingly fundamental logical structure. Although Levinas's attention to and concern for others looks, from one perspective at least, to be a kind of "patient-oriented" ethics that puts the interests and rights of the Other before oneself, it is not and cannot be satisfied with simply endorsing one side of or conforming to the agent–patient dialectic. Unlike Floridi's IE, which advocates a patient-oriented ethic in opposition to the customary agent-oriented approaches that have maintained a controlling interest in the field, Levinas goes one step further, releasing what could be called a *deconstruction*[2] of the very conceptual order of agent and patient. This alternative, as Levinas (1987, 117) explains, is located "on the hither side of the act-passivity alternative" and, for that reason, significantly reconfigures the standard terms and conditions. "For the condition for," Levinas

explains, "or the unconditionality of, the self does not begin in the auto-affection of a sovereign ego that would be, after the event, 'compassionate' for another. Quite the contrary: the uniqueness of the responsible ego is possible only in being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable *before*" (ibid., 123). The self or the ego, as Levinas describes it, does not constitute some preexisting self-assured condition that is situated before and is the cause of the subsequent relationship with an other. It does not (yet) take the form of an active agent who is able to decide to extend him- or herself to others in a deliberate act of compassion. Rather it becomes what it is as a by-product of an uncontrolled and incomprehensible exposure to the face of the Other that takes place prior to any formulation of the self in terms of agency.

Likewise, the Other is not comprehended as a patient who is constituted as the recipient of the agent's actions and whose interests and rights would need to be identified, taken into account, and duly respected. Instead, the absolute and irreducible exposure to the Other is something that is anterior and exterior to these distinctions, not only remaining beyond the range of their conceptual grasp and regulation but also making possible and ordering the antagonistic structure that subsequently comes to characterize the difference that distinguishes the self from its others and the agent from the patient in the first place. In other words, for Levinas at least, prior determinations of agency and patiency do not first establish the terms and conditions of any and all possible encounters that the self might have with others and with other forms of otherness. It is the other way around. The Other first confronts, calls upon, and interrupts self-involvement and in the process determines the terms and conditions by which the standard roles of moral agent and moral patient come to be articulated and assigned. Consequently, Levinas's philosophy is not what is typically understood as an ethics, a metaethics, a normative ethics, or even an applied ethics. It is what John Llewelyn (1995, 4) has called a "proto-ethics" or what others have termed an "ethics of ethics." "It is true," Derrida explains, "that Ethics in Levinas's sense is an Ethics without law and without concept, which maintains its non-violent purity only before being determined as concepts and laws. This is not an objection: let us not forget that Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine *a* morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general. But as

this determination does not offer itself as a *theory* of Ethics, in question, then, is an Ethics of Ethics" (Derrida 1978, 111).

Third, and because of this, Levinasian thought does not, like many of the other attempts to open up moral thinking to other forms of otherness, get hung up on debating and deciding the issue of moral personhood. The Other is not yet, strictly speaking, another person. In other words, I respond to and have a responsibility for the Other not because he/she/it is always already another person like I assume myself to be--a kind of alter ego with a similar set of properties, rights, and responsibilities--but because the Other is always and already otherwise. "Levinas," as Simmone Plourde (2001, 141) explains, "pushed the concept of personhood to its most intimate depths by substituting it with the notion of the face." But the face of the Other is not necessarily that of another "person" as that term has been deployed and developed in the history of moral philosophy.

Personhood is typically decided prior to the ethical relationship based on the articulation of an exclusive criteria and a decision as to who is and who does not possess the appropriate person-making qualities. In Kant's view, for instance, "the other person who is the object of my moral action is constituted *after* I have constituted myself as a moral subject a priori. This other person, then, is essentially an analogue of my own fully conscious moral personhood" (Novak 1998, 166). Conceptualized in this way, I have an ethical obligation to anyone who or anything that clears the bar for inclusion in the club of persons to which I already assume that I belong. All others who fail to measure up fall outside the scope of such obligations and may be dispensed with as I please and without further consideration. This is the case, whether personhood comes to be defined with a specific list of qualifying criteria (Cherry 1991; DeGrazia 2006; Dennett 1998; Scott 1990; Smith 2010) or delimited by deciding on an appropriate level of abstraction (Floridi and Sanders 2004). In whatever manner it comes to be determined, membership in the community of moral persons is something that is decided a priori, and the moral obligation is predicated upon and subsequent to this decision.

Levinas deliberately turns things around by reconfiguring the assumed order of precedence. For him, the ethical relationship, the moral obligation that the I has to the Other, precedes and determines who or what comes, after the fact, to be considered a moral subject or "person." Ethics, therefore, is not predicated on an a priori ontological determination of

personhood. Instead, personhood, assuming that this word is to be retained, is something that is first determined on the basis of and as a product of the ethical relationship. "Modern antihumanism," Levinas (1987, 127–128) writes, "which denies the primacy that the human person, free for itself, would have for the signification of being, is true over and beyond the reasons it gives itself. It clears the place for subjectivity positing itself in abnegation, in sacrifice, in a substitution which precedes the will. Its inspired intuition is to have abandoned the idea of person, goal and origin of itself, in which the ego is still a thing because it is still a being." According to Levinas, therefore, the Other always and already obligates me in advance of the customary decisions and debates concerning personhood and who or what is and is not a moral subject. "If ethics arises," Calarco (2008, 71) writes, "from an encounter with an Other who is fundamentally irreducible to and unanticipated by my egoistic and cognitive machinations," then identifying the "'who' of the Other" is something that cannot be decided once and for all or with any certitude. This apparent inability or indecision, however, is not necessarily a problem. In fact, it is a considerable advantage insofar as it opens ethics not only to the Other but to other forms of otherness. "If this is indeed the case," Calarco concludes, "that is, if it is the case that we do not know where the face begins and ends, where moral considerability begins and ends, then we are obligated to proceed from the possibility that anything might take on a face. And we are further obligated to hold this possibility permanently open" (ibid.).

Levinasian philosophy, therefore, does not make prior commitments or decisions about who or what will be considered a legitimate moral subject. For Levinas, it seems, anything that faces the I and calls its *ipseity* into question would be Other and would constitute the site of ethics. Despite the promise this innovation has for arranging a moral philosophy that is radically situated otherwise, Levinas's work is not able to escape from the anthropocentric privilege. Whatever the import of his unique contribution, Other in Levinas is still and unapologetically human. Although he is not the first to identify it, Jeffrey Nealon provides what is perhaps one of the most succinct descriptions of this problem in *Alterity Politics*: "In thematizing response solely in terms of the human face and voice, it would seem that Levinas leaves untouched the oldest and perhaps most sinister unexamined privilege of the same: *anthropos* [*ἄνθρωπος*] and only *anthropos*, has *logos* [*λόγος*]; and as such, *anthropos* responds not to the barbarous

or the inanimate, but only to those who qualify for the privilege of 'humanity,' only those deemed to possess a face, only to those recognized to be living in the *logos*" (Nealon 1998, 71). This residue of the human and of a certain brand of humanism is something that had also structured Derrida's critical response to Levinas's work in the introduction to the 1997 presentation at Cerisy-la-Salle and is the subject of Richard Cohen's introduction to the English translation of Levinas's 1972 *Humanism of the Other* (Levinas 2003).

For Derrida, the humanist pretensions of Levinasian philosophy constitute cause for considerable concern: "In looking at the gaze of the other, Levinas says, one must forget the color of his eyes, in other words see the gaze, the face that gazes before seeing the visible eyes of the other. But when he reminds us that the 'best way of meeting the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes,' he is speaking of man, of one's fellow as man, kindred, brother; he thinks of the other man and this, for us, will later be revealed as a matter for serious concern" (Derrida 2008, 12). And what truly "concerns" Derrida is not just the way this anthropocentrism limits Levinas's philosophical innovations but the way it already makes exclusive decisions about the (im)possibility of an animal other. "Emmanuel Levinas did not," Derrida points out, "make the animal anything like a focus of interrogation within his work. This silence seems to me here, at least from the point of view that counts for us, more significant than all the differences that might separate Levinas from Descartes and from Kant on the question of the subject, of ethics, and of the person" (ibid., 105–106).

Additionally, on those one or two rare occasions when Levinas does address himself directly to animals—when he is, it seems, not silent about the animal—it is in order to silence or dismiss them from any further consideration. There is, for instance, the well-known situation with Bobby, a dog that Levinas and his fellow prisoners of war encountered during their incarceration by the Germans (Levinas 1990, 152–153). Although Levinas directly, and with what one might call considerable compassion, addresses himself to the relationship the prisoners had with this particular animal, whom Levinas nominates as "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany" (ibid., 153), he only includes the dog in order to marginalize him. Bobby has, Levinas points out, "neither ethics nor *logos*" (ibid., 152). And in making this distinction, Levinas's consideration of Bobby does not subvert or

question but exhibits affiliation with the Cartesian tradition that Derrida charges him with: "Bobby is," as David Clark (2004, 66) points out, "thus closer to a cyborg than to a sentient creature; his is not unlike an empty machine of the sort Descartes hallucinated when he looked at animals."

Whereas Derrida maintains a critical stance toward Levinas's silence on the animal question and its rather conventional underlying humanism, Richard Cohen endeavors to give it a positive spin: "The three chapters of *Humanism of the Other* each defend humanism—the world view founded on the belief in the irreducible dignity of humans, a belief in the efficacy and worth of human freedom and hence also of human responsibility" (Cohen 2003, ix). For Cohen, however, this humanism is not the common run-of-the-mill anthropocentrism; it consists in a radical thinking of the human person as the unique site of ethics:

> From beginning to end, Levinas's thought is a humanism of the other. The distinctive moment of Levinas's philosophy transcends its articulation but is nevertheless not difficult to discern: the superlative moral priority of the other person. It proposes a conception of the "humanity of the human," the "subjectivity of the subject," according to which being "for-the-other" takes precedence over, is better than being for-itself. Ethics conceived as a metaphysical anthropology is therefore nothing less than "first philosophy." (Ibid., xxvi)

What is important to note in these two different responses to the anthropocentrism that is apparent in Levinas's work is the fact that both sides recognize and affirm a fundamental and irreducible form of humanism that is always and already at work within Levinas's ethics of otherness. For Levinas, as for many of those thinkers who came before and follow in the wake of his influence, the other is always and already operationalized as another human subject. For Derrida this is a matter for serious concern insofar as it threatens to undermine Levinas's entire philosophical enterprise. For Cohen, however, it is an indication of Levinas's unique dedication to and focus on the humanism of the Other. Either way, if, as Levinas argues, ethics precedes ontology, then in Levinas's own work, anthropology and a certain brand of humanism appear to precede and underwrite ethics.

### 3.4.1 The Animal Other

If Levinasian philosophy is to provide a way of thinking otherwise that is able to respond to and to take responsibility for other forms of otherness,

or to consider and respond to, as John Sallis (2010, 88) describes it, "the question of another alterity," we will need to use and interpret Levinas's own philosophical innovations in excess of and in opposition to him. We will need, as Derrida (1978, 260) once wrote of Georges Bataille's exceedingly careful engagement with the thought of Hegel, to follow Levinas to the end, "to the point of agreeing with him against himself" and of wresting his discoveries from the limited interpretations that he provided. Such efforts at "radicalizing Levinas," as Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (2010) refer to it, will take up and pursue Levinas's moral innovations in excess of the rather restricted formulations that he and his advocates and critics have typically provided. Calarco, in particular, takes issue with the way Levinas or at least certain readings of his work have simply and without any significant critical hesitation excluded the animal from ethics. "The two dominant theses," Calarco (2008, 55) writes, "in Levinas's writings concerning animals are: no nonhuman animal is capable of genuine ethical response to the Other; nonhuman animals are not the kind of beings that elicit an ethical response in human beings—which is to say, the Other is always and only the *human* Other." As Calarco correctly points out, the customary reading of Levinas, one that is shared by many of his critics and advocates alike, Derrida included, is that he denies both moral agency and patiency to the animal. In other words, the animal is not able to respond to others, nor does it constitute an Other who calls for an ethical response.

For Calarco, however, this is not and should not be the final word on the matter: "Although Levinas himself is for the most part unabashedly and dogmatically anthropocentric, the underlying logic of his thought permits no such anthropocentrism. When read rigorously, the logic of Levinas's account of ethics does not allow for either of these two claims. In fact, as I shall argue, Levinas's ethical philosophy is, or at least should be, committed to a notion of *universal ethical consideration*, that is, an agnostic form of ethical consideration that has no a priori constraints or boundaries" (ibid.). In proposing this alternative approach, Calarco interprets Levinas against himself, arguing that the logic of Levinas's account of ethics is in fact richer and more radical than the limited interpretation that the philosopher had initially provided for it. Calarco, therefore, not only exposes and contests Levinas's anthropocentrism, which effectively sidelines from ethical consideration any and all nonhuman things, but

seeks to locate in his writings the possibility for articulating something like Birch's (1993) "universal consideration." In fact, Calarco not only employs Birch's terminology but utilizes his essay as a way of radicalizing the Levinasian perspective: "Rather than trying to determine the definitive criterion or criteria of moral considerability, we might, following Birch and the reading of Levinas that I have been pursuing, begin from a notion of 'universal consideration' that takes seriously our fallibility in determining where the face begins and ends. Universal consideration would entail being ethically attentive and open to the possibility that anything might take on face" (Calarco 2008, 73).

This radical possibility obviously opens the door to what some might consider an absurd conclusion. "At this point," Calarco admits, "most reasonable readers will likely see the argument I have been making as having absurd consequences. While it might not be unreasonable to consider the possibility that 'higher' animals who are 'like' us, animals who have sophisticated cognitive and emotive functions, could have a moral claim on us, are we also to believe that 'lower' animals, insects, dirt, hair, fingernails, ecosystems and so on could have a claim on us?" (ibid., 71). In responding to this charge, Calarco deploys that distinctly Žižekian (2000, 2) strategy of "*fully endorsing what one is accused of*." "I would suggest," Calarco (2008, 72) argues, "affirming and embracing what the critic sees as an absurdity. All attempts to shift or enlarge the scope of moral consideration are initially met with the same reactionary rejoinder of absurdity from those who uphold common sense. But any thought worthy of the name, especially any thought of ethics, takes its point of departure in setting up a critical relation to common sense and the established doxa and, as such, demands that we ponder absurd, unheard-of thoughts."

A similar decision is made by John Llewelyn, who recognizes that we always risk sliding down a slippery slope into "nonsense" when we attempt to take others and other forms of otherness into account:

> We wanted to open the door of ethical considerability to animals, trees, and rocks. This led us to propose a distinction that promised to allow us to open the door in this way without thereby opening the door to the notion that we have ethical responsibilities to, for example, numbers. Is this notion a nonsense? Maybe. But nonsense itself is historically and geographically relative. What fails to make sense at one time and place makes sense at another. This is why ethics is educative. And this is why for the existentist concept of the ethical this chapter has been projecting

to be as extensive and democratic as justice demands we may be ethically obligated to talk nonsense. (Llewelyn 2010, 110–111)

Talking nonsense was, of course, the case with the animal question, which was initially advanced by Thomas Taylor (1966) as a kind of absurdity in order to ridicule what was assumed to be another absurdity—the extension of rights to women. It is again encountered in Christopher Stone's (1974) consideration of the seemingly absurd and "unthinkable" question "Should Trees Have Standing?" "Throughout legal history," Stone (1974, 6–7) writes, "each successive extension of rights to some new entity has been, theretofore, a bit unthinkable. . . . The fact is, that each time there is a movement to confer rights onto some new 'entity,' the proposal is bound to sound odd or frightening or laughable." And it is with suppressed laughter—the kind of embarrassed laughter that is always on the verge of bursting forth in the face of what appears to be nonsense—that the apparent absurdity of the machine question has been given consideration, as is evident from the editors' note appended to the beginning of Marvin Minsky's "Alienable Rights": "Recently we heard some rumblings in normally sober academic circles about robot rights. We managed to keep a straight face as we asked Marvin Minsky, MIT's grand old man of artificial intelligence, to address the heady question" (Minsky 2006, 137).

Calarco's reworking of Levinasian philosophy, therefore, produces a much more inclusive ethics that is able to take other forms of otherness into account. And it is, no doubt, a compelling proposal. What is interesting about his argument, however, is not the other forms of otherness that come to be included through his innovative reworking of Levinas, but what (unfortunately) gets left out in the process. According to the letter of Calarco's text, the following entities should be given moral consideration: "'lower' animals, insects, dirt, hair, fingernails, and ecosystems." What is obviously missing from this list is anything that is not "natural," that is, any form of artifact. Consequently, what gets left behind or left out by Calarco's "universal consideration"—a mode of ethical concern that does not shrink from potential absurdities and the unthinkable—are tools, technologies, and machines. It is possible that these excluded others might be covered by the phrase "and so on," which Calarco appends to the end of his litany, in much the same way that "an embarrassed 'etc.,'" as Judith Butler (1990, 143) calls it, is often added to a string of others in order to gesture in the direction of those other others who did not make the list.

But if the "and so on" indicates, as it typically does, something like "more along same lines as what has been named," then it seem that the machine would not be included. Although Calarco (2008, 72) is clearly prepared, in the name of the other and other kinds of otherness, "to ponder absurd, unheard-of thoughts," the machine remains excluded and in excess of this effort, comprising a kind of absurdity beyond absurdity, the unthinkable of the unthought, or the other of all who are considered Other. According to Calarco, then, the resistance that is offered to *ipseity* by all kinds of other nonhuman things does, in fact, and counter to Levinas's own interpretation of things, make an ethical impact. But this does not apply, it seems, to machines, which remain, for both Levinas and Calarco, otherwise than Ethics, or beyond Other.

### 3.4.2 Other Things

A similar proposal, although formulated in an entirely different fashion, is advanced in Silvia Benso's *The Face of Things* (2000). Whereas Calarco radicalizes Levinas by way of Birch's "universal consideration," Benso's efforts to articulate "a different side of ethics" take the form of a forced confrontation between Levinasian ethics and Heideggerian ontology:

> The confrontation between Heidegger and Levinas, in their encounter with things, is marked by a double truth. On the one hand, there are no things in Levinas, since things are for the same, or for the Other, but not for themselves. That is, in Levinas there is no alterity of things. Conversely, there are things in Heidegger. For him, things are the place where the gathering of the Fourfold—the mortals, the gods, the earth, the sky—comes to pass, in an intimacy that is not fusion but differing. Each thing remains other in hosting the Fourfold in its peculiar way: other than the Fourfold and other than any other thing; other than the mortals, who can dwell by things in their thinging only if they can take care of things as things, if they can let them be in their alterity. . . . Undoubtedly there is ethics in Levinas, even if his notion of ethics extends only to the other person (certainly the other man, hopefully also the other woman and child). Conversely there is no ethics in Heidegger, at least according to the most common reading. If the two thinkers are forced face to face in a confrontation that neither of them would advocate enthusiastically, the result is a chiasmatic structure, whose branches connect a double negation—nonethics and nonthings—and a double affirmation—ethics and things. (Benso 2000, 127)

What Benso describes, even if she does not use the term, is a *mashup*. "Mashup" refers to a digital media practice where two or more recordings, publications, or data sources are intermingled and mixed together in order

to produce a third term that is arguably greater than the sum of its constituent parts. Although the practice has recently proliferated across all forms of digital media content, becoming what William Gibson (2005, 118) has called "the characteristic pivot at the turn of our two centuries," it was initially deployed and developed in the field of popular music. Perhaps the best-known audio mashup is DJ Danger Mouse's *Grey Album*, which comprises a clever and rather unexpected combination of vocals taken from Jay-Z's *Black Album* layered on top of music extracted from one of the undisputed classics of classic rock, the Beatles' *White Album*. Benso does something similar with two philosophers who are at least as different as Jay-Z is from the Beatles, staging a confrontation between Levinas and Heidegger that neither thinker would want but which, irrespective of that, produces an interesting hybrid of the two.

What can be heard, seen, or read in this unauthorized remix of Levinasian ethics and Heideggerian ontology can, as Benso predicts, result in either a thinking of ethics and things or, its negative image, a thinking of nonethics and nonthings. In the face of these two possibilities, Benso suggests that the latter would not only be too easy but would result in a rather predictable outcome, which would inevitably sound like everything else. She, therefore, endeavors to take up and pursue the path less traveled. "Since Socrates," Benso (2000, 127–128) explains in what might be considered a Nietzschean mood,

> philosophy has walked the path of negation. If there is ethics, it is not of things; and if there are things, they are not ethical. The path of affirmation is a narrow strip, which has seldom been explored. It leads to an ethics of things, where ethics cannot be traditional ethics in any of its formulations (utilitarian, deontological, virtue-oriented), and things cannot be traditional things (objects as opposed to a subject). At the intersection between ethics and things, Levinas and Heidegger meet, as in "a contact made in the heart of chiasmus." The former offers the notion of a nontraditional ethics, the latter of nontraditional things.

Benso's philosophical remix sounds both inventive and promising. Like Calarco's "universal consideration," it endeavors to articulate a distinctly Levinasian ethics that is no longer exclusively anthropo- or even biocentric—one that can, in fact, accommodate itself to and is able to respond appropriately in *the face of things*. In addition to this, the mashup of Levinas's "nontraditional ethics" and Heidegger's "nontraditional things" does some important philosophical heavy lifting, facilitating a meeting between

the two parties where the one critiques and *supplements* the other in a way that would not be simply "critical" in the colloquial sense of the word or a mere corrective addition. In other words, the mashup of Levinas and Heidegger, as is the case with all interesting digital recombinations, does not try to define the one in terms of the other (or vice versa) but seeks to preserve their specific distance and unique differences in an effort to articulate what the other had forgotten, left out, or passed over. "As supplementing each other," Benso concludes, "Levinas and Heidegger remain external, exterior, other, each not defined as the other than the same. But still as supplements, each of them offers the other that remainder that the other leaves unthought" (ibid., 129). The mashup therefore exceeds the controlling authority and comprehension of either thinker, producing an unauthorized hybrid that is neither one or the other nor a synthetic combination of the two that would sublate difference in a kind of Hegelian dialectical resolution.

> According to Derrida, two different meanings cohabit, oddly although necessarily, in the notion of the supplement. The supplement is a surplus, an addition, a fullness that enriches another fullness. Yet the supplement is not only an excess. A supplement supplements. Its addition aims at replacement. It is as if it filled a void, an anterior default of a presence. It is compensatory and vicarious, "its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (Derrida 1976, 144–145). Neither Heidegger nor Levinas need each other. Yet, in both there is a remainder that is not described, that is forgotten in the meditation. In Heidegger it is ethics, in Levinas it is things. (Ibid.)

For Heidegger, as Benso correctly points out, the thing was and remained a central issue throughout his philosophical project: "The question of things, Heidegger remarks at the beginning of a 1935/36 lecture course later published as *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, is one of the most ancient, venerable, and fundamental problems of metaphysics" (ibid., 59). Benso's attentive reading demonstrates how this "question concerning the thing" had been operationalized in Heidegger's own work, beginning with *Being and Time*'s critical reconsideration of Husserl's phenomenology, which had directed analytical efforts "to the things themselves" (Heidegger 1962, 50), and proceeding through numerous lecture-courses and publications that address *What Is a Thing?* (Heidegger 1967), "The Thing" (Heidegger 1971b), and "The Origin of the Work of Art" (Heidegger 1977a). And she charts Heidegger's thought about the thing by identifying three distinct phases:

the instrumental mode of disclosure, the artistic mode of disclosure, and the possibility of an ethical mode of disclosure.

*The Instrumental Mode of Disclosure* Heidegger's initial thinking of things is developed in his first and probably best-known work, *Being and Time*. In this early work, all things are accommodated to and comprehended by what Heidegger calls *das Zeug* or equipment (Heidegger 1962, 97). "The Greeks," Heidegger writes in his iconic approach to the subject, "had an appropriate term for 'Things': πράγματα—that is to say, that which one has to do with in one's concernful dealings (πραξις). But ontologically, the specific 'pragmatic' character of the πράγματα is just what the Greeks left in obscurity; they thought of these 'proximally' as 'mere Things.' We shall call those entities which we encounter in concern *equipment* [*Zeugen*]. In our dealings we come across equipment for writing, sewing, working, transportation, measurement" (ibid., 96–97). According to Heidegger, the ontological status or the kind of being that belongs to such equipment is primarily disclosed as "ready-to-hand" or *Zuhandenheit*, meaning that something becomes what it is or acquires its properly "thingly character" in coming to be put to work by human *Dasein* for some particular purpose (ibid., 98). A hammer, one of Heidegger's principal examples, is for hammering; a pen is for writing; a shoe is for wearing. Everything is what it is in having a *for which* or a destination to which it is to be put to use.

"This does not necessarily mean," Benso (2000, 79) explains, "that all things are tools, instruments which *Dasein* effectively uses and exploits, but rather that they disclose themselves to *Dasein* as endowed with some form of significance for its own existence and tasks." Consequently, for Heidegger's analysis in *Being and Time*, the term *equipment* covers not only the disclosure of artifacts—and Heidegger provides a litany of such things, shoes, clocks, hammers, pens, tongs, needles—but the things of nature as well. Understood in this fashion, natural things either are encountered in the mode of raw materials—"Hammer, tongs, and needle refer in themselves to steel, iron, metal, mineral, wood, in that they consist of these" (Heidegger 1962, 100). "Or nature can be," as Benso (2000, 81) points out, "encountered as the environment in which *Dasein* as *Geworfen* exists. Again, the ecological conception of nature is disclosed with reference to and through its usability, so that the forest is always the wood usable for timber, the mountain a quarry of rock, the river is for producing waterpower, the wind is 'wind in the sails.'" Everything is what it is and has its

own unique being only insofar as it is always and already accommodated to and comprehended by human *Dasein*'s own concernful dealings.

In this mode of *primordial disclosure*, however, the things as such are virtually transparent, unnoticeable, and taken for granted. In being considered for something else, that which is ready-to-hand immediately and necessarily recedes from view and is manifest only insofar as it is useful for achieving some particular purpose—only to the extent that it is "handy." For this reason, the equipmentality of things as such only obtrudes and becomes conspicuous when the equipment fails, breaks down, or interrupts the smooth functioning of that which is or had been at hand. "The equipmental character of things is explicitly apprehended," Benso (2000, 82) writes, "*via negativa* when a thing reveals its unusability, or is missing, or 'stands in the way' of *Dasein*'s concern." In these circumstances, the thing comes to be disclosed as "presence-at-hand" or *Vorhandenheit*. But, and this is an important qualification, presence-at-hand is, strictly speaking, a derived, deficient, and negative mode of disclosure. What is merely present-at-hand comes forth and shows itself as such only when some thing has become conspicuously *un-ready-to-hand* (Heidegger 1962, 103). For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, therefore, everything—whether an artifact, like a hammer, or one of the many things of nature, like a forest—is primordially disclosed as something to be employed by and for human *Dasein*. And anything that is not ready-to-hand is merely present-at-hand but only as something derived from and no longer ready-to-hand. "In *Being and Time*," Benso (2000, 94) explains, "all things, that is, all non-*Dasein* entities, were assimilated as *Zeug* or as modalities thereof, and even natural entities were equipment-to-be."

Heidegger therefore effectively turns everything—whether technological artifact or natural entity—into an instrument that is originally placed in service to and disclosed by human *Dasein* and its own concernful dealings with the world. In this early text, then, Heidegger does not think technology as a thing but, through his own mode of thinking about things, turns everything into something technological—that is, an instrument placed in service to and primarily disclosed by human *Dasein*'s own interests and concerns. In fact, Heidegger will later explicitly connect the dots, specifying *Zeug* as something properly belonging to the technological, in the essay "The Question Concerning Technology": "The manufacture and utilization of equipment [*Zeug*], tools, and machines, the manufactured

and used things themselves, and the needs and ends that they serve, all belong to what technology is" (Heidegger 1977a, 4–5). Consequently, despite the promise to consider things otherwise, to make good on the promise of phenomenology's "return to things themselves," *Being and Time* accommodates all things to the conventional anthropocentric and instrumentalist view that Heidegger himself will criticize in his later work. "The much advocated 'return to things,'" Benso concludes, "remains only partially a return *to things* as such. 'The thingness must be something unconditioned,' Heidegger claims. What Heidegger thematizes in *Being and Time* and related works, however, is that *Dasein* is at the origin of the way of being of things. That is, the thingness of things is not truly unconditioned, as his inquiry into the question of things had promised" (Benso 2000, 92).

*The Artistic Mode of Disclosure* Because of this rather conventional (albeit one that is carefully and systemically articulated) outcome, "the question of things needs to be asked again" (ibid.), and Benso calls the next phase of involvement the "artistic modes of disclosure." This phase of the thinking of things is situated in "The Origin of the Work of Art," which Heidegger first delivered as a public lecture in 1935. Although the objective of this text, as immediately communicated by its title, was to ascertain the "origin of the work of art," this goal could only be achieved, Heidegger (1971a, 20) argues, by "first bring to view the thingly element of the work." "To this end," he writes, "it is necessary that we should know with sufficient clarity what a thing is. Only then can we say whether the art work is a thing" (ibid.). In response to this charge, Heidegger begins the investigation of the origin of the work of art by turning his attention to things. Although he recognizes that the word "thing," in its most general sense, "designates whatever is not nothing," he also notes that this characterization is "of no use to us, at least immediately, in our attempt to delimit entities that have the mode of being of a thing, as against those having the mode of being of a work" (ibid., 21).

In order to provide a more attentive consideration of the matter, Heidegger develops what Benso calls "a tripartition." In the first place (and "first" is formulated and understood both in terms of expository sequence and ontological priority), there are "mere things," which, on Heidegger's account, designate "the lifeless beings of nature" (e.g., a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood, a block of granite). Mere things, Heidegger argues,

are not directly accessible as such. They always and already withdraw and hold themselves back. If we were to impose Levinasian terminology on this, one might say that "mere things" constitute the extreme limit of alterity and exteriority. This is, according to another essay by Heidegger from the same period, namely *What Is a Thing?*, a kind of Kantian "thing-in-itself," but without the metaphysical baggage that this concept entails. Because of this, it is only possible, as Benso (2000, 99) describes it, "to approach the thing-being of things not in mere things but in pieces of equipment, despite the fact that the purity of their thing-being has been lost in favor of their usability."

Consequently, and in the second place, there are the "objects of use," the utensils or equipment (*Zeugen*) that had been analyzed in *Being and Time*, including such sophisticated instruments as "airplanes and radio sets" as well as "a hammer, or a shoe, or an ax, or a clock" (Heidegger 1971a, 21). But "to achieve a relation with things that lets them be in their essence, a thematic suspension of the usability of equipment is required" (Benso 2000, 101). In *Being and Time* this "thematic suspension" had occurred in the breakdown of equipment that revealed the mere present-at-hand. This is no longer considered sufficient. "It remains doubtful," Heidegger (1971a, 30) writes in something of a revision of his earlier efforts, "whether the thingly character comes to view at all in the process of stripping off everything equipmental." One discovers things, a pair of shoes for example, "not by a description and explanation of a pair of shoes actually present; not by a report about the process of making shoes; and also not by the observation of the actual use of shoes occurring here and there" (ibid., 35). This important work is performed by the work of art, specifically for Heidegger's analysis a painting by Van Gogh. "The art work let us know what shoes are in truth" (ibid.). It is in the painting of the shoes, Heidegger contends, that this particular being, "a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its being" (ibid., 36). Consequently, as Benso (2000, 101) points out, a shift occurs in the place and work of disclosure: "The work of art thus substitutes for *Dasein*, thanks to whose constitution as being-in-the world, in *Being and Time*, the disclosure occurred." Or as Benso's chapter titles indicate, there is a move from the "instrumental modes of disclosure" to "artistic modes of disclosure."

According to Benso's evaluation, "the move to artistic disclosure is certainly beneficial to the thing-being of things, if compared to the earlier

instrumental account provided in *Being and Time*" (ibid., 102). This is because artistic disclosure is, on her reading, considerably less violent and more respectful of things. In particular, the artistic mode of disclosure disputes and even undermines the anthropocentric privilege and its instrumentalist notion of things. "What is abandoned through artistic disclosure," Benso writes, "is *Dasein*'s instrumental attitude" (ibid., 103). Artistic disclosure, therefore, shifts the place of the disclosure of things from the concernful dealings of human *Dasein* to the work of art and in doing so deflects the anthropological and instrumentalist approach to things. This means that "works of art, although humanly made, are self-sufficient" (ibid., 104). Or as Heidegger (1971a, 40) explains, "it is precisely in great art . . . that the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge."

But artistic disclosure, although an obvious advance over the instrumental modes of disclosure introduced in *Being and Time*, is not without problems. It is, as Benso (2000, 104–105) argues, "not completely innocent in its exposure of the thingly character of things." On the one hand, Heidegger's articulation of artistic disclosure is exclusive, if not snobbish. "It is only great art," Benso points out, "that is capable of bringing forth a happening of the truth" (ibid., 105). Consequently, all kinds of things may get lost, that is, not get disclosed, in our everyday involvements that are neither artistic nor great. "Some essential part of the thing-being of things," Benso worries, "will be irreversibly lost in the process of everyday concern with things" (ibid., 107).

On the other hand, despite Heidegger's claims to the contrary, a kind of violence remains at work in the work of art. "The violence," Benso argues, "lies in the fact that the disclosure originates not from within the thing itself, in its earthy, dark, reticent, obscure depth, but from outside the thing, from art" (ibid., 108). And this violence is, according to Benso's reading, a technical matter: "That the potential for violation is inherent in the artistic activity had been understood clearly by the Greeks, which used the same word, *techne* [τέχνη], to express both art and that kind of knowledge which will later give birth to technology and its aberrations. Art is not the self-disclosure of things; rather, it is an external act of disclosing" (ibid.). This is, for Benso at least, not adequate. Things should, in her opinion, disclose their being from themselves. In other words, the

disclosure "should originate from what is already earth—namely, from the thing-being of things" (ibid.). The work of art, therefore, is already an aberrant distraction and a form of technical mediation that one should be able to do without. "The recourse to art seems to be an unnecessary superimposition in which art acts as a mediator between things and the disclosure of their thing-being. As Levinas has taught his readers, though, like all mediations such an interference endangers the risk of several violations. Among them, misunderstanding, neglect, abuse, betrayal of the thing-being of things" (ibid.).

*An Ethical Disclosure?* Although constituting a clear advance over the instrumental mode, the artistic mode of disclosure is, Benso contends, still too violent, still too *technological* to be respectfully attentive to the thing-being of things. It is, therefore, only in the later works, especially the essay "The Thing," that Heidegger, according to Benso's interpretation, finally gets it right. "In 'The Thing,'" Benso explains, "Heidegger chooses a rather obvious case of things, an artifact—a jug, which in *Being and Time* would have been considered, at best, a piece of equipment, and whose truth, according to 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' would have been disclosed only through its appearance in/as a work of art" (ibid., 112). In "The Thing," things are entirely otherwise. "The jug," Heidegger (1971b, 177) writes, trying to gathering up all the threads of his analysis, "is a thing neither in the sense of the Roman *res*, nor in the sense of the medieval *ens*, let alone in the modern sense of object. The jug is a thing insofar as it things. The presence of something present such as the jug comes into its own, appropriatively manifests and determines itself, only from the thinging of the thing." This third mode of disclosure, which is a disclosure of things from things, requires a radically different kind of response. It necessitates, as Benso interprets it, a mode of responding to the alterity of things that does not take the form of a violent imposition of external disclosure but which can let beings be—what Heidegger calls *Gelassenheit*. As Benso (2000, 123) explains: "Neither indifference nor neglect, neither laxity nor permissiveness, but rather relinquishment of the metaphysical will to power, and therefore acting 'which is yet no activity,' *Gelassenheit* means to abandon oneself to things, to let things be."

Whether this is an accurate reading of Heidegger or not, it produces something that is, for Benso at least, sufficient. It is in these later essays, Benso concludes, that "the thingness of things has been finally achieved

by Heidegger, and has been achieved in its fundamental character of alterity: unconditioned alterity, because things are unconditioned; absolute alterity, because the alterity of things does not stem from an oppositional confrontation with mortals, or divinities, which are rather appropriated by and relocated with the alterity of things" (ibid., 119). And because of this, it is here that Benso finally discovers, in Heidegger's own text, the possibility of asking about what she calls an "ethical disclosure." "What kind of relation is this relation, which, by extension, encompasses also the relation between *Gelassenheit* and things? Although Heidegger's work is silent, this relation could modestly be called ethics, if, as in Levinas, ethics is understood as the place of love for what remains and insists on remaining other. Things thus impose an imperative which comes close to an ethical demand. They request an act of love—ethics—which lets things be as things. . . . Heidegger, however, will never explicitly thematize the ethical character of such an act" (ibid., 123).

In identifying this possibility of an ethics in Heidegger's thinking of things, Benso likewise identifies the point of contact with Levinas, who, although not thinking the alterity of things, provides articulation of the kind of ethics that Heidegger had left unthematized. Consequently, the mashup of these two thinkers, like any well-devised and executed remix, is not something that is forced on them from the outside but seems to show itself by way of careful attention to the original texts that come to be combined. And what this mashup produces is something unheard of—a mode of thinking otherwise about things and ethics that could be called "an ethics of things":

> The expression "ethics *of* things," as the result of the supplementarity of Levinas and Heidegger, acquires a double meaning: it is *of* things, as the place where things can manifest themselves in their reality as the guardians and receptacle of the Fourfold, and from their receptivity can appeal to humans to dwell by them. But it is *of* things also in the sense that humans are compelled by things to respond to the demands placed upon them and shape their behavior in accordance to the inner mirroring of things. Things signify both a subject and object for ethics. Of things means thus the directionality of a double movement: that which moves out from the things to reach the I and the other, and that which, in response to the first moves from the I and the other to reach the things and to be concerned by them. The first movement is that of the demand or the appeal that things place on human beings by their mere impenetrable presencing there. It is the thingly side of the ethics of things. The second movement is that of tenderness, as the response to the demand and the properly human configuration of the ethics of things. (Ibid., 142)

As innovative as this proposal sounds, especially for the encounter with those things that call to us in their "obsessive appeal" to be recognized as other and to which we are called to provide some kind of response, one thing continually escapes Benso's "ethics of things," and that is the machine.

Although Heidegger began his thinking of things by appropriating everything into an instrument of human *Dasein*'s concernful dealings with the world, the later essays, the essays that Benso argues provides a more adequate thinking of the thing, differentiate things from mere objects of technology. In "The Question Concerning Technology," an essay that dates from the same period as "The Thing," Heidegger distinguishes "modern technology" as a totalizing and exclusive mode of revealing that threatens the disclosure of things by converting them into resources or what Heidegger calls *Bestand* (standing-reserve). "The coming to presence of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealedness of standing-reserve" (Heidegger 1977a, 33). According to Benso's (2000, 144) reading, this means that technology does not let things be but "diminishes things to objects of manipulation" through a "perverted logic of powerfulness" that leaves things "deprived of their thingly nature." Or to look at it from the other side, "the appeal things send out is an invitation to put down the dominating modes of thought, to release oneself to things, and only thus to let them be as things, rather than as objects of technical and intellectual manipulation" (ibid., 155).

This reading of Heidegger, which it should be noted is not entirely accurate insofar as it passes over Heidegger's (1977a, 28) remark that "the essence of technology must harbor in itself the growth of the saving power," leads Benso to make romanticized claims about pre–industrial era peasants and their imagined direct and immediate connection to the things of the earth. "Contrary to Heidegger's claim in 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' but in accordance with the future line of development of his meditation on things, a more respectful relation with things, dictated from the very thing-being of things, seems to take place not in Van Gogh's artistic painting of the shoes, but rather in the attitude of the peasant woman—not in the usability to which she submits her shoes, but in her depending on the shoes' reliability" (Benso 2000, 109). In other words, contrary to Heidegger's privileging of art, artists, and poets in his later

writings, it is the peasant who "may be close to the thing-being of things, respectful and preservative of their earthy character" (ibid.). Benso's analysis, therefore, privileges a supposed preindustrial and romantic notion of the European peasant (which is, in fact, a modern and industrial fabrication projected backward onto a past that never actually existed as such) and her assumed direct and immediate involvement with real things.

The machine, as a mere thing, already has no place in the nontraditional ethics of Levinas. It is, as far as Levinas is concerned, and even those individuals like Calarco who work to radicalize his thinking, always and already otherwise than the Other. A machine might have a well-designed and useful *interface*, but it does not and will never have a *face*. Likewise, machines do not belong to or have an appropriate place within Heidegger's conceptualization of things. Although Heidegger endeavored to address things and in particular sought to accommodate thinking to address the thing-being of things, the machine, as a technological object, remains otherwise than a thing. It is an object, which, as far as Benso is concerned, is neither a thing nor the opposite of a thing, that is, nothing. For this reason, Benso's mashup of these two thinkers, despite its promise and her careful attention to the material at hand, is not able to accommodate or address itself to the machine question. And this is mainly because of Benso's initial decision concerning the terms and conditions of the meeting. She endorses what she calls "the narrow path of affirmation"—things and ethics—and immediately excludes the negative mode of the encounter—nonthings and non-ethics. The machine does not get addressed or have a place in the course of this encounter, because it is always and already on the excluded side of things—the side of nonthings and non-ethics. In addressing herself to the affirmative mode of the Heideggerian and Levinasian mashup, Benso decides, whether intended or not, to leave the machine out of the (re)mix. It is, therefore, from the very beginning situated outside and beyond the space of consideration, in excess of the Levinasian–Heideggerian mashup, and remains both anterior and exterior to this attempt to think things and ethics otherwise.

The machine does not have a place in *The Face of Things* (and it should be noted that the term "machine" does not appear anywhere within the text), because Benso's approach had effectively excluded it prior to the investigation. This outcome, it should be noted, is not necessarily some deliberate failing of or fault attributable to this particular writer or her

writing. In the process of composing her text and its arguments, a decision had to be made; a cut needed to occur and could not have been avoided. That is, the analysis could not have proceeded, could not have even gotten underway, without instituting some exclusive decision about the terms and conditions of the encounter. These decisions, whether made in the course of a philosophical mashup between Levinas and Heidegger or in the process of remixing, for instance, Madonna and the Sex Pistols (Vidler 2007), is always strategic, calculated, and undertaken for a particular purpose, at a particular time, and in view of a specific objective. The problem—the persistent and seemingly inescapable problem—is that when the cut is made, something always and inevitably gets left out and excluded. And this something, which is, strictly speaking neither some-thing nor no-thing, is, more often than not, the machine. For this reason, it can be said that the machine has been always and already the other of the other, no matter how differently alterity comes to be rethought, remixed, or radicalized.

### 3.4.3 Machinic Others

Although Calarco's and Benso's texts have nothing explicit to say with regard to the machine, others have endeavored to provide a thinking that explicitly addresses such things. Lucas Introna, like Benso, endeavors to articulate an ethics of things, or, more precisely described, "the possibility of an ethical encounter with things" (Introna 2009, 399). Whereas Benso produces a mashup of Heideggerian and Levinasian thought by way of a careful engagement with their texts, Introna concentrates his efforts on Heidegger and does so mainly by way of secondary literature, especially Graham Harman's (2002) reading of "tool-being" in *Being and Time*. According to Introna, Harman advances an interpretation of the Heideggerian text that runs counter to the orthodox reading in at least two ways. "He argues that ready-to-handness (*Zuhandenheit*) already 'refers to objects insofar as they withdraw from human view into a dark subterranean reality that never becomes present to practical action' (Harman 2002, 1). He further argues, rather controversially, that *Zuhandenheit* is not a modification, or mode of revealing reality, which is uniquely connected to the human *Dasein*. Rather, *Zuhandensein* is the action of all beings themselves, their own self-unfolding of being" (Introna 2009, 406). In this way, then, Harman (2002, 1) advances what he calls an "object-oriented philosophy" that effectively reinterprets Heidegger as Kant by distinguishing between

"objects as explicitly encountered (*Vorhandenheit*) and these same objects in their withdrawn executant being (*Zuhandenheit*)" (Harman 2002, 160).

The result of following this unconventional and rather conservative interpretation of Heidegger (which becomes apparent when it is compared to the analysis of the same material provided in Benso's work) is something Introna (2009, 410) calls "the ethos of *Gelassenheit*." Introna characterizes *Gelassenheit*, which is one of the watchwords of the later Heidegger, as a mode of comportment that gives up "that representational and calculative thinking (or comportment) by which human beings dispose of things as this or that being" (ibid.) and "lets things be, as they are, in their own terms" (ibid., 409–410). This effort is, on the one hand, something of an advance over Benso's innovation insofar as Introna, following Harman's interest in equipment and tools, does not restrict things to natural objects but specifically addresses the relationship with or comportment toward technological artifacts like cars, pens, and chairs (ibid., 411). On the other hand, however, Introna's "ethos of dwelling with things" is far less successful than what Benso is able to achieve by way of her mashup. In effect, what Introna offers under the banner "ethos of *Gelassenheit*" is really little more than a sophisticated version of the lightbulb joke concerning German engineering: "Q: How many German engineers does it take to change a light bulb? A: None. If it is designed correctly and you take care of it, it should last a lifetime." In the end, what Introna provides, mainly because of his reliance on Harman's limited "object oriented" interpretation of the early Heidegger, is little more than another articulation of an ontocentric ethical comportment that looks substantially similar to Floridi's IE. What Introna calls "the impossible possibility of a very otherwise way of being with things" turns out to be just more of the same.

Coming at things from the other side, Richard Cohen takes up and directly examines the point of contact between ethics, especially in its Levinasian form, and what he calls "cybernetics."[3] The immediate target of and point of departure for this critical investigation is Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1995) and Introna's 2001 essay "Virtuality and Morality: On (Not) Being Disturbed by the Other," which Cohen situates on opposite sides of a debate:

> Thus Turkle celebrates cybernetics' ability to support a new form of selfhood, the decentered and multiple self (or rather selves). The multiple self cannot be held accountable in the same way that the integral self of morality is held account-

able. Cybernetics, then, liberates the traditional self for the freedom of multiple selves.

Introna, for his part, seems to be arguing the reverse point when he condemns information technology. But in fact he too credits cybernetics with a radical transformation, or the possibility of a radical transformation of morality. Because it mediates the face-to-face relation that, according to Levinas's ethical philosophy, is the very source of morality, cybernetics would be the destruction of morality. (Cohen 2010, 153)

What Cohen argues, then, is that Turkle and Introna, although seemingly situated on the opposite sides of a debate—what the one celebrates, the other reviles—actually "adhere to the same metainterpretation of cybernetics whereby it is considered capable of radically transforming the human condition" (ibid.).

Cohen, who does not take sides in this debate, takes aim at and contests this common assumption, and his argument follows, with little or no critical hesitation, the anthropological and instrumentalist position that had been identified by Heidegger: "The question, then, is whether computer technology produces a radical transformation of humanity, or whether, in contrast, it is simply a very advanced instrument, tool, or means of information and image processing and communication that is itself morally neutral" (Cohen 2010, 153). According to Cohen's reading, Turkle and Introna occupy and defend the former position, while he endeavors to take up and champion the latter. In making this argument, Cohen not only reasserts and reaffirms the standard instrumentalist presumption, asserting that the "so-called computer revolution" is "not as radical, important, or transformative as many of its proponents, such as Turkle, or its detractors, such as Introna, would have it" (ibid., 154), but also interprets Levinas as both endorsing and providing support for this traditional understanding of technology.

This is, of course, a projection or interpretation of Levinasian philosophy. Levinas himself actually wrote little or nothing about the machine, especially computers and information technology. "Admittedly," Cohen points out, "although he developed his philosophy over the second half of the twentieth century, Levinas did not specifically write about cybernetics, computers, and information technology" (ibid.). Even though Levinas lived and worked at a time when computers were becoming widely available and telecommunications and networking technology had proliferated at a rate of acceleration that is commonly understood to be unprecedented

in human history, Levinas, unlike Heidegger, never took up and engaged the question concerning technology in any direct and explicit way. Cohen not only interprets this silence as supporting the anthropological and instrumentalist position but makes the further argument that Levinas's ethics, despite its lack of providing any explicit statement on the subject, "is ideally suited to raise and resolve the question of the ethical status of information technology" (ibid.).

Cohen, therefore, takes the Levinasian text at its word. The face-to-face encounter that constitutes the ethical relationship is exclusively human, and as such it necessarily marginalizes other kinds of others, specifically the old Cartesian couple, animals and machines. This exclusivity is not, Cohen believes, immoral or ethically suspect, because the machine and the animal do not, for now at least, constitute an Other:

> Oddly enough computers do not think—are not human—not because they lack human bodies, but because like stones and animals they lack morality. They are indeed embodied, but their embodiment, unlike human embodiment, is not constituted—or "elected"—by an ethical sensitivity. Computers, in a word, are by themselves incapable of putting themselves into one another's shoes, incapable of intersubjective substitution, of the caring for one another which is at the core of ethics, and as such at the root of the very humanity of the human. (Ibid., 163)

For this reason, machines are instruments that may come to be interposed between the self and the Other, mediating the face-to-face encounter, but they remain mere instruments of human interaction. "Cybernetics thus represents a quantitative development: increases in the speed, complexity, and anonymity of communications already inherent in the printing press, an increase in the distance—but not a radical break—from the immediacy, specificity, singularity, and proximity of face-to-face encounters" (ibid., 160). To put it another way, computers do not have a face and therefore do not and cannot participate in the face-to-face encounter that is the ethical relationship. Instead, what they offer is an interface, a more or less transparent medium interposed and standing in between the face-to-face encounter. In making this argument, then, Cohen effectively repurposes Levinasian ethics as media theory.

The main problem for Cohen's argument is that he misunderstands both terms that are conjoined in the title of his essay. On the one hand, he misunderstands or at least significantly misrepresents cybernetics. According to Cohen's analysis, cybernetics is just "the most recent dra-

matic development in the long history of communications technology" (ibid., 159). Consequently, he understands and utilizes the word "cybernetics" as an umbrella term not only for information technology and computers in general but also for the specific applications of e-mail, word processing, and image manipulation software. This is not only terribly inaccurate but also unfortunate.

First, cybernetics is not a technology, nor is it a conglomerate of different information and communication technologies. It is, as originally introduced and formulated by its progenitor Norbert Wiener, the general science of communication and control. "We have decided," Wiener writes in *Cybernetics*, a book initially published in 1948, "to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or the animal, by the name *Cybernetics*, which we form from the Greek *χυβερνήτης* or *steersman*" (Wiener 1996, 11). Cybernetics, then, is not a kind of technology or a particular mode of technological application but a theory of communication and control that covers everything from individual organisms and mechanisms to complex social interactions, organizations, and systems.[4] According to Carey Wolfe, cybernetics introduced a radically new way of conceptualizing and organizing things. It proposed, he argues, "a new theoretical model for biological, mechanical, and communicational processes that removed the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particular privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition" (Wolfe 2010, xii). Cohen, therefore, uses the word "cybernetics" in a way that is neither informed by nor attentive to the rich history of the concept. And in the process, he misses how cybernetics is itself a radical, posthuman theory that deposes anthropocentrism and opens up thoughtful consideration to previously excluded others. Because of this, the editors of the journal in which Cohen initially published his essay provide the following explanatory footnote as a kind of excuse for this misinterpretation: "Richard Cohen uses the word 'cybernetics' to refer to all forms of information and communication technology" (Cohen 2000, 27).

But, and this is the second point, Cohen does not just "get it wrong" by misrepresenting the concept or misusing the word "cybernetics," which could, in the final analysis, always be excused and written off as nothing more than a mere terminological misstep. Rather, by doing so, Cohen actually "defeats his own purpose," to use a phrase popularized by Robert De Niro's Jake LaMotta in Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980). In particular,

Cohen, by misconstruing what cybernetics entails, misses the more fundamental and potent point of contact between it and Levinas's philosophy. If Levinasian ethics is, as Cohen presents it, based on an intersubjective, communicative experience of or encounter with the Other, then cybernetics as a general theory of communication not only addresses itself to a similar set of problems and opportunities but, insofar as it complicates the anthropocentric privilege and opens communication with and to previously excluded others, also provides an opportunity to "radicalize" Levinasian thought by asking about other forms of otherness. Consequently, cybernetics may be another way to articulate and address the "otherwise than being" that is of central concern in Levinasian ethics. And it is, we should remember, Heidegger who had prepared the ground for this possibility, when, in the course of his 1966 interview published in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, he suggested that what had been called philosophy was in the process of being replaced by cybernetics.

Derrida famously picks up this thread in *Of Grammatology*, demonstrating how cybernetics, even as it strains against the limits of metaphysics, is still circumscribed by a certain concept of writing: "And, finally whether it has essential limits or not, the entire field covered by the cybernetic *program* will be the field of writing. If the theory of cybernetics is by itself to oust all metaphysical concepts—including the concepts of soul, of life, of value, of choice, of memory—which until recently served to separate the machine from man, it must conserve the notion of writing, trace, gramme, or grapheme, until its own historico-metaphysical character is also exposed" (Derrida 1976, 9). Cohen, therefore, fabricates a derived caricature of cybernetics—one that turns it into a mere technological instrument so that it can be manipulated as a tool serving Cohen's own argument, which reasserts the instrumentalist understanding of technology. In doing so, however, Cohen not only risks getting it wrong but, more importantly, misses what he could have gotten right. In facilitating the conjunction of Levinasian ethics and cybernetics, Cohen introduces a potentially interesting and fruitful encounter between these two influential postwar innovations only to recoil from the radicality that this conjoining makes possible and to reinstitute what is perhaps the most reactionary and predictable of responses.

On the other hand, Cohen also risks misrepresenting ethics, and Levinasian ethics in particular. Although he recognizes and acknowledges "the

humanism of the other" (Levinas 2003) as it is construed in Levinas's philosophy, he does not, to his credit, take this to be an essential or even absolute limit. It is possible that things could, at some point in the future, be otherwise. "I have mentioned," Cohen (2010, 165) admits, "the possibility of animals and machines joining the one brotherhood of ethical sensitivity. In our day, however, moral responsibility and obligations have their sources in human sensitivities, in the humanity of the human." Cohen, therefore, appears to open up the boundaries of Levinasian philosophy to the possibility of addressing another kind of otherness. In other words, even though the Other has been and remains exclusively human, it may be possible, Cohen suggests, that an animal or a machine might, at some point in the future, become capable of gaining access to the fraternal "brotherhood of ethical sensitivity." For now, however, animals and machines, the old Cartesian couple, remain, at least as Cohen sees it, exterior to Levinas's reconsideration of exteriority.[5] Or to put it another way, the animal-machine remains, at least for the time being, the other of Levinas's Other. This conclusion requires at least two comments.

First, Cohen, to his credit, does not simply pass over or remain silent about the possibility of repurposing Levinas's philosophy so as to be able to address itself to others—especially those other forms of otherness found in the animal and machine. But he unfortunately at the same time ends up confirming the Cartesian decision, postponing the moral challenge of these others by deferring it to some future time. To make matters even more complicated, even if and when, at this future moment, we succeed in creating sentient machines like "the policeman-robot in the movie *Robocop* or the character called Data in the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*" (ibid., 167), they will, Cohen believes, still be subordinated and considered subservient to the moral center exclusively constituted and occupied by the human organism. "One has," Cohen writes in a footnote addressing these two science fiction characters, "moral obligations and responsibilities first to organisms, indeed to human organisms, before one has moral obligations and responsibilities to machines that serve humans or other organisms. . . . Note: to give priority to moral obligations and responsibilities to humans is not to deny the bearing of moral obligations and responsibilities toward the nonhuman, whether organic or inorganic. It is rather to locate the true source of moral obligations and responsibilities" (ibid.). Although recognizing that other organic and

inorganic entities are not simply to be excluded form moral consideration *tout court*, Cohen still enforces the anthropocentric privilege, asserting that these others will remain, always and forever, subordinate to the human entity and his or her interests (and literally subordinate, in that they are only considered in the subordinate place of a footnote). In this way, then, Cohen both releases a possible challenge to the "humanism of the other" in Levinas's ethics and, at the same time, shuts it down by reinforcing and reasserting anthropocentric hegemony.

Second, although Cohen is open to the possibility that there may, at some point in the future, be other forms of otherness that would need to be taken into consideration, the way these others become Other is by achieving what Cohen (2010, 164) calls "the humanity of the human."

> The humanity of the human does not arise from an animal or machine evidencing logic or the rationality of means and ends. Ants, termites, bees, and porpoises, after all, are rational in this sense. Rather, the humanity of the human arises when an animal or any being, is moved not by efficiency but by morality and justice. A being becomes moral and just when in its very sensibility, and across the pacific medium of language, it finds itself desiring an undesirable and insatiable service for the other, putting the other's need before its own. . . . If it happens that one day animals or machines become capable of independent moral sensitivity, then they too will enter into the unitary and unifying solidarity of moral agency. (Ibid., 164–165)

In other words, in order for these, for now at least, excluded others—namely, animals and machines—to be considered Other, that is to be admitted into "the unitary and unifying solidarity of moral agency," they will need to achieve that kind of "independent moral sensitivity" that is the very definition of the humanity of the human. They will, like Asimov's Andrew in the short story "Bicentennial Man," need to become not just rational beings but human beings.

This is, whether it is ever explicitly identified as such or not, a radical form of anthropocentrism, one that is much more exclusive and restrictive than what has been advanced by others under the umbrella term "personism." In this way, then, Cohen not only reasserts that ancient doctrine whereby "man is the measure of all things" but seems to advance a position that would, structurally at least, be contrary to both the letter and spirit of Levinas's own moral innovations. That is, the decision Cohen institutes concerning these other forms of otherness seems, despite what he says in support of Levinasian ethics, to enact a distinctly anti-Levinasian

gesture by reducing these others to the same. Animals and machines, as an other and like any other form of otherness, confront the self-assured enclosure of anthropocentric ethics. But rather than permitting this interruption of the other to call into question this self-certainty and hegemony, Cohen imposes it on these others in that kind of violent gesture that Levinas had sought to criticize. In this way, then, Cohen's argument appears to be exposed to the charge of what Jürgen Habermas (1999, 80), following Karl-Otto Apel, has called a "performative contradiction," whereby what is explicitly stated and endorsed is called into question and undermined by the way it is stated and endorsed. This is, it should be pointed out, not necessarily some deficiency or inability that can or even should be attributed to the author of the text. It is rather an indication and evidence of the persistent and systemic difficulty inherent in addressing others, especially the animal and its other, the machine.

### 3.5 Ulterior Morals

"Every philosophy," Benso (2000, 136) writes in a comprehensive gesture that performs precisely what it seeks to address, "is a quest for wholeness." This objective, she argues, has been typically targeted in one of two ways. "Traditional Western thought has pursued wholeness by means of reduction, integration, systematization of all its parts. Totality has replaced wholeness, and the result is totalitarianism from which what is truly other escapes, revealing the deficiencies and fallacies of the attempted system" (ibid.). This is precisely the kind of violent philosophizing that Levinas identifies under the term "totality," and which includes, for him at least, the big landmark figures like Plato, Kant, and Heidegger. The alternative to this totalizing approach is a philosophy that is oriented otherwise, like that proposed and developed by Levinas and others. This other approach, however, "must do so by moving not from the same, but from the other, and not only the Other, but also the other of the Other, and, if that is the case, the other of the other of the Other. In this must, it must also be aware of the inescapable injustice embedded in any formulation of the other" (ibid.). What is interesting about these two strategies is not what makes them different from one another or how they articulate approaches that proceed from what appears to be opposite ends of the spectrum. What is interesting is what they agree on and hold in common in order to be

situated as different from and in opposition to each other in the first place. Whether taking the form of autology or some kind of heterology, "they both share the same claim to inclusiveness" (ibid.), and that is the problem.

We therefore appear to be caught between a proverbial rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the same has never been inclusive enough. The machine in particular is from the very beginning situated outside ethics. It is, irrespective of the different philosophical perspectives that come to be mobilized, neither a legitimate moral agent nor patient. It has been and continues to be understood as nothing more than a technological instrument to be employed more or less effectively by human beings and, for this reason, is always and already located in excess of moral considerability or, to use that distinct Nietzschean (1966) characterization, "beyond good and evil." Technology, as Lyotard (1993, 44) reminds us, is only a matter of efficiency. Technical devices do not participate in the big questions of metaphysics, aesthetics, or ethics. They are nothing more than contrivances or extensions of human agency, used more or less responsibly by human agents with the outcome affecting other human patients. Consequently, technological artifacts like computers, robots, and other kinds of mechanisms do not, at least for the majority philosophical opinion, have an appropriate place within ethics. Although other kinds of previously excluded others have been slowly and not without considerable struggle granted membership in the community of moral subjects—women, people of color, some animals, and even the environment—the machine remains on the periphery. It exceeds and escapes even the best efforts at achieving greater inclusivity.

On the other hand, alternatives to this tradition have never quite been different enough. Although a concern with and for others promised to radicalize all areas of thought—identity politics, anthropology, psychology, sociology, metaphysics, and ethics—it has never been entirely adequate or suitably different. This is because such an effort has remained, if we might once again be permitted an allusion to Nietzsche (1986), "human, all too human." Many of the so-called alternatives, those philosophies that purport to be interested in and oriented otherwise, have typically excluded the machine from the space of difference, from the difference of difference, or from the otherness of the Other. Technological devices certainly have an interface, but they do not possess a face or confront the human user in a face-to-face encounter that would call for and would be called ethics.

This exclusivity is not simply "the last socially accepted prejudice" or what Singer (1989, 148) calls "the last remaining form of discrimination," which may be identified as such only from a perspective that is already open to the possibility of some future inclusion and accommodation. The marginalization of the machine is much more complete and comprehensive. In fact, the machine does not constitute just one more form of alterity that would be included at some future time. It comprises, as we have seen, the very mechanism of exclusion. "In the eyes of many philosophers," Dennett (1998, 233) writes, "the old question of whether determinism (or indeterminism) is incompatible with moral responsibility has been superseded by the hypothesis that mechanism may well be." Consequently, whenever a philosophy endeavors to make a decision, to demarcate and draw the line separating "us" from "them," or to differentiate who or what does and who or what does not have a face, it inevitably fabricates machines. The machine, therefore, exceeds difference, consisting in an extreme and exorbitant form of differentiation situated beyond and in excess of what is typically understood and comprehended as difference. It is otherwise than the Other and still other than every other Other. In other words, it remains excluded from and left out by well-intended attempts to think and address what has been excluded and left out. It is, to redeploy and reconfigure one of the titles to Levinas's books, otherwise than other or beyond difference.

The machine, therefore, constitutes a critical challenge that both questions the limits of and resists efforts at moral consideration, whether that takes the all-inclusive totalitarian form of the same or one or another of the alternative approaches that are concerned with difference. To put it another way, the machine occupies and persists in a kind of extreme exteriority that remains in excess of the conceptual oppositions that already organize and regulate the entire field of moral consideration—interior–exterior, same–different, self–other, agent–patient, subject–object, and so on. Asking the machine question, therefore, has a number of related consequences that affect not just where we go from here but also where we came from and how we initially got here.

First, there is a persistent and inescapable problem with words and terminology. Articulating the machine question and trying to address this form of extreme alterity that is otherwise than what is typically considered to be other, requires (as is clearly evident in this very statement) a strange

contortion of language. This is not necessarily unique to the machine question; it is a perennial difficulty confronting any attempt "to think outside box" or in excess of what Thomas Kuhn had called "normal science." "Normal science," Kuhn (1996, 10) writes, "means research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice." Normal science, therefore, establishes a framework, or paradigm, for investigation, a set of recognized procedures and methods for conducting research, and, perhaps most importantly, a shared vocabulary for asking questions and communicating results. Challenging this precedent and seeking to identify, name, or address "something" (which from the normalized perspective of the usual way of doing things would actually be considered "nothing") that has always and already been situated outside the scope of this conceptual field necessarily exceeds and resists the only language and concepts we have at our disposal. For this reason, there are typically two possible modes of responding to and articulating these paradigm shifting challenges—*paleonymy* and *neologism*.

Paleonymy is a Derridean (1981, 71) term fabricated from available Latin components to name the reuse and repurposing of "old words." Consequently, the word "paleonymy" is itself an instance of paleonymy. Using "an old name to launch a new concept" (ibid.) requires that the term be carefully selected and strategically reconfigured in order to articulate something other than what it was initially designed to convey. It therefore requires what Derrida characterizes as a double gesture: "We proceed: (1) to the extraction of a reduced predicative trait that is held in reserve, limited in a given conceptual structure, *named X*; (2) to the delimitation, the grafting and regulated extension of the extracted predicate, the name X being maintained as a kind of *lever of intervention*, in order to maintain a grasp on the previous organization, which is to be transformed effectively" (ibid.). This paleonymic operation is evident, for example, in Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, a 1968 publication that not only marked an important transition from Deleuze's earlier writings on the history of philosophy to the act of writing philosophy per se but also prefigured, as he suggests, the direction of all his subsequent publications, including those coauthored with Félix Guattari (Deleuze 1994, xv, xvii).

As is immediately evident from its title, *Difference and Repetition* is concerned with the "metaphysics of difference" and endeavors to formulate a different conceptualization of difference, that is, "a concept of difference without negation" (ibid., xx). "We propose," Deleuze writes in the text's preface, "to think difference in itself independently of the forms of representation which reduce it to the Same, and the relation of different to different independently of those forms which make them pass through the negative" (ibid., xix). *Difference and Repetition*, therefore, reuses and redeploys the old word *difference* in order to name a "new" and different concept of difference—one that cannot be reduced to negation and, as such, necessarily exceeds comprehension by the customary philosophical understanding of difference that had persisted from Plato to at least Hegel, if not beyond.

Neologism deploys a different but related strategy. "Neologism" is a rather old word, again comprising Latin roots, that identifies the fabrication of new words to name new concepts. Derrida's *différance*, for example, is a neologism for a nonconcept or quasi-concept that is, quite literally in this case, different from difference, or that marks a point of contact with and differentiation from the thinking of difference that had been situated in the history of philosophy. As Derrida (1981, 44) explains, "I have attempted to distinguish *différance* (whose *a* marks, among other things, its productive and conflictual characteristics) from Hegelian difference, and have done so precisely at the point at which Hegel, in the greater *Logic*, determines difference as contradiction only in order to resolve it, to interiorize it, to lift it up (according to the syllogistic process of speculative dialectics) into the self-presence of an ontotheological or onto-teleological synthesis." For Derrida, the visibly different *différance* indicates a different way to think and write of a difference that remains in excess of the Hegelian concept of difference. The machine question, therefore, challenges the available philosophemes, theoretical concepts, and extant terminology, necessitating linguistic contortions that seem, from the perspective of the normal way of doing things, curious and overly complicated. Whether one employs the strategy of paleonymy or neologism, articulating and addressing the machine question pushes language to its limits in an effort to force the available words to express that which remains in excess of what is considered possible or even appropriate.[6]

Second, and because of this, attempts to address what is and remains otherwise inevitably risk falling back into and becoming reappropriated by the established structures and protocols. Whether employing the strategy of paleonymy or neologism, efforts to think and write differently are always struggling against the gravitational force of existing structures, which understandably try to domesticate these extraordinary efforts and put them to work for the continued success of the established system of "normal science." This is what Žižek (2008b, vii), in an obvious but unacknowledged reworking of Kuhn, calls "Ptolemization." For this reason, any critical challenge to the status quo cannot be a "one off" or simply concluded or dispensed with once and for all. It is and must remain what Derrida (1981, 42) termed an "interminable analysis"—a kind of inexhaustible mode of questioning that continually submits its own achievements and advancements to additional questioning. Although Hegel (1969, 137) had called this kind of recursion[7] a "bad or spurious infinite" (*das Schlecht-Unendliche*), it is the necessary and inescapable condition of any and all critical endeavors.

For this reason, the machine question does not and cannot conclude with a definitive answer or even the pretense of supplying answers. The question, therefore, is not something to be resolved once and for all with some kind of conclusive and ultimate outcome. Instead, the result is a more sophisticated asking of the question itself. We began by questioning the place of the machine in ethics. It appeared, from the outset at least, to be a rather simple and direct inquiry. Either computers, AI's, robots and other mechanisms are a legitimate moral agent and/or patient, or they are not. That is, these increasingly autonomous machines either are responsible and accountable for what they decide and do, remain mere instruments in service to other interests and agents, or occupy some kind of hybrid in-between position that tolerates a mixture of both. Conversely, we either have a legitimate moral responsibility to these mechanized others, are free to use and exploit them as we desire without question or impunity, or cooperate with them in the formation of new distributed modes of moral subjectivity. In the course of pursuing this inquiry and following its various implications and consequences, however, all kinds of other things became questionable and problematic. In fact, it is in the face of the machine, if it is permissible to use this clearly Levinasian influenced turn of phrase, that the entire structure and operations of moral philosophy get put

on the line. The machine question, therefore, is not some specific anomaly or recent crisis that has come into being alongside contemporary advancements in computers, artificial intelligence, robotics, artificial life, biotechnology, and the like. It is a fundamental philosophical question with consequences that reverberate down through the history of Western thought.

From one perspective, this outcome cannot help but be perceived as a rather inconclusive kind of ending, one that might not sit well with those who had anticipated and wanted answers or neatly packaged lists of dos and don'ts. In fact, this is precisely what is often expected of a work in ethics, especially applied ethics. And the expectation is not without a certain intuitive attraction: "Those of us who live and work in the 'real world' and need to make day-to-day decisions want to know what to do. What we want and what we need are answers to moral questions or if not answers, then at least guidelines to help us resolve these important questions." Instead of satisfying this expectation, things have ended otherwise. The investigation does not simply seek to answer whether and to what extent computers, robots, AI systems, and other mechanisms might be morally significant. Instead, or in addition, it releases a cascade of critical inquiry that intervenes in and asks about the very limits and possibilities of moral thinking itself. In this way, the machine is not necessarily a question *for* ethics; it is first and foremost a question *of* ethics.

Understood in this manner, the machine institutes a kind of fundamental and irresolvable questioning—one that problematizes the very foundation of ethics and causes us to ask about the ethicality of ethics at each stage of what appears to be a more inclusive approach to accommodating or addressing the differences of others. To put it another way, asking the machine question is not necessarily about getting it right once and for all. Rather, it is about questioning, again and again, what it is that we think we have gotten right and asking what getting it right has had to leave out, exclude, or marginalize in order to "get it right." To paraphrase Floridi (2008, 43), and to agree with his analysis in excess of the restricted interpretation he gives it, the machine question not only adds interesting new dimensions to old problems, but leads us to rethink, methodologically, the very grounds on which our ethical positions are based.

Finally, what this means for ethics is that Descartes, that figure who, at the beginning of the investigation, was situated in the role of the "bad

guy," may have actually gotten it right despite himself and our usual (mis) interpretations of his work. In the *Discourse on the Method*, something of a philosophical autobiography, Descartes famously endeavored to tear down to its foundations every truth that he had come to accepted or had taken for granted. This approach, which in the *Meditations* comes to be called "the method of doubt," targets everything, including the accepted truths of ethics. With Descartes, then, one thing is certain: he did not want nor would he tolerate being duped. However, pursuing and maintaining this extreme form of critical inquiry that does not respect any preestablished boundaries has very real practical expenses and implications. For this reason, Descartes decides to adopt a "provisional moral code," something of a temporary but stable structure that would support and shelter him as he engaged in this thorough questioning of everything and anything:

> Now, before starting to rebuild your house, it is not enough simply to pull it down, to make provision for materials and architects (or else train yourself in architecture), and to have carefully drawn up the plans; you must also provide yourself with some other place where you can live comfortably while building is in progress. Likewise, lest I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments, and in order to live as happily as I could during this time, I formed for myself a provisional moral code consisting of just three or four maxims, which I should like to tell you about. (Descartes 1988, 31)

The four maxims include: (1) obeying the laws and customs of his country in order to live successfully alongside and with others; (2) being firm and decisive in action, following through on whatever opinion had come to be adopted in order to see where it leads; (3) seeking only to master himself instead of his fortunes or the order of the world; and (4) committing himself to the occupation of philosophy, cultivating reason and the search for truth (ibid., 31–33). Understood and formulated as "provisional," it might be assumed that this protocol would, at some future time, be replaced by something more certain and permanent. But Descartes, for whatever reason, never explicitly returns to the list in order to finalize things. This is, despite initial appearances, not a deficiency, failure, or oversight. It may, in fact, be the truth of the matter—that "all morality we adopt is provisory" (Žižek 2006a, 274), or, if you like, that ethics is provisional from the very beginning and all the way down. In this case, then, what would have customarily been considered to be "failure," that is, the lack of ever achieving the *terra firma* of moral certitude, is reconceived of

as a kind of success and advancement. Consequently, "failure," Žižek argues, "is no longer perceived as opposed to success, since success itself can consist only in heroically assuming the full dimension of failure itself, 'repeating' failure as 'one's own'" (ibid.). In other words, the provisory nature of ethics is not a failure as opposed to some other presumed outcome that would be called "success." Instead, it is only by assuming and affirming this supposed "failure" that what is called ethics will have succeeded.

In stating this, however, we immediately run up against the so-called problem of *relativism*—"the claim that no universally valid beliefs or values exist" (Ess 1996, 204). To put it directly, if all morality is provisional and open to different decisions concerning difference made at different times for different reasons, are we not at risk of affirming an extreme form of moral relativism? We should respond to this indictment not by seeking some definitive and universally accepted response (which would obviously answer the charge of relativism by taking refuge in and validating its opposite), but by following Žižek's (2000, 3) strategy of "fully endorsing what one is accused of." So yes, relativism, but an extreme and carefully articulated version. That is, a relativism that can no longer be comprehended by that kind of understanding of the term which makes it the mere negative and counterpoint of universalism. This understanding of "relative" would, therefore, be similar to what has been developed in physics beginning with Albert Einstein, that is, a conceptualization capable of acknowledging that everything (the terms of this statement included) is in motion and that there neither is nor can be a fixed point from which to observe or evaluate anything. Or to put it in Cartesian language, any decision concerning a "fixed point" would have to be and would remain *provisional*. Understood in this way, then, relativism is not the mere polar opposite of universalism but the ground (which is, of course, no "ground" in the usual sense of the word but something like "condition for possibility") from which the terms "universal" and "relative" will have been formulated and deployed in the first place.

If what is ultimately sought and valued is a kind of morality that is locked down and secured through the metaphysical certitude provided by some transcendental figure like a god, then this outcome would be virtually indistinguishable from "plain old relativism." But once it is admitted that this conceptual anchor has been cut loose—that is, after the death or termination of all the customary moral authority figures like god in Nietzsche

(1974), the author in Barthes (1978), and the human subject in Heidegger (1977c) and Foucault (1973)—all things appear to be open to reconfiguration and reevaluation. This occurrence, as Nietzsche (1974, 279) had written concerning the "death of god," is only able to be considered a deficiency and problem from a position that always and already validated the assumption of a fixed and immovable point of view—the equivalent of a moral Ptolemaic system. But if viewed from an alternative perspective, this situation can be affirmed as an opening and dynamic opportunity. In Nietzsche's words: "And these initial consequences, the consequences for ourselves, are quite the opposite of what one might perhaps expect: They are not at all sad and gloomy but rather like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn" (ibid., 280).

Relativism, therefore, does not necessarily need to be construed negatively and decried, as Žižek (2003, 79; 2006a, 281) has often done, as the epitome of postmodern multiculturalism run amok. It too can and should be understood otherwise. Robert Scott, for instance, understands "relativism" to be otherwise than a pejorative term: "Relativism, supposedly, means a standardless society, or at least a maze of differing standards, and thus a cacophony of disparate, and likely selfish, interests. Rather than a standardless society, which is the same as saying no society at all, relativism indicates circumstances in which standards have to be established cooperatively and renewed repeatedly" (Scott 1967, 264). Or as James Carey describes it in his seminal essay "A Cultural Approach to Communication": "All human activity is such an exercise in squaring the circle. We first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up residence in the world we have produced. Alas, there is magic in our self deceptions" (Carey 1989, 30).

In fully endorsing this form of relativism and following through on it to the end, what one gets is not necessarily what might have been expected, namely, a situation where anything goes and "everything is permitted" (Camus 1983, 67). Instead, what is obtained is a kind of ethical thinking that turns out to be much more responsive and responsible. Ethics, conceived of in this way, is about decision and not discovery (Putnam 1964, 691). *We*, individually and in collaboration with each other (and not just those others who we assume are substantially like ourselves), decide who is and who is not part of the moral community—who, in effect, will have

been admitted to and included in this first-person plural pronoun. This decision, as Anne Foerst (Benford and Malartre 2007, 163) points out, is never certain; it is always and continues to be provisional. In effect, and to paraphrase Carey, we make the rules for ourselves and those we consider Other and then play by them . . . or not.

Should machines like AIs, robots, and other autonomous systems be granted admission to the community of moral subjects, becoming what would be recognized as legitimate moral agents, patients, or both? This question cannot be answered definitively and finally with a simple "yes" or "no." The question will need to be asked and responded to repeatedly in specific circumstances. But the question needs to be asked and explicitly addressed rather than being passed over in silence as if it did not matter. As Norbert Wiener predicted over a half-century ago, "Society can only be understood through a study of the messages and the communication facilities which belong to it; and . . . in the future development of these messages and communication facilities, messages between man and machines, between machines and man, and between machine and machine, are destined to play an ever increasing part" (Wiener 1954, 16). What matters, then, is how one responds, how the terms and conditions of these relationships are decided, and how responsibility comes to be articulated in the face of all these others.

Consequently, we, and we alone, are responsible for determining the scope and boundaries of moral responsibility, for instituting these decisions in everyday practices, and for evaluating their results and outcomes. We are, in effect, responsible for deciding who or what is to be included in this "we" and who or what is not. Although we have often sought to deflect these decisions and responsibilities elsewhere, typically into the heavens but also on other terrestrial authorities, in order to validate and/or to avoid having to take responsibility for them, we are, in the final analysis, the sole responsible party. It is a *fraternal logic*, but one for which we must take full responsibility. This means of course that whoever is empowered to make these decisions must be vigilant and critical of the assignments that are made, who or what comes to be included and why, who or what remains excluded and why, and what this means for us, for others, and the subject of ethics. And, as Calarco (2008, 77) points out, there are "no guarantees that we have gotten things right." Mistakes and missteps are bound to happen. What matters, however, is that we take full

responsibility for these failures rather than making excuses by way of deflection or deferral to some transcendental authority or universal values. We are, therefore, not just responsible for acting responsibly in accordance with ethics; we are responsible for ethics. In other words, the machine is not just another kind of other who calls to us and requires a suitable moral response. The machine puts "the questioning of the other" (Levinas 1969, 178) into question and asks us to reconsider without end "what respond means" (Derrida 2008, 8).