

Metaphysics and the Question of Being

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between Heidegger's account of metaphysics and the central topic of his work, the question of Being. This inquiry is motivated by two developments in Heidegger's work in the 1930's that seem to converge. On the one hand, there is Heidegger's transition from situating his project within the metaphysical tradition to positioning it in opposition to the latter. We will call this the move from *completing* metaphysics to *overcoming* metaphysics. On the other hand, despite claiming that his focus upon the question of Being remains constant across his work, there is a noticeable shift in how Heidegger understands the question between the work coming out of *Being and Time* and the work surrounding *Contributions to Philosophy*. Heidegger presents us with various ways of describing this shift, including: from Being (*Sein*) to Beyng (*Seyn*), and from the Being of beings (*das Sein des Seienden*) to Being as such (*das Sein als Solche*). However, we will call it the move from Being to *Ereignis*.

While both of these transitions demonstrate a discontinuity between the early and later work, each also hides a deeper continuity. The task before us is to examine precisely how these overlapping continuities and discontinuities interact, and thereby to provide both a proper account of the relation between metaphysics and the question of Being and a unified picture of the development of Heidegger's work. We will start by examining Heidegger's account of metaphysics in his early work, the essential elements of which persist throughout.

2. The Origin of Metaphysics

For Heidegger, metaphysics is the inquiry regarding beings *as such* (beings *qua* beings), on the one hand, and beings *as a whole*, on the other. This duality stems from Aristotle's definition of *first philosophy*, which is the historical origin of what ultimately became the discipline of metaphysics. What concerns us are the two principle criticisms that Heidegger makes of the way this dual task is taken up by the metaphysical tradition.

Heidegger's first criticism is that the tradition does not provide an adequate account of what unifies the dual inquiry into beings as such and beings as a whole. To quote Heidegger:-

“Aristotle says nothing, or we have nothing handed down, about how he thinks these two orientations of questioning in their unity, to what extent precisely this questioning in its dual orientation constitutes philosophising proper in a unitary way. The question is open and is open to this day, or rather is not even posed any more today.”¹

There is thus an outstanding problem regarding the essential unity of metaphysics itself.

Heidegger's second criticism concerns the specific way in which each half of the task is carried out. The criticism is that the tradition thinks the *structure* of beings as such and as a whole in terms of beings themselves. This can be seen in the way the tradition approaches the two halves, by means of what Heidegger calls the fundamental questions of metaphysics:-

- 1) ‘What are beings?’ - which concerns the *essence* of beings *as such*.

1 *FCM*, p. 33.

- 2) ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ - which concerns the *existence* of beings as a whole.

By means of the former question, the tradition aims to *abstract* what is common to beings in much the way that one would abstract the common features of some particular kind of beings. This is to inquire after a *property* which Heidegger calls beingness (*Seiendheit*). By means of the latter question, it aims to *ground* the existence of beings within a particular being in much the way that one would locate the ground of one particular being within another. This is to inquire after a *highest being*, which is paradigmatically understood as God.

Heidegger’s attempt to complete metaphysics depends upon responding to both of these criticisms. He responds to the first criticism by locating the question of Being as the implicit impetus of the metaphysical tradition. This question is supposed to account for the essential unity of metaphysics. He responds to the second criticism by articulating what he calls the *ontological difference* between Being and beings. This names the fact that Being is not to be understood in terms of beings, be it in terms of a particular being or some property of beings.

3. The Origins of the Question

However, this does not tell us precisely how the question of Being incorporates the inquiries into beings as such and beings as a whole, and how it does so while respecting the ontological difference. These issues become more pressing when we consider the way in which Heidegger introduces the question of Being. The following quote from the *History of the Concept of Time* is typical:-

“When [B]eing is asked for, it involves inquiring into the basic character of the entity, what defines an entity as entity. What defines the entity as entity is *its [B]eing*.”²

What this indicates is that, in the early work, Heidegger identifies Being with the structure of beings as such.

This raises two questions regarding Heidegger’s early approach:-

- 1) How does he intend to think Being without thinking it as beingness?
- 2) How does the question of Being incorporate a corresponding concern with beings as a whole?

The answer to the former question is to be found by examining two important influences on Heidegger’s formulation of the question of Being. On the one hand, Heidegger traces the origin of the question to Aristotle’s problem of the unity of the many senses in which ‘Being’ is said. On the other, Heidegger’s account of the inquiry into Being as *fundamental ontology* is predicated upon Husserl’s notion of *regional ontology*.

Taking Aristotle first, he holds that there are four principle senses of the word ‘Being’: potential and actual Being, accidental Being, Being in the sense of Being-true, and the Being of the categories. The problem he poses is that of the underlying unity of these different senses. This is not a matter of finding some genus to which they all belong, but of understanding the underlying structure through which they are related to one another.

² HCT, p. 144.

Heidegger doesn't adopt Aristotle's own manifold of senses, but he does discuss a variety of such senses, or what we'll call *aspects* of Being. The best examples of these are the four senses of the copula that Heidegger focuses on in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* and *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, and the three fundamental oppositions he focuses on in *Introduction to Metaphysics*:-

- i) What-being (*Was-sein*) - essence
- ii) That-being (*Dass-sein*) - existence
- iii) Being-so (*Sosein*) - predication
- iv) Being-true (*Wahr-sein*) - truth

- v) Being as opposed to seeming
- vi) Being as opposed to thinking
- vii) Being as opposed to the ought

In addition to these aspects of Being, Heidegger also holds that there *modes* of Being (*Seinsweisen/Seinsarten*) specific to the different *regions* of beings that provide the subject matter of the various disciplines. For example:-

- i) Occurrence (*Vorhandenheit*) - physical objects
- ii) Availability (*Zuhandenheit*) - equipment
- iii) Existence (*Existenz*) - Dasein
- iv) Subsistence - abstract entities (e.g., mathematical objects)
- v) Life - living creatures (e.g., plants and animals)

The aim of *regional ontology* is to ground the inquiry into a particular region of beings (e.g., Biology or History) by furnishing a concept of its corresponding mode of Being (e.g., Life or Existence). The aim of Heidegger's *fundamental ontology* then is to ground this practice in turn, by developing a concept of Being in general that unifies these various modes.

There are thus two distinct manifolds that Heidegger aims to unify in answering the question of Being, the manifold of *aspects* belonging to each being, and the manifold of *modes* belonging to distinct types of beings. Taken together these constitute an account of the Being of beings which does not understand it as a form of beingness. It is this fact that makes Heidegger's attempt to complete metaphysics stand out from the tradition.

3. Being and World

We can now return to the second question we posed earlier: how it is that the question of Being is meant to incorporate a concern with beings as a whole, and thus unify the two halves of metaphysics. The answer to this question is to be found in the way that Heidegger aims to provide an account of Being. Although it is fair to say that Heidegger never actually provided this account in his early work, he did lay out a strategy for doing so. His intention was to locate the dual unity of aspects and modes within the structure of the phenomenological horizon within which all beings are encountered, or what he calls the *world*. Importantly, Heidegger identifies the world with the structure of beings as a whole. His strategy is therefore to locate the structure of beings *as such* within the structure of beings *as a whole*.

The prevalence of this strategy is perhaps most obvious in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where Heidegger draws an explicit link between the question of Being and the second fundamental

question of metaphysics we discussed earlier: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’. He claims that although this question cannot be answered, it lets us think Being insofar as it draws our attention to what he calls ‘the Nothing’ (*das Nichts*). This is because, in contrasting the existence of beings with the Nothing, it forces us to think the possibility of something like an empty world. This is to say that it forces us to think the *structure* of beings as a whole as distinct from any possible *content* it might have, to think the structure of the world in abstraction from whatever entities could be within it.

On this basis, we can see that Heidegger’s answer to the problem of the essential unity of metaphysics consists in the claim that there is nothing more to the Being of a being than what it is for it to be *situated* within the whole. The real significance of Heidegger’s claim that Being and Nothing are identical is that the structure of beings *as such* and the structure of beings *as a whole* are fundamentally the same.

4. Being and Ereignis

We are now in a position to consider the way in which Heidegger’s position changes. The thesis I’m going to put forward is that the transition from Being to *Ereignis* takes place in two stages, and that the second of these stages is equivalent to the move from completing to overcoming metaphysics. In order to get a grip on these two stages, we have to further examine Heidegger’s account of world and the way it develops.

For the early Heidegger, the world is the phenomenological horizon within which entities can be encountered as the entities they are. This means that the world confers significance upon entities by situating them in relation to our culturally articulated practices for dealing with them. The world is therefore something that is generated or *projected* by human Dasein. The name that Heidegger gives to this process through which the world is projected or opened up is *disclosedness*, or Truth. At this point, Heidegger recognises that the world is fundamentally revisable, insofar as our practices for dealing with entities can change and develop, but he doesn’t make anything of it.

It’s not until ‘On the Essence of Truth’ and ‘On the Origin of the Work of Art’ that he works out the consequences of this revisability. What he shows in these essays is that the process through which the world is revised is perpetual. There is a constitutive excess of the whole of beings *in itself* (or the earth) over our *grasp* of the whole (or the world). There is thus a constant back and forth wherein the earth disrupts our world and we revise our practices to adapt to it. Heidegger names this dynamic relation the *strife* between earth and world. He then identifies this strife with Truth.

The move from Truth as disclosedness to Truth as strife is the first stage of the shift from Being to *Ereignis*. This is because *Ereignis* is the other name that Heidegger gives to Truth as strife. The introduction of strife puts in place the essential features of Heidegger’s account of *Ereignis*. We will briefly elaborate some of these features:-

- 1) *Ereignis* replaces the world as the *structure* of beings as a whole. This is because *Ereignis* names the process through which the world (the whole *as horizon*) and the earth (the whole *in itself*) interact.
- 2) Although *Ereignis* is not a being, it is nonetheless *singular*. This is because the earth is singular, insofar as it is in excess of *every* projection of a world. *Ereignis* names that structure through which *all* strife happens. This is what it means to say that *Ereignis* is the *event* of the unfolding of history.

- 3) *Ereignis* is independent of the *existence* of Dasein. This is because the earth is independent of it.
- 4) *Ereignis* nonetheless incorporates the *essence* of Dasein (i.e., Existence, Freedom, or the essence of Man). Heidegger's claim that *Ereignis* gives Man unto his essence (or his claim that Freedom belongs to Truth) just means that the structure of the world *in itself* essentially involves the possibility of something like Dasein, i.e., an entity that projects open a horizon within which beings can appear.

However, all of this is still broadly compatible with the project of completing metaphysics. It seems that Heidegger could still locate the Being of beings in the way that they are situated in the whole, by way of *Ereignis*. The second stage of the transition from Being to *Ereignis* closes off this possibility.

The central thrust of this is best expressed by a quote from Heidegger:-

“It is... impossible to represent “Being” as the general characteristic of particular beings. There is Being only in this or that particular historic character: [*Physis*], [*Logos*], [*Hen*], [*Idea*], [*Energeia*], Substantiality, Objectivity, Subjectivity, the Will, the Will to Power, the Will to Will.”³

What this indicates is that Heidegger's abandonment of metaphysics is spurred by a disillusionment with the original project pursued in *Being and Time*. Whereas he originally thought that he could answer many of the problems of classical ontology by providing an account of Being distinct from beingness (in the form of an account of the dual unities of aspect and mode), by the time of the *Contributions* he is convinced that this is not possible. There is now no *ahistorical* conception of Being, but only the various forms of beingness that are championed throughout the history of metaphysics.

However, there is more to the second stage of the transition than a simple move away from metaphysics. The move to *overcoming* metaphysics involves positively accounting for the historical relativity of Being. The transition from Being to *Ereignis* is completed by incorporating the historical relativity of Being within the structure of *Ereignis* itself. This is the significance of the famous thesis that *Ereignis* ‘gives’ Being in the form of the various historical epochs within which given conceptions of beingness reign. In essence, all this means is that Heidegger ceases to see the structure of beings *as such* as an invariant feature of the process through which the world is revised, but instead takes it as something that is subject to revision in the process of strife. Therefore, insofar as *Ereignis* names the happening of strife it also names the process through which the various metaphysical epochs give way to one another.

5. Conclusion

We are now in a position to articulate the fundamental continuity and discontinuity between the project of completing metaphysics and the project of overcoming it. They are continuous insofar as they each concern themselves with the unitary structure of beings as such and as a whole, but they are discontinuous insofar as they conceive the unity of this structure, and the way it underlies the metaphysical tradition, in different ways.

3 *OCM*, p. 66.

In Heidegger's earlier work, the structure of beings as such (Being) is understood as an aspect of the structure of the whole (the world), insofar as it is the historically invariant way that entities are situated within within the latter. Together they constitute a unitary structure (also called Being) that provides the essence of metaphysics, insofar as it constitutes the forgotten object of metaphysical inquiry.

In his later work, the structure of beings as such (Being) is understood as an aspect of the structure of the whole (*Ereignis*), insofar as it forms a part of the process through which our grasp of the whole (the world) varies historically in relation to the whole in itself (the earth). Together they constitute a unitary structure (also called *Ereignis*) that provides the essence of metaphysics, insofar as it provides the structure through which the history of metaphysics unfolds.