

***Èthos* and ek-sistence**

**Humanism as an explicitly ethical preoccupation in Heidegger's
*Letter on Humanism***

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Senne van den Berg, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works - including electronic media - have been identified and the sources clearly stated. Place: Nijmegen, date: 30-09-2020.

Èthos and ek-sistence

Humanism as an explicitly ethical preoccupation in Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*

*To stand under the claim of presence is the greatest claim made upon the human being. It is "ethics."*¹
– Martin Heidegger

Senne van den Berg

Abstract: Martin Heidegger's 1947 *Letter on Humanism* takes up a significant place in the oeuvre of the German philosopher. This important text is often discussed for two topics: Heidegger's discussion of humanism, and his discussion of ethics as 'abode.' However, these two topics are being discussed isolated from each other, which obscures the inherent relation there is between the two for Heidegger. This paper will show that Heidegger's discussion of humanism in the *Letter* is decisively shaped by his ethical preoccupations.

I. Heidegger, humanism and ethics

Martin Heidegger's 1947² *Letter on Humanism* takes up a significant place in the oeuvre of the German philosopher. Through this text, Heidegger steps into (textual) publicity for the first time after World War II. This first public post-war text is a piece of occasional writing, and in his afterword to the Dutch translation of the *Letter*, Chris Bremmers mentions several reasons why this is the case.³ Obviously, the *Letter* is an occasional piece because it was written in response to

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 217.

² Written in response to Jean Beaufret in late 1946, edited and published together with *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit [Plato's Doctrine of Truth]* in 1947.

³ Chris Bremmers, "Nawoord," in Martin Heidegger, *Over het humanisme*, ed. and trans. Chris Bremmers (Budel: Damon, 2005), 130.

a letter by French *lycée* teacher Jean Beaufret. Beaufret had met with Heidegger in Todtnauberg in September 1946 and had been corresponding with him since November 1945.⁴ In addition to this historical context, it is the philosophical context which makes the *Letter* an occasional text – and this philosophical context is two-sided. On the one hand, Heidegger uses the questions posed by Beaufret in his letter to publicly expand on the development of his own thought in relation to *Being and Time*, which had been published twenty years earlier, for in the meantime Heidegger had written but not published much.⁵ An elaborate response to Beaufret's questions offered Heidegger the possibility of shining a light on the past twenty years: the *Letter* is often a central text in the discussion of Heidegger's so-called 'Kehre.' On the other hand, there is also a more apologetic nature to the *Letter*. Instigated by one of Beaufret's questions, Heidegger seizes the opportunity of discussing the notion of humanism to clarify his own project, and to distinguish it clearly from other (post-war) philosophical projects and '-isms' with which Heidegger's thought was being associated in one way or another. Most prominent here are existentialism, irrationalism, atheism and nihilism.⁶ Existentialism's most public advocate, Jean-Paul Sartre, had just declared existentialism to be a humanism, and Beaufret's questions offered Heidegger the chance to refute the identification between his thought and (French) existentialism.⁷ By taking up and reviewing the main claims from *Being and Time*, Heidegger wants to move away from the subjectivistic tendency present in Sartre's existentialism.⁸ Sartre's humanist proclamation thus served Heidegger quite well, be it as a counterpoint.

In the *Letter*, Heidegger chooses to take up two of Beaufret's questions. These concern (restoring) the meaning of the word 'humanism,' and the possibility of an ethics in relation to (Heidegger's) ontology. In the debates on 'Heidegger and humanism,' the *Letter on Humanism* obviously takes up a central part of the stage. However, in these discussions, Heidegger's engagement with humanism is discussed without explicitly relating it to his engagement with ethics in that same text. At first sight, this 'isolated' discussion of humanism is not that

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Even though Heidegger published rarely and, except for *Kant and the problem of Metaphysics* (1929), only relatively small texts in the years between *Being and Time* and the *Letter on Humanism*, he wrote and developed many texts which were not published during that time. Many of those texts, being e.g. classes Heidegger had taught, found their way into publicity after the war and through the *Gesamtausgabe*. Cf. Chris Bremmers, "Nawoord."

⁶ Bremmers, "Nawoord," 130.

⁷ Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, ed. John Kulka, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁸ Françoise Dastur, "The Reception and Nonreception of Heidegger in France," in *French interpretations of Heidegger: an exceptional reception*, ed. and trans. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 270-271, 278.

strange. First of all, the title, *Letter on Humanism*, of course already suggests the main theme of the text – this also ties in with the already mentioned philosophical context of the *Letter*. Second of all, Heidegger’s engagement with humanism has played a significant role in the discussion on (anti- and post-)humanism in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century – not least notably through Jacques Derrida and Peter Sloterdijk.⁹ However, these isolated discussions of humanism in the *Letter* treat humanism and ethics as if they are separate themes for Heidegger – which they are not.¹⁰

How can this inherent relation between Heidegger’s engagements with humanism and ethics in the *Letter on Humanism* be understood? Unlike the isolated discussion of the two topics suggests, Heidegger’s critique of humanism is decisively shaped by his ethical preoccupation: viewing the critique of humanism through the lens of his specific understanding of ethics deepens the understanding of Heidegger’s concern with humanism. The objective of the present text is to bring the relation between ethics and humanism in the *Letter* into focus and, through this, explicate the way in which ethical preoccupations shape Heidegger’s engagement with humanism. Omitting to acknowledge the inherent relation between humanism and ethics – and the isolated discussions of the themes precisely do this – obscures both Heidegger’s ethical preoccupations in critiquing humanism and the thematical unity of the *Letter on Humanism*.

II. Humanism in the *Letter*

“You ask: *Comment redonner un sens au mot ‘Humanisme’?* [How can we restore meaning to the word ‘humanism’?]”¹¹ Directly before Heidegger, in the *Letter on Humanism*, takes up this question by Beaufret, he states that he will be engaging with only that specific question. At first sight, this is a legitimate reason for commentators to limit their focus to Heidegger’s problematization of humanism. However, Heidegger adds, the focus on one question is not with the explicit

⁹ Cf. Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) and Peter Sloterdijk, “Rules for the Human Zoo: a response to the *Letter on Humanism*,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27 (2009): 12-28.

¹⁰ Nonetheless, this does not withstand that, given the absence of an explicit ‘ethical system,’ the presence of an ethics in Heidegger’s thought does not go uncontested. Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics,’” in *Heidegger and Practical Philosophy*, ed. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 219.

intent of discarding or ignoring the other questions.¹²

Prominent commentators on Heidegger's engagement with humanism have taken his word for granted, and only engage with Heidegger's critique of humanism while forgetting or overlooking the critique of ethics in the *Letter*: resulting in the inherent relation between humanism and ethics being overlooked and forgotten.

Already in William Richardson's monumental study *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, the inherent relation between humanism and ethics in the *Letter* is obscured. In the chapter on the *Letter*, Richardson only discusses Heidegger's critique of humanism, and leaves out Heidegger's discussion of ethics: this is symptomatic to the overlooking of the inherent relation between humanism and ethics in Heidegger's text. Richardson's choice is based on Heidegger's aforementioned decision to only discuss Beaufret's first question, the one on humanism: "Heidegger proposes to discuss only the first [question] at length, leaving the discussion itself to throw light on the other two. We follow his example, omitting (with regret) all reflections on the second question [on ethics] as not sufficiently germane to the problematic of thought, sufficiently complex in itself."¹³ Richardson justifies his omission of ethics again by claiming that it is not sufficiently akin to the main theme of his book: the problematic of thought throughout Heidegger's oeuvre. Although the separation between humanism and ethics seems to be understandable because of Beaufret's separate questions on the themes, Heidegger's own intention of dealing with (only) one question and Richardson's specific approach, it is precisely an illustration of the aforementioned reductionistic trend in discussing Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*: separating ethics from humanism.

This separation returns in later discussions of Heidegger's *Letter*. Where Richardson still – although before excluding it from his analysis – briefly mentioned the presence of a discussion of ethics in the *Letter*, Jacques Derrida, in "The Ends of Man," does not engage with Heidegger's discussion of ethics at all and only refers to Beaufret's first question. Derrida correctly points out that Heidegger's critique of humanism is a critique of anthropologism: Heidegger criticizes humanism for mis-placing the human at the centre of the ontological

¹² This is due to Heidegger's conviction that in writing, contrary to direct conversation, "thinking easily loses its flexibility [*Beweglichkeit*]" and multidimensionality [*Mehrdimensionalität*]. Cf. Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 219 and Martin Heidegger, "Brief über den Humanismus," in *Wegmarken* (GA 9), ed. F.-W. von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 315.

¹³ William J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 530-552. The second of the other two questions Richardson refers to is Beaufret's question on the adventurous element of philosophy, a question Heidegger deals with only very shortly at the end of the *Letter*.

'constellation.' However, Derrida fails to bring to mind that the concern of that critique – that of the place of the human – is also at stake in Heidegger's engagement with ethics.¹⁴ The focal point of Derrida's commentary suggests that Heidegger's approach to humanism in the *Letter* is (anti-)anthropological, for Heidegger fiercely criticizes humanism's conception of the human's essence.¹⁵

In "Rules for the Human Zoo," an address which was explicitly formulated as a response to the *Letter*, Peter Sloterdijk makes no mention of ethics in Heidegger's text. Again, the *Letter* is treated as an (anti-)anthropological document, for Sloterdijk only engages with Heidegger's discussion of Beaufret's first question.¹⁶ As for Derrida, Sloterdijk's exegetical point of focus is Heidegger's engagement with humanism and the "onto-anthropology" he opposes to classical humanism.¹⁷ However, like Richardson and Derrida, Sloterdijk treats Heidegger's critique of humanism as if it is detached from his discussion of the notion of 'èthos.' By forgetting, or at least not discerning, Heidegger's treatment of the theme of ethics, it is suggested that Heidegger limited himself to solely engaging with Beaufret's question on humanism. In all three instances, the approach to the *Letter* is determined (and limited) by this suggestion.

Gail Soffer's criticism of Heidegger's approach to the history of humanism fits into the same reductionism as the hereabove. Soffer states:

No one would deny that, as in the case of all "isms," there has been a proliferation of senses of "humanism" over history and the course of ideological debates. Yet an "ism" detached from its historical sources becomes empty, a mere slogan and polemical rallying cry. [...] Heidegger's critics have succumbed to his historical method in a crucial respect: its over-essentialism and sloganism, its reduction of highly complex, diversified historical phenomena to simplistic conceptual "essences." All too often, we find more interest in propounding a global characterization of humanism as a philosophical position and outlook – preferably in a sentence or less – than in any detailed inquiry into the historical roots and nature of humanism.¹⁸

Soffer criticizes Heidegger for presenting a too simplistic image of humanism in which he fails to acknowledge the complex history of the notion, and accuses

¹⁴ Derrida, "The Ends of Man," 118-119.

¹⁵ Not surprisingly, "The Ends of Man" was a lecture presented at a colloquium on philosophy and anthropology.

¹⁶ Sloterdijk, "Rules for the Human Zoo," 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸ Gail Soffer, "Heidegger, Humanism, and the Destruction of History," *The Review of Metaphysics* 49, no. 3 (March 1996): 551-552.

him of degenerating the term to a polemic slogan. Although Soffer's historical criticism might not be completely out of place, it is symptomatic to the (anti-)anthropological approach to the *Letter on Humanism*: in Soffer's criticism, Heidegger's critique of humanism is perceived as predominantly concerned with humanism itself. Soffer's criticism of Heidegger's characterization of humanism is therefore blind to the ethical preoccupations in the *Letter* and thus to the place of Heidegger's critique of humanism within that text. Due to the omission of Heidegger's critique of ethics, Soffer is unable to value Heidegger's 'essence-approach' to humanism and seems to be able to only judge it by historical criteria. Again, Soffer's criticism might not totally be out of place, but by engaging with Heidegger out of a different 'playing field,' the criticized essence of humanism as Heidegger presents it cannot even be correctly placed within the whole of the *Letter*.

The kinship between Heidegger's critiques of humanism and ethics in the *Letter* is overlooked and simply forgotten when the two critiques are isolated from each other. Moreover, it is overlooked that Heidegger's engagement with humanism is decisively shaped by his definition of ethics. Heidegger's approach in the *Letter* is not (anti-)anthropological, but ethical – be it through a specific understanding of ethics. To be able to retrieve what has been overlooked, we must of course return to Heidegger's *Letter* itself.

II.1 Critiquing Humanism

What shape does the critique of humanism take in the *Letter*? Heidegger starts his reply to Beaufret's question with remarking that within the question itself, there is already an intention to retain the word 'humanism' – Heidegger admits he is not sure whether retaining it is necessary at all and voices his doubts about such '-isms' supplying the "market of public opinion."¹⁹ By calling into memory that the Greeks thought without "such headings," Heidegger does not seem to care much for such designations. What does interest him, is the philosophical effect of this humanism.

Heidegger understands humanism to be the following: "[...] meditating and caring, that man be human and not inhumane, 'inhuman,' that is, outside his essence."²⁰ For Heidegger, the question then is how this human essence is

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 224. Throughout this paper, the word 'man' in the sense of 'human' will be retained merely for the sake of accurate quotations.

defined. At the heart of all traditional humanisms, which “are simply variants of the same ‘concern [...] to bring man back into his essence,’” is a “metaphysical conception of the essence of man, of human freedom, of human action.”²¹ The root of all these traditional humanisms, according to Heidegger, is Roman humanism as encountered in the Roman Republic. Gavin Rae summarises:

[...] Roman humanism arose from its encounter with the late Greeks. Humanism in the Roman context embodied the Greek spirit of *paideia*, meaning learned, philosophical scholarship and training in good conduct and manners. This ensured that the affirmation of a *culture* of reason and education became synonymous with the essence of humanity.²²

Heidegger mentions various other humanisms throughout history, that of Christianity (Scholasticism), Renaissance, and modern variants like that of Marx, but holds to the conviction that all of these humanisms are an embodiment of ‘*paideia*’ – this is precisely what Soffer’s aforementioned criticism aims at. However, through this, Heidegger aims to show that throughout history, these different versions of humanism all share a common understanding of the human’s humanity: the essence of humanity is found in reason and education.²³ In short: the human is regarded as an ‘*animal rationale*’.²⁴

In engaging with humanism, it is not so much humanism’s *concern* that Heidegger resists: “If [Heidegger] wonders whether it is necessary to retain the word ‘humanism’ at all, then not because he repudiates what he calls the ‘concern to bring man back into his essence.’ On the contrary, this much he seems to want to retain.”²⁵ Rather, it is the way in which humanity’s essence is defined in (traditional) humanism that Heidegger resists, and this objection to humanism relates to humanism’s ‘metaphysicality.’ Heidegger claims that for each traditional version of humanism there are certain truths which are presupposed to be self-evident:

However different these forms of humanism may be in purpose and in principle, in the mode and means of their respective realizations, and in the form of their teaching, they nonetheless all agree in this, that the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole. Every humanism is either grounded in a

²¹ Murray Miles, “Heidegger and the question of humanism,” *Man and World* 22 (1989): 432.

²² Gavin Rae, “Re-Thinking the Human: Heidegger, Fundamental Ontology, and Humanism,” *Human Studies* 33, no. 1 (May 2010): 28.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Miles, “Heidegger and the question of humanism,” 432.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one. Every determination of the essence of man already presupposes an interpretation of beings without asking about the truth of Being, whether knowingly or not, is metaphysical.²⁶

Heidegger argues that humanism does not only fail to ask about the truth of Being and the 'ontological difference' between beings and Being, but also does not address the relation between the essence of man and Being – a relation Heidegger was already engaged with in his '*Daseinsanalytik*' in *Being and Time*. Moreover, due to its 'metaphysicality,' humanism "impedes the question by neither recognizing nor understanding it."²⁷ Heidegger admits that the definition of the human as an '*animal rationale*' is not false per se, but argues that such a metaphysical translation of '*zöon logon echon*' will "never disclose the essential aspect of the human being:"²⁸

[...] the highest determinations of the essence of man in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of man. To that extent the thinking in *Being and Time* is against humanism. But this opposition does not mean that such thinking aligns itself against the humane and advocates the inhuman, that it promotes the inhumane and deprecates the dignity of man. Humanism is opposed because it does not set the *humanitas* of man high enough. Of course the essential worth of man does not consist in his being the substance of beings, as the "Subject" among them, so that as the tyrant of Being he may deign to release the beingness of beings into an all too loudly bruted "objectivity."²⁹

It is clear that Heidegger is not opposing the care that humanism has for bringing the human to its essence, so that the human be human, but rather fundamentally challenges both the way in which this essence has been characterised and, as we will see, the way in which this care should be shaped. The human is not the subject amidst objects, does not govern over beings, does not lend beings their beingness. Heidegger opposes this centralization of the human, this central *placement* of the human in the constellation of that which is.

Heidegger defends himself against those who wish to renounce him as an 'inhumanist'³⁰: "It ought to be somewhat clearer now that opposition to "humanism" in no way implies a defense of the inhuman but rather opens other

²⁶ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 225-226.

²⁷ Ibid., 226.

²⁸ Rae, "Re-Thinking the Human," 30.

²⁹ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 233-234.

³⁰ Anti-humanist carries too great a connotation to put here in this context without any reservations.

vistas.”³¹ Heidegger presents such an alternative vista on humanity’s essence in the idea of ‘ek-sistence.’ If we want to be able to understand Heidegger’s critique of humanism, we must also engage with what he opposes to traditional humanism – that which Sloterdijk insufficiently characterizes as an ‘onto-anthropology.’ This is the next step on our path.

II.II Another vista: Ek-sistence

After his critical discussion of traditional humanism, Heidegger sets out on formulating his own thought on the essence (*‘Wesen’*) of the human. This alternative vista that Heidegger ‘opens up,’ is only possible, he claims, after the critical examination of traditional humanism. For Heidegger, the crucial realization of that critical examination is that “[m]etaphysics closes itself to the simple essential fact that man essentially only occurs in his essence, where he is claimed by Being. Only from that claim ‘has’ he found that wherein his essence dwells.”³² Heidegger here, again, refers to humanism’s failure to address the unique relation between the human and Being, and that it is therefore unable to grasp the human’s proper essence. The proper essence of the human, through which it is claimed by Being, is what Heidegger calls ‘ek-sistence.’³³ In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger employs the specific notion of ek-sistence as opposed to *Being and Time’s* ‘existence’: the emphasis is on the ‘ek’ (‘out’, the transcendence) in the ‘sistere’ (‘to stand’) of the human:

With the *Kehre* in Heidegger’s thinking, however, comes the attempt to think Being itself as irreducibly more than any actual understanding or any sequence of different understandings of it, more even than the objective correlate of all possible ways of understanding Being. In other words, it is now conceived as *transcendent* in relation to man’s understanding of it.³⁴

Crucial to this, and to understanding the way in which Heidegger’s thought on the essence of the human differs from traditional humanism is that: “[...] the act of understanding the totality of what is in its entativeness [beingness] depends on *Being itself*, depends upon the becoming manifest of the non-entative which

³¹ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 250.

³² *Ibid.*, 227.

³³ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁴ Miles, “Heidegger and the question of humanism,” 436.

bestows an understanding of entities in their entativeness.”³⁵ Rae points out the effect this has on Heidegger’s thought on the essence of the human in the *Letter*: “The method to discern being is [...] a focusing on being to disclose the ontological truth of the human being. This focusing on being is accompanied by a re-thinking of the human being.”³⁶ A major difference between Heidegger’s thought on the human essence and traditional humanism shows itself here. Traditional humanism is concerned with the sake of the human itself – due to it not thinking and thus forgetting the unique relation between the human and Being³⁷ – and it assigns a *central place* to the human. Heidegger’s thought on the human essence, precisely out of trying to think the unique relation between the human and Being, is concerned with the sake of Being. This *relation* between the human and Being is a key focus of Heidegger’s thinking³⁸:

Man is rather “thrown” from Being itself into the truth of Being, so that existing in this fashion he might guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are. Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the Gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of Being lies in the destiny [*‘Geschick’*] of Being. But for man it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in his essence that corresponds to such destiny [...]. Man is the shepherd of Being.³⁹

Despite of his rejection of traditional humanism, Heidegger is not concerned with some kind of Nietzschean overcoming of (the concept of) the ‘human being’ or with moving toward an *‘Übermensch.’* Heidegger is not concerned with abandoning concepts such as ‘human being,’ ‘essence,’ and in some way not even ‘humanism’ per se.⁴⁰ As said, Heidegger still shares the same concern as traditional humanism: bringing the human to its essence. It is precisely this essence of the human which has to be re-formulated: the human does not govern over Being, but is, *as Heidegger puts it*, the shepherd of Being. Through his critical engagement with traditional humanism, Heidegger tries to point out its failings and misconceptions and through pointing this out tries to conceptualize and “initiate a new beyond-metaphysics humanism.”⁴¹

³⁵ Ibid., 437.

³⁶ Rae, “Re-Thinking the Human,” 31.

³⁷ A relation upon which humanism itself is based.

³⁸ Miles, “Heidegger and the question of humanism,” 438.

³⁹ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 234.

⁴⁰ Rae, “Re-Thinking the Human,” 31.

⁴¹ Ibid., 32. Rae still assigns the name of ‘humanism’ to Heidegger’s endeavour. It remains open to what extent Heidegger’s endeavour can still be considered a humanism (although

Heidegger designates the path he follows to regain the human's proper essence as follows: "Thinking does not overcome metaphysics by climbing still higher, surmounting it, transcending it somehow or other; thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness [*'Nähe'*] of the nearest."⁴² As Rae clarifies, Heidegger tries to indicate here that this metaphysical, traditional humanism is not overcome by the construction of "[...] more elaborate abstract metaphysical schemas," but rather that thinking has to comport itself to that which is at the same time both nearest and furthest from itself: Being.⁴³ Heidegger urges to direct the focus towards Being and the claim it makes on the human. The human essence is not 'something' to be found *within* the human being, something that it *has* or *owns*, but rather *is* its "unique *relation* to being."⁴⁴ This relation is what Heidegger calls 'ek-sistence,' and thus perceives ek-sistence to be the human's essence.⁴⁵ Ek-sistence is the "*space within which* the human being *lives* in its relation to being"⁴⁶ – and we will see that it is precisely in this 'spatial' metaphor that ethics enters the scene.

The human is the only being that ek-sists, the human is the only being able to disclose Being. Rae points to a passage by Heidegger from the 1957 text *Identity and difference*, which both shows that Heidegger's thought of the human stands in the light of Being's sake, and at the same time glorifies the human more than traditional humanism was ever able to:

untraditional), but it is clear that it is akin to it. Cf. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, 387-390 and 530-552.

⁴² Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 254.

⁴³ Rae, "Re-Thinking the Human," 32.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁵ Cf.: "Heidegger maintains that the human being is defined in terms of its 'existence.' The problem with this formulation was, however, that commentators understood that Heidegger's emphasis on the human being's existence was simply opposed to the essence of metaphysics. These commentators understood that, rather than privileging essence in opposition to existence, Heidegger's thought was simply privileging existence in opposition to essence. This led Jean-Paul Sartre to famously state that, in relation to consciousness, "*existence* comes before *essence*." However, Heidegger remarks that understanding that the affirmation of existence necessarily means the denigration of essence is grounded in a thought that conforms to the binary logic of metaphysics. Merely reversing the term privileged in a metaphysical dichotomy does not overcome metaphysical thinking; it "remains a metaphysical statement"." The use of 'ek-sistence' emphasizes Heidegger's resistance to the binary opposition between essence and existence. Rae, "Re-thinking the Human," 33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, emphases added.

[...] man's distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as the being who thinks, is open to Being, face to face with Being; [...] man remains referred to Being, and he is only this. This 'only' does not mean a limitation, but rather an excess. A belonging to Being prevails within man, a belonging which listens to Being because it is appropriated to Being.⁴⁷

We see here that Heidegger distances himself from the centralized position traditional humanism assigned to the human, and 'decenters' the human from the ontological constellation⁴⁸ – the human does not, as Heidegger phrases it, reign over beings but rather is the unique being which is open to Being and always remains referred to it. In the end, for Heidegger, in trying to think the proper essence of the human it is Being which is at stake.

In the hereabove, we have tried to get a grip on Heidegger's thinking on the essence of the human in the *Letter on Humanism*: we have tried to "think the humanity of *homo humanus*."⁴⁹ It becomes clear that Heidegger endeavours to re-place the human, to decenter the human from the central position traditional humanism grants it. What Heidegger aims to present is a "*humanitas* in the service of the truth of Being, but without humanism in the metaphysical sense."⁵⁰

Now, let us here return to humanism *and* ethics. The specific vocabulary of '(de)centering' and '(re-)placing' in the hereabove has been taken from Rae's comments on Heidegger's *Letter*.⁵¹ It is the presence of this place-oriented vocabulary which shows that Rae is on the right track concerning the inherent relation between humanism and ethics in the *Letter*. However, although many of the signs are already there in his own vocabulary, Rae does not make the last but vital connection: namely that the *re-thinking* of the human is mainly a *re-placing* of the human – and precisely the spatial metaphor and the figure of 'place' tie Heidegger's engagement with humanism to his discussion of ethics. Moreover, at the end of *Plato's Doctrine of Truth* – the text with which the *Letter* was first published in 1947 and which was first conceived in the early 1930's⁵² – we already find a place-oriented vocabulary when Heidegger engages with humanism in a way which is close to the *Letter*:

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 31.

⁴⁸ Rae, "Re-Thinking the Human," 33.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 254.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Rae, "Re-Thinking the Human."

⁵² Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit: mit einem Brief über den Humanismus* (Bern: Franke Verlag, 1947).

The beginning of metaphysics in the thought of Plato is at the same time the beginning of “humanism.” [...] “humanism” means the process that is implicated in the beginning, in the unfolding, and in the end of metaphysics, whereby human beings, in differing respects but always deliberately, move into a central place among beings [...]. What takes place in each instance is a metaphysically determined revolving around the human being, whether in narrower or wider orbits.⁵³

With his place-oriented vocabulary, Rae arrives at the very border of the isolated approach to the *Letter's* critique of humanism, but, in the end, does not cross it. Heidegger himself, however, shows that this border itself is a construct. After concluding his discussion on Beaufret's question on (traditional) humanism, Heidegger turns to the second question Beaufret had posed in his letter:

But if *humanitas* must be viewed as so essential to the thinking of Being, must not “ontology” therefore be supplemented by “ethics”? Is not that effort entirely essential which you [Beaufret] express in the sentence, “*Ce que je cherche à faire, depuis longtemps déjà, c'est préciser le rapport de l'ontologie avec une éthique possible*” [“What I have been trying to do for a long time now is to determine precisely the relation of ontology to a possible ethics”]?⁵⁴

So, contrary to his (explicit) principal intention, Heidegger starts engaging with another one of Beaufret's questions – this *follows directly* from his discussion of, and Beaufret's question on, (traditional) humanism and '*humanitas*'. From the start onwards Heidegger had already pointed towards the relation between humanism and ethics, precisely when he limited himself to dealing with Beaufret's first question: “Today I would like to grapple with only one of your questions. Perhaps its discussion will also shed some light on the others.”⁵⁵ Heidegger realizes that after thinking the essence of the human out of its relation to Being, a “longing necessarily awakens for a peremptory directive and for rules that say how man, experienced from ek-sistence toward Being, ought to live in a fitting manner.”⁵⁶ Here we see that if the place of Heidegger's critique of humanism in the *Letter* is to be understood, its relation to his critique of ethics should be taken seriously. But how does Heidegger deal with, and understand,

⁵³ Martin Heidegger, “Plato's Doctrine of Truth,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, trans. Thomas Sheehan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 181.

⁵⁴ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 254.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

the question of ethics in the *Letter*? And how does it tie in with his critique of humanism?

III. Ethics in the *Letter*

“Only those who have read Heidegger blindly, or not at all, have been able to think of him as a stranger to ethical preoccupations.”⁵⁷ With these words, Jean-Luc Nancy does not mean to deny that there seems to be an absence of ethics in Heidegger’s works. However, this means as long as ethics is defined in its traditional way: there is no morality in Heidegger’s thought, as long as “what is meant by that is a body of principles and aims for conduct, fixed by authority or by choice, whether collective or individual.”⁵⁸ There have been several authors who have argued for this absence of ethics⁵⁹ (rather ‘morality’) and Nancy mentions e.g. Derrida, Pöggeler and Habermas. However, ethics is understood here in a traditional way: based upon notions of human freedom, agency and the subject – the ethics of humanism. But, like Nancy’s stern remark already claims, the absence of such traditional (humanist) ethics does not mean that there are no ethical preoccupations in Heidegger’s work. To Heidegger, it is clear that a different understanding of the human goes hand in hand with a different understanding of ethics, and vice versa.

In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger explicitly introduces his own notion of ethics, departing from a reinterpretation and resituating of ‘ethics.’ Heidegger traces the essence of ‘ethics’ – ‘*èthos*’ – to a saying by Heraclitus. This saying says: “*Èthos anthrôpôi daimôn*.”⁶⁰ The common translation of this saying goes: “A man’s character is his daimon.”⁶¹ (“*Seine Eigenart ist dem Menschen sein Dämon*.”⁶²) Heidegger claims that this common translation is a modern one, which is not able to grasp the saying in its originary meaning. According to Heidegger, ‘*èthos*,’ instead of ‘character’ or ‘habit,’ means “abode, dwelling

⁵⁷ Nancy, “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics,’” 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁹ Cf. Samuel IJsseling, *Denken en danken, Geven en zijn* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2015), 114-118. IJsseling argues that the realm of ethics is (purposely) excluded in Heidegger’s (later) thought, but in this claim still clings to a more ‘conventional’ understanding of ethics – unlike Heidegger does in the *Letter*.

⁶⁰ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 256.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus,” 354.

place”⁶³ (“*Aufenthalt, Ort des Wohnens*”⁶⁴). This originary, Greek thinking of the word ‘*èthos*’ names

[...] the open region in which man dwells. The open region of his abode [cf. ‘ek-sistence’] allows what pertains to man’s essence, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear. The abode of man contains and preserves the advent of what belongs to man in his essence [i.e. Being]. According to Heraclitus’s phrase this is *daimôn*, the god. The fragment says: Man dwells, insofar as he is man, in the nearness of god.⁶⁵

To clarify and illustrate this interpretation of Heraclitus’ saying, Heidegger quotes Aristotle’s rendition of a story about Heraclitus who welcomed some visitors who wanted to see the philosopher ‘at work.’⁶⁶ When the visitors arrived at Heraclitus’ quarters, they found the philosopher warming himself by a stove. They were quite surprised to simply find him warming himself, and their astonishment grew when he invited them to come in with the following words: “For here too the gods are present.”⁶⁷

The visitors were baffled by the ‘ordinariness’ of the situation in which they find Heraclitus: they hoped and suspected to encounter him in exceptional and exciting circumstances, to find him meditating, to find him ‘thinking’ – which, of course, had to be material for “entertaining conversation.”⁶⁸ But, contrary to this, they find Heraclitus warming himself by a stove (not even baking bread!) which could be found in any home. Why should the visitors care about this, why should they even be interested any longer? Then they hear Heraclitus, responding to their disappointment, speak those words: “For here too the gods are present.”

With this phrase, Heraclitus illustrates that it is precisely in the most familiar, common, intimate and ordinary place (abode) that “the gods come to presence”⁶⁹ – the ‘here’ designates the human’s abode and the ‘coming to presence of the gods’ signifies the coming-to-pass of Being. Heidegger understands and reformulates Heraclitus’ phrase in the following way: “The (familiar) abode for man is the open region [cf. ek-sistence] for the presencing of

⁶³ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 256.

⁶⁴ Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus,” 354. In the German ‘*Aufenthalt*,’ there is a trace of ‘*Haltung*,’ translatable as ‘attitude,’ which unmistakably still bears a relation to the (more conventional and Aristotelian) understanding of ‘*èthos*’ as ‘character.’

⁶⁵ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 256.

⁶⁶ From *De partibus animalium* A 5, 645 a 17.

⁶⁷ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 256. The German reads: “*Auch hier nämlich wesen Götter an.*” Cf. Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus,” 355.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

god (the unfamiliar one).”⁷⁰ It is by virtue of this proper abode that the human is pertained to Being, that the human is open to the transcendence of Being.⁷¹ This means the following for the understanding of ‘*èthos*’:

If the name “ethics,” in keeping with the basic meaning [‘*Grundbedeutung*’] of the word *èthos*, should now say that ethics ponders the abode of man, then that thinking which thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of man, *as one who ek-sists*, is in itself the original ethics [‘*ursprüngliche Ethik*’].⁷²

In this crucial passage, Heidegger explicitly relates his thought on the essence of the human (“*as one who ek-sists*”) to his understanding of ethics as original or ‘originary’⁷³ ethics. Both are concerned with what we have called ‘the place of the human,’ the proper abode of the human. Where originary ethics inquires into the proper abode and ‘placing’ of the human, into its ek-sistence, traditional humanism ‘mis-places’ the human for it does not think the human’s proper abode and unique relation to Being. Due to its aforementioned ‘metaphysicality,’ traditional humanism mis-places the human because it is blind to the human’s ek-sistence on which it is based itself.

Heidegger tries to engage with Beaufret’s question(s) and the notion of ethics in a more original way by thinking ‘*èthos*’ as ‘abode’ (‘*Aufenthalt*’). Opposed to traditional ethics, which ‘provides’ rules and guidelines for practical moral conduct, Heidegger’s originary ethics serves a more primordial pursuit: “More essential than instituting rules is that man find the way to his abode in the truth of Being”⁷⁴ (“*Wesentlicher als alle Aufstellung von Regeln ist, daß der Mensch zum Aufenthalt in die Wahrheit des Seins findet*”⁷⁵). The shortcoming of traditional ethics, the ethics of humanism, is that it has been a logic of ‘*mores*’ instead of a ‘*logos*’ of ‘*èthos*.’⁷⁶ This logic of ‘*mores*’ is concerned with the question of how to act (instituting rules) and, through humanism’s ‘metaphysicality,’ goes hand in hand with, and is based upon, predetermined

⁷⁰ Ibid. The German reads: “*Der (geheure) Aufenthalt ist dem Menschen das Offene für die Anwesenung des Gottes (des Un-geheuren).*” Cf. Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus,” 356.

⁷¹ Cf. “[...] man’s distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as the being who thinks, is open to Being, face to face with Being; [...] man remains referred to Being, and he is only this. This ‘only’ does not mean a limitation, but rather an excess. A belonging to Being prevails within man, a belonging which listens to Being because it is appropriated to Being.” Heidegger, *Identity and difference*, 31.

⁷² Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 258. Emphasis added.

⁷³ Nancy, “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics.’”

⁷⁴ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 262.

⁷⁵ Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus,” 361.

⁷⁶ Silvia Benso, “On the Way to an Ontological Ethics: Ethical Suggestions in Reading Heidegger,” *Research in Phenomenology* 24 (1994): 160.

notions of the subject, freedom, agency and action et cetera. Heidegger's 'logos' of 'èthos' is concerned with the human's openness and susceptibility to Being, its ek-sistence, and is thus more concerned with thinking the human's relation to Being.⁷⁷

Despite having reservations surrounding the notion of ethics, Heidegger still presents a specific understanding of it. He re-thinks 'èthos' as 'abode,' and thus understands ethics to be concerned with the proper *place* (abode) of the human. This place is the 'ek' in 'ek-sistence' and "[...] the place in that, on the basis of it, of its opening, something can take place: a conduct of sense."⁷⁸ It is 'in' this proper abode where Being can come-to-pass, where the human is claimed by Being. Heidegger's pursuit in his critique of ethics is to uncover "a more originary sense of ethics as 'authentic dwelling' and 'standing in' the truth of being."⁷⁹ For Heidegger, "[e]xistence thus [...] is ethical through and through," and "[i]n a sense, for Heidegger, ethics is ontology itself; there is no need to 'add' an ethics to an ontology that would have been presupposed as unethical."⁸⁰ To Heidegger, the essence of the human *already is* 'ethical,'⁸¹ and inquiring into the essence of the human is therefore an ethical undertaking.

⁷⁷ Although there is no space for an extensive discussion here, it is important to note that Heidegger opens his *Letter on Humanism* precisely with a reflection on the essence of action (in relation to thought): "We are still far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough. We view action only as causing an effect. The actuality of the effect is valued according to its utility. But the essence of action is accomplishment. To accomplish means to unfold something into the fullness of its essence, to lead it forth into this fullness – *producere*. Therefore only what already is can really be accomplished. But what "is" above all is Being. Thinking accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man. It does not make or cause the relation. Thinking brings this relation to Being solely as something handed over to it from Being. [...] Thinking does not become action only because some effect issues from it or because it is applied. Thinking acts insofar as it thinks. Such action is presumably the simplest and at the same time the highest, because it concerns the relation of Being to man." Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 217.

⁷⁸ Nancy, "Heidegger's 'Originary Ethics,'" 72.

⁷⁹ François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 222.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁸¹ Chris Bremmers, *Overgankelijkheid: Heideggers ontwerp van een fundamentele ontologie en de kwestie van de ethiek* (Budel: Damon, 2000), 265.

IV. The place of the human: the *Letter on Humanism* as an ethical text

In the introduction to Capuzzi and Gray's translation of the *Letter on Humanism*, David Krell asks the following question: "[...] are the motivations of Heidegger's critique of humanism and of the *animal rationale* altogether clear?"⁸² Obviously, we do not try to give an all-comprising answer to Krell's question – however, we've put forward a different light to shine upon Heidegger's critique of humanism. As we have seen, the critique of humanism in the *Letter* has been received isolated from his critique of ethics in that same text. This isolated discussion of Heidegger's critique of humanism is unable to see how this critique is decisively shaped by his engagement with ethics, and is therefore unable to uncover the ethical preoccupations at the root of Heidegger's dealing with humanism in the *Letter*. The isolated way of engaging with Heidegger's critique of humanism, already seen in Richardson's and Derrida's (anti-)anthropological presentation of this critique, has led Peter Sloterdijk to insufficiently characterize Heidegger's alternative to traditional humanism as an 'onto-anthropology.' Of course, this is a characterization which is understandable in the light of the traditional (humanist) understanding of ethics, which is concerned with human freedom and action, and as the 'counterpart' of Heidegger's characterization of metaphysics as onto-theology. However, this precisely misses the point of Heidegger's engagement with ethics in the *Letter*.

Silvia Benso offers an insightful remark by Bernard Boelen on the crux of Heidegger's critique of traditional ethics. The shortcoming of the various traditional ethics is that

[...] they all have failed, although in different ways, to work out their 'explicit consideration towards the problem of Being itself.' In other words, they have failed to think man's fundamental *ethos*; they have left unthought Being as the *essential* 'dwelling place' of human existence [...]. Traditional ethics has been the *logic* of *mores* rather than the *logos* of *ethos*.⁸³

With this remark on traditional ethics, Boelen – but without mentioning Heidegger's critique of humanism – offers a stepping stone to uncovering the inherent relation between humanism and ethics in the *Letter*. Heidegger's originary understanding of 'èthos' goes hand in hand with his formulation of ek-

⁸² Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 216.

⁸³ Bernard J. Boelen, "The Question of Ethics in the Thought of Martin Heidegger," in *Heidegger and the Quest for Truth*, ed. Manfred S. Frings (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 78. Quoted in Benso, "On the Way to an Ontological Ethics," 160.

sistence as the essence (and abode!) of the human. It is precisely humanism which, as Boelen phrases it, fails to work out the problem of Being and therefore fails to think the proper dwelling place or abode of the human. Traditional humanism tried to centralize the human so gloriously, but it did not and *could not* see that the proper essence of the human is to be found precisely in its ek-sistence: an essence which implies an ontological ‘position’ which is not at the centre of everything that is, but is under the claim of Being. It is precisely this position, this place, the standing under the claim of presence, of Being, which Heidegger calls ethics.⁸⁴

Prior to commencing the formulation of the proper ‘*èthos*’ of the human, Heidegger first has to make a step back through traditional humanism. Following this, Heidegger is able to formulate his ‘rectification’ of traditional humanism and formulate the essential and fundamental abode of the human.⁸⁵ Only *after* his engagement with humanism, Heidegger unveils that the way in which he engages with humanism is what he calls originary ethics: the pondering of the human’s proper abode. For Heidegger, the point is that traditional humanism is oblivious to this abode. This obliviousness is what makes for the human’s ‘homelessness’ (*‘Heimatlosigkeit’*) in traditional humanism – something Heidegger not only mentions in the *Letter*, but also in the later “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.”⁸⁶ It is against this homelessness that Heidegger formulates his notion of ek-sistence.

We can now see that Heidegger’s engagement with, and discussion of, humanism is decisively shaped by his ethical considerations. We have already encountered that Heidegger signals this in claiming that engaging with Beaufret’s first question, he might also shine a light on the other ones.⁸⁷ This remark seems to have been overlooked by commentators discussed earlier in this paper, despite the significant role spatial metaphors play in both Heidegger’s critique of humanism and of ethics. Contrary to Sloterdijk characterizing it as an onto-anthropology, Heidegger’s critique of humanism is not so much anthropologically motivated, but rather ethically – be it in terms of an *originary ethics*. Understanding the way in which Heidegger’s engagement with humanism and his notion of originary ethics are related, also makes clear that the *Letter on*

⁸⁴ “To stand under the claim of presence is the greatest claim made upon the human being. It is ‘ethics.’” Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, 217.

⁸⁵ Bremmers, “Nawoord,” 148.

⁸⁶ Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. and trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 159 & Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 241-244. This ‘homelessness’ is, of course, not regarded or experienced as homelessness as such by traditional humanism. Heidegger names Nietzsche to be the last to experience this homelessness, but according to Heidegger only finds a way out by reversing metaphysics – however, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸⁷ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 219.

Humanism is not split up in a critique of humanism and a critique of ethics but that those critiques go hand in hand.

Heidegger's direction to us is to stop and listen, so that we may be receptive to becoming what we are and finding our place: ek-sistence – precisely that which remains undisclosed in and by humanism. David Krell writes that “[h]owever splendid the ‘Letter on Humanism,’ it should only serve to call *us* to *thinking*.”⁸⁸ An apparently modest ambition, which Heidegger echoes in the closing words of the ‘*Prachtstück*’⁸⁹: “With its saying, thinking lays inconspicuous furrows in language. They are still more inconspicuous than the furrows that the farmer, slow of step, draws through the field.”⁹⁰ Those furrows might not be that easy to see, but like the inconspicuous furrows drawn by the farmer, they are not invisible to the receptive observer of the blooming field.

⁸⁸ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 216.

⁸⁹ This could be translated as ‘showpiece,’ or maybe more colloquially as ‘gem.’ Hannah Arendt referred to the *Letter on Humanism* as a ‘*Prachtstück*.’ Cf. Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 216.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 265.

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