

BEFORE THE VOICE OF REASON

*Echoes of Responsibility in
Merleau-Ponty's Ecology and Levinas's Ethics*

DAVID MICHAEL KLEINBERG-LEVIN

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Before the Voice of Reason

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Echoes of Responsibility

in Merleau-Ponty's Ecology and Levinas's Ethics



David Michael Kleinberg-Levin

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Dedicated to Ev

*From the child of joy, a song,
and friendship borne in the echoes*

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"The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth."

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

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"[T]he voice of reason . . . speaks equally in each and maintains the same language for all. The voice of reason, Kant says, . . . speaks to each without equivocation, and it gives access to scientific cognition. But it is essentially for giving orders and prescribing."

—Jacques Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone
Recently Adopted in Philosophy"

"The unity of reason is still treated as repression, not as the source and ground of the diversity of its voices."

—Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*

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Before the Voice of Reason

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Introduction



§1 A Human Voice

I would like to open this Introduction with some lines of verse from Wallace Stevens, a poet whose works I have lived with and learned from for many years. In a poem titled “Chocorua to Its Neighbour”, we are given this:

To say more than human things with human voice,
That cannot be; to say human things with more
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
Of human things, that is acutest speech.¹

This stanza, presumably the poet’s homage to Hölderlin, recalls, in its echoes, the earlier poet’s simple yet strangely provocative and unsettling words, appearing in an early version of his “Hyperion”: “Permit me”, he writes, “to speak humanly.”² And perhaps, Stevens also had in mind Hölderlin’s no less challenging evocation of the “voice that makes us human”, a line from “At the Source of the Donau”, that likewise compels us to question the humanity of our own voice.³ These humbling references to the human voice have been immeasurably significant sources of inspiration guiding my writing of this book. The humanity of the voice is, in fact, the very subject to which I want here to give some thought: the morality and politics of the voice and its speaking. One might say that it is what is at stake here. Whether or not I have been able to serve the wisdom that the poets’ words suggest I must leave to the judgement of others. But the attentiveness that these two poets’ invocations of the voice demand is arduous: not only to speak of human things, things that matter, things worthy of being bespoken, but also to speak of them with a human voice—a voice, I shall say, that comes from the heart, a voice exposed, audibly vulnerable, without dissimulation, without the conceits of egoism, without the arrogance of knowledge, a voice that expresses one’s openness to learning. A voice for which ethical life urgently calls. But that may well seem to be an almost impossible

voice! I concede that this very understanding—its resignation before the almost impossible—can serve as a defense, masking sincerity and feigning vulnerability. Philosophical thought, and the writing of it, have their own distinctive ways of subverting this voice, betraying it even when that effect may be least expected. In the end, we can be assured of nothing. I think it worth desiring, nevertheless, that there be here no easy settlement of any ethical claims.⁴

In *Language and Death*, Giorgio Agamben argues that “the voice is the originary ethical dimension” and that “to think the voice is therefore necessarily the supreme task of philosophy.”⁵ However, he says, the voice is “that which has always already withdrawn [*già sempre scinde*] from every experience of language.” And although philosophy is “a dialogue between man—the mortal who speaks—and his voice”, in the long history of metaphysics, “the taking-place of language (the fact that language is) gets to be forgotten in favour of what is said in the moment of discourse”. Consequently, “this taking-place (the voice) is thought only as the ground of the said, so that the voice itself never comes, as such, into thought.” I do not want to continue this repression of the human voice—of what Levinas, after Kierkegaard, will call “Saying”. Nor, in fact, do I want to consent to the silence into which the voices of nature have been for too long abandoned by a philosophy deaf to their ways of communicating. Each thing in nature has a voice, an expressiveness, indicating something about the world that would otherwise remain concealed.

What is a “human” voice? What is involved in speaking “humanly”? In *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, Levinas argues that “the most extraordinary thing that Heidegger brings [us] is a new *sonority* of the verb ‘to be’: precisely its *verbal* sonority.”⁶ Levinas is, as this remark reveals, keenly aware of the implications of this “new sonority” for philosophical reflection on ethical life—but, as I will argue, he is no less conscious of the ethical significance of the voice—the voice called upon to speak, as the poet has expressed it, “humanly”. But what does this adverb mean? If “humanity” is always an unapproachable ideality, if it is always an achievement still to come, how could there be any final, conclusive meaning for this adverb? How could we—anyone, including philosophers—possibly, without moral offense, assume that we know this voice?

Presuming to speak for all and for all times, is there not a certain inevitable temptation to arrogance in the philosophical voice? The search for a voice—a more human voice—must be internal to the activity of philosophical thought. Thus, if it is distinctive of modernity that it throws us into an unsettling time, and if philosophical thinking is a useless passion unless it can be responsive to its own time, then it must confront the unsettling of its own identity—and questions about the character of its voice, its ways of expressing itself.

In *the Infinite Conversation*, Maurice Blanchot asks a question that would always have been Levinas’s question as well:

How might one speak in such a way that speaking is essentially plural? How may one affirm the search for a mode of plural speaking no longer founded on equality and inequality, hierarchy and subordination, or reciprocal mutuality, but rather on dissymmetry and irreversibility [. . .]?⁷

For both Blanchot and Levinas, these are questions of morality that compelled them to think critically about the voice—about its responsive origination, its gathering of tonalities, its echoes, its ways of saying, its indebtedness, its generosity, its hospitality.

Concerned, above all, to stake out the difference—a difference constitutive of essence—that separates the human animal from the other, lower animals, but also to maintain the essential difference, legacy of Platonism, between the sensible and the intelligible, Aristotle removes speech, human language, from the voice, reducing voice to mere sound. In the power of speech, he recognizes, above all, its role in establishing shared values and ideals. The “telos” of speech is the communication of right and wrong, the useful and the harmful, the just and the unjust. Speech thus forms and informs the very fabric of ethical and political life. Indeed, for Aristotle, speech is the very essence of the political. His conception of speech accordingly excludes the voice, which he reductively identifies with our animal nature:

Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and for the purpose of making man a political animal she has endowed him alone among the animals with the power of reasoned speech. Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by animals also and used by them to express pleasure and pain; for the natural powers of some animals do indeed enable them both to feel pleasure and pain and to communicate these to each other. Speech, on the other hand, serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is right and what is wrong. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust. And it is the *sharing of a common view* in these matters that makes a household or a city.⁸

And yet, as Aristotle well knows, rhetoric is an art that disciplines the voice, finding advantage in its freedom, its capacity for modulations in tone, accent, rhythm, pitch. But, of course, the other animals have no freedom in the use of their voices: nature denies them the freedom that sociality alone can bestow, as it receives human beings into the community of a shared language. But if only human beings can enjoy the gift of speech, must there not also be, then, a distinctly, essentially human voice? A voice—or voices—one voice or many voices, but in any event, something uniquely human?

“Is there”, Agamben asks, “a human voice, a voice that is the voice of man as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray is the voice of the donkey?

And if it exists, is this voice language?"⁹ Things have, and make, sounds; and some things make recognizably distinctive sounds. Animals make sounds, but they also have voices—voices, however, incapable of speech. We human beings can of course make, with our voices, an impressive range of sounds; we also have identifiable voices, and, in spite of the singularity of our voices, our voices, similar enough to an ideal norm, are capable of becoming speech.¹⁰ The cricket, the donkey, the songbird: each has its distinctive voice; but it is as if these creatures have been punished, condemned to repeat the voice of their species: always the same sequence of sounds, a predetermined programme elicited by their present situation without the mediation of consciousness. Agamben's point is that, having denied the existence of a human voice, Aristotle would seem to be unsettling his definition of the human being as the animal possessing language. For what would language be, what would speech be, without a voice? I cannot imagine Aristotle believing what many today think, namely: that there are only individual voices with nothing—no essence at all—in common. But even if we think the deconstruction of essentialism to be right, must we renounce the very thought of a voice speaking "humanly"? Or capable of speaking *more* humanly? Beyond challenging Aristotle, Agamben is of course also questioning, at the same time, the metaphysical assumption that we should think of the "human voice" in terms of an essence: a voice whose sonorous possibilities would be completely predetermined by biology, for example, or indeed dictated by any *a priori* conceptual legislation. Whatever else we might want to say about the human voice, we must, at the very least, subtract it from all absolute determinisms, whether empirical or transcendental. The human voice is nothing, if not, as such, a manifestation of freedom, a gift of nature that we have been entrusted to respect and preserve with all the political wisdom we can muster.

In "A King Is Listening", one of many marvelous short stories by Italo Calvino, there is a thought-provoking meditation on the voice, asserting that the human voice is always in truth a singularity, but recognizing that this singularity may be deeply buried beneath, or within, the constructed, or "artificial" voice we have in common:

Buried deeply within you, your true voice perhaps exists: the song that does not know how to leave your closed throat, your lips dry and tight. Or else your voice wanders in dispersion around the city, its timbre and tones disseminated amidst all the din. What no-one knows you are, or have been, or would be capable of being—this would reveal itself in that voice.¹¹

How would this "true voice" of individuality be heard? Is there anything signifying the ethical in this voice? Why is it deeply buried? Why does it *need* to be buried—or repressed?

What is it for a voice *to be* a “human” voice? What is required of speaking, of the voice, for them *to be* speaking “humanly”? These questions are formulated in a way that seems to ontologize or essentialize the voice. I would prefer to think of the human voice as always becoming, as being, in its being, always unsettled, since, in its coming into being, its remaining in being, and even in its departure from being, the human voice is always engaged in a dialogical relationship with other voices. Echoing Theodor Adorno’s beautifully precise characterization, I want to think of this voice as “the voice of human beings among whom all barriers have fallen”.¹² Finding such a voice, attaining such a voice, requires, I believe, that we get in touch with our body’s felt sense of the moral Idea that, in his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant described as “the humanity in our person”.¹³ Which means that the voice of the I is always answerable to a voice that comes from a time, a dimension of human existence, that can never be mastered, possessed, made entirely one’s own.¹⁴ Perhaps these thoughts were on Kant’s mind when, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he remarked that the question of the origin of the human voice—the origin of its ability to enter into a world of language—will inevitably draw us into a “veritable abyss”, where human Reason risks madness.¹⁵ Unfortunately, instead of giving thought to the ethical significance of this abyss and exposing his thinking of Reason to its consequent deconstruction, Kant, like Aristotle before him, takes the danger to require the exclusion of the voice from the realm of philosophical contemplation.

This proto-ethical dispossession of the voice, its heteronomy, its heteroaffection, must not be confused, however, with the totally different dispossession of the voice that has taken place in the contemporary phase of capitalism. In his essay on Samuel Beckett’s “Endgame”, Adorno observes that “the individual is revealed [there] to be a historical category, both the outcome of the capitalist process of alienation and a defiant protest against it.”¹⁶ Thus, he argues, “what is left of the subject is its most abstract characteristic: merely existing [*da zu sein*] and thereby already committing an outrage.” Consequently, the characters that Beckett shows us in his plays are “empty *personae*, truly mere masks through whom sound merely passes”:¹⁷ they have been robbed of their own voices, voices turned into mere ventriloquisms, voices consumed in the programmed mimesis of alienated, meaningless desire. “What is left of spirit, which originated in mimesis, is pitiful imitation [. . .].”¹⁸ What is left of the voice is something uncanny, no longer recognizably human, yet also not reduced to “animality”: the merest chatter, utterly bereft, finally emptied of all possible meaning.

In the dialogue between the animals and Zarathustra, Nietzsche brings us to the very extremity of the problematic nature of the human voice.¹⁹ In the chapter on “The Convalescent”, Zarathustra, “roaring in a terrible voice”, a voice that frightens all the animals, summons what he names his “abysmal thought”. The exertion, and perhaps that thought itself, overwhelm him and

he falls to the ground, unconscious for seven days, whilst the animals attend him. Upon awakening, he says to them, "O my animals, [. . .] chatter on like this and let me listen. It is so refreshing for me to hear your chattering: where there is chattering, there the world lies before me like a garden. How lovely it is that there are words and sounds! Are not words and sounds rainbows and illusive bridges between things which are eternally apart?" "For me," he says, continuing the thought, "there is no outside-myself. But all sounds make us forget this; how lovely it is that we forget. Have not names and sounds been given to things that man might find things refreshing? Speaking is a beautiful folly: with that, man dances over all things. How lovely is all talking, and all the deception of sounds! With sounds our love dances on many-hued rainbows." The animals respond to this speech by evoking an eternity of cosmic cycles, the endless "wheel of being". Zarathustra replies, lightly mocking them: "O you buffoons and barrel-organs!" And, in what I take to be merely a semblance of irritation, he accuses them of having turned the episode of his lapse into unconsciousness, and the symbolically charged episode that followed his awakening, into a "ditty": "And you, have you already made a hurdy-gurdy song of this?" The animals, however, realizing that Zarathustra is still suffering and in need of convalescence, respond simply by counseling him to go to an environment that is healing:

Go out to the roses and bees and dove-cots. But especially to the songbirds, that you may learn from them how to sing! Singing is for the convalescent; the healthy can speak. And when the healthy man wants songs, he wants songs that are different from those needed by the convalescent.

And Zarathustra now, as I imagine him, considerably more irritated, but still master of his temper and still capable of finding amusement in their semblance of divine wisdom, repeats his tempered admonishment:

O you buffoons and barrel-organs, be silent! [. . .] How well you know what comfort I invented for myself in seven days! That I must sing again, this comfort and convalescence I invented for myself. Must you immediately turn this too into a hurdy-gurdy song?

To this the animals reply:

Do not speak on! [. . .] Rather, O convalescent, fashion yourself a lyre first, a new lyre! For behold, Zarathustra, new lyres are needed for your new songs. Sing and overflow, O Zarathustra; cure your soul with new songs that you may bear your great destiny, which has never yet been any man's destiny [. . .].

Now, this text is exceedingly rich, but I will restrict my commentary to just a few thoughts, matters distinctly pertinent to the argument at stake in this present book. But first, some of Heidegger's commentary:

Zarathustra agrees with his animals. With their injunction to sing, the animals are telling him of that consolation he invented for himself during those seven days. Once again, however, he warns against turning the injunction to sing into a call for tunes on the same old lyre.²⁰

"What," Heidegger asks, "is being thought here?" "This", he says:

that the thought most difficult to bear, as the convalescent's conquering thought, must first of all be sung; that such singing, which is to say, the poetizing of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, must itself become the convalescence; but also that such singing must be singular, that it dare not become a popular tune.

The teaching that Heidegger wants most of all, it seems, to draw from this story is that "poetry, if it is to fulfill its task, can never be a matter for barrel-organs and ready-made lyres. The lyre, viewed now as an instrument for the new singing and saying, has still to be created." What I would like here to stress is that, as Heidegger says—but without fully recognizing the implications: such singing or poetizing "must itself become the convalescence." In other words, the achievement of poetizing will bring about, will constitute, the achievement of convalescence: the two moments are constitutively one and the same, for poetizing is possible only to the extent that the metaphysical diremptions—above all the opposition that the intelligible maintains against the sensuous—have all been radically deconstructed. Only in this way will Zarathustra be able to sing. Only then will he experience the healing spirit in his song.

Heidegger notes that, upon hearing the animals' words, Zarathustra "lay still" in order to "commune with his soul". The great thought that he now bears—the thought of the eternal recurrence of the same, comes to him "in its full import". "He now knows," says Heidegger, "that the greatest and the smallest cohere and recur, so that even the greatest teaching, the ring of rings, itself must become a ditty for barrel-organs, the latter always accompanying its true proclamation."²¹ But Heidegger, for one, will never be comfortable with talking animals; nor with the authentically human voice reduced to a hurdy-gurdy song. The human voice—the voice that will speak most humanly, is destined for fulfillment, he maintains, in the "elevated" language of poetry and the "sobriety" of thought.

My interpretation of "The Convalescent" does not greatly differ from Heidegger's; but, whereas he wants to concentrate on the metaphysical question of the eternal return, "die ewige Wiederkehr", I wish to concentrate instead

on ethically charged questions concerning the relation between philosophical thought and its investment in language. I have my own philosophical obsessions! I want to draw out of the quoted passages four distinct, yet intricately interrelated threads of thought, all of them bearing on that singularly fateful relation. For our purposes, Zarathustra will here represent the figure of the philosopher, the one whose relation to language—to truth, sincerity, voice, meaning, song and the abyssal, is contested and put to the test. Tested, in fact, by animals who can talk, who thereby transgress the very boundary between themselves and the human that, for Heidegger, it is of the greatest importance—even urgency—for philosophical thought to maintain.

[1] The animals in the textual passages I have cited have been provocations to question the “status”, or say the “legitimacy” and “authority” of what Zarathustra has to say. Zarathustra hears mockery in the animals’ discourse. Though he accuses them of trivializing, turning his greatest thought into a hurdy-gurdy song, the voicing of this accusation is, ironically, more than sufficient to give some credibility to that possibility. Like a snake, the accusation, though directed at the animals, turns around to bite him. Do Zarathustra’s deepest reflections amount to nothing but a ditty played on a barrel-organ? Do his words have any substance, any truth to tell? Are his words an indulgence in idle chatter? This in turn raises another constellation of questions, for whether or not his speech is idle chatter is in part a question of the truth-content and, at least in part, a question of sincerity. Can idle chatter be true? Is chatter to be defined by its content—and if so, does its truth matter? Or is it to be defined by more subjective and intersubjective factors—by intention and attitude, say, making it, as it were, a distinctive language-game? How seriously does Zarathustra mean what he says? Does he really mean what he is saying? Because, if he does mean what he says, if he is in that sense serious, then maybe it should not be treated as a idle chatter—or as a mere ditty. But in that case, should what is being said be judged by its truth or its reason? Then is what he is saying—the claim, namely, about the eternal return of the same—just foolish? Or is it perhaps simple-minded, reducing the complex, or the incomprehensible, to something all too simple to understand that way? Would we ourselves be foolish if we repudiated “chatter”? What is wrong with “chatter”? Is it necessarily meaningless or empty? Could “chatter”, toying with this thought, toying with that, even be, as the early German Romantics thought, the beginning of philosophical thinking—or, at the very least, one of its sources?

Can “serious philosophical thought” always be distinguished from “idle chatter”? In Novalis’s “Monologue”, which I will quote at some length, this question is understood to represent a serious challenge to the seemingly unbreachable disciplinary walls that philosophical thought has constructed around itself:

There is really something very foolish about speaking and writing. . . . One can only marvel at the ridiculous mistake that people make when they think—that they speak for the sake of things. The particular quality of language, the fact that it is concerned only with itself, is known to no one. Language is such a marvelous and fruitful secret—because when someone speaks merely for the sake of speaking, he utters the most splendid, most original truths. But if he wants to speak of something definite, capricious language makes him say the most ridiculous and confused things. This is also the cause of the hatred that so many serious people feel toward language. They notice its mischief, but not the fact that the chattering they scorn is the infinitely serious aspect of language.

Continuing this argument for the virtues of chatter, Novalis contends that words, like mathematical formulae, “constitute a world of their own”:

[These formulae] play only with themselves, express nothing but their own marvelous nature, and just for this reason they are so expressive—just for this reason the strange play of relations between things is mirrored in them. Only through their freedom are they elements of nature and only in their free movements does the world soul manifest itself in them and make them a sensitive measure and ground plan of things.²²

Thus he encourages an experience with language, and with the voicing of thought, that releases language from the suffocating rule of a severe rationality that would tolerate, if it could have its way, no free play, no free association of words, no voice unwilling to subordinate its tone, its melody and measure to the demands of the voice of Reason.

Reflecting on Kierkegaard and Heidegger, two philosophers who, in different ways, compel us, their readers, to question our reliance on conventional notions of sense and nonsense, Wittgenstein once observed:

Everything that we feel like saying [here] can, a priori, only be nonsense. Nevertheless, we do run up against the limits of language. This “running up against” Kierkegaard also recognized and even designated in a quite similar way (as running up against Paradox). This running up against the limits of language is Ethics.

“Yet,” he confided, “the tendency represented by the running up against *points to something*.”²³ Perhaps this is why he once wrote a note saying, “Never stay up on the barren heights of cleverness, but come down into the green valleys of silliness [*Dummheit*]!”²⁴ In another note, he pursues this point, suggesting that, “For a philosopher, there is more grass growing down in the valleys

of silliness than up on the barren heights of cleverness."²⁵ One could take these remarks to mean that, in the valleys of silliness, there is much for the philosopher to do, cutting through the silliness and bringing the inhabitants of those valleys to their senses. But one could also take these remarks to suggest that there is much to learn and much to provoke thought precisely in such silliness. I think it crucial to realize, however, that these two readings are not necessarily incompatible. If it is true that philosophical thought is needed to "correct" sound sense that has somehow gone astray, it is no less true that philosophical thought will find, precisely there where it must go to rescue "common sense", great provocations, great challenges, new angles and perspectives from which to continue its adventure. Wittgenstein himself must have thought so, for he also remarks, in another note, that, "Our greatest stupidities may [also] be very wise."²⁶ He believes not only that these wise stupidities show themselves in language, but also that it is what language permits, or even encourages us to say—what language makes it possible to say—which tempts us to wander into nonsense. Thus, for him, the philosopher is inevitably compelled to struggle with language: struggle to overcome its temptations to nonsense—but struggle, also, to say what needs to be said in the best possible way. But Wittgenstein read his Nietzsche well, and he learned, as had Nietzsche before him, that it will often be in what appears to be nonsense that the limits of language—limits that are also its conditions of possibility—are encountered, offering fertile ground for the transformation of all-too-settled experience. Zarathustra climbs to the heights; but precisely there, he learns that he cannot avoid the return to the chattering of the valley, the silliness, the hurdy-gurdy song.

Nietzsche's trope of the barrel-organ returns us to the question of sincerity, to the extent that the image conjures up a certain blustering pomposity, a deceitful self-inflation. Sincerity and truth are intertwining here and cannot be disentangled. What if the desire for sincerity—for speaking humanly—can find no secure measure in the essence? What if the aporetic logic of sincerity—being true to oneself—were to turn it into its opposite? If sincerity means—requires—being true to one's word, hence being true to oneself, such that word and self correspond; if it requires the coincidence of the self with itself, or in other words, an essentialism of identity, then it is not only that sincerity is impossible—because temporality is the condition of all consciousness, and because all our knowledge, both of ourselves and of our world, is finite, and susceptible therefore to error; but also that the claim is rendered deceptive, mere pretence, necessarily insincere, for it claims sincerity on the ground of an impossible coincidence or correspondence. Thus, *a fortiori*, the only way to sincerity would pass through insincerity. According to Kant, one should not count on hearing the truth when one hears a "tone of truthfulness" in the voice.²⁷ The animals' exchange with Zarathustra supplements this sobering skepticism: How can the philosopher claim to speak with conviction—how can the voice communicate

this conviction? Resuming, in *A Pitch of Philosophy*, certain Nietzschean contestations that Wittgenstein set in motion, Stanley Cavell raises his own questions in this regard, calling attention to the tone or pitch of the philosophical voice, in large measure a question of its “speaking humanly”:

Could I speak philosophically and mean every word I said? . . . And does it mean that I have—before I speak—to ask myself whether I am sincere in my words, whether I want all their consequences, put to no matter what scrutiny? Who would say anything under such conditions?²⁸

The animals, Zarathustra’s interlocutors, are, in an uncanny sense, voices of conscience, voices of sobriety, tolerating no delusions, no easy victories. Misrepresented by philosophical thought, the animals cannot resist finding ways to question its claims—and its voice. Philosophy itself—the question of its boundaries, its ways of marking and remarking the difference between it and, on the one hand, science (domain of objective truth) and, on the other hand, the art of fiction (domain of subjective truth)—is ultimately at stake: one might even dare to say it is at risk. If the borders cannot be defended, if they become porous, or fissured, like the Great Wall of China in Kafka’s story, then the old confidence, our assuring ourselves that philosophical discourse is not a ditty, not a hurdy-gurdy song—not even resembling such a form, is disturbed, and thought must renounce the need for settled accounts, absolute differences, even revising its conception, its theory, of truth. More scandalous still, thought must allow for the questioning of its meaningfulness: not merely its significance, but, more essentially, its very sense: whether or not it even makes sense. But, of course, thought could make perfect sense, could, that is, be intelligible—and yet be utterly trite, utterly pointless, “a waste of breath”, as we sometimes are stirred to say. Banality is perhaps just another form of madness.

Compelling Zarathustra to defend the difference between his “thought” and the hurdy-gurdy tunes of the barrel-organ, the animals also compel us—not only to question the philosophical voice with regard to the seriousness and sincerity of its conviction, but eventually to confront the exclusion of the imagination from the interior of philosophical discourse. Is philosophical thought free from the operations of imagination? Is it possible without the art—the artifice—of the imagination? Can there be knowledge of the world without the imagination? Can there be truth without fiction? Kant conceded a role for the imagination in the production of empirical knowledge; and he even, in his late essays in the philosophy of history, believed there could be intimations of providential truth in the conjectural reconstruction of history by a power of imagination—although he required that the imagination agree to the company of Reason. Even Kant, whose argument for truth-telling verges on a fanatical madness, recognized the usefulness of the imagination

in philosophical thought: an employment distinct from its schematizing role in the acquisition of empirical knowledge, but equally distinct from its role in aesthetic judgement.

Can we always say, or anyway easily say, where the essential difference lies between the philosophical and the fictional—or, for that matter, between the meaningful and the meaningless? Can we isolate the intelligible from the sensible? Must we always be able to answer—I mean resolve, settle—all these questions once and for all? Is it not, after all, important that philosophical discourse maintain its openness to contestation? If such thought requires an exercising of the imagination, then thought must acknowledge, must avow its employment of conjectures, speculations, hypotheses, stories, myths, metaphors, and an assortment of other tropes and tricks. And must it prove its worth—prove that it is not a mere nursery-rhyme, or a mere ditty? Must it demonstrate its truth-value, its seriousness of purpose, its conviction, justifying its sobriety? If so, how? Could such demonstration be truthful, worthy of trust, without acknowledging that which, in showing itself, shows its incomprehensibility? Can thought ever hope to “come to terms” with the incomprehensible—or with the incomprehensibility of the incomprehensible? These questions take us to the verge of the abyssal—there, precisely there, where thought imagines its return to itself.

To be worthy of its name, philosophical thought must never cease to ask itself about its sincerity, about its humanity, its commitment to truth, its avoidance of idle chatter, its defense of boundaries, its rhetorical investments, its tone of voice. And it must never cease to question the adequacy of its responsiveness to the needs of its time, questioning its capacity to “speak humanly”, questioning its arrogation of the right to speak for everyone.

[2] A second thread that intrigues me is the question of convalescence. To identify the achievement of song with the moment of convalescence, as Zarathustra’s animal companions suggest, is, in effect, to deconstruct the dualisms that have ruled the history of metaphysics; it is to celebrate, as the possibility of a utopian moment, an intimation, indeed, of redemption, the reconciliation of the sensuous and the intelligible, the sensible and the conceptual, the rational and the corporeal. (I take Freud’s insistence on “free association” to be based on a certain recognition of the fact that these diremptions have actually become manifest in numerous pathological symptoms: “free association”, bringing together, hence accepting, what repression has kept apart, would thus answer the need for a procedure to cure the psychopathology for which the dualisms in our cultural life are responsible.)

What does it take to heal the fateful wound of mortality and transmute all the suffering that afflicts us into forms of moral strength? The animals are telling Zarathustra that there is healing power in singing the truth, in making it sing; and that is because the singing of truth roots it in the earth, and because singing involves the harmony of mind and body, reason and feeling, sense

and sensibility—the overcoming or sublimation of our culturally constructed dualisms. But whilst the earth nourishes & nurses, it also threatens the truth with the abyssal withdrawal of its grounding. Poetic language is rooted in an earth, a materiality it must struggle to claim: it can take nothing for granted. What does this mean for the voicing of philosophical thought? What does the voice need to learn to become more “human”, more responsive to the suffering that summons it? Why is there a prevailing sense that the power of language—and in particular, the power of the philosophical voice—to alleviate suffering, to edify and redeem, has been lost? What are Zarathustra’s animals trying to tell us?

[3] A third thread in the quoted passages concerns the question of the origin of language in song. What is the significance of the fact that Zarathustra expresses his deepest thought in the form of a song? Many have said that the origin of language is song—or that when the philosopher’s saying makes a strong connection with its origin in language, then it may become, by grace of that connection, having received its inaugural, inceptive, original richness, an original song. To convey the essence of the spoken language, Hölderlin calls the word “a flower of the mouth”. The name he gives is a poetic image for poetizing speech. In this poetic figure, he sees the word in the brief moment of its flowering. But if words are flowers, then their *origin* is the elemental earth, ground of being. And the voice that bears them is not merely the “expression” of subjective meanings, for this understanding of language penetrates the phenomenon so deeply that it even disturbs our investment in the boundaries that install the speaking subject in the world. The voice, drawing its tonality, strength, and measure from its rootedness in the earth, is what takes place in a dimension that hovers *between* world and earth. It is thus in language that, according to Heidegger, the strife between earth and world takes place most intensely, most consequentially. Moreover, it then becomes necessary for philosophical thought to avow its grounding, its rootedness, not only in the realm of the living, on and above the earth, but also in the realm of the dead, the realm beneath the earth. For there can be becoming, can be life, only if there is passing away: the eternal requires a time in transience, a passage through the apparitional, the ephemeral. If thought is grounded only in the earth, the strife, the rift deprives it of an unshakable ground, the *presence* of an origin. The language of thought would thus be rooted in an origin that cannot be made present. Indeed, the earth threatens to make thought absolutely abyssal. Simply because of that threat alone, the threat as such, thought is rendered already groundless, already abyssal.

So a question for the philosopher becomes this: Whether or not that suspension over the abyss enables the language of thought to attain the poetic heights of song—song understood as an opening of truth. The truth is an abyss, though, that requires the voice, the song of thought to pass through the realm of echoes, the realm of the dead. It must let itself be touched and