François Raffoul’s *Thinking the Event* offers us a panoramic history of philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as an ever increasingly thematized thinking of the event. It provides in-depth treatments of major figures in that history – Heidegger, Derrida, and Nancy, foremost among them, along with fresh interpretations of Leibniz, Kant, Nietzsche, Arendt, Levinas, Deleuze, and Marion – while also approaching the topic of the event thematically, each chapter addressing a different way of thinking the event or a different facet of the event – as beyond thought, as phenomenological excess, as things, as democracy, and/or as secret. The chapters thus build on each other and we think along as this history unfolds, our understanding of the event deepening all the while; the effect is magisterial and it is achieved by Raffoul’s command of a wide range of thinkers (his breadth), and his ability to incisively intervene in the discussion and find the through line (his depth).

But this investigation of the event conducted by Raffoul also gives us Raffoul’s view, it is a view that he earns by close readings and textual engagements, culminating in what he will call “the ethics of the event.” Across the chapters, one learns a capsule history of the event in continental philosophy, and I can think of no better guide through this variegated, even treacherous, terrain. But one also learns something else, a way of thinking, if I may call it that, a way of repeatedly and thoughtfully responding to the need for an

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1 This review stems from an author meets critics book panel at the 2022 meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy at Texas A&M University. I am grateful to the author and respondent, François Raffoul, fellow critic, Daniela Vallega-Neu, and our moderator, Gertrude Postl, for their presentations, responses, and interventions at the panel.
appropriation of the inappropriable. *Thinking the Event* is a welcome addition to and continuation of this concern with the appropriation of the inappropriable that is a leitmotif of Raffoul's thinking and writing.

In these remarks, I focus on chapter four of *Thinking the Event*, entitled, “Things as Events.” I find this chapter to be the most unexpected in the book and one where Raffoul leads us to see old texts in new ways. It raises three concerns for me, however, and my remarks will consist of simply unpacking these.

First, I am curious about the history of Heidegger's thinking of the “thing” that Raffoul presents, a history that begins with the ready-to-hand in *Being and Time*. Raffoul finds a continuity between *Being and Time* (1927) and Heidegger's later view expressed in “The Thing” (1949) and I would like to inquire a little further into this, for I do not. The emphasis on service and utility regarding the ready-to-hand in *Being and Time* precludes for me any rigorous thinking of the event.

Secondly, Raffoul at times speaks of the relation between event and thing as though it were an instance of ontological difference, where the “thing” would be the particular “being” and the ‘event” character of the thing would be its “being,” i.e. that it is. My concern is with whether a thinking of things as event, or even a thinking of the event *simpliciter*, is possible from the perspective of “ontological difference.”

Last, I turn to the figure of the secret, which forms the closing chapter of the book. Here I bring in a few aspects of Heidegger's thinking of the thing that Raffoul foregoes (his book is about events, not necessarily things), but which I think move Heidegger closer to the position of Derrida that Raffoul presents, particularly around the figure of the impossible.

My hope is that these three queries will allow us to further explore Raffoul's intriguing thinking of things as events.

1 Ready-to-Hand and Thing as Event

Raffoul's chapter, “Things as Events,” begins from the “tool analysis” of *Being and Time* and surrounding texts from the 1920s, the period of fundamental ontology. Raffoul's account is wonderfully expanded by inclusion of the lecture courses of the time. In each case he finds something revelatory in these courses, something that expands or even casts in a new light the distinction between the present-at-hand and the ready-to-hand. I just want to acknowledge how hard that is to do, because this is very well-trod ground, and Raffoul's presentation is as clear and sophisticated as any available. If I object that it is an overly generous reading, it is nonetheless a detailed and compelling one.
Raffoul provides an exceptional account of the distinction in these pages, and brings some direly needed new life and new concerns to it. It is this tool analysis that he turns to after writing: “Things themselves must be taken as events, a claim that is supported in key sections of Being and Time, where, precisely, Heidegger rethinks the being of ‘things.’”

Now I am sure that we would both quickly agree that a thing is not something present-at-hand. One of the consequences of Heidegger’s analysis is to show that the present-at-hand way of being for an entity, i.e., the seemingly basic, inert, objective way of being for an entity, the entity as understood by science, he would say, objectified and reified, this understanding of the entity is really founded upon a more prior understanding. Indeed, it is a pre-conceptual understanding that founds the present-at-hand. No doubt one of the breakthroughs of Being and Time was its undermining and deconstruction of presence as per this relegation of the present-at-hand to a founded mode of being. Heidegger’s alternative to this is the ready-to-hand.

This appeal to the ready-to-hand is where my concerns lie because it is this ready to hand that Raffoul will see as comparable to the thinking of things in Heidegger’s later work. Now for Heidegger, the objective mode of being, “presence-at-hand,” is regarded as derivative. What is not derivative, what is not founded, what is primary, by this account, is what Heidegger calls the “ready-to-hand.” This is the way of being of entities as they appear to our circumspective engagement with the world while pursuing a project. They are not exactly “tools” in the hardware store sense, as Raffoul is correct to emphasize, but they are nevertheless of use and utility. Heidegger observes in The Basic Problems of Phenomenology that the ready-to-hand “includes everything we make use of domestically or in public life.” As such, the ready to hand is the being of use, is how entities show themselves to someone who is actively engaged with a “project.” To pursue a project, to exist as projection, is to be ahead of oneself, to live prospectively, to be futural. In this future oriented, projective way of being in the world, entities show themselves as “ready-to-hand,”

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2 Raffoul, Event, 118.
3 In what follows, I will reserve the term “thing” for Heidegger’s explicit treatment of things in the context of the fourfold and in his postwar writings more broadly, “tool” (despite reservations) will name the piece of equipment that is ready-to-hand, and I will use “entity” for the broadest class, containing things, objects, beings, the present-at-hand, the ready-to-hand, the tool, the work, and Dasein.
which is to say as opportunities for action towards the achievement of one’s goals, opportunities that one might circumspectively seize upon without even thinking. For to think is to break the spell, to grind the gears of one’s project to a halt, to drop all the juggled balls at once, to interrupt the context and in so doing reveal not a broken or missing item of equipment, but instead the entire referential context of the project itself, which Heidegger will call worldliness. Heidegger works through the nature of these referential contexts in *Being and Time*. Without putting too fine a point on it, Dasein hammers the nail, for the sake of the bucket, for the sake of the water, for the sake of the bread, for the sake of the evening meal, etc. I will not belabor this, but to say that the connections always lead back to the ultimate “authentic and unique for the sake of which” who is Dasein.\(^5\)

Dasein’s projects are oriented around Dasein, it only makes sense that they would be. The ready-to-hand is a tool deployed in a project, something used to facilitate the project, to achieve its end. And this is the worry about identifying things with the ready-to-hand: the ready-to-hand is circumscribed by use, something so useful we do not even notice we are using it.

If I can call the present-at-hand entity an “object” and the ready-to-hand entity a “tool,” then we could say: in *Being and Time* Heidegger shows the way of being of the object to be founded upon that of the tool, objectivity founded upon equipmentality, utility. Our primal way of access to the world is through tools, which is to say, by means of means, and thus towards ends and purposes that accumulate around Dasein. This underlying or more primordial way of being in the world in a project, this instrumental way, reveals entities in this particular way (readiness-to-hand) as serving a purpose.

So Heidegger takes on metaphysical objectivity and opposes to it serviceability, utility. His answer to the object is the tool, and it is this tool that I wish to distinguish from the thing. Raffoul sees a continuity between them, but I want to see if this can remain, given how deleterious utility would seem to be for the event-character of things.

For one, serviceability defines the being of the entity in terms of its relation to Dasein, in terms of whom it is serviceable for. It would be wrong to call this position “anthropocentric,” since Dasein is surely no *anthropos*, but the entity is thought first in terms of this other to whom it relates, or better, by whom it is used, i.e., Dasein. So it is hard to square an event that Raffoul repeatedly presents as always “beyond thought” and almost annihilative of subjectivity, with

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these everyday tools, the material extensions of our intents and purposes, tools defined by that Dasein which the event is required to exceed.

Another way in which tools are not event-like and thus not candidates for thinghood, is in their service itself. To serve is to serve a purpose, and thus to be subordinated to that purpose. This subordination to another seems beneath the event (not “worthy of the name” as Raffoul says, following Derrida), something that would utterly compromise the sovereignty (if not autonomy) of the event.

Further, what serves a purpose is a means to an end. All means are replaceable in advance by other means so long as they achieve the same end. Means are always replaceable, otherwise they would be the end. This replaceability of the means also seems to utterly compromise the uniqueness of the event, placing it at the disposal of a subject, another instance of what Raffoul terms the “egological reduction of the event” that has plagued philosophy.6

So in all these ways – existing only relative to Dasein, subordinated to a purpose, exchangeable in its service to the goal – it is difficult for me to think what is ready-to-hand, and thereby defined by use, as a thing. Things in the later work are not first thought as equipment. In fact, rather than utility, they are better thought in terms of sacrifice (the famed jug pours out and expends oblations to the divinities). Things are singular in their sacrifice of utility, something both Heidegger and Bataille could affirm. And the moment they lose their utility, they likewise lose their substantiality and any presence-at-hand founded on this. Here is where we first catch of sight of things if they are at all to be understood as events.

I think Heidegger registers an inkling of this in the 1935 text “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Heidegger’s use of the term “ready-to-hand” does not extend much past 1930 in his thinking (according to the Heidegger Concordance), but in the artwork essay, Heidegger returns to the basics of his old distinction between the object and the tool.7 His purpose in doing so is to add a third party to the list, the “work,” signally the artwork. The work exists differently than both the tool and the object, or, as he calls it here “the thing.” But the use of the same word does not guarantee the sameness of what is thought through that word. The “thing” here is another name for the object, more or less, the material substrate for artworks and tools. Both the work and the tool have their “thingly” character, but only because what is meant by thing is here “object.” Both work and tool have their objective character; neither is necessarily a thing. I worry Raffoul is too quick to equate the sense of thing in the artwork

6 Raffoul, Event, 5.
essay with that of the postwar writings, which serves again to compromise the event character of the thing.

Interesting in “Origin of the Work of Art” is also the demotion of utility and serviceability from its privileged place in Being and Time. Serviceability organized the chain of “what fors” that oriented equipment around Dasein’s projects. Those routes of influence were even then called world. And that service-world was presented as the alternative to scientific objectification and the reign of presence. Perhaps Heidegger grew uncomfortable with inscribing utility into the foundation of existence, however proleptic that existence might be. In any event, what happens in the essay is that the tool is indeed understood in terms of its serviceability, but serviceability is now revealed as founded mode of being. Serviceability (Dienlichkeit) now comes to rest on an underlying “reliability” (Verläßlichkeit), a pre-conceptual familiarity that need not be read in terms of use and which is explicitly distinguished from use and serviceability in the first place: “The equipmental being of the tool, its reliability, keeps all things gathered within itself, each in its own manner and to its own extent. The serviceability of the tool, however, is only the necessary consequence of reliability. The former vibrates in the latter and would be nothing without it.”

Heidegger is quite clear in “On Time and Being” (1962) where he succinctly observes that “both readiness-to-hand as well as presence-to-hand are ways of presencing.” The alternative that readiness-to-hand offered Heidegger during the period of fundamental ontology, an alternative that allowed him to question the presentism of his day, is ultimately rejected by him as no alternative at all.

2  Thing as Event: Ontological Difference?

In thinking the thing as event, Raffoul writes, “there is a ‘presencing’ of things, that is, an eventful occurrence of things as things,” and the statement is representative of his view more broadly that seems to construe all existing as

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event. If a thing is what it is, then the fact that it is would be the event of its existing. Its existing (or even essencing) would be understood verbally and actively, to be sure, and this activity would be termed the event of its being. But such a conception raises many questions. First, what is particular about this occurrence as a thing? The thing exists as an event, but is this manner of existence any different from that of an object, a tool, or any other entity, with regard to its eventness? Another way to ask this: is every occurrence to be understood as eventful; is existence inherently eventful? My worry is that existence as such might simply be identified with the event. Part of this stems from Raffoul’s own interpretive flair, as he is even able to find a thinking of the event at the heart of existentialism, one of the most heroically subjectivist movements of the twentieth century, in this distinction between essence and existence, the what and the that. Essence is substantial whereas existence is eventual. But everything non-substantial is not thereby eventual; in the same way that something not being an object does not automatically make it a thing.

Part of what makes the thing eventful is the role of the fourfold at play in the thing, which Raffoul takes up in the chapter. He is quite clear in the book that to think the event is no longer to think in terms of substances and hypokeimen. In my view, the fourfold does this kind of “desubstantializing” work in the thing. To understand a thing as a gathering is to approach it at its dis-integration, to note the seams that hold it together. Heidegger’s understanding of the thing as gathering of the fourfold means that the thing cannot be thought as a unified substance, but as a nexus of relations. The avenues of the fourfold coalesce in or as the thing, where Heidegger says they engage in a “mirror-play” whereby each reflects back the other and catches sight of itself in turn. The scene he presents is one of expropriation at the heart of the thing. What appears the gentleness of a gathering from one side is the violence of a disrupting and disintegrating on the other. However we cast it, gathering keeps the thing from converting into substance, keeps it spaced, eventual. I am not sure that in his thinking of entities other than Dasein, i.e., in his thinking of tools or other beings, Heidegger ever gives such an elaborate account of their very way of being as he does in these pages regarding the mirror-play of the fourfold in the thing, the mirror play that spaces the thing as event. Heidegger shows us the mechanism of the thing as event, shows us the twinkling of things. This distinguishes the thing understood as event, as event of the fourfold, from all other entities, which fail to achieve a comparable event-character.

If this is the case, then the framework of ontological difference, stemming from Being and Time, is incapable of thinking the very differentiation that is

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10 Raffoul, Event, 141.
the event of thing and world. The event cannot be approached by a thinking that would separate the ontic from the ontological. To think the event along the lines of ontological difference would again compromise the overwhelmingly impossible totality of it, would be another attempt to deflect the event or capture it in advance in the pincers of the ontic/ontological.

A set of notes published in Zum Ereignis Denken (Towards Thinking the Event), GA 73.2, entitled "On the Event VI: Ontological Difference [Differenz] and Differentiation [Unter-Schied]" appear to date from the 1940s or 1950s. In them, Heidegger repeatedly discusses the "abandonment" of the ontological “difference” between being and beings, a difference which is always indicated by the German term Differenz, in favor of thinking the differentiation [Unter-Schied] between thing and world. The thing here is understood not like an object that would be intact and whole, but instead as "cut" (geschieden) and thus opened up, splayed open, and as such now able to exist "among" (unter) the other things. Heidegger’s name for this is Unter-Schied, which I will render “differentiation.” Heidegger’s note reads:

Abandonment of the difference [Differenz] and the conversion [Verwindung] of its appearance into differentiation [Unter-Schied], wherein the distinction [Verschiedenheit] of thing and relationship takes place (Cut? and Inter?). Something entirely other than the difference [Differenz] of beings and being.\textsuperscript{11}

This thinking of the thing thinks difference starting from the cut, at the skin of it, where thing meets world. If anything, Heidegger wants to think the event of this limit, the appropriative and expropriative dimensions of it, and this is not something he finds accommodable by the thought of ontological difference, which does not start out from this limit, but from a separation in need of connection, and a transcendental one at that: “The differentiation [Unter-Schied] – not ‘between’ beings and being – not on the side of being or of beings. Both abandoned along with their transcendental connection.”\textsuperscript{12} The thinking of the thing in its differentiation from world breaks with a thinking of ontological difference.

\textsuperscript{11} Martin Heidegger, Zum Ereignis-Denken, ed. Peter Trawny, Gesamtausgabe GA 73.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2013), 1430.

\textsuperscript{12} Heidegger, Zum Ereignis-Denken, 1443.
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**Thing and Secret**

*Thinking the Event* culminates in a chapter devoted to the secret as event, a consideration of Derrida on the inappropriable and the impossible. The discussions are dizzying, but Raffoul is an expert guide who makes this internally contradictory and aporetic material not only understandable and apposite to the event, but utterly compelling and crucial to our understanding of it. The focus of the chapter is on the secret and the impossible, and the understanding of these as events. Noteworthy here is how these same two factors, secret and impossible, are also to be found in Heidegger's thinking of things and explicitly so. Thus, I would like to briefly sketch Heidegger's take on these factors and ask what congruity is to be found with Derrida on these points, if any.

In the 1955 lecture “Gelassenheit,” it is well known that Heidegger advocates for a kind of “releasement” or “letting be,” but what is less often recalled is that this *Gelassenheit* is emphatically described as a *Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*, a releasement “toward things,” a letting be of things.\(^\text{13}\) This provides another instance of a repeated theme across the chapter, that things (or entities) always attend Dasein. Releasement, too, is not some releasement as such, or something accomplished elsewhere, it is a releasement toward the things.

Now Heidegger glosses this bearing of releasement as “this bearing of a simultaneous yes and no to the technological world.”\(^\text{14}\) The sense seems to be that we cannot close ourselves off from the technological world, simply say no to it, as this is nevertheless a dispensation of being. Instead, we are called upon to say yes to it, at least to the degree that it harbors what Heidegger will term its “hidden meaning” or, in a word, its “secret.”\(^\text{15}\) Heidegger speaks of the secret as a way of showing while not showing: “What shows itself and at the same time withdraws itself in such a way is the basic trait of that which we name the secret [*Geheimnis*].”\(^\text{16}\) A secret cannot be completely hidden, it has to show itself for there to even be a secret. But it cannot reveal itself so completely as to no longer be a secret. The secret is a showing of concealment that does not reveal what is concealed. We could massage this further and refine the point (Heidegger is explicit already in 1934 that a secret cannot be considered as a matter of a hidden content), but for our purposes we will remain with this

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\(^{14}\) Heidegger, *Reden*, 527/54, translation modified.

\(^{15}\) Heidegger, *Reden*, 528/55, translation modified.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
formulation, offered by Heidegger to a popular audience. Now, to discern such a secret even in the obscene displays of technology is to detect a moment of withdrawal at the heart of availability, a hesitation in the profusion, a flicker of the screen. This is the “hidden meaning” of technology, the secret of technology is that it bears a secret (and as such it is event). As Heidegger writes, “I name the bearing by force of which we hold ourselves open for the hidden meaning in the technological world: openness for the secret.” To detect this moment of withdrawal in availability is to see the navel of technology, the mark of its givenness, its non-completion and failure to achieve totality, to see that this too is epochal, all too epochal. Withdrawal reveals the technological world to be something given, something issuing forth from that withdrawal or secret, something sent. To discern the secret is to discern a trace of the event in technological positionality, in the Gestell as such.

Heidegger will think these two bearings together, releasement toward the things and openness for the secret; it may well be that they are the same bearing. Heidegger speaks of them as belonging together: “Releasement to the things and openness for the secret belong together. They preserve for us the possibility of residing in an entirely different way in the world.” Heidegger gives us to understand that any discerning of or, perhaps, exposure to the secret happens in our concourse with things and that this too is a dispensation of being, even when given over to technological replaceability. This is so much as to say that the “entirely different way” of residing in the world would be a residence amid the event, which is to say, among things.

Turning now to the impossible, this, too, factors into Heidegger’s thinking of the thing (and thus of the event). In the Bremen Lectures of 1949, where he first broaches this new understanding of the thing as essentially challenged by technology, as a kind of testament to the struggle between singularity and replaceability, with the technological challenge to things issuing from being (beyng) itself, as itself, in those lectures which famously present this new figure of the thing, where he first publicly uses the terms “fourfold” and “positionality,” Geviert und Gestell, we also read the confounding line that, in our contemporary context, “things are not only no longer admitted as things, but the things have not yet ever been able to appear as things at all.” An appendix to the text puts it even more starkly: “The things are as though long gone and nevertheless

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
they have never yet been as things.”\textsuperscript{20} In this repeated claim that there have never yet been things, I wonder if we can find a bridge to Derrida’s notion of the im-possible as presented in the chapter. Can we say, in keeping with Derrida, that things qua events would be impossible?

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\textit{Thinking the Event} has something to offer the novice and seasoned scholar alike. I am sure it will become a major reference in future discussions of the event. For those who know Raffoul’s other books, \textit{Thinking the Event} further develops his interest in an appropriation of the inappropriable. In \textit{Heidegger and the Subject} (1999), Raffoul read the “mineness” of Dasein as this appropriation of the inappropriable, in \textit{The Origins of Responsibility} (2010), it was integral to responsibility as such, and now in \textit{Thinking the Event} (2020), we see that the event too “exposes the inappropriability of existence.”\textsuperscript{21} We might wonder whether for Raffoul, things, too, qua events, in whatever sense, would share this inappropriability. And an innappropriable thing, would that not be a secretive thing, a thing one could not have, even though it is right there in front of oneself? And for such an inappropriable, secretive thing, would we not thereby, in our comportment toward it, also have to let that thing be, in order that such inappropriability might announce itself?

I have focused on the role of things in \textit{Thinking the Event} because it is in things that Heidegger’s ontological maneuvering must render itself legible. Heidegger’s emphasis on things breaks with the remnants of transcendentalism still attending the thought of ontological difference. Raffoul’s investigation of the issue deepens our understanding considerably and brings “the event” down to earth. If we forego an objectification of things, we might better understand how the event of our existence is always already attended by them, so much that we first find ourselves through them. Raffoul makes a provocative and convincing case that things must be included in any consideration of the event.

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Andrew J. Mitchell}
Professor, Department of Philosophy, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA
andrewj.mitchell@emory.edu
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\textsuperscript{20} Heidegger, \textit{Bremer}, 22/22.