CHAPTER 1

Is a Non-Metaphysical Ethics Possible?

I

In my publications, I have suggested that the historical situation of the philosophers of today is characterized by the fact that they are "condemned" to think in a space between "tradition" and "another beginning." Perhaps a reflection on this domain of movement of our present philosophical endeavors may inaugurate a meditation on the possibility of a "non-metaphysical" ethics. Our eyes should be above all on the method and the object of a non-metaphysical ethics.

Let us recall the two sides that delimit the space within which we must engage in philosophy today. One of them is formed by our tradition, broadly speaking the epoch of "metaphysics." Here, one does not need to share Martin Heidegger's view, according to which "Metaphysics," beginning already with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, has been expressed in all the configurations of Western culture. The basic features characteristic of this ensemble, cited not only by Heidegger but many others as well include its ontological and theological constitution, and the determinative nature of reason conceived as light, which actually or potentially assured the rationality of reality. Thus, at the end of this epoch, Hegel stated the then still valid conviction that "reason rules the world." Further features of this epoch are the determination of being as substance in its different varieties—conceiving, again with Hegel, substance also as subject—along with the determination of freedom as the utmost manifestation of the subjectivity of

the subject. To these basic features we must add that already Aristotle had thought man as a *zoon logon echon* and a *zoon politikon*. This one side, delimiting the interspace of our philosophical endeavor today, continues to rule even though it is often only in the ruin-like form co-determined by those developments that have dissolved the tradition. We shall just hint at these with the names of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud.

The *other* side delimiting this space would be that of "another beginning," already forethought by "another thinking" in different projects but never become a reality— "another beginning" with an eye to a total conception of reality as such and of human reality in particular.

The space in which we philosophize our philosophical thought takes place today—be it by working on the tradition historically in manifold different attempts, or by merely repeating it under other names, or by exploring completely different methods, like analytic thought or a thinking oriented towards the structure of language forms—has known the endeavors of "another" thinking, like that of Rosenzweig, Buber, Ebner, Maritain, Marcel, Levinas, and Heidegger, although their projects have as yet brought forth no "other" kind of Being. My own works also attempt to think against metaphysics in order, in this sense of the "non" in the expression "non-metaphysical," to disassociate myself from metaphysical determinations. Thus I designate my attempt at an ethics as a *non*-metaphysical one. I suppose that I have not succeeded completely in disassociating my thought radically from metaphysics because many metaphysical determinations are already sedimented implicitly in our language. Precisely this characterizes philosophical thought within the space between tradition and "another beginning."

My view is that it is not possible for us, finding ourselves thinking philosophically between tradition and another beginning, to already develop an ethics in the sense of a fully matured set of basic determinations. Nor is it necessary to share Heidegger's view that only the "disciplines" outlined by Plato and Aristotle may bear this name. One

can speak of an "ethics" without meaning a fully elaborated project. Yet one can also forgo the name ethics and be content to speak of "descriptions of *ethos*," as is the case in the contributions contained in this book.

We find the appropriate method of describing an *ethos* within the realm of non-metaphysical thought in a *phenomenological* explication. This is because phenomenology, as we understand it, is able to interpret that which reveals itself, to describe in a retracing by experience and thought that which, emerging from concealment, becomes manifest as given in itself—that which appears in this way, the phenomenon. Phenomenology interprets without referring to psychological or other theories, for it brings the respective matter at issue into view in order to clarify the structural features and relations of meaning that lie within it, to uncover them insofar as they were hidden, and to bring them into the "open."

The following descriptions of our *ethos* in our life-world do not provide mere depictions of actual, contemporary events. For phenomenology may not simply "depict" what is experienced in each respective case. It rather attempts to interpret a structural whole in such a way that it does not grasp an individual entity, but the *being* of this entity. When, in the following, we seek to understand how an individual, based on the experience of his or her own mortality and sociality, can set off on a path that transforms his or her whole character, it cannot be a question of describing this path as a factual one. Disregarding the sphere of actual occurrences, phenomenology must rather point out the possibility of such a path of transformation solely from the *structures of human Being* and the world.

In addition, we must realize that the phenomenon of a path of transformation that proceeds from the experience of one's own mortality and sociality, does not constitute the phenomenon of something "real" but of something "possible." And a phenomenological description can indeed be applied to this. Admittedly, we must then designate the possibility whose interpretation is at issue beforehand in order to be able to describe it as *accurately* as possible. The

possibility with which we are concerned can be formulated in the question: How can a person, on the basis of a preceding experience of his own mortality and sociality be brought to the greatest possible appropriation of responsibility and ultimately to the virtue of com-passion? It is not the object of our investigation to describe the possible paths leading to contrary attitudes that can indeed also be *results* of that initial experience, like closing oneself off with regard to others and the world at large. Each of these requires rather an analysis of its own.

We can repudiate the suspicion that we have resorted to arbitrary constructions by focusing our inquiry on the said possibility of a path of transformation, by the method of phenomenological explanation we employ for this inquiry, and by our intention to orient ourselves solely to those states of affairs which can be shown to spring from the being of man at each of the individual "stations" of the transformatory path.

II

What is, more specifically, the theme and the aim of the following descriptions? It will be a matter of rendering visible that, and how, transformations within the element of the emotions are possible—transformation precipitated by a radical change in attunement that can liberate man from the imprisonment constituted by the *indifference* towards his fellow-man and the community.

Metaphysics, particularly since Aristotelian teleology, has attributed a far greater role to rationality than to emotionality when treating questions of morality and ethical conduct. Admittedly Spinoza (in his *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* despite its rationalistic method), Pascal, and later Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and others saw clearly the importance of emotionality for the ethical consciousness. Hume, in particular, described emotionality in thorough-going observations in his *Enquiry into the Principals of Morals.* However, it was above all Husserl who put

great importance on the role of feeling in the constitution of a "pure" ethics in his numerous lectures on ethics. Husserl did not, however, discuss the role of emotionality in the formation of virtues, rather he outlined an "ethics of value" as had already been carried out by Max Scheler—though on the basis of Husserl's insights—in particular in his *Formalism in Ethics and the Material Ethics of Value.*

At any rate, our real adversary is not Aristotelian teleological rationality but rather the one described by Alisdair MacIntyre as Weberian "purposive rationality" in his book *After Virtue* (London 1974). Under this title, MacIntyre subsumes not only the determining influence of the whole period of the Enlightenment (in particular Kant's doctrine of the categorical imperative for the autonomous moral subject) but also the whole utilitarian movement, Marxism, and Neo-Marxism. For he claims that they all share the view that the "highest concept" for "the moral life is the concept of a 'rule' " (MacIntyre p. 112). He further points out that this purposive rationality has only been countered by Nietzsche's conviction that traditional philosophy never justified these universally valid rules of rationality and that, apart from this, it obscured the fundamentally irrational phenomenon of the will. MacIntyre's thesis hold that in this conflict between Weberian "purposive rationality" and Nietzsche's "irrationality" there is no universally shared conception of what constitutes the "good" for a community. He sees the only possible solution to this conflict in a rehabilitation of Aristotelian philosophy and its teleological rationality, since it leads to the formation of virtues. MacIntyre regards the main task of a contemporary philosophical ethics as being concerned with the *quality of character* and not in the following of rules. One can agree with MacIntyre on this and one should join him in seeking a possibility to fend off a Nietzschean rejection of all morality and ethical norms, which is indeed not non-metaphysical but anti-metaphysical.

We cannot, however, agree with MacIntyre's contention that Aristotelean teleology is the only possibility of rehabilitating a doctrine of virtues. Such a doctrine is certainly

needed in order to understand at all the function and au-
thority of rules. However, this is not afforded by most con-
temporary cognitivist ethics, like constructivist ethics, the
attempts at rational reconstruction of the Kantian and He-
gelian ethics of consciousness, the Marxist and Neo-
Aristotelian ethics, the structuralist and analytically
orientated ethics, and Karl Otto Apel's transcendental-
pragmatic ethics of argumentation. Jürgen Habermas,
starting from normative or regulative speech acts and of-
fers of speech acts in the everyday life-world, and from
agreement oriented actions, seeks to ground a discursive
ethics by means of formal-pragmatic investigations and a
"logic of moral argumentation." Furthermore, as an ethics
of accountability, it should provide a satisfactory answer to
the question of justice and of "the good life" as institution-
alized morality.[1] All these cognitivist ethics proceed tacitly
from the assumption of the universal reign of reason. But
also the non-cognitivist ethics, such as Max Scheler's and
Nicolai Hartmann's intuitionist ethics of value, as well as
the emotivist and decisionist ethics are mostly concerned
only with the conventional comportment of an agent.

We expect an answer to very different questions from a
non-metaphysical ethics. How does a person become just?
How does a person become one who loves his fellow-man,
how does a person become one moved by compassion? This
ethics is not only concerned with the question of how the
claims to validity of moral judgments can be tested for their
possibilities of attaining truth—as is largely the case in
contemporary ethics—nor only with the question of the
"universalizing" of particular conceptions and of the appli-
cation of the general to any given situation (the question of
"concretization"). This has been traditionally the work of
judgment; in Aristotle, it was a question of the feasibility
of an action on the basis of a consideration in which a con-
crete situation is related to what the virtuous person takes
to be the just and proper thing to do. In the following stud-
ies, we shall neither discuss the extent to which Aristotle's
concretion contained the logical structure of an inference,
nor shall we deal with the related problem that is also

posed in the critique of Kantian ethical formalism as that of "reason putting law to the test" (the Kantian formalism of duty). We are rather concerned with the possibility of a transformation of ethical comportment on the basis of an experience that arises out of emotion and thus plays a role in the formation of virtues, without, however, excluding reason in doing so. We do not conceive *reason* in the Aristotelian fashion of *prohairesis*, nor in such a way that its *telos* is composed by those Aristotelian virtues that were ultimately oriented towards the polis, the perfect form of the *ergon anthropinon* being, for Aristotle, a life devoted to *sophia* as the godlike *noesis noeseos*.

What is peculiar to, or distinctive about, a nonmetaphysical ethics would lie above all in the liberation from Weberian purposive rationality without a return to Aristotelian teleology, a liberation directed towards a rationality which recognizes another role for emotionality in the formation of virtues. Thus, the phenomenological descriptions undertaken in this book want to show that "purposive rationality" cannot lead to the formation of virtues. The question presents itself whether any type of rationality at all could achieve this on its own. Speculative pure reason once laid claim to encompassing and elevating all types of rationality. But it was founded on the assumption of an identity of thought and Being, in which thinking—ultimately in the form of reason as system—claimed to be able to rule all reality and to penetrate it completely. This claim to an absolute power of reason and its concomitant will to subordinate to itself every last nook of reality failed as a philosophical position when the limits of such an all-encompassing rationality began coming to the fore ever more clearly. This failure led to the insight that there are, particularly in the domain of human existence, basic modes that do not reveal themselves to a reason that has elevated itself to absolute spirit. The insight into the limitation of reason and spirit could have guarded man from the dangerous urge to a progressive rationalization of his life-world. But this did not happen because of the still predominant blind insistence on the convictions of the all-encompassing

rule of purposive rationality. Still, in contemporary philosophy, the liberation from this and other traditional assumptions of metaphysics has opened up the possibility of posing new questions and of seeing traditional contents differently in a changed situation.

But can we today simply return to virtues? Plato taught that this was possible through knowledge. Aristotle stated that to knowledge must be added practice. Is it possible for us today to acquire this knowledge and develop our character in accordance with it? It is not, and for two reasons. First, because in antiquity and presumably in all our previous periods, the relationships that men bore their fellow-men were not governed by indifference to the extent they are today as a result of "scientification," technicalization, and the emergence of a "mass society." The person today who wants to show ethics the way to the regaining of virtues, must above all point to a phenomenon that is suitable for breaking through this indifference in a radical way. In no way should it be some far-fetched construction; it should rather spring from a state of affairs that belongs to our Being. To our Being belongs above all that we are mortal.

These essays will show how the individual can be transformed in the experience of mortality in such a way that the *measure for the capacity of com-passion* is disclosed as an existential possibility. As a force that has become operative, this measure—and this is our thesis—could develop his *ethos* in the virtues of sympathy, acknowledgment, and neighborly love to such an extent that he could participate sympathetically in the fate of others.

Let it be mentioned explicitly at this point that we are not concerned, in what follows, with presenting the history and the problems of theories of compassion; nor do we propose to analyze the different structure of meaning on the part of the phenomenon of sympathy as contrasted with the phenomena of justice, love, and neighborly love. Our question is directed towards the *genesis* of virtues in our life-world. Here, particularly in the first of the following phenomenological descriptions, the central problem is how

the disclosure of the capacity for com-passion as a healing force could provide a measure.

For us, the capacity for com-passion belongs to the integral moments within the existential constitution of being-there, which, understood phenomenologically, is the phenomenon that reveals itself of its own accord, even if it is often hidden. Thus, the possibility of the capacity for com-passion appertains to each person and distinguishes the human being as a human being in this unfeeling universe. This is not belied by the fact that it is mostly not revealed in individual and social life. Because it belongs to the determination of man's Being, phenomenological philosophy has the task of revealing it as well as of describing the path of transformation on which it is disclosed and where it becomes operative. This is not equivalent to a teleological presentation of the realization of a potentiality.

How can the capacity for com-passion and its efficacy as an ethical force be characterized in greater detail in advance? Already we have to pay attention to the fact that the capacity for com-passion, as a phenomenon belonging to the Being of man, signifies an ability to share the suffering of others. It must not be equated with having compassion merely in the sense of changing mental states that can be described by psychology.[2]

If, however, the capacity for com-passion belongs to the constitution of Being of our existence and is precisely *not* operative for the most part in our daily life of indifference, the question arises as to how it can be revealed. It could take place on a path of transformation on which the person following it becomes aware of the limitation and transience of human Being in an attuned and intuitively rational way. This experience, which goes beyond the mode of Being of our everyday attunement, that is, indifference, makes it possible for the capacity for com-passion to be revealed and to become operative as a healing force, though not in a speculative and metaphysical way as in Schopenhauer's attempt to ground the principle of life in universal suffering.

For the one who passes through the path of transformation, the disclosure of the mode of Being of the capacity

for com-passion happens *at one* with the experience of the other as *other,* more precisely as the other of *myself,* that is to say: as the person whose Being constitutes a value in itself and who is given over to the same finitude as I am. For as long as the force of the capacity for com-passion remains operative in being-there, a person dwells in this transformed relation to the other and to all others, or to a communal group. He has shared, and shares, inasfar as it is possible for him as a singular existence, in the weal and woe and the pain of others. This phenomenologically verifiable circumstance allows us to designate that operative healing force terminologically as the "capacity for compassion."

This sharing in the fate of others in the light of the now operative force of the capacity for com-passion can be further developed until it reaches the point where it is consolidated in forms that are given a priori as forms of interhuman relations and which have traditionally been defined as *virtues,* for example, acknowledgment, compassion, and neighborly love. Only the force of the capacity for com-passion that has become operative enables these virtues to attain an intensity that distinguishes them essentially from all their configurations in the "mode of Being of indifference."

III

The phenomenological descriptions of an ethics can best be evaluated as such by presenting two examples. Admittedly, these can only prepare the exposition of a non-metaphysical ethics concerning one's fellow-man and of a social ethics. As the first example of a description of *ethos,* we take a possibility of human comportment that allows man to experience one side of his Being, the one that is comprised by his *mortality.* We should like to show how an attunement, namely, that of "horror," [*Entsetzen*] can bring him before the fact of his mortality. Horror, and the fright accompanying it, can dis-place him from all his habits and set opinions, and can set him off on a path on which any

indifference is dissolved and destroyed. The guide on this path is not rationality but an ever-increasing emotion accompanied by a pre-predicative "understanding" that does not proceed by discursive inference though it still belongs to reason. The dissolution of indifference on this path is such that one learns to experience one's fellow-man, out of the capacity for com-passion, not merely as another one present to hand but as the "neighbor." This is the theme of the first of the following studies.

Not only our mortality, however, but also our *sociality* belongs to the configurations that make up the Being of man. The second study shows how also here—particularly today in the face of the possibility of total extinction—the attunement of horror can not only overcome indifference, as well as how other emotions can show the way to a "commitment" to the community, to an appropriation of social virtue whose source is likewise the capacity for com-passion. To be sure, in a state based on law and freedom our rationality must also be a determining factor.

The three subsequent investigations deal with our *life-world*. This is so permeated by scientific and technical "idealizations" that the real relations men bear to it can only be experienced in a concealed form. One does usually not perceive the "richness" which lies in the fact that man is able to exist in many different life-worlds "simultaneously" and "in succession," nor does one notice how the ethical, as capacity for com-passion, "colors" the various life-worlds. Both phenomena, the fact that we do not live in "one" world but in a plurality of worlds, and the power of the ethical were not hitherto the thematic object of the more recent discussions of the life-world.