## Introduction

## Excess and More

### Trajectories of Thought

Two distinctive trajectories of thought lead to this book. First, it stems from a long-standing reflection on the curatorial,[1] which today can only make one stark observation: curating is now a practice without any form of institutional anchoring. As is well known,[2] it has acquired this freedom with the advent of the content curator. The term *content curator* refers to anyone who selects, adds, and arranges relevant content on an Internet site. A content curator differs from a gallery or museum curator in at least two ways. First, what they curate knows no limit—basically anything tradable, shareable, or distributable. Gone is the unique artwork with a distinctive aura; in comes copyable pixels or samples in gigabyte form. This endless reproducibility frees curating from the shackles of professionalism and know-how imposed until now by art colleges and museums. This digital work is also no longer dependent on institutional frameworks but on success or profit margins. While the old-school curator selects artists or artworks following specific institutional narratives (e.g., aesthetic, historical, theoretical, political), the content curator selects images, videos, or sounds mainly to pique the interest of a target audience, and expects a quasi-immediate return (financial, viewer numbers). Gone are the art curators with an argument, and in come the aggregator curators[3] with nothing in their hands except the building of hubs around which their targeted users can access and digest their contents without having to step outside, visit a gallery, or engage with another human being. Curating has indeed lost a lot of baggage. It is free, and for good or bad, everyone now curates irrespective of any institutional anchoring.

The advent of the content curator and the surreal expansion of the activity of curating outside of the confines of museums and galleries cannot be ignored. This rapid change calls for a radically different approach to the practice itself. It needs to take into consideration a plethora of new sources, gestures, and outcomes that were previously unthinkable in the old world of curation, with its hackneyed formulations of relationality or participation. This is what leads me now to define curating not simply as the activity of exhibiting culture but also, above all, as the activity of engaging, selecting, arranging, critically evaluating, and sharing culture in general.[4] As this definition clearly emphasizes, the focus on the visual—this old ocularcentric despotic trope of Western culture—is gone. Curating today includes online curating, which is predominantly visual, but it also includes other fields less driven by the visual, like perfumery or catering. With such a wide remit, the visual, and the visual arts above all, cease to be central to the articulation of curating. The practice finally becomes detached, not only from that Enlightenment metaphysical referent ("art") but also from the artificial constraints of art discourses. Curators operate in all spheres of life, and this extraordinarily challenging diversity is precisely what needs to be thought through.

There are a number of ways this thinking can happen. If one were to focus on content curating alone, then one would need to analyze a whole range of online practices. Having no expertise in new media, I can only leave this area of work to experts addressing the radical changes

that have taken place in curating since the apparition of the Internet.5 What I can do instead is to consider this activity of engaging, selecting, arranging, critically evaluating, and sharing culture6 in broad terms—that is, in a situation that can be applied to both the world of cultural exhibitions and to the more mundane but global activity of organizing and sharing content from around the Web on social media platforms. With such a wide remit, the activity that then needs to be thought through becomes much less driven by the trite particularities of practice, however this is understood. It becomes applicable to a limitless number of different settings, none of which can cohere into a single institutional praxis. Performance and impact indicators need to be considered alongside the old communication systems still in place in the art world, such as message, medium, code, and referent. Instant digestibility and shareability also need to be taken in consideration alongside the old model of author and viewer functions. It is this loose, protean, and uncontainable remit that the following arguments attempt to address.

But this is not just a book about curating in a new wide remit. It is above all a book about curating as ethics. As such, the focus is not about the diversification of the practice of curating but about the ethical dimensions of such a wide-ranging activity of global proportions. In this new context, the ethical issue is now this: if there is no more training or schooling to help aspiring curators navigate the muddy waters of right and wrong, if there is no more expertise or professionalism to set, represent, and protect good standards of practice, and if there are no more guilds or syndications to verify, correct, and/or defend these standards, then how can this activity remain in any way ethical? This does not mean that old-fashioned curators are ethical because they are still constrained by institutional parameters. As is well known, many museum curators are known for their unethical behaviors, and this expansion in the practice changes nothing regarding this fact. The problem is rather a much broader one, whereby anyone who curates any form of culture online and/or in noninstitutional remits is faced with making ethical choices that are equally unanchored. The freedom of a global practice inevitably comes with the freedom from any form of ethical directives.7

Of course, many curators today attempt to contain and direct their practices ethically. These can be broadly divided into three sorts. First, there are codes of ethics for curators. These are usually put forward by a panel of experts from the old regime (art curators, art historians, museum directors, legal advisors, etc.), and they usually focus on the fine art practice of curating in museums and galleries.8 Then, over and beyond some social media corporations' plainly lame attempts to impose ethical limits to their platforms, there are also a vast number of tips and instructions on how to curate ethically online.9 These are generally put forward by new media companies in the hope of vaguely controlling their users' activities. They include suggestions such as "All curators should acknowledge their sources" and "All curators should be cognizant of the Internet ecosystem in order to improve it." Finally, there are also a large number of curators putting forward their own private ethical codes. These range from simple advice on how to curate ethically to exhortations on how to lead a better life.10 My aim in what follows is not to correct these ethical suggestions, propose new ethical codes or maxims, or question these moral tips put forward by panels of experts or curators.11 My aim is simply to think through how such a worldwide phenomenon now practiced by millions of people around the world can be understood, outside of any institutional remit, as ethical, and if yes, how?

This first trajectory of thought thus leads me to the first key question of this book: in a situation where a practice no longer has any institutional anchorage, can curating, this now global phenomenon without expert, guild, syndication, or professionalization of any kind still be ethical, and if yes, how? This is the first of two topics that will be addressed in this book, and my hope is

that the unusual structure outlined below—one provided by Martin Heidegger's fourfold—helps us articulate it. But before looking at this uncommon structure, it is necessary to address and clarify the second trajectory of thought that leads to this book: the issue of ethics.

The second path is a reflection on ethical issues. Ethics is usually defined as the process of determining, systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong to an individual or society at large; overall, it means "moral philosophy." This conventional definition of ethics focuses for the most part on examining, for example, the nature of our moral principles (determining which social and/or cultural conventions, norms, emotions, or habits make up a society's ethical standards, for example) and the rightness or wrongness of a society's generic (good practice, duties to follow, or the consequences of bad behavior on others, for example) or specific actions (abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental impacts, capital punishment, nuclear war, etc.). Overall, the aim of ethics understood as moral philosophy is to develop and cultivate some kind of rationalist self- or social legislation. The most common example of this kind of ethics with regards to curating is, as mentioned earlier, museum and curators' codes of ethics: short texts that put forward sets of supposedly rational principles that museums and/or curators should follow.

For me, however, there is always one major problem with ethics as moral philosophy. In its endless rationalizations, it never knows what to do with "what exceeds the living present" even though this "excess" plays a crucial role in all ethical predicaments. In order to make sense of this, it is necessary for me to briefly summarize my trajectory in addressing this issue. In a previous book examining how the notion of peace survives after the Rwandan genocide of 1994,[13] I put forward the premise of an ethics whereby death, this phenomenon that veers out of the living present, invisibly structures human moral encounters. In this, I followed Jean-Luc Nancy's idea that it is always finitude that guides ethics.[14] To be ethical is therefore in this context to allow the possibility of one's own demise to thwart the possibility of any violence against the other. With such an inalienable fact turned into a sentry, the hope is that we necessarily incline ourselves toward the living present; we give birth to more—that is, to furthering dialogue and not additional deaths. In this way, by retaining the importance of the finite limits of any encounter, these limits that exceed the living present, we effectively present the other with more than he or she can think, thus keeping both absolute silence and total darkness (death) and absolute light and total rationality (tyranny) at bay.

The outcome of such a vision of ethics is that as long as one is mortal, then ethics is already a given. It requires no adherence to some religious commandment or ethical imperative. It requires no specific knowledge, information, know-how, or opinion. It only requires an ability to judge that as soon as an ethical dilemma emerges, the realization of one's always impending death invariably veers the dilemma toward its resolution instead of its annihilation. Obviously, such a type of ethics could never give the "highest possible peace of mind" of having done right or truthfully. It is a type of ethics that is always ad hoc and extemporaneous to any lifelong held belief or rational maxim. While these characteristics are more or less acceptable, one thing remains problematic: how is one to always retain in our ethical dilemmas this finite horizon? How can this focus on finitude turned into sentry truly guard life over and above its destruction? The only hint I give right at the end of *After "Rwanda"* is that it would be necessary to develop a type of midwifery able to retain and exploit this sentry, thus emphasizing the birth of more—that is, the possibility of dialogue over and above absolute rationality/light-silence/darkness.

It is this midwifery that retains "what exceeds the living present" as a sentry that is developed here with regards to curating. I use the term *midwifery* as a general expression for all

the gestures that allow us to point, beyond death, to a "more"—that is, to a new or other life hereto unimaginable. As the chapter Midwifing shows, this term is used not simply to refer to women assisting other women in childbirth, but also and above all to anyone who gives birth to more and who therefore provokes a future that defies death, exactly in the same way as when a child is begotten. In the previous sentence, I carefully use the adverb "also" to emphasize that the work and labor of women is not here undermined or sidelined but rather expanded to encompass the birth of both bodies and spirits, as well as the delivery of more: the genesis of a new dialogue or a new dawn. The second path in this trajectory of thought thus leads to another key question in this book: can there be a type of ethics that negotiates, like a midwife, the treacherous waters of the birth of the new in order to keep death and everything that stands for it at bay? Heidegger's fourfold is here again, I hope, what helps to address this issue.

So why is Heidegger's fourfold useful in articulating an ethics understood not as a set of moral principles destined to regulate a global activity but as an ethical midwifery for curators birthing the new in their arrangements of culture in general?

## Heidegger's Fourfold

As intimated in the two trajectories of thought explored above, the structure of this book is inspired by what Martin Heidegger calls *das Geviert*, "the fourfold."[15] It is what brings together and structures the twin topics addressed here: curating and ethics. I develop in the following pages my own idiosyncratic reading of Heidegger's four dimensions, at times closely reading his work (cf. Mortals, Gods, Beckoning, and Strife)[16] and at times evading it altogether (in nearly all the other chapters). My aim with this unruly approach to Heidegger's complex idea is twofold. First, and most simply, I want to evade at all cost the kind of Heideggerianism that reads the fourfold with the only aim to yet again explain it (often erroneously), judge it (unnecessarily), render us more religious (without evidence), or discard it (without understanding it) and instead to literally put it to work.[17] In doing so, there is no other choice but to betray Heidegger—not in order to annoy Heideggerians but in order to push the remarkable logic of the fourfold further. This does not mean that Heidegger's fourfold is incomplete or that it needs further explanations or extrapolations. The idea is simply to show that Heidegger's fourfold can be rethought and perhaps reactivated outside of his vocabulary in order to make it resonate differently.

Second, and more importantly, I want to evade the whole discourse on Heidegger and ethics. The idea that Heidegger might have been interested in ethics is usually considered foolish. As is well known, Heidegger subordinated ethics to ontology.[18] For him, ethics basically comes afterward, once the question of being is addressed. His notions of responsibility, care, solicitude, empathy, and more generally "being-with" are primarily ontological and therefore enter the ethical register with difficulty. Furthermore, if one takes into consideration his affiliation with National Socialism, the idea that his work might have anything to do with ethics is equally senseless. The import of his work is that of a supposedly triumphant sovereign Being who has no interest in the other, the weak, or the oppressed because It is entirely absorbed in thinking Itself as the true ethos. There are already a few remarkable publications that attempt to go against these facile arguments.[19] Here I try instead to depart from after Heidegger's "turning" *(Kehre)* and therefore from what I see as an ethically accentuated polylogical structure, called the fourfold, that no longer rests on either a sovereign Being or on same–other economies.[20] With this fractured and always interrelated polylogicality that is the fourfold, ethics no longer stands for the ground of Being alone; it becomes instead, as I endeavor to show in the following chapters, a midwifery—that is, an ethical practice

that no longer abides in any form of epochal closure.

Free from the shackles of Heideggerianism, in this book I furthermore attempt to read Heidegger's fourfold by traversing it with seemingly unacceptable alien inputs (e.g., Spinoza, Meillassoux, Levinas). My hope with these traversal readings is that the betrayal of Heidegger's fourfold will feel less violent and more inventive, thus remaining more in tune with the actual spirit of research and investigation that characterizes so much of Heidegger's work. After all, is philosophy not an attempt to recast what appears to be already certain and acquired? Is philosophy not the task of inventing new concepts for our times not out of nowhere, but precisely from the premise of a particular lineage of thought? The difficult balance between respecting someone's ideas—in this case Heidegger's fourfold—and challenging them without altogether falsifying them is precisely what I aim to do in the following pages. Doubtless most Heideggerians will disagree with me, but I hope that some will also see that Heidegger's logic for the fourfold deserves to be pushed further in order to reveal not only its potential for philosophy but also, and above all, its power to rethink, from a completely different perspective, our own contemporary ethical predicaments.

There is no space here to present an account of the fourfold as Heidegger originally intended it. A number of well-known scholars have already done a remarkable job of analyzing it, and I can only encourage readers interested in making sense of *das Geviert* within Heidegger's corpus to read Andrew J. Mitchell's remarkably detailed book on this topic or Jean-François Mattéi and Frank Darwiche's books on Heidegger and Hölderlin.[21] Besides these key references, most of my own reading of Heidegger follows Reiner Schürmann's own insightful and pathbreaking reading of the fourfold,[22] which does not focus exclusively on "things" and how they can be apprehended anew by the fourfold but rather on the way it puts forward a polylogical structure that literally defies all previous monologic takes on beings and their ethical predicaments. This specific Schürmannian reading of Heidegger's fourfold originally started in a few articles on the fourfold.[23] These articles give a more Heideggerian account of the fourfold than the one expressed here. I hope the reader—and the Heideggerian reader particularly—will forgive me for directing them to these as a way of verifying a less unruly take on the late Heidegger's work.

In the short amount of space allocated in this Introduction, the only thing I can do is to highlight the reasons why I think Heidegger's fourfold needs to be taken seriously to understand the overall question structuring this book: can there be a type of ethics for a global contemporary practice such as curating that negotiates, like a midwife, the treacherous waters of the birth of the new in order to keep death and everything that stands for it at bay? Heidegger's fourfold helps to address this overall question because it points in a polylogical way toward a type of ethics that both retains death as a sentry (mortals) and playfully remains conjectural, not unlike a midwife, of "what exceeds the living present" (gods). How so?

Out of me[24] but also with me, earth and sky—the event of being.[25] Away from but entirely dependent on this event are the gods: according to Heidegger, this "is" the fourfold. The event is that of a mortal arising with earth and sky, a "dwelling"[26] intruded on by reliant but unruly gods. The four folds (mortals, earth, sky, gods) are not proper physical, metaphysical, or religious compass points. They have no proper equivalent in the world (or in another) because they stand, however difficult this is to imagine, for the very event of time-space. The four participate in and as this event; they take part in the fact that I "am" here, mortal, with earth and sky, invariably unseated by gods.[27] There would be no being, no other,[28] and no world without this four-dimensional[29] quasi-structure that utterly defies the entire arsenal of archic and telic representations and their inevitable epochal stampings, thus also fracturing all singular points of

view, exclusive vistas, and uniform narratives. We need to think of ourselves not just as one or two, but as four. The fourfold is indeed not just about mortals[30] or about things; it is also, and above all, about the event of time-space that arises out of earth, sky, and gods.[31] Out of me, as one dimension of the fourfold, and out of gods, earth, and sky, the event of time-space arises as dwelling.

But what is the point of focusing on the fourfold? The fourfold makes us aware of the conditions that make events possible, including all curatorial events. Since it constitutes the very advent of time-space, the fourfold is effectively the prerequisite for any form of happenstance. As James Edward says: "Each of the four is . . . intended to put in someone's mind the particular conditions that make possible . . . the life that brought to presence the actual thing . . . before us."[32] So for example, my existence is conditioned by a number of factors: the ground out of which humanity grew, the sky into and against which it elevates itself and allows me to breathe and work, my parents who made me mortal, and the divinities—this dimension intrinsic to mortals that, as I shall demonstrate, structure and radically disturb my living present. It would be wrong to think that this conditionality is a causality. Because the fourfold creates the event of time-space, this conditionality is relative to the always accidental occurrence of any given spatial and temporal configuration engaging mortals/gods surging with earth into and against the sky.

Three of Heidegger's four dimensions (mortals, earth, sky) are somewhat self-evident: "Earth is the serving bearer. . . . The sky is the vaulting path of the sun. . . . The mortals are the human beings."[33] I explore these first three dimensions at length in Mortals, Earths, and Skies, albeit also transforming them in order to give them a different resonance (especially in the no doubt controversial idea of pluralizing the first two). The burning question is always the one concerning the gods. What is one to make of the last dimension of Heidegger's fourfold: the gods *(Götter)*? Although I explore this crucial dimension at length in Gods, Beckoning, and Obsession, in some instances closely reading Heidegger's arguments, I feel I ought to introduce it here again, this time with a non-Heideggerian vocabulary in order to avoid as much as possible what can only be inevitable misunderstandings.


**Mortals Also Happen to Be Gods**

The only way to make sense of the gods outside of any theological or religious contexts is to think of them as an inescapable dimension of mortals.[34] Mortals basically also happen to be gods. To say this does not imply that mortals are somehow also immortal or that they are superhuman beings or spirits that need to be worshipped, looked up to, or adored in order to secure salvation or redemption. The nomination *gods* is used here most simply as another word for *mortals*—that is, for finite beings and nothing else. The entire book does not deviate from this inalienable finitude. The reason the word *gods* is used here interchangeably with *mortals* is simply because there is effectively something about finitude that is not quite right, and this is precisely why the juxtaposition or interchangeability works. How is one to characterize this, once again, outside of any theological or religious contexts?[35]

Let me begin by saying that the main gist of this nontheist, nondeist, nontheological, and nonreligious suggestion that mortals also happen to be gods is that the suggestion itself cannot be dissected, analyzed, approved, or disproved. This does not immediately invalidate the argument or relegate the issue to the metaphysical realm, and therefore to some nebulous or quaint transcendental philosophy that, on all accounts, has already being dumped in the dustbin of history. To say that mortals also happen to be gods is simply to recognize that, beyond their bound finitude,

mortals' thought always follows a certain structure of faith, that this structure makes of them gods, and that this is not something that can easily be axed as true or false. As I hope the chapters Mortals, Gods, Beckoning, and Obsession show, this introductory reference to thought does not relegate the issue of mortals/gods to the realm of the mind alone. Thought is here understood not as the intellect alone but rather as the heart and the demand itself. As such, thought is not something that can be quickly and efficiently identified; it is an event that takes place at the limit, marks the limit, is itself the limit. Thought is effectively a bodily event at the edge of finitude, the breaking through of the form of the sensible as sense, a breaking through that never reaches a breaking point—"a final thought," for example. Through thought, then, mortals exceed themselves beyond death throughout their lives, and this is why, as I try to show throughout this book, they also happen to be gods.

The crucial thing about this excess is therefore the never-ceasing supplementary process that always occurs in thought. Thought cannot not exceed itself. It cannot not think the maximum it is able to think. It always exceeds even the highest thought conceivable, managing in the process to exceed its own power to think. Jean-Luc Nancy talks about this excess in a quick commentary on Saint Anselm's famous text, *The Proslogion*, in *Dis-enclosure*. Focusing exclusively on thought, he writes, "Thinking . . . can think—indeed, cannot not think—that it thinks something in excess over itself. It penetrates the impenetrable, or rather is penetrated by it."[36] This has nothing to do with a banal transcendental movement, a going beyond or a prayer that no reason could attest to. As an eminently concrete thinker, Nancy is quick to highlight that his interest in Anselm's effort is only to catch the way thought takes place. Thought is not just finite; it is marked by an extraordinary unconditionality that prevents it from simply delimiting itself as a simple assemblage of inherited and repeatable ideas. This radical unconditionality that occurs in thought is again what makes mortals gods. Mortals unconditionally always open up the future while being caught up in their finite condition. They are gods precisely because of this ordeal of thought that disturbs or disrupts the shackles of mortality, even if they are the most stringent of atheists or agnostics.[37]

Inevitably, the questions now beckon: why give this ability to exceed thought the name "gods"? Why bother with a denomination that always refers to what is superior to mortals? Do we really need this old reference to characterize the an-archic or an-telic structures of thought? Should we not in our materialist, pragmatic, consumerist, and scientific world, not evade a type of vocabulary that is so stained with fratricides and genocides? Should we not be able by now to grasp the excess that caries thought out of itself without automatically having recourse to the idea of god? Can we not be mortals without necessarily assuming being also gods sparking a beyond that never ceases to withdraw itself? And finally, should we not be able by now to refer to this desire beyond need without also referring to some imagined phantasm? I accumulate here the questions to emphasize that I am aware that using the word *gods* to reference this excess of thought is not just problematic but also effectively a scandal for thought—what is radically unacceptable in the face of humanity's sovereign rationality as well as of humanity's unrelenting violence, cruelty, and destructiveness. How can we be gods in this rational and violent hegemony? Yet a number of fundamental reasons impel me to insist on using the word *gods*, way beyond Heidegger's own articulations.

First, using the word *gods* to qualify mortals' ability to exceed themselves through thought is intended to simply highlight a type of nomination that, for good or bad, exceeds all concepts. After all, this is what the word *god* stands for: a nomination radically distinct from any other nomination of concepts and as such is key to expose this excess. It is, as will be explored in the chapter God, the name of a relation with what knows no return. Thought exceeds itself even if

there is no answer coming back. As such, thought always reaches out toward the immemorial or the unhoped for (cf. Intuiting)—that is, toward what exceeds the living present and knows no predetermined return. It is this reaching out, this excess, that indeed constitutes if not the faith that structures thought then at least its scandal. Reason cannot do without this scandal. It structures thought even if it adheres to the most stringent of formal or mathematical logic: there will always be the possibility of its absolute disruption. To think otherwise is nothing short of fascism. It is indeed to revert to the most worrisome of logics, the ones that precisely lead to inalienable truths, the imposition of the same, the rejection of the other, and so on. Using the word *gods* for "mortals" is therefore first and foremost to emphasize the importance of evading the dictatorship of concepts and the impossibility of doing away with either faith or scandal.

Second, but more important, using the word *gods* is an attempt to destabilize the monopoly held by our own two contemporary gods: the God of the Abrahamic tradition and the God of money.[38] Whether one obeys the God of monotheist religions or the God of capital, one is always obeying a tautology: God equals God or money equals money (the latter not in an equivalence between currencies, but within currencies, i.e., one dollar equals one dollar).[39] These two tautologies rule our contemporary lives because they are the only absolute values superseding and regulating all others.[40] They stand for the only language referents able to mediate and regulate all other exchanges in language. From procreation to death and from inorganic events to natural disasters,[41] God or money regulates the world with two types of return: in another life (the God of religion) or in this life (money). They are no other options, but these sovereign traffics regulating the lives of both religious and secular folk. How can one break such indomitable twofold sovereignty? By precisely bringing the referent *god* down to the level of mortals—that is, by precipitating an absolute value to the level of finitude. In doing so, the aim is to encourage mankind to think of returns other than those provided by God and/or money. This aim will not break the monopoly of the two absolute tautologies ruling our lives, but it will at least raise the question of their omnipresence. We are gods because we are the only absolute values worth considering.

Third, using the word *gods* to indicate "mortals" is also a way of rejecting any form of hierarchy, including that put forward by organized religion with god(s) above and mortals below. To qualify mortals as gods is not to determine anything to have a supernatural structure but rather to precisely disqualify the very possibility of such a structure. It is to precipitate the idea of the divine down to the level of mortals without hierarchy. In doing so, I am not elevating mortals to a special status. I am not unconsciously replicating here Psalm 82:6 and John 10:34 in which local magistrates, judges, and other people who held positions of authority were suddenly qualified of "gods." As the focus on thought above shows, I hope, no mortal is here given any authority over other human beings; no one is qualified as a demigod, demiurge, or demon, and no one is assumed to derive power and authority from God Himself. To say that mortals also happen to be gods is on the contrary to destabilize all forms of sovereignty and highlight, through the excess of thought, an absolute equality trumping all equalities of concepts. Mortals also happen to be gods and this, whoever they are.

Fourth, to say that mortals also happen to be gods is to remove from the determination "gods" any kind of moral value. Mortals are not always sinful, and gods are not necessarily exempt from sin; the bad does not reside in mortals and the good in gods. As the chapters in the last section of this book will, I hope, testify, the good is conceived precisely in the same vein as Nancy's reading of Anselm. If there is a desire to exceed thought, then this desire cannot be structured by an economic return whereby whomever thinks over and above him- or herself expects a payback or reward. This is, on the contrary, a desire for what is beyond satisfaction and as such cannot be

entered into the category of need—neither as a mean nor as an end, let alone as a prayer in the conventional sense of this term. As such, if mortals recognize their godly selves, then their recognition is a desire without end; it is an excess that can only exceed itself over and beyond any form of satisfaction; it is a desire for a future in which they no longer matter (cf. Conclusion). In this way, free of any form of standard or right, free of the constraints of "good intentions" and "good consciences," mortals/gods expose, as we will see, the good only when they exceed themselves beyond what the value "good" stands for today: an excess, a good that is nothing other than what they themselves are.

Finally, to think mortals as gods is to bring finitude and midwifery together. Mortals are finite. They have death as their ethical sentry. But they are also gods. Godly, they are more than just mortal rational beings; they also free the possible for the future (cf. Deeds and Ends). As such, they operate from a double premise that allow them not only to retain in their ethical judgments the sentry that is death, but also to midwife what is immemorial or unhoped for—a time, for example, when they (and their ethical dilemmas) no longer matter. This midwifery reinforces death as sentry. As I will explore in detail in the chapters that follow, mortals also happen to be gods because they can, not only regulate their world with rationality and a mortal sentry, but can also do so by midwifing a time in which the "good" can still take place (cf. Conclusion). In other words, mortals are not just finite rational animals securing—well or badly—a better world for all. They are also, and importantly, able to playfully let their godly selves midwife what can never be secured by any form of assurance or guarantee.

These are some of the reasons for justifying the way I interpret two of the four dimensions of Heidegger's fourfold. As I said before, such polylogicality requires us to think in more than one (being, becoming, for example) or two dimensions (same/other, for example). Living beings are complex. Their ethics can no longer rest on a utilitarian accounting weighing the good and the bad and/or melting out responsibilities and exonerations for individuals understood as economic rational mortal units. We need a way of approaching the ethical dilemmas of our world that is in tune with the way we operate as fourfolding finite beings able to open up the future like the gods we are. The fourfold is indeed our new ethical constellation. It allows us—all of us, including curators and those shunning this much maligned practice—to midwife, with death as a sentry, a time in which we will no longer matter. It is by recognizing this polylogicality, this play among mortals, earths, and skies that we can exceed, as gods, our capacity to think, thus midwifing a new world—a new fourfold hereto unimaginable.


**Curating Philosophy**

This book also puts forward a specific approach to philosophy. To many, this approach will be objectionable because it does not follow the conventional structure of philosophical theses and treaties. Although long ago many past authors have brilliantly questioned and successfully disrupted these conventional structures, the conservative ideology that theses need to follow specific criteria stubbornly maintains its status quo. What will be particularly annoying to traditional *doxa* is that the authors' texts put forward in the following pages are read outside of their traditions; for example, Spinoza is read outside of Spinozism, and Heidegger is read obliquely in relation to Heideggerian studies. But this is not all. What will no doubt infuriate some readers is that philosophy is not presented as a textual analysis proving past or contemporary authors right or wrong. Instead, I use it in order to push the argument in a completely new direction. For example, the most antitranscendentalist philosopher imaginable, Quentin Meillassoux, is placed in

dialogue with the least materialist thinker conceivable, Emmanuel Levinas. The aim of such seemingly unacceptable juxtapositions is not to provoke readers gratuitously or deliberately misread authors. The aim is simply to give birth to a different thought all in the belief that philosophy would go much further if it stopped its endless game of textual buggery[42] and embraced its varied richness together.

This is what leads me to think up what I call here curating philosophy. Again, the idea of such juxtaposition will doubtless send shivers down the spine of a number of readers. If curating is an indeterminable activity with diverse disciplinary heritages and little scholarly import, then philosophy must stay well clear of it. Inversely, philosophy is too dry, textual, and abstract for curating, so it must therefore remain confined to what curators know best: the visual and this last meaningless refuge of the philistine, "practice." I have little time for such reactionary pseudo- or postdisciplinary distinctions. What matters above all for me is to come up with a way of addressing the issues that is adequate to the topic explored, a way whereby form and content somehow match each other, if this is possible. Because curating now permeates the lives of many people around the world, curating thus needs a new mode of thinking adequate to its vast undertaking. This is what curating philosophy aims to achieve. However, the aim was not to patch together two distinct fields (art history and philosophy, for example) and hope for the best, but to think them through one another. Curating here helps philosophy, and vice versa. The outcome of such a double activity is a type of thought that hopes to continue the long work of disrupting institutional and disciplinary structures and apparatuses, these ideological falsities that ruin everything, including thought itself, and to begin thinking again.

The main aspect of this new type of thought is that it takes both curating and philosophy at its task. On the one hand it takes the textual fabric of philosophy and its context seriously, not as theorizations of art, curating, or visual culture but for its potential to articulate life overall and contemporary experience more specifically. On the other hand, it takes the cultural elements explored here equally seriously, not as illustrations for philosophical arguments but for their intrinsic cultural characteristics (as demonstrated, for example, in Images). The outcome of such a twofold attempt is a type of thought that is characterized by an essential incompletion. This is taken not in a negative sense (e.g., as a thesis that lacks something or fails to achieve something substantial) but rather in a way that positively matches what happens in life. As such, this sense of incompletion is taken in the way Friedrich and August Schlegel think of the fragment. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy say in a commentary on their work, "the [Schlegel] fragment designates a presentation that does not pretend to be exhaustive and that corresponds to the no doubt properly modern idea that the incomplete can, and even must, be published (or to the idea that what is published is never complete)."[43] The following chapters adhere to this idea that incompletion is not a call for completion but instead is proof of the essential characteristic of both life and thought.

This, however, does not mean that because it is incomplete it is necessarily formless. Curating is famous for an ordered appearance that on quick inspection is always flawed. Exhibitions always give the impression of cohesion when in fact what is exhibited is often the result of many compromises, concessions, and trade-offs between institutions, funders, lenders, contexts, and/or artists. The "ordered clutter" of curating (cf. Skies) is thus often criticized or dismissed as the typical outcome of a hotchpotch discipline. I'm not disputing this. However, I also think that there is some potential for this much-maligned flawed order that is curating. What presents itself as ordered but in fact hides an essential disorder should be, when successful, perceived as a reflection on the way life always presents itself. Life does not appear as utter chaos

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but rather appears under certain guises that make sense today. To present these guises truthfully is to try and reveal the essential incompleteness of what presents itself. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy help us to see this again with the Schlegel brothers' fragments: "The . . . task is not to dissipate or reabsorb disorder, but to construct it or to make a Work from disorganization."[44] This does not excuse or justify shambolic exhibitions or philosophical work. On the contrary, this is a call to see curating philosophy—understood together or separately—as the work of exposing a single and comprehensible life caught up in the throes of utter disorder. The outcome will be not yet another comprehensive system but the characterization of a feeling for the disorder outside of all systems, like mankind's feeling for something beyond mankind.

The formal guises in which the disorder called *Curating as Ethics* presents itself here and now are as follows: the book is simply made of three parts of ten short chapters. The three parts draw up the structure of the ethics. First is the ontic-ontological[45] structure of the ethics (cf. Gods and Mortals). I have to start somewhere, so I begin with a few definitions about key terms that will be used throughout this book: how everything stems from dark matter, how everything is constituted by matter, how mortals deal with God, how mortals apprehend interhuman relationships, and so on. This structure proceeds carefully from more or less nothing (cf. Dark Matter) to more or less everything (cf. The Absolute) without, of course, assuming any form of exhaustiveness. This first part—abstract and on all accounts seemingly alien to curating—prepares for the (inevitably always loose) boundaries of this ethics.

The second part (Earths and Skies) establishes some of the parameters of this ethics—the stuff that makes up, in what concerns us here, *Curating as Ethics*: the textual and visual evidence, the digital medium, the materiality of the (art) object curated, the play of imperatives, the game of knowledge, and so on. This exploration of the ethics' boundaries proceeds, again, carefully from an ontic-ontological description of the event that is the curatorial (cf. Earths) all the way to the manner in which the protagonists involve themselves in this event (cf. Names). This second part— less abstract and a little more in tune with the everyday practices of curating—lays the groundwork for understanding anew the actions of curators.

The third and final part (Deeds and Ends) indeed focuses on the ethical issues associated with the activity of curating understood broadly: preparing, caring, fraternizing, dispensing. This last part deals with some key actions of curators, whether these take place in museological or extramuseological contexts or online. They are exemplary inasmuch as they touch upon specific ethical predicaments. These are obviously not exhaustive of all ethical predicaments incurred by curators; there are no tips here, for example, on how much it is ethically fair to pay artists or how curators should respond to the #MeToo movement. The actions explored in this final part only expose general but salient ethical curatorial predicaments and not immediate ethical problems and/or how to address them.

Inside these three parts, each short chapter addresses a specific topic and how this topic imbricates itself in the overall structure of the ethics. Strangely, perhaps, the chapters are not necessarily linked one after the other in order to form a continuous line of argumentation within each part. This will be the most rebarbative aspect of this thesis for traditional philosophers, but perhaps the most coherent for curators in general. The idea behind this lack of continuity is to deliberately exploit shifts in registers in order—again, to evade the logic of conventional academic theses. But these shifts in register within each part are not gratuitous. They carefully adhere to the logic of a curated exhibition whereby each individual chapter stands for one argument in the overall exposition of the thesis, not unlike works on display in a show. The table of contents is therefore like an exhibition map, and the cross-references in the text (signaled with a cf.) are

signposts along the way. This does not undermine the distinctness of each chapter or its self-contained character. The chapters can be read independently of the whole or the parts. The shifts in register should therefore be read as curated segments of reflections in the exposition of the ethics. The overall trajectory, as for any exhibition, can never, of course, constitute a comprehensible all-encompassing system; it simply catches here a set of flights of thought in their necessary incompleteness.

1 For a detailed account of this reflection, especially with regards to the academic settings of curating, see Martinon, "Edging Disciplines," and Martinon, ed., *Curatorial*.

2 On this topic, see, e.g., Balzer, *Curationism*.

3 I am grateful to my then student, Takeshi Shiomitsu, for this astute use of language. See Shiomitsu, "Curation as a Practice."

4 Michael Bhaskar defines curating in even more general terms as the "acts of selecting, refining, and arranging to add value [in order to] help us overcome [information] overload." Bhaskar, *Curation*, 7–8. Bhaskar adds a note at the end of his dazzling but problematic book saying that the term *value* should be taken in its broadest sense—that is, as both an "addition of capital" and an "addition of knowledge." Bhaskar, *Curation*, 314–15. This uncertainty with regard to the value added by curating unfortunately does not help. It only confuses the issue, leaving us stranded in a capitalist dead end of "more" without any discernment between profit and epistemic enhancement—hence my choice of limiting the scope of curating to that of culture and my attempt to rethink this added value not as a loose capitalist interchangeable term but precisely as the other of all value: life. As the arguments in this book attempt to show, it is by focusing on this other value that curating can have a chance to rescue itself from Bhaskar's problematic conflation.

5 On the topic of the expansion of curating outside of the reified art world, see, e.g., Krysa, *Curating Immateriality*; Fisher, "Curators and Instagram"; Landow, *Hypertext 3.0*.

6 I understand culture in a relatively narrow sense, namely as the set of values, beliefs, conventions, and/or social practices associated with a particular activity—here, curating. With this definition, my aim is to avoid defining culture from the premise of a predetermined idea of what constitutes a "group of people" (e.g., Western culture, European culture, British culture, black culture, LGBTQ+ culture).

7 To the point where the denomination *curator* is now applied to the most unethical practice imaginable: driving suicidal teenagers to take their own lives. I am referring here to the little-known—and perhaps unfounded—Blue Whale Challenge, which is a social network phenomenon that started in Russia in 2016, in which a curator assigns a series of tasks to suicidal teenagers that progressively introduce elements of self-harm until they commit suicide. There is no space here to explore this type of curatorial cyberbullying, not only because it exceeds the remit of the notion of culture that, for good or bad, frames this book, but also because it calls for a type of applied ethics to immediately counteract this urgent moral problem, such as that put forward, for example, by the Brazilian project Baleia Rosa (Pink Whale), which instead assigns positive tasks that value life and combat depression.

8 See, e.g., Mayer et al., eds., *Code of Ethics*; Cgercgu Usai, "Charter of Curatorial Values"; Philbrick, "Exhibition Ethics"; Trevelyan, ed., *Code of Ethics for Museums*.

9 See, e.g., Popova, *Curator's Code*.

10 See, e.g., Huberman, "Take Care"; Eleey, "What About Responsibility?"

11 On this topic, see, e.g., Montmann, ed., *Scandalous*; King and Levin, *Ethics and the Visual Arts*; Beshty, *Ethics*.

13 Martinon, *After "Rwanda."*

14 See Nancy, *L'Impératif catégorique*, 114–37.

15 Heidegger's account of the fourfold is scattered through a number of texts that span nearly twenty-five years, from a first mention in his 1949 essay "Insight into That Which Is" all the way to his 1973 seminar in Zärhingen. See Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* and *Four Seminars*. The best-known account of the fourfold can be found in the essays "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" and "The Thing," in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 141–60, 161–84. Mention of the fourfold is also made across a number of other publications, including *Contributions to Philosophy* and *Mindfulness*, as well as his readings of Hölderlin (*Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry* and *Hölderlin's Hymns*).

16 The use throughout this book of "cf." (short for the Latin term *confer*, "compare") is not intended as a lazy request to the readers to join the dots. Living with a chronic health problem that affects my memory, these were originally intended to help me ensure coherence of the argument throughout the book. I left them behind in the hope that

perhaps readers might also find them useful when comparing the topic being discussed in one part of the book with another formulated elsewhere.

17 Just to clarify, the fourfold makes no reference to any four orders turning (clockwise or anti-clockwise) continuously in either ancient Asian traditions (Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, for example) or in more recent western genocidal political ideologies. For an inaccurate interpretation of the fourfold in this sense, see Faye, *Heidegger, l'introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie* and for an excellent rebuke see Mattéi, "Emmanuel Faye, l'introduction du fantasme dans la philosophie."

18 Or more precisely, equated ontology and ethics. For this argument, see Raffoul, *Origins of Responsibility*, 220–46.

19 See, e.g., Hodge, *Heidegger and Ethics*; Nancy, "Heidegger's 'Originary Ethics,'" 65–85; Hatab, *Ethics and Finitude*; Lewis, *Heidegger and Place of Ethics*; McNeill, *Time of Life*; Webb, *Heidegger, Ethics*.

20 There is unfortunately no space here to unpack this topic. Suffice to say that monological apperception of the subject of ethics dominates the field, whether from a normative or extemporary perspective. Badiou's someone caught in the process of ethical truths or Caputo's responsible body without ethics are two contemporary examples that show how ethics still remains riveted to monological apperceptions that never truly take into consideration the importance of what radically evades or surprises it. See Badiou, *Ethics*; Caputo, *Against Ethics*.

21 Mattéi, *Heidegger et Hölderlin*; Darwiche, *Heidegger*; Mitchell, *Fourfold*. See also Crownfield, "Last God"; Edwards, "The Thinging of the Thing"; Wrathall, "Between the Earth and the Sky."

22 See Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting* and *Broken Hegemonies.*

23 See Martinon, "Time Unshackled" and "Between Earth and Sky."

24 The pronoun *me* does not refer to an ego as such but rather to a mortal co-original with earth, sky, and gods.

25 The event of being *(Ereignis)* must not be confused with "mortals" or Dasein, both of which refer, at different registers, to one dimension of this very event. The event of being includes mortals, gods, earth, and sky, each participating in this event as expropriating movements. Thinking four expropriating movements at once avoid monological and monotheistic (and therefore historical) interpretations of being. See Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*.

26 I explore this Heideggerian expression the chapter Saving.

27 Obviously the four do not end up creating a suprarepresentational structure because each is understood as an expropriating movement. See Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 178.

28 I deliberately leave this other unexplained. The reading of Heidegger's gods that follows should assuage all those who fear that the other has yet again been violently reappropriated in the event of being.

29 The number four has no mystical, magical, religious, or apocalyptic meaning. As many commentators have shown, it is the outcome of the history of being and that of the world as analyzed by Heidegger through and beyond his readings of Hölderlin. For a mystical reading of Heidegger (one that is not followed here), see Caputo, *Mystical Element*. For a further commentary, see Mattéi, *Heidegger et Hölderlin*.

30 As Reiner Schürmann superbly says, with the fourfold, "The 'mortals' find themselves, as it were, marginalized." Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, 211.

31 I leave aside in this introduction the fact that the event of time-space of the fourfold can be created or destroyed at will and for no reason by hyper-chaos time. See the chapters *Strife* and *the Absolute*.

32 Edwards, "The Thinging of the Thing," 458.

33 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 147–48.

34 I realize that in saying this, I depart from conventional readings of Heidegger's fourfold, for which the gods are separate entities that somehow arise after the death of God and the advent of modern technology from sacred places; these remnants of religious sites rekindle us with our true selves. Mortals only truly experience the gods in holy precincts, thus reviving in us a sense for the divine in the world. There are at least two serious problems with this conventional reading. The first is that there is never any explanation for how the gods are supposed to materialize themselves in these places and send messages. For me, this interpretation is still imbued with the idea that although God is dead, He is still somehow somewhere incarnated in these holy places, thus reintroducing through the back door a monotheistic approach to the divine. The second one is that there is an incredible confusion with these analyses between the earth and the gods. Heidegger's sacred places can only be understood as part of earth, yet there is no explanation as to why the earth carries with it, in its many holy sanctums, the messages from the gods. For these reasons, I can only leave aside these conventional readings of Heidegger's gods, preferring to follow Schürmann and to take Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche's death of God seriously— namely as no longer lurking in churches, temples, and mosques. For one brilliant reading of Heidegger's gods through the holiness of sacred places, see Wrathall, "Between the Earth and the Sky."

35 I realize that this might be perceived as a contradiction inasmuch as any mention of the word *gods* necessarily

implies a theology. However, the focus here is on the event of being, its worldly taking place and not on any relation provoked or put at rest by the nominal event called God (cf. the Absolute). With such an exclusively mundane focus, one that does not even amount, because of earths and skies, to an ontotheology, I thereby extricate myself—with difficulty, no doubt—from the discussions on the possibility or impossibilities of a new theology, especially within the phenomenological canon, including those emanating from the work of Heidegger himself. I am thinking here specifically of the debates between either Derrida and Marion, or Caputo and Kearney. See Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*; Kearney and Zimmermann, *Reimagining the Sacred*; Bradley, "God *sans* Being."

36 Nancy, *Dis-enclosure*, 11.

37 Using a different vocabulary, one could also say that mortals are essentially meaningful. It is in their nature to bear meaning. In other words, meaning is finitude or finitude is meaning. As such, mortals are meaningful because they are tied to a beyond themselves that they do not own but that they spend their time trying to reach. In bearing meaning, in reaching out toward this unreachable beyond, they are witness to the constant withdrawal of this beyond. This is not a frustrating gesture that never succeeds. On the contrary, it is the realization that the beyond takes place right at the moment meaning occurs. The beyond occurs in the proffering of meaning. What is beyond is effectively only what appears to us as beyond. It is a call or an invitation (cf. Beckoning and Obsession) from "what always withdraws" to participate in this beyond. There would be no meaning if there were no beyond inviting us to consider itself. There would only be death or absolute darkness. This constant play with what appears beyond is what makes mortals gods. Their godly nature is precisely the ordeal of meaningfulness.

38 I only reference here these two absolute values. Others could be found. After all, is the history of Western culture since Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God not filled with endless attempts to replace Him with a new suprasensory value? Commenting on Nietzsche's madman speech in *Gay Science*, Heidegger famously gives a list of all these values: conscience, reason, progress, happiness of the greatest number, civilization, enterprise. I only focus on two here because of their unique tautological characteristics. See Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 119–20; Heidegger, *Question Concerning Technology*, 53–114.

39 I develop this theme in Martinon, "Im-mundus."

40 Marx obviously made this point long before me: "A particular kind of commodity acquires the character of general equivalent, because all other commodities make it the material in which they uniformly express their value." Marx, *Capital*, 79.

41 On the way natural disasters are recuperated by the principle of general equivalence, see Nancy, *After Fukushima*.

42 As Deleuze famously remarked. See Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 6.

43 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, 42.

44 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, 51 (translation modified).

45 I refer here to an ontico-ontological structure because the constellation at stake here—the fourfold—always hovers hesitantly but deliberately between ontology and the ontic sciences. Cf. Mortals and, as a contrast, The Absolute.