

## A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE PROFANE: HEIDEGGER, BLUMENBERG AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHTHONIC

JOHN J. DAVENPORT

### 1. Introduction

The category of the sacred has been a familiar theme in phenomenology since Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*,<sup>1</sup> which attempted to extract the original religious experience of the "numinos" as *mysterium tremendum* from all subsequent "rationalization of religion."<sup>2</sup> Yet Otto's analysis of the numinos as simultaneously "daunting and fascinating"<sup>3</sup> did not shed much light on the difference between the sacred and its opposite, the profane. It was Mircea Eliade, in several works on the history of archaic religious narrative, ritual, and art,<sup>4</sup> who made prominent the ubiquity of the sacred-profane contrast throughout world mythologies. But still, while an almost limitless variety of expressions for the sacred have been the subject of many phenomenological and anthropological studies, different senses of the profane and their connections have been much less widely studied, though they are as important in our symbolic history. As an archetype for all that is "unmeaning" in Heidegger's sense,<sup>5</sup> the "profane" is not simply the absence of meaning. Rather, the profane has a positive archetypal meaning that remains one irreducible pole of the religious experience of Being which later existentialists, following Otto's inspiration, tried to recapture.

The main goal of this essay is to fill this gap by interpreting the profane through its close connections with a series of *anti-vital* paradigms that – following Claude Lévi-Strauss, Eliade, and other mythographers – I classify together under the heading 'chthonic.' As I will show, these chthonic figures for the profane, which are found in mythic and legendary narratives the world over, divide up into several complexes of associated motifs.<sup>6</sup> To make these motifs clear, I will look at a wide variety of sources, ranging from archaic mythology, ancient art, folklore, and pre-Socratic writings to modern film, psychology, and examples from the work of Sartre and Heidegger that seem to fit the same figurative paradigms.

These more recent instances from art and existential philosophy, and their *prima facie* connections with mythological motifs of the profane, will help illustrate the enduring significance of archetypal analysis for understanding contemporary themes – a relevance perhaps too rarely appreciated by philosophers today. Understanding the profane means much more than simply reviewing some interesting curiosities of our cultural history: it may give us a vantage point for critical evaluation of contemporary issues. For

example, the symbol of the 'earth', of which recent 'ecofeminist' literature has made so much, can have either sacred or profane connotations, depending on whether it is construed as a protective 'home and origin' or as a dark chthonic density or tomb. Similarly, I hope to show that an analysis of the profane in terms of the chthonic provides at least one plausible context for interpreting concepts such as facticity, appropriation, and teleology, which are so central to contemporary continental philosophy.

Finally, although this goal lies beyond the scope of this preliminary study, a phenomenology of the chthonic may ultimately help clarify the crucial distinction between the *profane* as a religious category and *evil* as an ethical category – a division that is often blurred because artists and philosophers revert to chthonic figures that evoke profanity in interpreting ethical concepts, as if evil always has to take a profane form. This conflation is dangerous because it also motivates the converse inference: if some idea or practice seems unnatural to our aesthetic sensibility, and we can associate its qualities with some motif of the archetypally profane, then on *this basis* we can portray it as evil. Fallacies of this sort can only be recognized if the profane and the morally unjust or unvirtuous are clearly differentiated.<sup>7</sup>

### 2. The Profane as Impurity: Ricoeur

This crucial distinction has of course been made before, but in an insufficiently primordial fashion. For example, in his famous study of evil, Paul Ricoeur begins by distinguishing evil in the moral sense from profanity as "defilement" or *ritual impurity*. As Ricoeur recognizes, the system of faults that "stain" one in this sense "abounds in minute prescriptions in domains that for us are ethically neutral," and does not always condemn as profane actions that are evil by Greek and Semitic ethical codes. He suggests that this evinces "a stage in which evil and misfortune have not been dissociated, in which the ethical order of doing ill has not been distinguished from the cosmo-biological order of faring ill: suffering, sickness, death, failure."<sup>8</sup>

There are two problems with this approach. First, it assumes that historically, the apprehension of profanity in phenomena such as misfortune, illness, deformity, or any force destructive of human existence, *derives* from viewing all natural evils or their signs as moral evils attributable to some supernatural agent, or from confusing harms with wrongs. This implies an *error theory* of the profane. But a more charitable and positive alternative is available: the profane may simply precede the various ethical senses of evil<sup>9</sup> altogether. On this hypothesis, once the ethical contrast between good and evil was conceived (however unclearly), there would inevitably be a long period in which its expression was intertwined with the prior contrast between the sacred and profane (e.g. in the *karmaic* notion that misfortune connotes a *moral* fault in past lives). As Ricoeur himself notes, in the

Hebrew tradition, "the experience of sin itself, the profound originality of which in comparison with the experience of defilement we shall show further on, is expressed in the old language of defilement."<sup>10</sup> But on my hypothesis, this kind of overlap is itself a derivative phenomenon, not to be read back into core notions of the sacred and profane around which preceding archaic systems of life were organized.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Ricoeur's approach distinguishes the profane from evil in its ethical senses by interpreting it as "defilement." Ricoeur's account is typical here: in previous anthropological and philosophical treatments, the profane has most commonly been explained (following Frazer and Pettazzoni) in terms of *impurity*, a kind of 'infection' that is transmitted by contact and renders its bearer unfit for certain religious rites, or even for involvement in human affairs generally. Ricoeur rightly argues that this was never apprehended simply as a *ordinary* pollution (such as unsanitariness); nor was its ritual removal ever a literal act. Both impurity and its cleansing remain in figurative ambiguity, as he puts it, between the "physical" and the "ethical."

In truth, defilement was never literally a stain; impurity was never literally filthiness; dirtiness. It is also true that impurity never attains the abstract level of unworthiness; otherwise the magic of contact and contagion would have disappeared. The representation of defilement dwells in the half-light of a quasi-physical infection that points towards a quasi-moral unworthiness... just as the rite suppresses symbolically, defilement infects symbolically. In fact, even the ablution is never a simple washing: ablution is already a partial and fictive act.<sup>12</sup>

But just because of this, equating profanity with "impurity," a "quasi-material something that infects as a sort of filth,"<sup>13</sup> is either reductive, or does no explanatory work at all. If we interpret "impurity" in a naturalistic sense, then the equation is inaccurate, since profanity transcends any literal contagion; alternatively, the equation can be true, but only if we interpret "impurity" in the *profane* sense. This level of analysis cannot get to the root of the matter.

My alternative hypothesis is that to explain *why* taboo objects (such as blood or dung), misfortunes (such as a crop failure), departures from perceived norms (such as deformities), or socially important acts (such as sexual contact) ever had their power of *tainting* with such a non-literal impurity, we have to recognize their derivative symbolic connections to a more primordial set of expressions for the profane, the logic of whose associations remains largely unexplored, concealed behind the surface phenomena of ritual impurity, which have hitherto been held up as showing us all there is to the profane. Moreover, on my account, the meaning towards which these more primordial motifs of the profane converge cannot be explained as any 'intermediate' between physical and ethical senses; rather, its significance is *sui generis*, arising neither from any natural reaction to unpleasant physical phenomena, nor from any prior ethical evaluation (or its misapplication), nor

even from any sort of undiscriminating 'composite' of the two. Instead, this significance will be characterized as *chthonic*.

### 3. The Profane as Chthonic 'Underground'

It is difficult to give any short definition of the profane, precisely because (following Eliade) there are no more basic meaningful contrasts in terms of which we can explicate the sacred and profane: their opposition is the hermeneutically ultimate one.<sup>14</sup> As a result, only paradigmatic expressions can give us any access to the profane as such, and this is what the range of associated motifs comprising the 'chthonic' will provide.

If we begin by trying to identify the widest connotation of the *chthonic*, we might provisionally characterize it as all that is negative in the sense of unintelligible, life-destroying, chaotic, dark and terrifying, and most of all, *dead*. To be *chthonic* in this sense, then, something does not *have* to be literally disgusting or ugly: although many instances of the *chthonic*, such as the disintegration of organic life-forms, may seem aesthetically repulsive in the extreme, what makes them *chthonic* is their more basic connection to a dispersion of meaning, an absorption into the deathly, the unconscious darkness that is loss of selfhood. The O.E.D. defines "*chthonic*" as "Dwelling in or beneath the earth," and refers to the use of the term by theorists such as Müller and Lang.<sup>15</sup> This definition comes closest to the term's origins in Greek myth itself, as we can see near the beginning of the *Theogony*:

Verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundation of all...and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth...<sup>16</sup>

The word describing Tartarus "in the depth" here is  $\chi\theta\omicron\nu\omicron\varsigma$ , or *khthonos*; it shows the most primordial association of this word with the underworld of death, which is also the world of Night (Nyx), into which the sun descends and re-emerges.<sup>17</sup> This, of course, is the realm in which the conquering god Zeus buries his elemental enemies, the Titans.<sup>18</sup> It is also the realm of dragons that symbolize chaos and destruction, such as "Typhoeus," whom Hesiod describes as the offspring of the union of Earth and Tartarus, a snake with a hundred fire-breathing heads.<sup>19</sup> Typhoeus ends up in Tartarus after being destroyed by Zeus in Hesiod's version of the 'combat-myth' narrative, whose paradigmatic structure is perhaps most well-known from Marduk's combat with Tiamat in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*.<sup>20</sup>

This dark "depth" is perhaps the most primordial of the multiple aspects of the *chthonic*, since it figures so prominently in many epic narratives. In particular, the hero's archetypal "descent into hell" (or underworld) and return is very well documented throughout world literature, from Gilgamesh onward. The descent episode, which may be read in some cases as a "descent into the self" or self-discovery (as Jung suggests), is central to the plot of such epics as *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, and of course, *The Divine*

Comedy. It is also an integral part of Christian tradition, through the apocryphal "Gospel of Nicodemus" which tells us Christ's "harrowing of hell."<sup>21</sup> Descent episodes also play a crucial role in myths relating to regeneration/seasonal cycles, such as the myth of Persephone in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*: Hermes is sent by Zeus to retrieve Persephone from Erebus because, until she is released, her vengeful mother Demeter is bent on "keeping seed hidden beneath the earth."<sup>22</sup> In other words, the crops cannot grow because their life is held down, which is the central archetypal expression for the *chthonian* refusal of life.

We should note that the *chthonic* 'underworld' is more closely associated with containment and darkness rather than literal depth: for this reason, it can be pictured under a lake, as in *Beowulf*, or within a mountain. For example, in discussing Near-Eastern cylinder seals from 2335-2155 B.C., Pierre Amiet identifies the repeated "iconographical" theme of subordinate gods and goddesses presiding at "the appearance of the sun-god, adorned with flames, at the center of a massive mountain on which a tree grows."<sup>23</sup> Similar scenes appear on several noteworthy seals: in one, Amiet notes that the sun-deity's "exceptional posture suggests that he is attempting to free himself from the mountain"<sup>24</sup> - as in autochthonic emergence myths. In another seal featuring a combat, the conquering deity is pictured reigning within the mountain, whereas the defeated gods, who are associated emblematically with vegetation, are held there in captivity,<sup>25</sup> like the Greek Titans.

#### 4. *The Earthly as 'Tied down' and the Mark of Mortality*

As these examples already indicate, the "depth" has more than one meaning, and its associations expand outward as we trace them through world mythology. The *chthonic* significance of the 'underworld' is figurative rather than equivalent to a literal position 'beneath the earth:' for example, destructive subterranean dragons such as the Babylonian Tiamat also inhabit *chthonic* "depths" within the sea. As an expression of the deathly, as something that takes one down under the earth, the "*chthonic*" also includes the earth itself - "earth" thought of not in its rich, loamy, life-supporting sense, but as the *dead matter* of remains.<sup>26</sup> It is in this sense of the *chthonic* which is operative in Levi-Strauss' famous non-Freudian reading of the Oedipus legend, in which he argues that the entire legendary 'cycle of Thebes' from Kadmus's founding of the city to the Oedipus sequence is focused structurally on balancing man's "autochthonous origin" or emergence from lifeless clay, with the "denial" or attempt to escape such origins.<sup>27</sup> In particular, in the Theban cycle, Levi-Strauss re-recognizes the theme of autochthony in many motifs relating to *feet*:

In mythology it is a universal characteristic of men born from the Earth that at the moment they emerge from the depth they either cannot walk or they walk clumsily. This is the case

of the *chthonian* beings in the mythology of the Pueblo: Muyingwu, who leads the emergence, and the *chthonian* Shumai-koli are lame ("bleeding-foot," "sore-foot"). The same happens to the Koskimo of the Kwakiutl after they have been swallowed by the chthonic monster, Tsiakish: When they returned to the surface of the earth, "they limped forward or tripped sideways."<sup>28</sup>

Like Oedipus, these figures bear a mark or 'flaw' that signifies the mortality of human existence by connection with the *chthonic* - a sign that shows up on feet, which are profane because they touch the ground.<sup>29</sup> In his remarks on "Apotropaic Foot-Twisting," for example, Christopher Faraone notes that many profane mythic characters, such as "Death and Sleep" (nursed by Nyx), and Medusa are often depicted with feet "completely twisted around" or reversed.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, as Levi-Strauss points out, Oedipus's name may mean "swollen-footed" (or club-footed)<sup>31</sup>; the legends attribute his lameness to being nailed to the side of a mountain as a baby.

Although Levi-Strauss focuses on the *chthonic* in the contexts of myths of emergence, however, paradigmatic expressions for being 'tied down' to the earth have a more fundamental profane significance, of which autochthonic origination itself is only one possible expression. Prometheus, for example, does not emerge from the earth, but when Zeus chains him down for his misappropriation of fire, we have the same *chthonic* motif suggesting subordination to the power of the sacred. Similarly, in a different genre, the Rumpelstiltskin fairy tale (in versions prior to misguided contemporary 'sanitizations') has a violent ending that illustrates the tying-down motif particularly clearly. When the Queen guesses his name, thus saving the firstborn child she promised him in return for his spinning her straw into gold, he reacts as follows:

"The devil told you that! the devil told you that!" cried the little man, and in his anger he plunged his right foot so deep into the earth that his whole leg went in: and then in rage he pulled at his left leg so hard that he tore himself in two.<sup>32</sup>

Rumpelstiltskin is chthonic being, a type of deformed trickster figure, and he ends by being sucked into the earth; in attempting to break away from its grasp, he destroys himself.

Yet mere connection to the earth in itself is always *equivocal*, because "earth" has both its range of life-sustaining vitalist significance, and its chthonic significance as the "dust" into which we return, a 'material undertow.' As Amiet notes in discussing the iconography of the cylinder seals mentioned above, the mountain image is "symbolic both of the fertile earth and of the netherworld."<sup>33</sup> Heidegger recognizes the same ambiguity in his famous description of Van Gogh's portraits of peasant shoes:

In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment [the shoes] is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth.<sup>34</sup>

In these shoes, Heidegger thus reads the tension in humanity's relation to the earthly: on its *chthonic* face, the earth stands over against us as the chaotic contingency to be resisted by work; on its sacred face, it is a bounty that our work can never earn, a gift we can never fully appropriate.

The same ambiguity is expressed in many symbolic expressions of man's autochthonous emergence from the ground (implying an anticipated return to the earth in death), for example in the origin myth at the beginning of the Theban cycle. The legendary founder, Kadmus, slays a dragon, "a *chthonian* being which has to be killed in order that mankind be born from the earth."<sup>35</sup> He sows the dragon's teeth (planting the mark or remnant of this life-boarding being), and the Thebans - his army of soldiers - spring up from them. Significantly, they begin by fighting one another: this *strife* expresses the notion of chaos, which is associated both with the 'dragon below'<sup>36</sup> and the *chthonic* in general, as we will see.

Within the complex of the *chthonic* as the *earthly* in the sense of that which *ties down*, we should include the 'craftsman god' motif: for instance, Hephaestus, the Greek god who creates out of the *prima materia* of fire and earth, is traditionally pictured as 'lame,'<sup>37</sup> like Oedipus. The dwarf, an earth-bound creature in mythology, who characteristically smithies under mountains, functions as another symbol for autochthony. For example, Visnu in the *Rg Veda* is described as "he who stayed in the mountains wandering cruelly like a wild beast." Visnu in his earliest manifestation was a dwarf figure whose cosmic 'three strides' measured the world, thus 'creating' it by giving it *logos* and order. Indeed, his famous "three footprints" were considered magically powerful symbols: as Wendy O'Flaherty comments, "...it is significant that Visnu's feet are the object of worship,"<sup>38</sup> since they serve as symbols for *hierophany*, the sacred's point of contact with the profane order. In other words, we should think of these feet as 'imprinting' form or significance onto the previously unmeasured chaos.

A similar idea is involved in an activity that might at first glance seem completely unrelated to these figures of the *chthonic*: namely, marking something with a sign of one's claim to it. This activity, which became the earliest form of 'writing' in human culture,<sup>39</sup> was first performed in the earliest Near Eastern cultures with cylindrical seal-stones used "to make marks on clay as signs of the ownership of property or the authenticity of a document."<sup>40</sup> As Edith Porada argues, these seals also served as amulets that "had a close relation with their owners: they were considered to be an integral part of their owner's persons, like their fingernails, the impression of which could replace that of a seal."<sup>41</sup> The seal, in other words, was originally not just a metonym but almost an extension of the owner; its impression was a *trace* of the person himself, which literally made what it sealed 'part' of his or her being. Visnu's 'footprints,' like other sacred 'marks,' have a similar

function of giving order and intelligible being by 'marking' or *imprinting* a *chthonic* indeterminacy, or giving it meaningful form by assimilating it to an agent who 'owns' or controls it. To be marked is to be appropriated (a wedding ring is a mark in this sense). And when these seals or marks are found on humans themselves, as we noted, the foot (which is associated with the clay) is frequently the location of the divine *mark of mortality*: 'Achilles' heel' and similar 'points of vulnerability' keep otherwise quasi-divine heroes within the limits of human finitude. There is thus a relation between the motif of the 'flaw' or weak point that signals profane imperfection and the motif of *being marked*; both are *chthonic* metaphors for being claimed, possessed, or fated by something that stands hierarchically above what is marked, i.e. by something that is 'sacred' relative to its profanity.

These different examples seem to converge on a certain kind of subordination of the *chthonic* as a *profane mass* that is 'beneath' all meaning, or that is sealed, 'bound down,' or assigned a proper place by being imprinted with a function, and thus given its significance by the sacred. In this connection, the *chthonic* as base 'matter'<sup>42</sup> is latently associated with all that goes under the heading of "facticity," especially in Sartre's sense of the utterly opaque "in-itself," which is the unintelligible core of absolute contingency at the heart of human existence. Finitude or the limitation that comes from earthbound existence is related to the notion of a substratum of 'pure existentia' as Heidegger called it, which serves to 'tie down' abstract possibilities into concrete or situated lived possibilities.<sup>43</sup>

The *chthonic* in this sense as 'what is tied down' is also expressed throughout the mythical lineage which Hans Blumenberg identifies in "the personnel extending from chaos or Nyx [Night] to the Titans."<sup>44</sup> Like Oedipus, who was literally 'tied down' to the mountain, the Titans were 'earthbound' in the depths, along with even darker forces occupying the underworld, such as Nyx and her deadly children "Doom", "Black Fate," and "Death."<sup>45</sup> Blumenberg's analysis of Hesiod's "Chaos" as "pure metaphor" for the yawning gap or abyss of "opaque space"<sup>46</sup> also fits precisely with the *chthonic* in this sense. The matter that is formed, like Heraclitus's "flux" or Plato's indefinite dyad,<sup>47</sup> is chaotic in the sense of being a purely indeterminate substratum lying beneath the light of meaning that defines stable entities by delimiting, tying down, or imprinting this chthonic *resistance* with form.

##### 5. *Binding, Teleology, Appropriation and 'Enframing'*

Underlying these motifs is the even more primordial notion of being 'bound' simpliciter, or enclosed in a bind. As Alexander Mourelatos demonstrates in his study, *The Route of Parmenides*, within pre-Socratic poetry this notion of binding is intimately related to resistant subordination

to sacred necessity: the narrating goddess 'Truth' speaks of "a divinity of many faces" who is *Dike* or "Justice," *Ananke* or Constraint, and *Moirai* or "Fate," who "holds" the One in unchanging being and determines the Way of Truth.<sup>48</sup> As Mourelatos says, "There is an unmistakable motif of locks, chains, and bonds" employed in connection with this divine figure<sup>49</sup>; citing Onians, he relates this motif to Fate in Homer as the power that spins "a bond (or band)" around mortals like a "yoke of slavery": "one might think of the captivity of the Titans, Atlas, Prometheus, or Typhon as the appropriate paradigm" for this sense of *Ananke*.<sup>50</sup> In particular, the bind itself, or *τεῖνον*, "may refer to a 'rope,' or to the 'limit,' 'extremity,' or 'consummation' of something,"<sup>51</sup> thus we have "unity of motifs" that are intimately interconnected in Greek thought: "'bond,' 'band' (cf. 'rope'), 'bounds(s)' (cf. 'limit'), 'boundary' (cf. 'extremity,' 'consummation')." Mourelatos fears that the alleged link between these ideas may strike the modern reader as unintuitive,<sup>52</sup> but we can already see that their underlying unity derives from the *chthonic* significance which they all express. For, as Onians surmised, the very idea of a telos as an end comes originally from the notion of a completion of *closure*: "...τέλος and cognate words in Homer depend on a logical paradigm of τέλος as a circle, band, bond, or bound..."<sup>54</sup> Such closure unifies its object by tying it together: thus τέλος is used in one instance in Homer for a "band of soldiers."<sup>55</sup>

The original significance of 'telos,' which is homologized with the divine in later Aristotelian philosophical thought, is thus linked with key metaphors of the *chthonic*. If this seems counterintuitive, the implicit logic of these associations may perhaps be as follows: specifically *chthonic* impurity imbues not the being, power, or principle that *does the binding*, but rather that which is the passive substrate of this active agent, that which is *bound*, or is ordered to some end, put to some use, or defined as a definite something (*to de ti*) by being 'given its proper telos.' To bind something to a position, role, or function that then becomes *necessary* or even constitutive for it is therefore a kind of 'appropriation' or claim of ownership by the sacred or divine principle that determines the thing's fate: this appropriation is expressed by metaphors of enveloping or containing it, defining its limits, oppressing or fettering it down, or even enslaving it. Thus the underlying symbolic significance of all later hylomorphic theories of substance derives from this mythological *pairing* between the profane as *chthonic* and the sacred that expresses its divine right by gripping and grasping, appropriating, directing to an end – or 'binding and destining' in one unified sense.

Heidegger also saw this in his famous essay on "The Question Concerning Technology." In his discussion of the classical 'four causes' as four "modes of occasioning,"<sup>56</sup> he describes the 'final cause' as that which makes a work of art what it is by "circumscribing" its being.<sup>57</sup> Thus, in a

passage that would fit right into Mourelatos' argument, Heidegger concludes:

That which gives bounds, that which completes, in this sense is called in Greek *telos*, which is all to often translated as "aim" or "purpose," and so misinterpreted.<sup>58</sup>

Or rather, we might say that the *telos* does signify 'purpose,' but not in the intentional or motivational sense: it is purpose in the *appropriative* sense of claiming something by binding it to some end, drawing it like fate to its limit. The hierarchical differentiation between the *chthonic* resistant element and the sacred destining element is essential to this original sense of *telos*.

In this complex of the *chthonic* as what is bound or tied down, we therefore also find the primordial sense of *property*: 'action' as control of the *chthonic* is probably the root of the notion of "appropriation" or "taking possession" through grasping with the enclosing hand. As we have seen, the same archetypal meaning is involved in the primordial significance of *signing* or *marking* something as one's own. Note, in particular, the interesting convergence between the connotations of *sealing something closed* or binding it shut with a seal, and *sealing as signing* something with an imprint or signature that 'appropriates' it: to 'own' is originally to stamp, bind, or give the limiting 'telos.'

Thus the intimate interconnection between *Moirai* or fating power, *legein* (or binding together, gathering up), and *Ereignis* or "the event of Appropriation"<sup>59</sup> that 'gives' ("es gibt") Being and Time themselves in Heidegger's later works. But notably, in characterizing *Ereignis*, Heidegger inverts the mythic significance of Appropriation by appeal to the Neo-Platonic conception of the sacred as *superabundance*, i.e. that which overflows or gives itself so that what is lesser can exist, and withholds itself from overwhelming the imperfect or lesser being that overflows from it, without itself being reduced. For Heidegger, *Ereignis* is the "It" which "withdraws in favor of the gift which it gives;" it is a *sending* or "A giving which gives only its gift, but in giving holds itself back and withdraws..."<sup>60</sup> In other words, *Ereignis* as Heidegger imagines it is a creative upwelling that *frees* what it gives, sends it off, rather than controlling its creations or hoarding them (dragon-style) for its own use. Heideggerian *Ereignis* is thus precisely the antithesis of *chthonic* appropriation, which is what gives it such sacred overtones.

This background in turn sheds new light on Heidegger's own metaphor of "Ge-stell" or "Enframing," which he uses for the dangerous mode of human existence in which we feel compelled to "challenge" or grasp the earth, "ordering" nature into resources or "standing-reserve."<sup>61</sup> 'Ge-stell' suggests binding things into a *rigid frame*, locking them into an ossified framework of instrumental meaning, in which everything is a "stockpart, available resource, or executor, within Enframing."<sup>62</sup> In this way, *Ge-stell* is a *chthonic* mode of revealing that obscures the sacred way of revealing beings:

As a destiny, it banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing. Above all, Enframing conceals that revealing which, in the sense of *poesis*, lets what presences come forth into appearance. As compared with that other revealing, the setting-upon that challenges forth thrusts man into a relation to that which is, that is at once antithetical and rigorously ordered... Thus the challenging Enframing not only conceals a former way of revealing, bringing forth, but it conceals revealing itself, and with it That wherein unconcealment, i.e. truth, comes to pass.<sup>61</sup>

Thus Enframing is profane in a Parmenidean sense: it reduces all beings to *doxa* and obscures truth. Moreover, 'Enframing' stands for a state of *our* being in which we try to *misappropriate* a nature we can never fully own or claim to control, and so we ourselves become enslaved: through Enframing, man "comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve." In other words, humanity itself is reduced to *chthonic* status.

This reading suggests a remarkable conclusion: Heidegger's critique of modern 'technology', in favor of a quasi-divinized image of nature as the unappropriable 'gift' of Being - which has so strongly influenced many environmentalist writers - derives its force from the *symbolic* association of technology with the *chthonic* archetype. Heidegger works out the association in a typically complex analysis of Enframing as a way that Being acts violently on human *Dasein*, challenging existing persons in turn to understand nature as a set of resources appropriated to await our beck and call, "a way of revealing that holds sway in the essence of modern technology."<sup>62</sup> But the basis of this analysis lies in Heidegger's awareness of what are in fact mythological connections evident in early Greek literature, which he can use to portray modern technology and its associated way of life as profane.

It is not at all surprising that Heidegger should have inherited a notion of the profane as *chthonic*, given both the historical lineage by which these mythic archetypes passed into our philosophical tradition and his pursuit of Presocratic etymologies in an attempt to recover the prephilosophical or sacral senses of Being. As Ricoeur says, Greek interpretation of profane defilement "constitutes one of the non-philosophical sources of philosophy," which was contested and revised in philosophy.<sup>63</sup> For example, Plato's famous description of the body, "in the language of the mysteries," as "a kind of prison" for the soul<sup>64</sup> is replete with *chthonic* imagery.<sup>65</sup> Plato also tries to invert the *chthonic* significance of death by arguing that philosophy and death both *purify* the soul by separating it from that which taints, namely contact with the *chthonic* body: "people do not realize that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death."<sup>66</sup> The connection between this idea and Heidegger's later theme of authentic "being-towards-death" is clear.

But even more importantly, his reflections on Parmenides and Heraclitus

lead Heidegger to reject modern philosophy's whole conception of Being as the object of our representations, because it is *misappropriative*:

As Leibniz clearly saw, *percipere* is like an appetite which seeks out the particular being and attacks it, in order to grasp it and wholly subsume it under a concept... *Repräsentatio*, representation [*Vorstellung*], is defined as the perceptive self-arrogation (to the self as ego) of what appears.<sup>67</sup>

This construal of perception as chaotically attacking, violently binding or 'grasping,' enclosing or 'subsuming' the object by drawing it to the consuming ego is overdetermined with the very chthonic metaphors that (consciously or unconsciously) Heidegger has learned from Parmenides's *Moira*, the "destining of Being" that first "allows the presencing of what is present to arise as outer appearance and aspect," making perception possible.<sup>68</sup> Man does not grasp or master Being, but rather the *Moira* which apportions Being grasps, destines, or 'keeps' him, and death as his "outermost possibility" is an expression of this. Moreover, "man's subversion" of these relations of mastery (e.g. in making language his tool) is profane: it "drives his nature into alienation."<sup>69</sup> When misappropriated, "even God can, for representational thinking, lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance."<sup>70</sup> An authentic attitude, which allows the sacred its mastery rather than leveling it off, requires affirming our *chthonic* nature:

To be a human being means to be on the earth as mortal. It means to dwell... to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.<sup>71</sup>

Thus the juxtaposition of Heideggerian concepts with mythic paradigms of the sacred as superabundant and the profane as chthonic is certainly not *ad hoc*: the themes of Heidegger's later writings cannot be comprehended, let alone evaluated, *without* recognizing this connection. The fact that there is a direct association between the *chthonic* and the *mechanical* (as we will soon see) only strengthens this hypothesis that Heidegger's horror of modern technology is inspired by his sense that our 'technological viewpoint' is archetypally profane.<sup>72</sup>

#### 6. The *Chthonic* as Chaos and Contingency

At this point, however, another unavoidable ambiguity must be recognized. Although the telos that appropriates gives limit and definition to its matter, when it becomes an absolutely *fixed* or rigid frame, it becomes as mindless, violent, and hence *chthonic* as that which it binds up. Thus paradoxically, the sacred itself can turn *chthonic* when it takes the form of 'iron law' or absolute fate. Hence the *Moiratic* divinities that hold the Titans below (or that keep Ares bound) are inevitably, like the figure of Pluto, assimilated to the *chthonic* significance of the forces they bind so tightly: *absolute* chaos and *absolute* binding order become but two sides of the profane itself. In this section and the next, we will see how each of these motifs in turn comes to form its own complex of *chthonic* meaning.

As George Seidel points out, in Ptolemy's *Enneads*, "Chaos" is the absolute nothingness of mass utterly devoid of form,<sup>73</sup> and "Matter" (ὕλη), which is related to the Greek word for "mud or slime," is characterized as "infinite or limitless (ἀπέτατον, II. 4.15)."<sup>74</sup> This illustrates the primordial connection between the negative facticity of base matter and the archaic meaning of Chaos: both denote the unintelligible or utterly opaque. As we have already seen in the Theban legends, chaos is closely associated with autochthonic emergence. Chaos is such a powerful and embracing notion, however, that it should be considered as a motif-complex in its own right, forming one entire strand of *chthonic* metaphors. In addition to its other associations, "chaos" undeniably connotes strife, unpredictable destructive change and mutability, overwhelming and uncontrollable formlessness, etc. Thus it is a short step from "chaos" to Hesiod's "deep-swirling Oceanus," which Blumenberg rightly associates with figures such as Proteus and Medusa.

This is the aspect of the *chthonic* that is dominant in Blumenberg's novel but questionable view that "Myth is a way of expressing the fact that the world and the powers that hold sway in it are not abandoned to pure arbitrariness."<sup>75</sup> Myth so conceived is a way of *overcoming the chthonic*, conceived especially as chaos. Blumenberg believes that all mythic contents (including archetypes) are human responses to the original state that he calls "the absolutism of reality." he describes this as the feeling that the conditions of our existence are completely beyond our control,<sup>76</sup> or as an anxiety extending to the "entire horizon" of absolutely unpredictable possibilities,<sup>77</sup> and the consequent sense of being utterly abandoned to "opaque powerfulness."<sup>78</sup> But in light of our analysis, it seems clear that this hypothetical event, which Blumenberg imagines as *prior* to all mythology (and thus providing an external condition for myth, by which its hidden function can be explained) is nothing but an experience of the *profane*, and hence not pre-mythic at all: Blumenberg's "absolutism" is simply an apprehension of the *chthonic* as archetypal chaos, i.e. as horrifying unintelligibility, or exposure to pure contingency or total unpredictability, or meaningless randomness magnified to the point of oppressive totality. This itself is one type of mythological content, one central motif in a family of *chthonic* motifs.<sup>79</sup>

I shall refer to this 'chaos' strand of the *chthonic* as *gyring instability*, since chaos itself connotes swirling formlessness, like the Skyllas and Charybdises in which it is figured. Heidegger appeals to this motif, for example, when he describes the constant movement of our existential falling: "*Dasein's* facticity is such that *as long as* it is what it is, *Dasein* remains in the throw, and is sucked into the turbulence of the 'they's' inauthenticity"<sup>80</sup> (as if everydayness were a whirlwind, or a drainhole). Similarly, this chaotic

face of the *chthonic* is powerfully exhibited in Sartre's account of human facticity as implying an existential "nausea" resulting from the very insecurity of life, the 'liquidity' of our existence. Blumenberg obtains a related intuition from Freud's death instinct theory: "The risky outsider status of the organic realm as a whole is merely reflected in the existence of the individual outside the uterus, in the risky situation in which he is abandoned to his own self-preservation and self-determination."<sup>81</sup> Nausea in Sartre's special sense is motivated by everything that suggests how vulnerable the body is, prompting the giddy realization of our nothingness, our lack of secure foundation. Thus in his section on "The Body" in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that there is

a contingency without color, a pure apprehension of the self as factual existence. This perpetual apprehension on the part of my for-itself of an insipid taste which I cannot place, which accompanies me even in my efforts to get away from it, and which is *my* taste."<sup>82</sup>

As with Heidegger, of course, one may ask why Sartre should revert to a mythic sense of profanity, or whether this comparison may not be unfounded. But this doubt is reduced if we keep in mind that Sartre, like Heidegger, is committed to elucidating the most basic experiences that give meaning to existence. If the sacred-profane dyad is the most primordial contrast within the horizon of meaning as a whole, as I have suggested, then it was perhaps inevitable that in their search, existential phenomenologists would return to it, and explore the *chthonic* paradigms of its latter pole. It is compelling, in any case, to compare Sartre's sense of the in-itself to Seidel's mythographic point that "χάος [chaos] is related to γυρνοίς, which means loose, porous, or spongy."<sup>83</sup> Chaos includes the indeterminate ooze of our *chthonic* materiality and its vulnerability: Sartre sees this nauseating apprehension as an expression of the "contingency" that "remains at the heart of the for-itself," the "facticity" which "does not cease to haunt the for-itself" even though it is surpassed towards one's possibilities, which always transcend one's actual state.<sup>84</sup>

This sense of the *chthonic* as exposure to utter arbitrariness or chance defines another profane sense of 'fate.' Thus Blumenberg suggests that the system of connections drawn by sacred myth has a "life-stabilizing" function, because it insists on "the inadmissibility of the arbitrary, the elimination of caprice."<sup>85</sup> Western literature is full of figures representing this kind of chaotic arbitrariness as an unstable danger to be overcome. Consider Machiavelli's *fortuna* or Edmund Spenser's *Mutabilitae*, to take two disparate examples. As J.G.A. Pocock explains in his study of the development of republican political thought, unless the occurrence of emergencies could be attributed to eschatological providence,

The occurrence would then be without essential meaning, the sequence or time-dimension a mere spinning of the wheel. Fortune thus came to symbolize the irrationality of history, the medieval sense of the absurd... When medieval minds despaired, this symbolism appeared:

the crystal spheres revolved perfectly in the heavens, but within the orbit of the moon the consequences of the Fall caused the irrational circularities of Fortune to spin eccentrically and unchecked, and all history was summed up in the figure of Hecuba lying beneath the wheel.<sup>88</sup>

Thus in the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition inherited by later Florentine thinkers, political life is almost by definition a cooperation for the sake of *resisting fortuna* or the *chthonic* in this sense of instability.<sup>89</sup> In particular, a stable polity would be one that "escaped the cycle" of different forms of constitution (a cycle Polybius had described) by a mixed form of government that "held stable against the deforming work of time."<sup>90</sup>

This sense of our common cause against the profanity of the world - or against our *chthonic* vulnerability to chance, which is the antithesis of *fairness* - is even the intuitive basis for John Rawls's theory of justice. For Rawls starts from the ideal of a stable "scheme of social cooperation"<sup>91</sup> and the fundamental premise that no one deserves their starting position in life<sup>92</sup>; ideally, no one would be disadvantaged by "the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances."<sup>93</sup> By contrast, libertarians who lack this fundamental sense of justice seem numb to the *essential profanity* of unlimited *fortuna*, so much so that they prefer the outcomes of the 'invisible hand.' From the classical perspective, demanding that unpredictable aggregate social and economic outcomes be allowed to take their course completely unchecked is to give up the very idea of politics in pure capitulation to the chthonic. Thus the ambiguity in the meaning of the profane even makes its way into political philosophy. While the Hayekian ideal may seem to be the antithesis of the 'technological' approach of 'social engineering,' which attempts to regiment human relations by an absolute enframing design, it also becomes profane when it totally abandons human beings to the absolutism of chance.

### 7. Mechanism, Necessity, and 'Necrophilia'

We have seen that archetypally, both the extremes of complete contingency and crushing necessity appear *chthonic*, and are thus associated with the profanity of everything inimical to life. The *chthonic* is found in cyclic chaos, or the instability of strife, but as we already saw in "Enframing," it appears just as potently in motifs for utterly lifeless mechanism, or automatic 'iron law.' Throughout myth, religion, and literature, this other sense of the *chthonic* has been expressed in terms of *cyclic necessity* which, far from simply being the immanent reflection or transcendent reality (as Plato reinterpreted it), was used to provoke horror with a soteriological intention. Perhaps the most powerful example of this is evident in later Hindu notions of reincarnation and cyclic time. As Mircea Eliade argues in a famous interpretation of Indian thought, the endless *cycles of time* so emphasized in the Indian *Brahma-vaivarta Purana* are precisely intended to create an

absolute "terror of time," a realization that man is fated to an "iron ring of existences." Only this horror can motivate man to seek escape from the "world of samsara, the world of suffering" by overcoming egoity and thus breaking eschatologically out of these time cycles altogether.<sup>94</sup>

This *chthonic* necessity which characterizes profane time also helps explain a crucial feature of the experience of ritual impurity. As Ricoeur notes, from the beginning the experience of defilement is always connected to the anticipation of vengeance: "suffering is the price for the violation of order, suffering is to 'satisfy' the claim of purity for revenge."<sup>95</sup> This "primordial fatality"<sup>96</sup> refers to a sense of horrifying inevitability: impurity is disorder, a misappropriation of what *belongs* to the sacred, the Owner that *always* returns to reclaim its own. This sense of inescapable *doom* is evident, for example, in the Norse concept of the *Wierd* (or "wyrd" in Old English) which ensures the world's final return to primeval chaos. The poet of the *Wanderer* complains that his exile is bitter, but in resignation he says, "Wierd is set fast."<sup>97</sup> His condition cannot be changed, because all human existence is a kind of exile and he is subject to the law of fate. In a similar vein, the scribal addition that concludes *The Seafarer* reflects on death: "...Doom is stronger and God mightier than any man's conception."<sup>98</sup> No matter what we pretend, the law of Nature prevents man from becoming immortal. Like many early expressions of the divine, the *Wierd* thus ambiguously links the sacred and profane.

In quite a different genre, the modern psychotherapeutic tradition has recognized the significance of the chthonic-as-necessity. This paradigm of iron law is clearly evident in Erich Fromm's concept of the "necrophilous" (which he offers as a modification of Freud's theory of the death instinct). Fromm concludes his shocking analysis of the propensity to "malignant aggression" by examining "necrophilia," first in its literal clinical sense as sexual use of the dead, and then in a far broader psychological sense:

Necrophilia in the characterological sense can be described as the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. It is the passion "to tear apart living structures" (H. Von Hentig, 1964).<sup>99</sup>

We might say that necrophilia in this wider sense is 'love of the *chthonic*.' Fromm's disturbing but enormously insightful study is based, at bottom, on perceiving an antivitalist mythic motif-complex associated with the profane as that which is indifferent to and/or destroys life. But unlike Freud, Fromm preserves the final symmetry of the two principles: "love of life and love of death" remains "the fundamental alternative for every human being."<sup>100</sup> In contrast to necrophilous love, Sartrean "nausea" seems like a very healthy reaction indeed.

In fact, in light of Fromm's analysis of necrophilia, Sartre's



phenomenology of the body appears all the more clearly to be *essentially mythic*. Sartre anticipates Fromm's later view when he argues that all our understanding of the body is derived from the unavoidably 'necrophilous' perspectives of anatomy and physiology. The life of the body can be directly apprehended only by living in it, because to know the body scientifically we have to adopt the perspective of exteriority, for which the body is essentially a cadaver. Thus in Sartre's theory, even to apprehend the body as an object of cognition is "to transform" the live possibilities which it 'is' for me "into *dead-possibilities*,"<sup>101</sup> necrophilously converting the lived body with its *Einfühlung* into matter: thus "From the outset physiology is condemned to understand nothing of life since it conceives life simply as a particular modality of death, since it sees the infinite divisibility of the corpse as primary."<sup>102</sup> This infinite divisibility suggests that the body is *chthonic* prime matter, the 'substratum' which 'analysis' ever further dismembers, disassembles, and divides.<sup>103</sup>

Fromm's analysis of 'necrophilia' as a broad attitudinal category is intended to provide a psychoanalytic approach to understanding what underlies aggressive and destructive tendencies. But we should not miss its real mythological inspiration. For example, the symbol of the 'sparmagos' or profane god who is ritually dismembered (as if by a necrophilous killer) is one of the most important elements in the cosmogonic myths of many cultures. In the Norse myths, for instance, the creation of the cosmos itself takes place through a necrophilous dismembering of Ymir, the Father of Giants, whose body serves as the *prima materia* out of which things are made, and whose skull becomes the heavens. The ritual dismemberment is not a celebration of necrophilia, however, but a symbolic destruction of the profane in a way that expresses the *chthonic* character of the passive substrate worked on: the giant who is broken up is an earthbound, *chthonic* figure for all that is chaotic and negative. It is thus appropriate that Ymir becomes the 'clay' out of which all things in the cosmos are formed. The cosmogonic event involves the destruction of the monster or giant symbolizing the *chthonic*, whether through dismemberment of the *sparmagos* or the triumph over the dragon of chaos, as we have seen. Fairy tales repeat this pattern: for instance, as we saw earlier, Rumpelstiltskin ends in self-dismemberment.

Note that the passion Fromm identifies for lifeless, mechanistic 'necessity' (or for being fated to autochthonic return), has served from time immemorial as the prime expression for the most monstrous horrors that ought to repulse us if our spirit is in a healthy condition. To take a familiar example from folklore, in the story of 'Bluebeard,'<sup>104</sup> during her husband's absence, Bluebeard's wife opens the door to a room he has forbidden her to enter and discovers the dismembered corpses of his previous wives. She

cannot hide this from Bluebeard, because the magic key becomes tainted with the blood and "she could never make it quite clean; when the blood was gone from one side, it came again on the other."<sup>105</sup> This illustrates how ritual impurity or contagion (the mark on the key) draws its significance from the deeper *chthonic* motifs: although the raw material for this story may well have originated from an actual historical case of necrophilous personality disorder, it is the *interpretation* of it as an expression of archetypal profanity that makes it a fairy tale. Thus in different versions, the basic narrative structure is embellished with different chthonic elements. In the German version, which is more graphic, the heroine is the youngest of three sisters, and she reassembles the bones of her slain elder sisters to bring them back to life.<sup>106</sup> Then she tricks her husband (a wizard in this version) by dressing and ornamenting a skull and placing in the window above her doorway: the wizard mistakes it for his young bride! This substitution is horrifying precisely because it suggests that the lifeless frame is beautiful: drawn in by it, he enters the house, is locked inside (another *chthonic* element), and destroyed.

The list of examples of profane significance which fit with Fromm's sense of the necrophilous is almost inexhaustible. From the ancient stock figure of the 'necromancer' (lover of the deathly) to Edgar Allen Poe's mechanistic pendulum, iconography, literature, and other genres have been familiar with this association. Contemporary examples of that remain sensitive to this complex of *chthonic* figurations include J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which portrays the evil strongholds of "Barad-dur" and "Orthanc" as places of vast 'morlockian' engines and turning wheels. Indeed, the very phrase 'morlockian,' from H.G. Wells, is so useful because it conjures up all the associations in this strain of the *chthonic*: images of a lifeless underworld of machines where humans become drones, passively controlled and used by others, hidden like the giants and Titans away from the light and cut off from beauty.

The same scheme is repeated in film. Consider Fritz Lang's famous silent movie, *Metropolis*: in one classic scene, the underground workers appear to be 'feeding' a machine with their bodies, and the prime stratagem of the antagonist is to replace the living woman (who leads these workers to salvation) with a mechanical doppelganger, heartless metal covered with deceptive and lascivious flesh. As long as mythological significance and legend have existed, so has this motif of the *chthonic* as *necrophilous*. We saw that even Heidegger's critique of technology depends on this archive, and its influence is still felt in popular film today. Recent expressions of the *chthonic* as mechanism include George Lucas's "Death Star" from the movie *Star Wars*: a planet-sized machine covered with a meaningless 'texture' in which humans are reduced to faceless stormtroopers (the high-tech

equivalent of mortlocks). As its very name suggests, though this stronghold of the Evil Empire is the size of a small planet, it is a 'world' *entirely devoid* of the nourishing vitality of an 'earth.' Its 'ground' is entirely mechanical, entirely composed of fruitless artifice. In other words, the Death Star is a completely *technological* world in the chthonic sense of this term: it is Heidegger's (or Tolkien's or Lang's) worst nightmare. The same *chthonic* sense of mechanism gives 'the Borg' (short for 'cyborg') their horror in films like *Star Trek: First Encounter*. In the form of Borg, human beings are "assimilated;" their organic forms are fitted into a controlling mechanical frame and their individual minds absorbed into a Hegelian central absolute consciousness. They produce revulsion by tapping into our sense of the *chthonic* significance of being lost in the depth of a labyrinth (the Borg cube), of being appropriated by a 'program' not our own, or of being coerced by an absolute necessity summed up in the Borg's refrain: "resistance is futile."

#### 8. Conclusion: the Chthonic From Genesis to Postmodernity

This analysis of the chthonic has given us a brief overview of four variant complexes of figures that express 'the profane.' Although they are provisional, the results may be conveniently summarized in a table to bring out some of the most important comparisons:

Four Complexes of the Chthonic		Cyclic iron law
The depths	Tying down	'terror of time'
underworld	dead matter, opacity	lifeless mechanism
death	binding, limiting	pure necessity
descent motif	marking, appropriating	chaos as automatism
Typhoeus/Gaia	chaos as unintelligibility	corpse/necrophilia
Nyx et al.	titans, giants	

It should be noted that these four divisions are mainly heuristic and far from exhaustive, and that the forms of the *chthonic* I have distinguished here are closely interrelated, and tend to merge together in actual myth, legend, and iconography. These four basic ways in which early mythmakers were able to express their notion of the profane are each figuratively associated (as a means of paradigmatic expression) with all the others: for example, the "depths" connotes death and darkness, opaque unintelligibility (as in Plato's cave), and emerging from and being 'tied' to the ground expresses the 'enslavement' of humans to the soil, which is the very essence of *mortality*. As God says to Adam after he has sinned, "Cursed is the ground for thy sake...for dust thou art, and into dust shalt thou return."<sup>107</sup>

In fact, the *J*-author *Genesis* story of creation is replete with many of the same figures of the *chthonic* we found in the Theban cycle of legends. The serpent in Eden is an earthly creature, like Kadmus's dragon. Adam and Eve suffer from 'nausea' at becoming aware of their insecurity and exposure:

their literal lack of garments expresses the fact that they are *naked* in the most primordial, *chthonic* sense. The need to till the soil and bear children becomes for them an 'iron law' of necessity. And chaotic strife rears its head when Cain kills Abel, whose blood, God says, cries out to him *from the ground*. As God tells Cain: "And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand."<sup>108</sup> Finally, God places his mark of ownership on Cain - a 'mark' that protects because its *chthonic* significance has apotropaic power, like that of a profane Gorgon's Head.<sup>109</sup>

This biblical narrative thus provides a good example of a story in which different types of *chthonic* metaphors are combined to express the profanity of this original murder. It is against this background that Emmanuel Levinas argues that every treatment of the Other as a thing involves 'murder,' i.e. a *chthonic* reduction that attempts to misappropriate the Other or to *violate* them.<sup>110</sup> As we have seen, this theme of strife feeds into the ambiguous associations of chaos, necrophilous destructiveness, and mechanistic necessity as a paradigm for the utter lifelessness also expressed by polluted matter.

These basic paradigms of the *chthonic* are thus closely interwoven in myth, philosophy, and the history of art, yet they each constitute a discernible line of figurative associations. Together, we may say, they give sense to the one superarchetype which stands in their jointure: the profane as such. The profane pervades this entire network of mythic motifs of the *chthonic*, which are correlated in sacred myths, hero legends, and even completely 'non-sacred' genres such as fairy tales, fantasy literature, and film in the expressionist tradition.

This preliminary phenomenological analysis has also shown that a familiarity with these different sides or aspects of the profane as *chthonic* may be indispensable for understanding some central themes in existentialist philosophy. Likewise, in contemporary movements in continental thought, from 'deep ecology,' to feminist interpretations of the body, to Levinasian ethics, we find a host of positions that draw on symbolic associations to which the profane is relevant. In some cases, the negative associations of the *chthonic* are accepted as they are, and then (mis)deployed for evaluative purposes. For example, we have the idea that conceiving the 'other' through any kind of universalizing cognition is profane because it *grasps* or appropriates or metaphorically 'enslaves' them to the dominant first-person. Similarly, technology is corruptive because it is domineering and totalizing. As we have seen, 'grasping' acquires this negative connotation from its *chthonic* meaning, its symbolic association with 'pushing under' into the dark, or subjecting to iron necessity. In other cases, writers consciously invert the profane, trying to give a positive valuation to figures which have traditionally symbolized the

*chthonic*. For example, although Levinasians frequently describe the body in self-evidently *chthonic* terms as a 'gravity' which de-centers the subject by exposing consciousness to facticity, this is portrayed as *good*, since such a body is the site of lived care. My approach in this paper has the radical implication that before any satisfying resolution of these questions can be reached, we have to clarify the issues at stake by tracing these postmodern themes to their mythological origins. Only then, I think, does something closer to an objective adjudication of them first becomes possible.

Fordham University  
Bronx, New York, USA  
email: davenport@mary.fordham.edu

#### References

1. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, tr. John Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923, pb. 1953).
2. *Ibid.*, p.27.
3. *Ibid.*, p.31.
4. Such as *The Myth of the Eternal Return (or Cosmos and History)*, tr. Willard Trask, Bollingen Series Vol. 46 (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1954/Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); *The Sacred and the Profane*, tr. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1959); *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol.1-3, tr. Willard Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978-1985); *Images and Symbols*, tr. Philip Mairet (Sheen and Ward, 1969); *Myth and Reality*, tr. Willard Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). Eliade himself was inspired by Rudolph Otto's *The Holy*, as he makes clear at the beginning of *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.
5. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), H152, p.193, where he argues that entities with the character of presence-at-hand are "essentially devoid of any meaning at all" in the existential sense, and hence can appear as "absurd" against the background of our constitutive expectation of meaning.
6. In a fashion similar to Otto's analysis of the different 'moments' of the numinos.
7. I believe errors of this sort can be found in many different contexts, from the literature of the 'deep ecology' movement to opposing arguments employed by either side in the right-to-die debate.
8. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, tr. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p.27.
9. These include, for example, evil as a state contrary to human well-being or flourishing, vice or motivational evil of character, and moral injustice, either in personal action or in state action and institutions.
10. *Ibid.*, p.34.
11. I have defended this hypothesis in my paper, "The Essence of Eschatology: A Modal Interpretation", *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 19.3 (September, 1996): 206-239, \$V.
12. Ricoeur, p.35.
13. *Ibid.*, p.25.
14. This is analogous to the difficulty Heidegger perceives in capturing the "meaning of Being".
15. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Unabridged), Vol.C, p.192.
16. Hesiod, *Theogony*, tr. H.G. Evelyn-White (Loeb Classical Edition), lines 116-119, p.86.
17. *Ibid.*, p.133, lines 745-748.
18. Hesiod tells us that Zeus's champions assailed the Titans and "hurled them beneath the

wide-pathed earth" (*Theogony*, p.131, lines 717-8) ("beneath" here translating  $\chi\theta\omicron\nu\nu\alpha\zeta$  again). These three warriors of Zeus then guard the wall that rings the domain of the Titans, binding them in (lines 734-735). Significantly, one of these champions is "Gyes", whose name may be etymologically related to the legendary Lydian Gyges who finds the Ring of Invisibility. In Plato's version of this myth (at *Republic* II, 359d-360b), Gyges descends *beneath the earth* into a "chasm" opened up by an earthquake (like that described in the battle of gods and titans), finds a *corpse* buried in a bronze horse sarcophagus (a figure combining both the 'night-mare' archetype and perhaps the "fence of bronze" enclosing the Titans - *Theogony* p.131, line 725), and recovers the profane ring from its hand, which, having escaped from the underworld, corrupts its wearer. Plato's version is full of chthonic suggestions that this hypothesised link to the Titan myth would explain.

19. *Ibid.*, p.139, lines 820-827.
20. For a representative study of this narrative paradigm in many different forms, see Joseph Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).
21. In one comparative structural study alone, Jack Lynch (now of Rutgers University) has surveyed and analysed over one hundred such descent episodes in mythic narratives from cultures spanning the globe ("The Descent into Hades", 1989, unpublished paper on file with the author).
22. Hesiod, "Homeric Hymn to Demeter", *The Homeric Hymns*, p.315 (lines 353-4).
23. Pierre Amiet, "The Mythological Repertory in Cylinder Seals of the Agade Period", in *Ancient Art in Seals*, ed. Edith Porada (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.43.
24. *Ibid.*, p.44.
25. *Ibid.*, p.46.
26. According to the O.E.D., the term "chthonography" refers to "A history of description of soils" (p.193).
27. This analysis is found within Levi-Strauss' "The Structural Study of Myth" (*Journal of American Folklore*, 1955), and reprinted in revised form in his *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1963), p.215. What attention there has been to the chthonic as an archetype in recent decades may be largely due to the influence of Levi-Strauss' analysis: for example, neostructuralist articles by Claude Calame and Robert Parker in *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, ed. Jan Bremmer (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1986) discuss the theme of autochthonic origins.
28. Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Analysis of Myth", in *Structural Anthropology*, p.215-6.
29. The Chinese practice of footbinding and the archaic aesthetic valuing small and 'dainty' feet for females - although now primarily explained in terms of its function in male domination of women - may have derived in part from this negative paradigmatic significance which feet had already acquired in the earliest known mythology. We can recognise traces of the same associations in ballet, where the minimisation of foot contact with the ground (standing on tiptoes etc.) aims to create a sense of arial, almost divine separation from the base material reality of the world. In this same vein, my wife brings to my attention the emphasis on foot-imagery in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Stroke of Good Fortune".
30. Christopher Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.133-135 (see note 8 on a cylinder seal portraying the battle of Perseus and Medusa). Faraone notes that this twisting parallels the reversal of heads on voodoo dolls and witches. That reversibility, however, may derive instead from the *separability* of the dragon's head from its lower portion, or tail. Moreover, Faraone thinks that this twisting back of the foot is meant to 'turn' or inhibit the menace represented by the figure, but I suggest that the motif is essentially an expression of *chthonic* profanity - any apotropaic powers it might have derive from this more basic significance.
31. Levi-Strauss, p.214.
32. *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, tr. Margaret Hunt, tr. rev. James Stern (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p.268.

33. Amiet, *Ancient Art in Seals*, p.46.
34. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", tr. Albert Hofstadter, reprinted in *Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p.163.
35. Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Analysis Of Myth", in *Structural Anthropology*, p.215.
36. As opposed to dragons inhabiting the heavenly regions, which are generally associated with the paradigms of the sacred. Of course, these dragons 'below' and 'above' are also often figured as the tail and head of a single cosmic dragon, expressing the irreducibly equivocal unity of the profane and sacred.
37. See Faraone, pp.18-20 and p.133.
38. Wendy O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths* (London: Penguin Books), p.176.
39. Even rudimentary alphabets, such as runes, that were used to convey orally pronounceable messages in graphic form, were probably first used as 'seal-script', i.e. as signature-markers. See R.I. Page, *Runes* (Berkeley: University of California Press/British Museum, 1987). As Page notes, many of the earliest instances of runes occur on slats of wood serving as "ownership markers, tallies for sticking into bales of goods purchased" (p.8). One ancient neck ring inscribed "gutanowihailig" in runes illustrates the same motif: its runes may mean something like 'holy to the Goths' (pp.10-11). In other words, it is a ring that marks as inviolate that which it encircles.
40. *Ancient Art in Seals*, ed. Porada, "Introduction", p.3.
41. *Ibid.*, p.5.
42. This is obviously not the idea of matter as a nexus of strong and weak forces filling some quanta of the spacetime continuum in contemporary physics, but 'matter' in its original - that is chthonic - sense.
43. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H144, p.183. Note that Heidegger's descriptions of inauthenticity and human facticity as "throwness" are rife with chthonic metaphors: Dasein is "absorbed in a world" (H176, p.220, italics added), and in a kind of "downward plunge", it is pulled into the "groundlessness and nullity of inauthentic everydayness" (H178, p.223).
44. Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, tr. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p.113.
45. *Theogony*, lines 211-212, p.95.
46. Blumenberg, p.127.
47. In Aristotelian and late Platonic metaphysics, original prime matter is an *indefinite dyad* ('great and small') without determinate limit, or *apeiron* - see Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Late Ontology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp.10-11. This is the chthonic as Heraclitean flux, chaotic indetermination, that is paired with the rigid control of formal necessities, which cut or shape prime matter into objects or individual substances.
48. Mouraiatos, *The Route of Parmenides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp.25-26. Mouraiatos leaves for a later chapter the question of whether the daimon-goddess who escorts the Kourous in the Poem is another aspect of this same divine figure for the sacred power of determining Being.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, p.27. We might relate this divinity also to "the goddess loathed by the deathless gods, terrible Styx, eldest daughter of backflowing [i.e. enclosing] Ocean[us]" (Hesiod, *Theogony*, p.135, lines 776-777). For Styx is the goddess who binds the gods to their Oaths, keeping or sealing them with Necessity.
51. *Ibid.*, p.28.
52. *Ibid.*, p.28.
53. *Ibid.*, p.259.
54. *Ibid.*, pp.30-31, citing Omians.
55. *Ibid.*, p.31.
56. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, tr. & int. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp.10, 11.
57. *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.
58. *Ibid.*, p.8.
59. Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p.19.
60. *Ibid.*, p.8.
61. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", p.20.
62. *Ibid.*, p.29.
63. *Ibid.*, p.27.
64. *Ibid.*, p.20.
65. Ricoeur, p.39.
66. Plato, *Phaedo* 62b, *Five Dialogues*, tr. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p.98.
67. In particular, he argues that suicide is immoral because we are the property of the divine, and our 'imprisonment' expresses this ownership: to destroy the body is thus to misappropriate, and defile the soul - see *Phaedo*, 62b: "this seems to me well expressed, that the gods are our guardians and that men are one of their possessions" (*Five Dialogues*, p.98).
68. *Phaedo*, 64a. For death is nothing but "the separation of the soul from the body" (*Phaedo*, 64c).
69. Heidegger, "Moira (Parmenides VIII: 34-41)" from *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, reprinted in *Early Greek Thinking*, tr. David F. Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), p.82. Heidegger explicitly links this idealist misconception of perception to the profanity of Enframing in "The Question Concerning Technology": "man ... exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way, the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct" (p.27).
70. *Ibid.*, p.97.
71. Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking", in *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971): "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man" (p.148).
72. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", p.26.
73. "Building Dwelling Thinking", p.147. Of course, there is in this more than a hint of Pietism mingled with Heidegger's romanticism for his south German roots: "Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants..." (*Ibid.*, p.160).
74. Admittedly, Heidegger's attitude may also in part be a response to Junger's romanticization of technology, which was too insensitive to the chthonic side of mechanization.
75. George J. Seidel, "Chaos in Plotinus", *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne*, X.2 (1992): 211-220, p.215.
76. *Ibid.*, p.214.
77. Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, p.42.
78. *Ibid.*, p.4.
79. *Ibid.*, p.5.
80. *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.
81. This analysis thus defeats Blumenberg's attempt to claim that mythic archetypes can be explained by their hypothesized function of reducing the absolutism of reality. This original state cannot stand 'behind' the opening of mythological horizons of meaning, as Blumenberg wishes to claim, because its own sense derives from motifs for the profane that stand within (or help define) the mythological horizon of significance. Hence the existence of this horizon and its primal contents (e.g. the sacred/profane contrast) cannot be reductively explained by the kind of naturalistic evolutionary account Blumenberg has proposed.
82. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H179, p.223.
83. Blumenberg, p.90.
84. Jean-Paul Sarre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp.444-445.
85. Seidel, p.214.

86. Sartre, p.408.
87. Blumenberg, p.127. He adds, against Cassirer, that "the offensiveness of the consciousness of accident is eliminated, in mythical rationality, by connections that are not causal and are not explanations" in any proto-scientific sense (p.128).
88. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp.47-48.
89. See Pocock on the development of the humanist conception of *politieia* from its Aristotelian roots: pp.61-71.
90. Pocock, pp.77, 78.
91. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.6.
92. *Ibid.*, p.15.
93. *Ibid.*, p.12.
94. See Elisade, "Time and Eternity in Indian Thought", in *Man and Time*, Vol. 3 of *Papers From the Eranos Yearbooks* (Bollingen Series XXX - 3), ed. Joseph Campbell, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Bollingen Foundation/Pantheon Press, 1957), pp.180-186. For more on this topic, see my essay, "The Essence of Eschatology", §VII.
95. Ricoeur, p.30.
96. *Ibid.*
97. "The Wanderer", in *The Earliest English Poems*, tr. Michael Alexander (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1966, pb. 1982), p.70.
98. "The Seafarer", in *The Earliest English Poems*, p.77.
99. Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Owl Reprint), Part III, chapter 12, p.369.
100. *Ibid.*, pp.406-7.
101. Sartre, pp.401-3 (emphasis added).
102. *Ibid.*, p.457.
103. It is interesting to compare this to Fromm's suggestion - probably motivated more by the force of his theory than sound evidence - that "necrophilous behavior" can be found more frequently among medical students and physicians than in the general population (see Fromm, p.375).
104. From Charles Perrault's collection of tales, reprinted in Andrew Lang, *The Blue Fairy Book* [1889] (Dover reprint, 1965): 290-295.
105. *Ibid.*, p.292.
106. "Fitcher's Bird", in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*: 216-220, p.218.
107. King James Bible, *Genesis*, verses 17-19.
108. *Ibid.*, *Genesis*, verse 11.
109. There is even a remarkable structural relation between the story of the Fall and the elements in the Cycle of Thebes, which would repay closer investigation. In the Theban legend, we have: (1) a symbol of strife (the warring army emerging from the dragon's teeth which stand for planted seeds), (2) a curse for kin-slaying (on King Oedipus), and (3) a bad grain harvest, due to the *miasma* (or plague-like profanity) of Oedipus's (unintended) sin with his mother. In *Genesis*, we have: (3') a bad grain harvest (the implied reason why Cain the farmer is jealous of his brother the shepherd), (1') strife (Cain's fratricide) and its polluting profanity (Abel's blood), and finally (2') the curse and mark on Cain. A purely morphological analysis might suggest that these stories are simply variant versions of the same narrative structure, with different orderings of the same chthonic elements.
110. As with Heidegger, Levinas's ethics turns on the latent meanings involved in the mythological significance of the *chthonic* as negative and abhorrent.