

Introduction

Honor is a title of respect that is bestowed on something or someone because of proven worth or merit—or perhaps simply because of rank. It can also distinguish a person who demonstrates integrity—that is, consistency and steadfastness in his or her beliefs and actions. But what could it mean to speak of the honor of thinking? In what sense can thinking be distinguished by this term, which has a decidedly pompous ring in many languages? Indeed, the word “honor” resonates differently in various languages; for instance, the English “honor” and the French *honneur* are certainly less charged than the German *Ehre*, which continues to resonate with the culturally normative role it has played in the past as a social and cultural regulator. Is it because of thinking’s special accomplishments, of its position or status, that thinking can claim a mark of honor? If this is the case, then the question at once becomes: higher than what? Or is it because of the high-minded principles in strict conformity to which thinking operates that it could be seen as honorable? Then again, perhaps the honor of thinking is determined by that with which thinking concerns itself? Perhaps, certain issues, topics, or objects—rather than others—are more conducive to “honoring” thinking. Let us also bear in mind that honor is always good public esteem, and it presupposes the communal—if not the general—recognition of what is thus distinguished. Is this to say that to refer to the honor of thinking is to allude to an essential public nature, task, and role that would be its own? Is this emphasis on the honor of

thinking a reminder that thinking pertains to humankind as such and that its thrust is by nature universal? How could we make such a weighty claim without seeming preposterous? Furthermore, does the title *The Honor of Thinking* not also invoke a concept of honor that would be specific to thinking—say, a philosophical conception of honor distinct from what is commonly understood by this term—a concept that is only somewhat in tune with the connotations of the term in specific languages? Finally, does such talk of the honor of thinking not also suggest that its honor is in question—perhaps even in jeopardy—and that, therefore, expanding on it is an urgent necessity? What precisely is it that is imperiled in thinking? Is it its own self-understanding, the principles that it is supposed to uphold and to which it should conform, or its claim to universality? Or is thinking putting its own honor in danger by misinterpreting itself, by conceiving of itself merely as intellect or as merely a means for something else? Is the honor of thinking then something in need of being saved? If, indeed, the honor of thinking is at stake, we must ask precisely what it is that might threaten the alleged honor of thinking. In other words, is the honor of thinking threatened merely by external causes or does thinking itself endanger its own inmost honor?

As an homage to the philosophical accomplishments of Jean-François Lyotard, this book borrows its title, *The Honor of Thinking*, from his opus magnum, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, which, in its preface, raises the question of “how to save the honor of thinking.”¹ We will explore this question in the two chapters of this book that are devoted to Lyotard, in which some of the aforementioned matters are addressed within the framework of Lyotard’s thought. But the demarcation of thinking from critique, theory, and philosophical thought that this book’s subtitle suggests warrants a broader introductory sketch of the issue of the honor of thinking, and, in particular, of the reasons why critique, theory, and philosophy may not fully live up to the exigencies of thinking.

According to Immanuel Kant, dignity (*Würde*) and nobility (*Adel*) set human beings apart from all other beings. Yet, if these characteristics pertain to human beings, and to them alone, it is insofar as they are capable of reason (*Vernunft*)—not because they are in possession of understanding (*Verstand*), hence, capable of rational thinking as differential and cognitive thinking (*Verstandesdenken*), for as *animalia rationalia*, they still belong to nature. Only insofar as human beings are persons (rather than merely natural, or sensible, beings)—that is, insofar as they are subjects of

moral and practical reason—are they endowed with a dignity that raises them above all things and other living beings. Put differently, what makes us recognize our dignity as well as that of every other human being and, consequently, what leads us to show respect for ourselves and others is that each and every human being as a being capable of self-thinking incarnates nothing less than mankind as a whole. As a person, the human being is, therefore, an end or a purpose in itself. According to Kant, dignity as “an absolute inner worth,” implies that the “human being cannot be used merely as a means by any other human being (either by others or even by himself), but must always be used at the same time as an end.” He remarks that the acknowledgment of the human being’s dignity is the acknowledgment of “a worth that has no price, no equivalent for which the object evaluated could be exchanged.”² In sum, the dignity or nobility that the human being as a moral being capable of reason can lay claim to is that of universal mankind. Dignity and nobility are, thus, terms that indicate universal rank.

Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is faced with antinomies that derive from reason’s striving to extend its domain beyond the limits of experience, thus soaring to lofty ideas; he at first acknowledges the “dignity and worth” of philosophy manifest in such a progressive extension of the employment of reason. If nonetheless, for Kant, the honor (*Ehre*) of reason is at stake in such an extension, it is because by thus seeking to give satisfaction to the highest ends with which humanity is most closely concerned, reason finds itself “compromised by the conflict of opposing arguments,” and hence divided against itself. Indeed, what these opposing arguments put into question is not only the unity of reason, but also its universality. Consequently, the imperative “to defend . . . the honor of human reason,” as the early Kant formulates it, derives above all from the fact that “reason” stands for the human being’s highest aspirations and expectations.³ In *Rogues*, Jacques Derrida refers to these Kantian statements, as well as to Edmund Husserl’s call for a rehabilitation, or *Ehrenrettung*, of reason in order to suggest that today the honor of reason is at stake, and that it is, perhaps, “a matter of saving the honor of reason”; but it is also in order to uphold the intractable demand of the unconditional—which is intrinsically linked to what is called reason—against all calculating thought.⁴ Furthermore, as Derrida’s discussion of Husserl’s diagnosis of a crisis of European rationality caused by the naturalistic and objectivist turn of the sciences reveals, it is reason itself that is responsible for its crisis,

because the calculating rationality of the modern sciences is reason's own product. This calculating rationality, which has made European rationality sick, cannot be surrendered because it is a legitimate form of reason itself, but the unconditional and the incalculable must nonetheless be upheld against it.⁵ It follows from this that the need to save the honor of reason, in the face of the crisis undergone by reason, does not originate in some historically accidental and limited situation but responds to an internal division of reason that is intrinsic to reason itself. But, if the need to save the honor of thinking derives from conflicting demands of reason itself, can one then not also say that to save the honor of reason is the most elementary movement of reason itself? Perhaps reason has to be constitutionally saved from itself, and it is only reasonable, first and foremost, in bringing its unconditional demands to bear on calculating rationality.

However, what can it mean to speak of the honor of thinking, and, eventually, of the necessity "to save the honor of thinking"? Apart from making reference to Lyotard, my emphasis on thinking in the demand to save the honor of thinking also elicits Martin Heidegger's privileging of thinking over philosophy, although Heidegger, to my knowledge, never speaks of the honor of thinking or of the need to save it. Indeed, among the contemporary thinkers, Heidegger is the one, who, after the turn most forcefully asserted the primacy of thinking over all forms of philosophizing. Thinking is the counter-concept to both philosophical and scientific thought as representational and calculating thought. Furthermore, all of the thinkers whose work will be discussed in part 3, "Philosophy"—Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Lyotard, and Derrida—are driven by Heidegger's question, "What is called thinking?" Therefore, in the following pages, Heidegger's claim for a primacy of thinking will be given special attention.⁶ From the perspective of common sense, no less than from that of philosophical thinking, such a concern with thinking alone is usually presumed indifferent to the realm of the practical. Heidegger, by contrast, in the "Letter on Humanism," for instance, remarks that "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."⁷ But as Hannah Arendt, for one, observes, to hold that thinking is acting is a dishonest claim. In the name of honesty (*Ehrlichkeit*), one must, she writes, insist on distinguishing thinking as contemplation—in other words, as a concern with what is essential—from praxis.⁸ However,

thinking, as understood by Heidegger, is not contemplation—that is, a theoretical gazing at the essence of what is—and does not stand in contrast to praxis, as is the case with theory. Yet, the title, *The Honor of Thinking*, rather than merely speaking of honesty—that is, the uprightness, integrity, or truthfulness of thinking—evokes the honor of thinking. But, how and when does the question of honor become an issue? Even when thinking is understood as contemplation, that is, when—rather than being of the order of an apprehending response to what calls upon thought to be addressed in a thinking mode—it is regarded as (merely) thoughtful gazing at what is essential for the sake of thinking alone, the rank of that which thinking contemplates decides its honor. If, furthermore, the object of contemplation concerns things or situations that calculating thought ignores, and to which it blinds itself, then thinking is already no longer merely contemplative. Whether thinking addresses that which metaphysical thought has, for essential reasons, been unable to think—in other words, Being itself—or whether it understands itself as being truly thinking only on the condition that it respond to extreme encounters (such as speaking up when a victim has been wronged absolutely, that is, deprived of even the means of testifying) or when and where situations are aporetic and undecidable, the very act of thinking is no longer merely contemplative and inconsequential. But, apart from the kinds of objects that thinking addresses, the form of thinking bears on its honor as well. The honor of thinking is at stake at any moment when thinking is subject to external constraints and subservient to, among other things, ideological, pragmatic, or religious concerns. A form of thinking that does not also produce and secure, in Kantian terms, self-thinking and the autonomy of the person, surrenders its honor. Could one not argue therefore that it is in this sense (at least, but certainly not limited to it) that one has to understand Heidegger's claim that thinking is praxis in an eminent sense? Undoubtedly, if thinking can be understood as the highest form of doing, it is not because thinking would create a subject who by his very autonomy stands in an opposition to the world and to others, but because it relates the human being to the meaning of Being without which the human does not come into its essence and, from which alone, all his other activities can become meaningful.

When we oppose thinking to philosophy, it is not a question of confronting the latter with what one could call “mere thinking,” that is, a

mental activity directed without any discrimination toward objects in general.⁹ On the contrary, for Heidegger, thinking is a highly determined mode of being (rather than an activity) not only insofar as it is understood as an apprehending (*Vernehmen*), or hearing (*Hören*), but also through what thinking apprehends, and to which as a hearing it belongs. If the essential nature of thinking is, as Heidegger contends, “determined by what there is to be thought about: the present (*Anwesen*) of what is present, the Being of beings,” then it is clear that to philosophize is not yet necessarily to think.¹⁰ Indeed, to think Being and to question it as the opening or clearing that grants the appearance of all beings is not the matter of philosophy. What determines the essence of thinking remains concealed to philosophy as philosophy and constitutes what Heidegger terms philosophy’s “unthought.” If, consequently, philosophizing is no guarantee in itself that thinking occurs, it is not simply because in our times philosophizing has become more than ever a ludicrous thing or a pompous pretension. Largely a thing of the academy and part of the so-called humanities, doing philosophy today consists mostly of historical or textual commentaries on the texts of the tradition; of critically probing, in conformity with certain disciplinary and institutional constraints, criteria and rules, arguments taken out of context; or of epigonic variations on previous philosophical accomplishments, however brilliant. As is well known, this situation is, according to Heidegger, the consequence of philosophy’s development as metaphysics into the independent sciences in which it finds its legitimate completion. As Heidegger writes, “Philosophy is ending in the present age. It has found its place in the scientific attitude of socially active humanity.”¹¹ This diagnosis of philosophy’s ending in the present does not mean that there are no philosophies anymore, nor that philosophizing no longer takes place, but we must remember that even when preoccupation with philosophy and its problems is serious, this is not yet evidence of any readiness to think. Heidegger writes: “The learned world is expending commendable efforts in the investigation of the history of philosophy. There are useful and worthy tasks, and only the best talents are good enough for them, especially when they present to us models of great thinking. But even if we have devoted many years to the intensive study of the treatises and writings of great thinkers, the fact is still no guarantee that we ourselves are thinking, or even are ready to learn thinking. On the contrary—preoccupation with philosophy more than anything else may give us the stubborn illusion that we are thinking just

because we are incessantly ‘philosophizing.’”¹² Indeed, it is not only because philosophy has come to an end in our age that we are not yet thinking according to Heidegger, but also because philosophy itself—that is, qua metaphysics—has deterred the need to think. Such a claim, however, in no way implies any disrespect for philosophy, nor a disparagement of its greatness, but only an awareness that philosophizing and thinking are not the same. For Heidegger, thinking is a possibility of philosophy, one that the completion of philosophy as it evolves into the sciences has not yet been able to address precisely because of what philosophy is about. Rather than a “*last* possibility,” that is, “the dissolution of philosophy in the technologized sciences,” the possibility of thinking that has not yet been actualized is a “*first* possibility,” or “a possibility from which the thinking of philosophy had to start, but which as philosophy it could nevertheless not experience and adopt.” Thinking thus remains a task, one that is still “reserved for thinking in a concealed way in the history of philosophy from its beginning to its end, a task accessible neither to philosophy as metaphysics nor, and even less so, to the sciences stemming from philosophy.”¹³ Compared to “the greatness of the philosophers” and their philosophizing, thinking and its task are “less (*geringer*) than philosophy.” Great philosophy is already less assuming, more modest, and even more sober-minded than technology and the sciences, in which the extreme possibilities of philosophy have found their completion; this is even truer of thinking whose direct or indirect effects are felt even less than those of philosophy. But if in distinction to great philosophy, thinking remains unassuming, it is “because its task is only of a preparatory, not a founding character.”¹⁴ Rather than creating epochs, or even worldviews, thinking only seeks to awaken the not yet actualized possibility of philosophy at the very moment at which the latter has come to an end. The thinking in question is itself, therefore, something still to be learned, and that from which thinking receives its essential determination—the matter of thinking—is itself something that always remains in need of being secured. Even though this thinking has a rigor of its own, it does not have the assurance and security that institutionalized rules of philosophizing, which have been handed down to us, traditionally provide. To quote Arendt, this thinking is “thinking without bannister,” thinking without guardrails.¹⁵ The contours of the possibility for which thinking prepares, therefore, remain uncertain, and thinking qua thinking necessarily runs the risk of missing the mark.

Putting the emphasis on thinking serves thus, first and foremost, to demarcate it from philosophy and philosophizing. The reference in the title of this book to the honor of thinking acknowledges this necessity of distinguishing between the two. However, setting thinking and philosophy apart is not merely a matter of breaking free from philosophy's legitimate exigencies, nor a declaration that anything goes. But, even in order to be able to think only a little bit, a strategically calculated and highly vigilant suspension of the institutionally established norms of philosophy as an academic discipline and also of the seemingly legitimate demands of philosophical thought in the metaphysical tradition is required—particularly, if thinking is to do justice to the conflicting demands from within the tradition itself. Now, as we have seen, thinking, for Heidegger, is entirely suspended from and determined by the unthought of philosophy as metaphysics, that is, by thinking's relation to Being as the clearing for the unconcealment of beings. Although the Heideggerian question of Being is a question that cannot be bypassed, we cannot allow the Heideggerian determination of Being to monopolize thinking. There may be “more” than the Opening, or clearing, of Being to which thinking needs to open itself up. In order to remain thinking, thinking cannot let itself be saturated, not even by the call of Being. If it is to be true to itself, thinking must remain constitutionally open to respond even to the call(s) of what remains as yet unforeseeable and unthinkable. It may therefore be necessary to “think thinking otherwise,” as Derrida has put it.¹⁶ Given Heidegger's appropriation of the term “thinking” for a responsiveness in thought to Being, “thinking” may even be too charged a concept for what still remains to be thought.

Let us recall Heidegger's assertion that thinking is perhaps the highest form of praxis. Such a claim is, of course, meant to counter the objection that action, rather than thought, is what is lacking. But if Heidegger suggests that it could well be that “man for centuries now acted too much and thought too little,” this is not because “the time of theory” has come, as Theodor W. Adorno once proclaimed in the sixties, arguing that the call for “action now” chains thought and brings it to a halt precisely where thinking would have to continue in order to arrive at the place where finally something could be changed.¹⁷ Indeed, Heidegger's affirmation that thinking is perhaps the highest form of praxis also means that thinking is not of the order of the theoretical, for only theory stands in direct opposition to praxis. Undoubtedly, Heidegger acknowledges that the way in

which the Greeks conceived of *theoria* emphasized its grand nature and lofty design. They understood *theoria* and the *bios theoretikos* as the highest form of doing, and the most perfect form of human existence, not in the least because the Greeks, who, according to Heidegger, thought in a unique way out of their language, also heard in the word *theoria* the word *ora*, that is, “the respect we have, the honor and esteem we bestow.” Thus apprehended, *theoria* is “the reverent paying heed to the unconcealment of what presences.”¹⁸ But if thinking as the highest form of doing is not theoretical, this also means that it is not theoretical in the sense of what Greek *theoria* has become in the modern sciences. Certainly, the Greek conception of *theoria* is itself not without ambiguities, but the refusal to conflate thinking and theory is rooted in the need to demarcate thinking from what theory has come to mean in the modern sciences, which largely dominate our understanding of theory today. As Heidegger remarks, “The interest of the sciences is directed toward the theory of the necessary structural concepts of the coordinated areas of investigation. ‘Theory’ means now supposition of the categories, which are allowed only a cybernetical function, but denied any ontological meaning.”¹⁹ Theory in the modern sense is a deductive system in view of the explication of given facts, and, hence, is dependent on a naturalistic view of the world, which theory advances while being grounded in it. For the present purpose, it will suffice to recall that modern science—hence, theory—is grounded in the fundamental experience of Being that characterizes the metaphysical ground-situation of Western science and cognition, that is, in the experience of that which presences as object in objects and which consists in securing and entrapping what presences in such objectness. But even if the doing of thinking is not theoretical in the sense of the theory of the sciences, it is nevertheless not practical in our common sense. Although theory implies a clear distinction from praxis, the latter shares with it the same representational relation to Being as presence-at-hand. By contrast, the deed of thinking is “neither theoretical nor practical, nor is it the conjunction of these two forms of behavior.”²⁰

Undoubtedly, the title of this work, *The Honor of Thinking*, seems to suggest a supremacy of thinking over theory. However, registering reservations with respect to the concept of theory in no way entails a suspicion of theory for, say, annihilating the specificity of that which it deals with, abandoning concreteness for lofty abstractions, or for simply being obscure and convoluted. Resistance to theory does not amount to hostility

against theory. Declarations against theory are hopelessly naive, and even self-contradictory. This is the case whether their authors profess to follow an approach that is more American (i.e., a pragmatist approach in the humanities) than continental (i.e., a theoretical approach) or whether they are terrified of becoming politically irrelevant by deferring to theory, and, therefore, intend to go it alone without theory. In contrast, Heidegger's reticence to embrace theory is founded in thinking's broader task. Yet, he never disregards theory; on the contrary, he fully recognizes the technical interpretation of thinking that it entails, whatever some of its disastrous consequences may be, as what also constitutes the grandeur of the metaphysical heritage of the West. Heidegger's reservations regarding theory are fueled by what modern theory has faded out from early Greek *theoria* in whose shadow, and in reaction to which, it still proceeds. But we should not limit ourselves to Heidegger's reservations in expressing a guardedness with respect to theory while revaluing thinking. Contemporary developments in literary theory are a further motivation for registering a reticence regarding "theory." Indeed, what has come to be known as "theory" in many of North America's literature departments, is, in fact, a specifically North American phenomenon and artifact: "theory" (or Theory), otherwise unspecified, is not theory in the sense of the modern sciences, but basically means continental philosophy.²¹ Whatever the specific cultural and, especially, academic reasons for such a translation have been, the reason for resisting calling "continental philosophy" theory is that the label "theory" divests so-called continental philosophy of nothing less than its character of thought and philosophical nature. Furthermore, because theory in this sense neither encompasses continental thought in the entirety of its tradition nor pays attention to what motivated its developments, it is unaware of the exigencies of that tradition for interpreting the texts that are part of it; it is thus more often than not highly eclectic and selective, referring above all to contemporary developments in French philosophy and literary studies—that is, to what came to be known as French postmodern thought. Therefore, to uphold thinking in the face of "theory" is also to resist the impoverishment of continental thought that the label "theory" produces and to advocate a responsibility toward the tradition of continental philosophy as a whole, without which a critical break in a thinking mode with this tradition makes no sense. Finally, to reassert thinking over theory is also to take into account the fact that, paradoxically, the one

thinker whose writings have become eminently associated with theory in this latter sense—Jacques Derrida—has time and again asserted that deconstruction is not a theory, and has, for essential reasons, no theoretical status. The advocates of “theory” pay no attention to the fact that deconstruction cannot be theoretical either if it is not to be another philosophy even when it takes the form of a philosophical or theoretical inquiry. Indeed, compared to what theory has always meant, Derridean thought does not aim at epistemologically totalizing and mastering regions of given objects.²² It is, therefore, theoretical neither in a philosophical nor in a scientific sense. But, in addition to questioning the criteria that would make a theory of it, deconstruction is also a manner of thinking intimately interlaced with ethical and political concerns, and in this sense, not theoretical either.²³

Nonetheless, to highlight thinking and to demarcate it from theory is not at all to argue for its irrelevance, nor to insinuate some supremacy of thinking over theory. Thinking does not occur in the denigration of theory or in the cutting of all ties to it, leaving it behind for a new approach that would be exempt from all theoretical implications, as it were. Thinking is neither a new fad nor a novel activity nor a domain that has only lately come into being. In the case of Heidegger, we have already pointed out that, compared to theory, thinking pursues a more modest task, namely, to link theory back to *theoria*. The characteristic modesty of thinking is also what intrinsically inhibits it from making any claims to priority. But Derrida does not, as Richard Rorty holds, “simply drop theory.”²⁴ Rather, what is at stake in Derrida’s resistance to theory is the demand “to exceed the theoretical rather than to hinder it and take positions ‘against theory.’”²⁵ A thinking that exceeds the theoretical does not leave it behind but comprises the confrontation of theory with the structural limits that its very enabling conditions impose on its totalizing and stabilizing enterprise. It also follows from this that thinking does not make theorizing obsolete—totalization and mastery remain as necessary as ever, except that theory needs to face both the structural limits of its conditions of possibility and the metaphysical (but also ideological and political) character of many of its claims. Theory continues to have its place, but “reformed,” as it were, within and with respect to thinking.

But what about the relation of thinking to critique or criticism? On the surface, the question is, of course, also motivated by the fact that like

“theory,” the words “critique” and “criticism” are used today in ways otherwise unspecified. Indeed, literary criticism in the English-speaking world is still referred to simply as “criticism,” and in the wake of the importation of French thought of the sixties and seventies into North American literature departments, “critique” and “criticism” have become synonymous with “theory.” “Critical theory,” distinct in all respects from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, has been the title of a more theoretical approach to literary studies. But setting thinking apart from critique and criticism does not only, or even primarily, take issue with this relatively recent phenomenon, for the concept of critique has a long and complex history within philosophical thought. In particular, since the Enlightenment, critique belongs to the fundamental capacities of our cultural identity and self-understanding. But what is critique or criticism in the first place? Needless to say, no elaborate or general definition of critique is to be expected here, but only the bare contours of the concept are provided so as to make the necessity of a demarcation of thinking from critique plausible.²⁶

As they are commonly understood, critique and criticism have a negative ring and mean faultfinding and unfavorable judgment. But given that the concept of critique in modernity has its origins in Descartes’ effort to establish an indubitable foundation for the explanation of what is by way of methodical and universal doubt, critique also entails a new and radical negativity of thought.²⁷ But is this the sense of “critique” when critique is contrasted with thinking? Is thinking distinct from critique because it is essentially positive and affirmative? Or, by contrast, could it be that from the perspective of thinking, critique is not sufficiently negative? Finally, what if the distinction in question derives from thinking’s irreducible nature to the binary opposition of negativity and positivity? When critique as faultfinding does not occur just for its own sake, it involves judgment about the truth or merit of what is judged—in other words, it presupposes a definite standard of what is essential. The negativity of critique is thus a function of a self-evident positivity held to be fundamental and unshakable. Furthermore, since the notion of critique derives from the Greek verb *krinein* (to separate, to distinguish, to choose, to decide), critique entails the assumption of the possibility of clear-cut, pure distinction and discrimination. The reticence of thinking with respect to critique derives from these unquestioned, if not uncritical, presuppositions of self-evident truth and purity that underlie, and essentially determine the concept of

critique. Let us also remind ourselves of the fact that throughout the eighteenth century, which Kant, in *Critique of Pure Reason*, labeled “in especial degree, the age of criticism” and to which our use of “critique” today remains largely indebted, critique was above all critique of prejudice and established authority, and hence was intimately tied to a conception of the human being as capable of self-thinking, hence autonomous, and free from religious and political authorities.²⁸ However fitting and necessary such criticism was and is today, thinking cannot take the Enlightenment ideas of freedom and of the autonomy of the human individual simply at face value. Not to interrogate the presuppositions of these ideas would, paradoxically, imply a lack of critical vigilance on the part of thinking.

But no discussion of the concept of critique and criticism can skirt the Kantian concept of critique. Indeed, notwithstanding Kant’s statement that his age is the age of criticism, the concept of critique only really became a concept in its own right with Kant’s radical conception of critique as a self-critique of reason by way of which reason subjects itself to its own standard and achieves self-knowledge, as well as a knowledge of its inherent boundaries. It is true that in the eighteenth century, a theory of critique had already come into existence in which critique was deemed the art of judgment in general (*ars judicandi*); however, only Kant’s understanding in his critical philosophy of critique as the self-policing of reason elevated the concept of critique to the level of a key concept and endowed it with a discreteness that retrospectively became the signature of the century.²⁹ Notwithstanding the progressive dissolution of the radicality of the Kantian concept of critique, which, as some have argued, had already begun with Kant’s immediate followers, it is this conception that supplied critique’s prominence, which for us today is a given, and put it on par, as it were, with theory.³⁰

The radicality of critique in the Kantian sense—which has been heralded by many as inaugurating an epochal change—is owed, at first, to its thorough destruction of the pretensions and dialectical illusions of reason. But critical destruction is not an aim in itself. By inquiring, for example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, into the sources of theoretical cognition, the task of critique is limited to the, indeed, rather modest ambition to overcome dogmatism and skepticism alike by securing the minimal, but firm, foundation for the much more ambitious project of establishing a future metaphysics. In *What Is a Thing?* Heidegger takes a brief look at the origin

of the term “critique” in the Greek verb *krinein* and suggests that Kant’s understanding of critique and criticism, like the original meaning of the Greek word, has no negative connotations. He writes: “‘Critique’ comes from the Greek *krinein*, which means ‘to sort’ (*sondern*), ‘to sort out’ and thus ‘to lift out that of special sort’ (*das Besondere herausheben*). This contrast against others arises from an elevation of a new order. The sense of the term ‘critique’ is so little negative that it means the most positive of the positive, the positing of what must be established in advance in all positing as what is determinative and decisive.” Since, of course, such positing of what is determinative and decisive entails “separation and lifting out of the special, the uncommon, and, at the same time, decisive,” critique, by implication, also acquires a negative meaning.³¹ Indeed, as we have seen, *krinein* is also rendered as “to separate,” “to sever,” “to distinguish,” and “to decide.” But let us also remind ourselves of the fact that in the eighteenth century, critique became a concern of its own in conjunction with the emerging philosophical discipline of aesthetics. As Heidegger remarks: “Critique meant establishing the standard, the rules, legislation; and this at the same time means the elevation of the general over against the special [*dem Besonderen*]. In this contemporary direction of meaning lies Kant’s use of the term ‘critique.’”³² Needless to say, the positive that is exhibited in Kant’s radical review of the faculty of pure reason is reason’s proper nature—its elements and the rules that govern its different possibilities.

Whence, therefore, comes the urge to demarcate thinking from critique? Is it because criticism, even in its Kantian radicality, is not sufficiently critical and leaves out certain presuppositions on which it rests from its critical undertaking? Is critique hampered from within by the positivity that it seeks to throw into relief? Does not even Heidegger’s fundamental understanding of critique, which, by relating it to its early Greek meaning as a contrasting of the decisive, then also fail to think critique to its end? As Gilles Deleuze has remarked, “Kant is the first philosopher who understood critique as having to be total and positive *as* critique. Total because ‘nothing must escape it’; positive, affirmative, because it can not restrict the power of knowing without releasing other previously neglected powers.” But he also emphasizes that rather than making good on his general project of a radical critique, “Kant merely pushed a very old conception of critique to the limit, a conception which saw critique as a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to knowledge and truth, but not on

knowledge and truth themselves; a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to morality, but not on morality itself.”³³ According to Deleuze, Friedrich Nietzsche, who “in the *Genealogy of Morals*, wanted to rewrite the *Critique of Pure Reason*,” was the first to realize the project of a critique, which, as an internal or immanent critique, puts also reason itself into question insofar as it is not only the faculty that is judged, but also the judging faculty.³⁴ All-pervading critique, for Deleuze, is the strength of active forces that turn negation into the power of affirming sense and values, creating the new and the future. “Critique is destruction and joy, the aggression of the creator. The creator of values cannot be distinguished from a destroyer, from a criminal or from a critic: a critic of established values, reactive values and baseness.”³⁵ Yet, is thinking’s reservation regarding critique adequately described by characterizing Kant’s critique, or any other forms of critique, as “a false critique” to be opposed to Nietzsche’s “true critique,” thus reintroducing the value of truth that internal critique, precisely, was supposed to overcome?³⁶

As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has argued, the credit owed to Kant for having initiated an epoch-making event rests less on the critical nature of his thought, through which, for the first time, metaphysics puts itself into question, and more on what such a critique presupposes—namely, that, in order to be a critique, “critique must reminisce [*remémorer*] the whole of metaphysics *ab initio*. From this perspective, critique is the first philosophical anamnesis of philosophy and, hence, the first belated [*après-coup*] resounding, in the figure of lucidity, of the Platonic decision.”³⁷ In other words, the self-critique of reason that Kant stages throughout the three *Critiques* rests not only on the confrontation of the whole of philosophy hitherto, but also on the lucid recognition of the Platonic decision to sever philosophical thought from its others, in particular, from the arts. If Kant’s critical enterprise opened up a new age, it is precisely because it entails revisiting the Platonic decision and opens thinking up again to its others. But does this opening up of thinking not also throw a critical light on criticism as well? By putting the Platonic distinction into question, does Kant not also put the metaphysical understanding of critique as pure separation into question? Is he not forced to acknowledge intrinsic limits to the need, however necessary, to sever the necessary from the accidental, the essential from the contingent, the pure from the impure, and so forth? Furthermore, does this problematization of the Platonic decision not also

imply that freedom from impurity, hence clear-cut binarism, is, rather than a fact of essence, essentially of the order of a demand and thus something that can only be accomplished and striven after but never be achieved in a full and unequivocal manner? Rather than objecting to Kant's criticism on the basis that it is not sufficiently critical because it is too timid to realize in full its severing nature, we should examine the inherent limits of critique's ability both to put what is decisive into relief by contrasting it against others and to radically accomplish the operation of critical severing, which thus come into view. Kant's criticism would thus not only be a radical criticism that puts the dogmatic assumptions of critique into question, but would also be the beginning of thinking. If thinking can neither entirely embrace critique nor become its full incarnation, this is precisely because of an inherent dogmatism of all critique: the critical idea is founded not only on the assurance or *doxa* that binary severing is ultimately possible without also being rendered impossible from within, but also on the uncritical faith in the salutary nature of what critique tries to sever off in strokes of uncontaminated purity and the desirability of thus achieved purity and ideality. By questioning the critical ground of assumptions on which critique rests, as well as that which necessarily limits critique from within, thinking is unconditionally critical of all the conditions on which the critical idea is grounded. Such a criticism of critique turns thinking into a hypercriticism, as it were.

Let us call to mind one more time that like the notion of "theory," "critique" is used as a name for the practice of close reading, rhetorical reading, or "deconstructive" reading in the North American academy as a result of the reception of so-called French postmodern thought—particularly, of deconstruction. Ironically, no one has more clearly resisted identifying deconstruction with critique than Derrida. Yet, according to Derrida, deconstruction, although critical of critique, "does not seek to discredit critique. Deconstruction unrelentingly relegitimizes the necessity and the heritage of critique without, however, neither renouncing the genealogy of the critical idea nor the history of the question and supposed privilege of interrogative thought."³⁸ Deconstruction can give rise to critical effects because of its unconditional criticism of the dogmatism of critique, but "it is even *critique* in an essential manner," a "radical critique," more precisely, a "hypercritique."³⁹ Whatever the subject matter that thinking consists in, critique belongs to thinking in an essential way. However, to the extent that critique has its roots in an uncritical ground set of

presuppositions, it itself needs to be thought. Hypercritique directed at critique seeks to exceed critique without, however, compromising it in the least. In thinking critique otherwise, radical and interminable hypercritique expropriates critique from all reassuring certitudes, above all from the certitude of disposing of unequivocal, definite, and determined oppositions, and opens it up to what, therefore, is by definition indeterminate, incalculable, and unforeseeable—to what exceeds binary determination, and which, therefore, escapes the categorization sought by the latter. Hypercritique makes critique into a duty, but by submitting it to criticism, it also outlines within critique a space for that which is other than the determinable and the determined other that critique severs from its opposite, and which as a noncategorizable other remains an other yet to come.⁴⁰

The preceding discussion of critique, theory, and philosophy concerns some specifically internal threats that puts thinking into question. The honor of thinking is, indeed, at stake when thinking is conflated with “critique,” “theory,” and “philosophy.” Yet, if critique, theory, and philosophy imperil thinking from within, this is because they necessarily arise from within thinking itself and accomplish tasks that are intimately tied to it. However, there is not *one* thinking that critique, theory, and philosophy threaten with annihilation. Thinking is not a unified and separate undertaking. Rather, thinking is multiple from the start and takes shape only by way of such differentiation and multiplication of its forms. But although it takes place in the shape of these various undertakings that are critique, theory, and philosophy, it is also what ceaselessly questions these formations and expands on their inherent limits. Thinking occurs in no other way than by way of the uncompromising vigilance regarding the unquestioned presuppositions of the different forms in which it segregates.

During the years of my apprenticeship of philosophy, different teachers, approaches, experiences, encounters, and events formed my sense of the philosophical. Derrida’s seminar titled “Theory of the Philosophical Discourse,” which I attended at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris in 1968–1969, during the first year among several that I spent at this institution, was definitely the decisive event that shaped my understanding of philosophy. There I began to understand that the unquestionable and irreducible uniqueness of philosophy as a disciplinary discourse rests on structures, which, while enabling the autonomy of the philosophical, at the same time tie it to its many others—particularly, to literature situating it within a complex economy that also prevents the philosophical from ever

severing itself completely from these others. Henceforth, the task of thinking for me became one of investigating these enabling and disabling structures constitutive of the philosophical, including those of critique and theory. To continue thinking within the legacy of Derridean thought is to pursue the legitimate demands of theorizing and criticism without, however, ceasing to be critical of both the dogmatic presuppositions and the certitudes of theory and critique. Indeed, fidelity in thinking in response to that legacy consists above all in preventing the conceptual and categorial grid that informs philosophical thought from closing thought upon itself and of eliminating the possibility, first and foremost, of something that would not let itself be identified by what Kant referred to as the “form of thinking.” This form of thinking, however necessary, must be rethought so as to secure a space within it for the possibility of events so singular and so new that they do not let themselves be determined in distinction from and in opposition to what already obtains.

The essays collected in this book were written over more than ten years. Initially, *The Honor of Thinking* was planned as a systematic book, but circumstances did not permit my carrying the project through in such a form. Although each one of the essays in this book can be read independently, without heeding the order in which they appear here, what holds them together will not elude the shrewd reader, although it is perhaps visible at times only by way of dotted lines. By focusing these introductory remarks on the rationale for dividing the book into three sections—“Critique,” “Theory,” “Philosophy”—and explaining its title, I hope to have provided the reader with the hints necessary to construct the broader picture that should emerge from these essays, one that relates to the task of thinking. This task arises not only at the end of philosophy as the project of another beginning of thought, that is, as a beginning in which thinking turns upon the unthought of the metaphysical tradition and thus realizes an originary possibility of philosophy: one that was forgotten in the development of metaphysical thought. Rather, the task in question consists in thinking thinking otherwise—in other words, in meeting the challenge of the unthinkable to thought. Only in this extreme confrontation with the demand to account for the unaccountable, the unpredictable, the impossible, and the still-to-come can thinking ultimately be true to its name.