

Reading Heidegger after Derrida

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This essay attempts to broach the complex difference between Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. It focuses on the fundamental assumptions involved in the reading of Heidegger's **Being and Time** and Derrida's early "noted" attention to this text. Is Heidegger's early work essentially tainted by "the metaphysics of presence," as Derrida wishes to suggest? After sketching Derrida's interpretation, the author attempts to show how readers of **Being and Time** need not succumb to Derrida's criticism.

"In order to see one light determinately, we always need another light. For if we imagined ourselves in total darkness and then a single spot of light appeared, we would be unable to determine the position of this light without a relation to another."

Søren Kierkegaard¹

More specifically, my title could read "reading Heidegger's **Being and Time** after Derrida." In general, however, this essay is about Derridian "différance" and Heideggerian hope.

Already in **Speech and Phenomena**² Derrida raises the question of "the metaphysics of presence" in Heidegger. Derrida —one inclined to

¹ KIERKEGAARD, SØREN: **Papirer**, 1 A1, Copenhagen, 1912; **S.K.'s Journals and Papers**, no. 2240, trans. Howard and Edna Hong, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967.

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relegate what is often crucial for a fuller understanding of his texts to the superfluity of a footnote— writes:

...it is already apparent that, while we appeal to Heideggerian motifs in decisive places, we would especially like to raise the question whether...Heidegger's thought does not sometimes raise the same questions as the metaphysics of presence.³

According to Derrida the decisive feature of the classical Western metaphysical tradition is that Being is determined as *presence*, as for example, the presence of the absolute (*parousia*) or the presence of an object determined as *substance*. A related criticism is that this metaphysical tradition is thoroughly logocentric. In other words, since Plato philosophers have centered on uncovering the truth of *logos*, presupposing all along that its Being, its presence, was something within their intellectual grasp. Derrida praises Heidegger, however, for being the one writer most aware of the falsity of logocentrism, and for recognizing that the critique of metaphysics itself continues metaphysics. Nevertheless, as is evident from the above quote, Derrida feels that it would be possible to raise the question of whether Heidegger himself succumbs to the metaphysics of presence. But Derrida does not do this directly, and given that he "would like to raise the question," it seems a bit perplexing that in an earlier footnote he can write:

...it is only by a superficial reading of Heidegger's texts that one could conclude that these texts themselves fall under these, Heidegger's own objections. We think, on the contrary, without being able to go into it here, that no one before has

² DERRIDA, JACQUES: *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973. This text was originally published in 1967, the same year that *Of Grammatology and Writing and Difference* were first published.

³ DERRIDA: *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 74 n.

better escaped them. This does not mean, of course, that one often escapes them afterwards.⁴

With the possibility of this “afterwards” it is apparent that Derrida has already assumed an ambivalent and ironic deconstructive attitude towards Heidegger's texts.⁵ Derrida's ostensive concern is to discuss Husserl's theory of signs, and yet he already seems to be working towards a theoretical consideration of Heidegger's texts, which would no doubt ultimately lead to their deconstruction. Given this method of presentation it is often not easy for readers to see through Derrida's ambiguity and opaqueness. How are we to understand Heidegger initially as the escape artist *par excellence*, only to find him enclosing himself within the walls of metaphysics “afterwards?” When does this afterwards occur in the thoughts of Heidegger?

An important essay entitled “Différance” is appended to *Speech and Phenomena*. In Derrida's texts “différance” is a key term, and it is coined to signify the double meaning of the French *différer*, which means both “to be unlike” (differ) and “to put off to a future time” (defer). But this is not all that is packed into this signification. According to Derrida, “différance” –which is not a neologism, but a neography, which is “neither a *word* nor a *concept*”– reflects the juncture of our philosophical epoch.⁶ Thus, included in (the meaning of) *différance* is Heidegger's ontic-ontological difference, i.e., the difference between approaching Being qua entities and Being qua beings.⁷ Derrida also credits Heidegger with showing the import of

⁴ DERRIDA: *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 26 n.

⁵ Perhaps readers of Derrida may often wonder whether they would especially like to raise the question of the duplicity of Derrida's writing.

⁶ DERRIDA: *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 130.

⁷ Concerning the ontic-ontological distinction with regards to the question of Being, see Heidegger's *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, New York, Harper & Row, 1962, pp. 28-35. The translators note: “Ontological inquiry is concerned primarily with *being*.”

the authority of presence "to be the onto-theological determination of being."⁸ In other words, Heidegger's project is constructed to escape the metaphysical determination of Being qua entities by describing the domain of a "fundamental ontology" that studies Being qua beings.

In Derrida's summary of "Différance" he turns to a reading of one of Heidegger's texts, "Der Spruch des Anaximander." Here it is important to recognize Derrida's aim. At all times he is trying to portray what he labels the "trace." This term is developed to escape the metaphysics of presence, for the trace is not a presence, but instead "the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace."⁹ Nevertheless, Derrida remarks in this context that it is not his intention to criticize Heidegger, but rather to convey his texts with all "their provocative force."

In summarizing the non-concept "différance," however, Derrida admits that it "remains a metaphysical name," for there can be "no *name* for this, not even essence or Being -not even the name 'différance,' which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and continually breaks up in a chain of different substitutions."¹⁰ It is within this context that Derrida reveals the "shocking" Heideggerian *hope*, which wants to return to the nostalgia of metaphysics in the "quest for the proper word and the unique name" that will allow being to speak through language.¹¹ Derrida is here quoting Heidegger's "Der Spruch des Anaximander," where we read:

ontical inquiry is concerned primarily with *entities* and the facts about them" (p. 31 n.).

⁸ DERRIDA: *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 147.

⁹ DERRIDA: *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 156. For further elucidation see the index listings for "trace" in this text. Appropriately, one reference is to a blank page!

¹⁰ DERRIDA: *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 158.

¹¹ DERRIDA: *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 160.

Thus, in order to name what is deployed in Being, language will have find a single word, the unique word. There we see how hazardous is every word of thought that addresses itself to Being. What is hazarded here, however, is not something impossible, because Being speaks through every language; everywhere and always.

Consequently, the unconcluding question of "Différance" is whether Heidegger's philosophy, or more properly, his ontology, has been or can be successful in attempting to escape the metaphysics of presence.

Derrida alludes to this question in other places as well. For example, in his essay "Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book" in *Writing and Difference* he again ends unconcludingly by calling attention to the possible confusion between ontology and grammar. It would seem that Derrida would want to go even further than Karl Jaspers, who differs from Heidegger by denying the possibility of a constructive "fundamental ontology." Derrida's questions -and Derrida, like Heidegger, puts a great deal of energy into his questioning- seem to point towards that which is to be investigated, interrogated, and "that which is to be found out by the asking."¹²

But what if the Book was only, in all senses of the word, an *epoch* of Being? ... If Being was radically outside the book, outside its letter? And was such by virtue of a transcendence which could no longer be touched by inscription and signification, a transcendence which would no longer lie on the page, and which above all would have arisen before it? If Being lost itself in books? If books were the dissipation of Being? If the Being of the world, its presence and the

¹² For the structure of "questioning" see Heidegger's *Being and Time*, pp. 24-28.

meaning of its Being, revealed itself only in illegibility, in a radical illegibility which would not be the accomplice of a lost or sought after legibility, of a page not yet cut from some divine encyclopedia? If the world were not even, according to Jasper's expression, "the manuscript of another," but primarily the other of every possible manuscript?¹³

But what if?

Derrida's earliest focused reading of Heidegger is his essay "*Ousia* and *Grammé*: Note on a Note from **Being and Time**."¹⁴ With the question of the metaphysics of presence in Heidegger¹⁵ in mind, I shall now turn to look at this essay.

What is Derrida's essay about? In the first place, it is "a note on a note from **Being and Time**." The note Derrida is concerned with examining is the longest one that appears in **Being and Time**. It appears in the next to the last section of a work which proposed, among two other aims, the "destruction of the history of ontology." "Traditional ontology," so the claim goes, "can only be destroyed by repeating and interrogating its relation to the problem of time."¹⁶

¹³ DERRIDA, JACQUES: **Writing and Difference**, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 77.

¹⁴ This essay was originally published in *L'endurance de la pensée: Pour saluer Jean Beaufret*, Paris, 1968. The English translation appears in Derrida, **Margins of Philosophy**, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 31-67.

Derrida's most sustained reading of Heidegger has recently appeared in English as **Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question**, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989. Here, however, it is the question of Nazism—rather than the question of metaphysicism—which takes precedence.

¹⁵ It should be clear from the context that I am here concerned with the thoughts of the early Heidegger, particularly those of **Being and Time**.

¹⁶ DERRIDA: **Margins of Philosophy**, p. 31.

Heidegger's note appears in the section –incorrectly cited by Derrida– devoted to “A Comparison of the Existential-ontological Connection of Temporality, Dasein, and World-time, with Hegel's Way of Taking the Relation between Time and Spirit.” Thus, Heidegger's purpose in this section is to examine Hegel's conception of time in effort to further his planned destruction of the history of ontology. Alternatively, Derrida's aim, at least one of them, is to read Heidegger's proposed destruction of traditional ontology, with its vulgar conception of time, as falling within and continuing the metaphysics of presence (*ousia*). Let us consider these aims.

It is well-known that, for the purposes of professional qualification, Heidegger published *Being and Time* before it was completely finished. As the matter now stands, this work will forever remain incomplete. I have already indicated that the destruction of the history of ontology was one of the three main aims of this text. The other two aims were to raise and answer the question of the meaning of Being-in-general, and to provide a preliminary existential-analytic of *Dasein* (literally “being there”) or “human being.” It appears that Heidegger was only successful in completing the last of these aims, and for this reason it has been rightly suggested that Heidegger's examination of Hegel's connection between time and spirit “achieves nothing in the overall plan.”¹⁷ But this is not to say that Heidegger's study of Hegel is unimportant and should not be read¹⁸, although it does suggest that the significance of section 82 lies somewhat outside the scope of coming to grips with Heidegger's successful central development of an existential analytic of human being.

¹⁷ KAELIN, E.F.: *Heidegger's “Being and Time”*: A Reading for Readers, Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, p. 296.

¹⁸ And Kaelin does not hesitate to provide an interpretation of section 82, which may indeed be said to appear as an enigma explained by a mystery. See KAELIN: *Heidegger's “Being and Time”*, p. 272.

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Nevertheless, section 82, like footnote xxx of part (a), which Derrida quotes in its entirety, is still a significant piece of writing. But why does Derrida find it of such special interest? This may be answered dialectically. Derrida is not directly concerned with Heidegger's positive achievement of bringing the existential situation to phenomenological clarity. Derrida, unlike Heidegger, could hardly be said to express existential concerns in his writing. Instead, his foremost concern lies in advancing the theoretical, consequently unexistential, position of deconstructing the metaphysics of presence.

To get beyond metaphysics Derrida has to bring the trace into play. This is given in the third and final summary suggestion Derrida wishes to offer for following his reading (rewriting) of Heidegger's texts, not to mention Hegel's, Kant's and Aristotle's.

In order to exceed metaphysics it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text. Such a trace cannot be thought *more metaphysico*. No philosopheme is prepared to master it. And it (is) that which must elude mastery. Only presence is mastered.¹⁹

Derrida also wishes to suggest "that the question we are asking remains within Heidegger's thought," for "it is not in closing but in interrupting **Being and Time** that Heidegger wonders whether 'primordial temporality' leads to the meaning of Being."²⁰ Finally, reading Derrida's suggestions in reverse order, he initially suggests that there is perhaps no "vulgar concept of time." Derrida writes:

The concept of time, in all its aspects, belongs to metaphysics, and it names the domination of presence.

¹⁹ DERRIDA: **Margins of Philosophy**, p. 65.

²⁰ DERRIDA: **Margins of Philosophy**, p. 64.

Therefore we can only conclude that the entire system of metaphysical concepts, throughout its history, develops the so-called "vulgarity" of the concept of time (which Heidegger, doubtless, would not contest), but also that an *other* concept of time cannot be opposed to it, since time in general belongs to metaphysical conceptuality....

Was this not Heidegger's experience in **Being and Time**? The extraordinary trembling to which classical ontology is subjected in **Sein und Zeit** still remains within the grammar and lexicon of metaphysics. And all the conceptual pairs of opposites which serve the destruction of ontology are ordered around one fundamental axis: that which separates the authentic from the inauthentic and, in the very last analysis, primordial from fallen temporality....

Now, is not the opposition of the *primordial* to the *derivative* still metaphysical? Is not the quest for an *archia* in general, no matter with what precautions one surrounds the concept, still the "essential" operation of metaphysics? Supposing, despite powerful presumptions, that one may eliminate it from any other provenance, is there not at least some Platonism in the *Verfallen*? Why determine as *fall* the passage from one temporality to another? And why qualify temporality as authentic –or *proper* (*eigentlich*)– and as inauthentic –or improper– when every ethical preoccupation has been suspended? ...If we have chosen to examine the opposition that structures the concept of temporality, it is because the entire existential analytic leads back to it.²¹

I have found it useful to quote Derrida extensively on this last (first) suggestion because it would seem to suggest a serious problem to readers of Heidegger who find something important and worthwhile in his existential analytic (particularly the description of authentic Being-a-whole in anticipatory resoluteness), and yet who would wish

²¹ DERRIDA: **Margins of Philosophy**, pp. 63-4.

to avoid falling into the metaphysical realm. For is this not precisely the inauthenticity and impropriety that Heidegger wished to avoid? Must one necessarily give consent to Derrida's suggestion that primordial temporality is as metaphysical as the ordinary conception of time? How might this deconstructive reading of Heidegger's text be avoided?

Let me offer some suggestions. In the first place, it is important to keep Derrida's agenda in mind when considering his suggestions. His reading is governed by the trace, and in the case of Heidegger he has the question of the meaning of Being-in-general and the de(con)struction of traditional ontology at the front of his mind. In other words, Derrida's criticism is guided by attending to Heidegger's incompleting projects, such that he either loses sight of or simply disregards (disprivileges) the project that Heidegger was able to work out in *Being and Time*. That the preliminary existential analytic relies on, or leads back to, the other two aims of Heidegger's work, as Derrida seems to imply, seems false to me. Indeed, Heidegger realized, although he perhaps later forgot, that the meaning of Being-in-general could only be first approached through the being of some entity. This is to say that Heidegger's ontology had to proceed from the Being of some entity, in particular the Being of a human being, who has the capability to pose the question of the meaning of Being, and therefore, with a preontological conception of the meaning of Being, is able to project the horizon upon which the question may be explicitly formulated and answered. Such is Heidegger's achievement in *Being and Time*.

But Derrida is not all to blame, however. Heidegger, in his concluding section and other places as well, seems to forget his own admission in section 3 of *Sein und Zeit*: "Being is always the Being of an entity."²² This holds even if *Dasein* is a very unique kind of entity. Had Heidegger recalled this admission when expounding a

²² HEIDEGGER: *Being and Time*, p. 29.

painful series of unanswered questions in the last section of this early work, he might not have felt the need to repose the question of the meaning of Being-in-general. Instead, he might have concluded with a simple inductive argument²³ that the question was successfully answered.

Furthermore, Heidegger could have learned more from his predecessor and instructor Edmund Husserl, who in his *Logical Investigations* convincingly disposed of Locke's problematic universal triangle, or, to put it in Heideggerian-sounding language, the problematic triangle-in-general. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke had written:

Does it not require some pains and skill to form the general idea of a triangle (which is not yet the most abstract, comprehensive and difficult) for it must be neither oblique, nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural nor scalenon, but all and none of these at once.²⁴

Husserl recognizes the confusion here, and would remind Locke that "a triangle is something which has triangularity, but that triangularity is not itself something that has triangularity." Moreover, "the universal idea of triangle, as an idea of triangularity, is therefore the idea of what every triangle as such possesses, but it is not therefore itself the idea of *a* triangle."²⁵

Husserl's criticism of Locke could be applied to Heidegger, who is certainly wrong in thinking that the meaning of Being-in-general could

²³ Kaelin suggests such an argument in his *Heidegger's "Being and Time"*.

²⁴ LOCKE, JOHN: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1961, vol. II, p. 197.

²⁵ HUSSERL, EDMUND: *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1970, p. 359.

ever be answered, for there is no such Being-in-general. Being is always the being of some entity; it is whatever an entity as such possesses, but it is not itself *an* entity that may be disclosed or uncovered.

What, then, about Derrida? In order to avert the criticism of the metaphysics of presence would it not be possible to draw a useful distinction between metaphysics and ontology? Phenomenological ontology²⁶ differs from metaphysics in the following way: it seeks to describe entities as they appear and does not go further in making any claims about such entities that are not descriptive. Metaphysics, on the other hand, does not rely upon pure description alone, but imports evaluative claims that cannot be upheld in philosophical discourse. One can then concede that Heidegger's proposed destruction of traditional ontology and construction of a "fundamental ontology" was conceivably metaphysical in that it attempted to go beyond merely descriptive claims to evaluative claims concerning the nature of metaphysics itself. Thus, in this respect, Derrida's criticism is accurate and appreciated. This does not entail, however, that the phenomenological-ontological description of human existence must needs be read as metaphysical. Authenticity and inauthenticity are used descriptively throughout *Being and Time* and do not form any normative ethical judgments concerning a human being. Although one may be inclined to think that they do, this would be a mistake, albeit a common one. To read *Being and Time* as an ethical treatise is quite simply to be guilty of a self-deception.

What, then, may be said of primordial temporality and ordinary time? There are clearly numerous helpful phenomenological distinctions that may be made regarding natural time and primordial temporality, which Heidegger shows are always running concurrent with one another, although in different directions. These distinctions

²⁶ Add the perhaps unfortunate adjective "universal" and you have Heidegger's early definition of philosophy. See *Being and Time*, p. 62.

are summarized nicely by an American commentator on Heidegger's **Being and Time**.

Natural time is composed of homogeneous moments; the moments of human time are heterogeneous, depending upon the value placed on the lived content of each moment....

Natural time is continuous; the sequence of itsnows knows no gaps....

Now-time is infinite; ...But this covers up our being-unto-death.

Now-time is objective....

In all four of these characteristics, what has been lost from our primordial time? Only its datability, its significance (as being tied to a personal world), its spanning in an authentic moment of vision, and its localizability with respect to a human being's opened region. In other words, it has only lost all human significance.²⁷

There are further "essential distinctions" that are made concerning natural time and primordial time, although they need not be repeated here. The point to be made is that the above distinctions are decisively phenomenological-ontological, not metaphysical.

Thus my conclusion follows that (1) if Heidegger's readers bear this last point in mind, (2) if they are cognizant of the descriptivity of authentic human existence, and (3) if they focus on the single aim that Heidegger successfully addressed in his treatise, then they can come away from their readings of **Being and Time** with a hope that avoids the traditional metaphysics of the past.

²⁷ KÄELIN: Heidegger's "Being and Time", pp. 268-9.

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