

# The Overcoming of Metaphysics in the Quest for Being

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Martin Heidegger's sole obsession in his vast corpus of writings is *Seinsfrage*, the Question of the Meaning of Being. The question,  $\tau\iota\ \tau\omicron\ \omicron\nu$  – “what is being?” first preoccupied him when he was an eighteen-year old student in Constance in 1907, when pastor Dr. Conrad Grüber gave him Franz Brentano's dissertation *On the Manifold Sense of Being according to Aristotle*. The primacy of Being is evidently present at the very start of Heidegger's career in thought. The question persists throughout all his writings. It remains as something that never attains a final answer, simply because it needs to be asked continually. It is not therefore unjustifiable to look at Heidegger as primarily a philosopher, or more accurately (if one follows Heidegger's own line of deliberation), a thinker of Being. Thus one can identify the Heideggerian project as an attempt to think Being.

One way to attain a deeper appreciation of this project is to carefully read Martin Heidegger's essay “Overcoming Metaphysics.”<sup>1</sup> Heidegger commentator Joan Stambaugh notes that this article, among a few others, presents the thinker's “most explicit attempt to show the history of Being as metaphysics.”<sup>2</sup> The work in consideration thus opens up a pair of essential questions at the heart of Heidegger's project: it discusses his notion of metaphysics, as well as its overcoming. The article is of eminent significance since it embodies the carrying-out of the proposal made in Heidegger's first major work *Being and Time*, concerning the “destruction” or “deconstruction” (*Destruktion*) of the history of ontology.

This essay attempts to examine Heidegger's idea of the overcoming of metaphysics by first giving an exposition of his understanding of the “question of Being.” Furthermore, the chapter clarifies Heidegger's concept of the meaning of “metaphysics.” A

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 84-110.

<sup>2</sup>Joan Stambaugh, “Translator's Introduction,” in Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*.

reprisal of the question of Being follows, now with Heidegger's understanding of "metaphysics" in mind. Afterwards, the essay will show his reading of the history of metaphysics and where it is leading us. The section that follows discusses Heidegger's idea that the current epoch is the time of technology, and as such is the terminus of the history of metaphysics. The succeeding part reveals in a prescriptive fashion the real meaning of "overcoming" by tackling the question, "in what does the overcoming consist?" This essay ends with Heidegger's thoughts on thinking itself, thinking differentiated from what had formerly been tagged as "metaphysical." All throughout this essay, the writer will employ the text "Overcoming Metaphysics" in order to clarify Heidegger's thoughts about these aforementioned issues.

## The Question of Being

One is better prepared to read Heidegger's fecund writings by first considering the very question Heidegger tries to think through in all his essays.<sup>3</sup> How do we approach this question of Being? Given that as early as Aristotle's time, people have always been puzzled by the many senses there are for the word "being" (ov), Heidegger's task is therefore quite daunting. The simplest "definition" would be, "a being is what is." But given the infinity of all that is, what gives unity to all "is"? That which grants possibility to all beings, all "is," must be Being itself.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle asks, τι το ov η ov ("what are beings as beings?"), and says that this is the central thought of all that can be called metaphysics. Is Heidegger himself not simply asking a metaphysical question, therefore? No, since Heidegger is exploring the more primordial question of the meaning of that which gives beings their "is-ness," the meaning of Being itself. Thus from the very start of Heidegger's life as a thinker, the question has always been about Being, especially about its relationship with what is called metaphysics.

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<sup>3</sup>And essay is a particularly apt word for Heidegger's attempts to think Being. Notice that Heidegger never actually constructs a definite school or system of thought precisely because the object of his thought can never be truly objectified in writing, can never be given a final treatment. In the face of Being, all ventures to name it remain, in Montaigne's sense of the word—essais.

<sup>4</sup>This and much of the following reflections on Heidegger's thought concerning Being comes from William J. Richardson, S.J., Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 3-24.

## What is Metaphysics?

The Stambaugh-edited volume *The End of Philosophy* (1973) contains the English translation of the essay “Overcoming Metaphysics” (*Überwindung der Metaphysik*). The essay is one among a collection of eleven of Heidegger’s essays originally published in 1961 entitled *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. “Overcoming Metaphysics” is composed of twenty-eight “fragments” that grapple with the question of metaphysics and the issue of its overcoming. This fragmentary style indicates a searching, a seeking. Heidegger says that his writings should never be treated as works; rather they should be recognized as paths,<sup>5</sup> as attempts to arrive at the most important topic of all—Being. Heidegger’s style therefore is due to the very elusiveness of the topic of his thought.

The first sentence in the essay exhibits the interrogative nature of this particular piece of writing—“What does ‘overcoming metaphysics’ mean?”<sup>6</sup> The question first of all points to something that is (or is it to be?) overcome—metaphysics. However, what does Heidegger mean by “metaphysics”? He says the more appropriate title should be “Overcoming the Past of Metaphysics.”<sup>7</sup> “Past” means that metaphysics as the history of thought is already at its end, even though it is in its utmost possibility in the current age:

*The past means here: to perish and enter what has been. In that metaphysics perishes, it is past. The past does not exclude, but rather includes, the fact that metaphysics is now for the first time beginning its unconditional rule in beings themselves, and rules as beings in the form, devoid of truth, of what is real and of objects. Experienced in virtue of the dawning of the origin, metaphysics is, however, at the same time past in the sense that it has entered its ending. The ending lasts longer than the previous history of metaphysics.*<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger maintains that metaphysics has always been the history of the forgetfulness (*Vergessenheit*) of Being (*Sein*). He therefore focuses on the essential nature of the task of questioning the whole history of metaphysics.

It is from Aristotle that Heidegger first obtained the importance

<sup>5</sup>Dominique Janicaud and Jean-François Mattéi, *Heidegger from Metaphysics to Thought*, trans. Michael Gendre (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), ix. [Henceforth, references to this text will be abbreviated HMT.]

<sup>6</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 84.

<sup>7</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 85.

<sup>8</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 85.

of the question of Being. The great Greek philosopher historically also initiates the use of the term “metaphysics.” The Aristotelian metaphysical question of  $\tau\iota\ \tau\omicron\ \omicron\nu\ \eta\ \omicron\nu$  sheds light on the meaning of the term “metaphysics.” If we take the literal meaning of the term to be a “going beyond” ( $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha$ ) the “physical” ( $\tau\alpha\ \beta\upsilon\sigma\iota\kappa\alpha$ ), we can understand metaphysics in the figurative sense as the consideration of beings as beings brought about by an attitude of transcendence to their very Being.

Aristotle, however, was not the first metaphysician. Heidegger grants that “honor” to Plato, since Plato even earlier divided reality into a world of shadows that must be transcended in order to go into the world of pure Forms, of Ideas. The latter is for Plato the domain of the Being of all beings that exist in our experiential world of shadows.

These great philosophers, however, from the point of view of Heidegger, overlooked the  $\phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  (physis) which the Pre-Socratics before them had already uncovered.  $\Phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  is the process by which beings come into presence as they are, and that very process is Being itself. Heidegger says that the Pre-Socratics, particularly Heraclitus, hit the nail on the head for they still had the awareness of this process of Being; because of this, they were the “greater thinkers.”<sup>9</sup> Socrates and Plato afterwards initiate the step into what would eventually be known as philosophy. Heidegger equates philosophy in general with metaphysics since both point to the kind of thinking that humanity has developed over history, one that forgets Being.

In a sense, then, metaphysics (if “physics” is taken in the sense of the ancient  $\phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ) is a “going beyond” that is not then “in tune,” or “attuned to,” for it goes beyond that which was already sound, to begin with—namely, an identification of, and thus, with the generative process of Being.

In the essay “What is Metaphysics?”<sup>10</sup> Heidegger comments that metaphysics’ preoccupation with beings as beings blinds it to that which makes beings appear as what they are. Beings are unconcealed as beings to the metaphysician, but does the metaphysician see what renders them unconcealed? That which itself remains unconcealed? The process by which beings are

<sup>9</sup>Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (New Haven: College & University Press, 1968).

<sup>10</sup>Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 89-110.

unconcealed as beings is what Heidegger understands (or at least tries to name) as Being. It is clear then that this "Being" is not itself a being (*Seiendes*). Being (*Sein*) can therefore be variously described as a clearing, a totality, an openness, or a lighting. Being is that light which a clearing is opened for the totality of beings (*Seiendes*) to appear.

But metaphysics itself is not concerned with the *Seinsfrage* since it is preoccupied with beings as beings. Metaphysics cannot even pose the *Seinsfrage*<sup>11</sup> since it can only consider beings but not the very lighting process, since the latter is not itself a being, not something revealed. Heidegger here is saying that metaphysics misses the fact of Being as  $\alpha\text{-}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$  ("unconcealment," the process which reveals and yet itself hides at the same time), which the Pre-Socratics were able to recognize. Metaphysics by its very nature cannot focus on Being for it is essentially directed towards beings as beings, towards the unconcealed, to the detriment of the concealed.

Both Plato and Aristotle were metaphysicians of the highest order, the former due to his theory of eternal Ideas, the latter because of his idea of  $\epsilon\nu\epsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\iota\alpha$  (*energeia*, the actualization of anything into a substance).<sup>12</sup> According to Whitehead, everything after Plato is simply a footnote to him, a recognition of the fact that subsequent thinkers have remained in the tradition of Plato's thinking. But if Plato is guilty of *Seinsvergessenheit* (the forgetfulness of Being) because of his metaphysical way of thinking, the history of thought becomes detrimental to the *Seinsfrage*. It would mean that the whole history of metaphysics, of philosophy is *Seinsvergessenheit*. Plato dominates the history of thought, and by that very domination, dooms that history into oblivion, into the darkness away from the lighting, away from the clearing. As Heidegger says in *Being and Time*:

...not only that the question of the meaning of Being is one that has not been attended to and one that has been inadequately formulated, but that it has become quite forgotten in spite of all our interest in 'metaphysics.'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Richardson, Heidegger, 7.

<sup>12</sup>George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978, 1989), 28.

<sup>13</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 43.

## The Question of Being: A Reappraisal

Heidegger uncovers the meaning of  $\text{ov in } \tau\iota \text{ to } \text{ov } \eta \text{ ov}$  in order to uncover the inner meaning of metaphysics. He shows that the phrase “beings as beings” in itself is highly ambiguous. Of course it means a consideration of that which makes them be ( $\text{ουσια}$ ), but what does that in itself mean? This “being-ness” can mean either of two things: the common denominator of all things, or the highest thing of all things.<sup>14</sup> In the first sense,  $\text{ov}$  is taken as Being-in-general, the commonality of all that is. In this meaning of metaphysics as affirmation of that which binds ( $\text{λογος}$ ) all beings ( $\text{οντος}$ ), metaphysics can be understood as onto-logy. The second sense considers  $\text{ov}$  as the Supreme Being, the highest being among and above all other beings, making it the absolute ground of all things, that which makes beings be. Because it is Supreme, Being is known as “divine” ( $\text{θειον}$ ), and thus metaphysics turns out to be a theio-logy. Since metaphysics encompasses both these meanings, its necessary structure is revealed to be onto-theio-logical.<sup>15</sup>

The essential onto-theio-logical structure of metaphysics arises from an innate ambiguity in both the phrase  $\text{ov } \eta \text{ ov}$  and the word  $\text{ov}$  itself. This very ambiguity originates from what Heidegger calls the ontological difference, the difference between Being and beings.<sup>16</sup> The whole history of metaphysics is its forgetfulness of the ontological difference. But it is this very *Seinsvergessenheit* which defines metaphysics, which is essential to its way of thinking, as  $\text{μετα τα φυσικα}$ . Heidegger seeks to go beyond all metaphysics, however, by thinking the “fundamental ontology” behind all metaphysics, so as to reach its ground, the process of Being, which largely remains unthought.

Heidegger however poses a puzzling suggestion in “Overcoming Metaphysics”: that “(m)etaphysics belongs to the nature of man.”<sup>17</sup> Human beings as human beings are caught in the unawareness of the difference between beings and Being. *Dasein*, Heidegger’s term for the kind of existence that the human being is, has as its average everyday mode, an existence as *das Man*, or the “They.”

<sup>14</sup>Richardson, Heidegger, 9.

<sup>15</sup>Richardson, Heidegger, 10.

<sup>16</sup>Richardson, Heidegger, 12.

<sup>17</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 87.

The normal conditions of human beings is an imprisonment in the world of beings. Rarely, if ever, does one pay attention to Being itself, that which grants beings as beings. People in daily life are caught in the work-a-day world, their whole lives consumed in endlessly trying to earn a living. “Practicality” rules the day:

*Thus confined to what is metaphysical, man is caught in the difference of beings and Being which he never experiences. The manner of human representation which is metaphysically characterized finds everywhere only the metaphysically constructed world.*<sup>18</sup>

But what is truly most important? What is truly central? What must occupy us as human beings? Even those that go beyond the concerns of “ordinary folk,” the supposed “thinkers”—technologists, scientists, even so-called philosophers, are still caught up in this forgetfulness of Being. The *Seinsvergessenheit* is not a rare malady; it is part of what it means to be human. No other beings can forget Being; the very forgetfulness, it can be said, is already a granting to us by Being. The granting, the openness to Being to us as Dasein, however, does not need to end there.

## The History of Metaphysics

In “Overcoming Metaphysics,” Heidegger concentrates on how the metaphysical thought of modern philosophy is leading towards what he calls “the completion of metaphysics.”<sup>19</sup> Heidegger uses the term “will to will” as the central human tendency which drives human thought to close off all avenues of Being in order to fit it into a more rationally graspable being. For Heidegger, the greatest philosophers of the modern era have only facilitated the progress (or regress?) of thinking into the gradual absolutization of the will to will, which eventually is leading metaphysics into its “completion.”

The will to will is the insistence of the human subject, as subject, to be master over Being. Although the insistence is inherent in all of us, Heidegger shows that modern history is a history of the gradual coming out of the will to will, until now, in

<sup>18</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 87.

<sup>19</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 89.



the present era, when it is running roughshod over everything in the guise of modern technology. Heidegger assesses the thoughts of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and, in the end, Nietzsche—the great “moderns”—to show how the will to will shows itself differently in recent history. All four men are still part of the metaphysical tradition laid out by Plato and Aristotle, and as such these four moderns give the 2500-year history of metaphysics a full circle.

In fragment IV of “Overcoming Metaphysics,” Heidegger suggests how Descartes gave birth to modern philosophy by inaugurating the thinking of Being as “objectivity.” The Cartesian ego cogito becomes the fountainhead of certitude that grants objectivity to beings:

*The object is the unity of the constancy of what persists. In its standing, persistence is essentially related to the presentation of re-presentation as the guarantee of having-something-in-front-of-oneself. The original object is objectivity itself. Original objectivity is the “I think,” in the sense of the “I perceive” which already presents and has presented itself in advance for everything perceivable. It is the subiectum. In the order of the transcendental genesis of the object, the subject is the first object of ontological representation.<sup>20</sup>*

This persistence given in re-presentation guarantees the presence of the object before the knower. Descartes thus sets the ego cogito as subject “over against” all objectivity. The Cartesian metaphysical revolution is a turn therefore towards epistemology, in which the central question is “how can I be sure (of that which is set over against me)?” A turn that turns towards the primacy of the subiectum, for everything is related to the self as the “I think” in the form of knowledge.

One can see that through the problem of identifying thought with re-presentation, Descartes is related to his predecessor Plato, and in that relation they are tied up in the Seinsvergessenheit. Plato departs from the Pre-Socratic notion of  $\alpha\text{-}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$ , and the notion of  $\Phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  is transformed: the awareness of the process-nature of Being is replaced by the eternity of Ideas. Ideas in their unchangeable-ness, in their persistence become “something-to-be-seen ( $\epsilon\iota\delta\omicron\varsigma$ ;  $\iota\delta\epsilon\iota\nu$ ),”<sup>21</sup> and truth comes to mean the proper

<sup>20</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 87-88.

<sup>21</sup>Richardson, Heidegger, 17.



viewing of the Ideas by the human mind, that is, the conformity between the “viewer” and the Ideas that are viewed (i.e., re-presentation). Away from the Pre-Socratic Being of process-unconcealment, Plato’s Being becomes a static being to be viewed. Heidegger sees Plato and Descartes, being conjoined in their metaphysics, as forgetting Being.

Descartes, however, takes metaphysics into its subjective extreme. Beings for him, according to Heidegger, are only “true” if they can be entered into the subject-object polarity, i.e., they are either subject or object.<sup>22</sup> The Being of beings does not mean unconcealment anymore, but the certitude of re-presentation by the *subiectum*. The value of reality is only in relation to myself as knower. The epistemological ego, the knower, thus considers the world as something to be grasped. The knower thus becomes predatory.<sup>23</sup> Truth is transformed into certitude: what is true is what is indubitable. But this certitude is a mere function of the re-presentation undertaken by the *subiectum* itself.

In fragment V, Heidegger discusses how Immanuel Kant’s transcendental philosophy shows the fundamental epistemological character of modern ontology. “Epistemology,” Heidegger says, “and what goes under that name is at bottom metaphysics and ontology which is based on truth as the certainty of guaranteed representation.”<sup>24</sup>

This ontology views *ov* in terms of objectivity, and truth as the certitude of re-presentation. For the world to remain in the realm of reason, the world must conform to the transcendental Kantian consciousness. Like Descartes, Kant prioritized, according to Heidegger, the status of the *subiectum* (as knower) over reality. Being for Descartes and Kant is understood as objectivity and re-presentedness, which for Heidegger is a going-away from the early Pre-Socratic awareness of Being-physis and is tantamount to a confusion of Being with beings. What is therefore evident at the very start of modern ontology is an erasure. What is blotted out is the fundamental significance of Being in favor of an epistemological surrender to the ego:

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*“Epistemology” is the title for the increasing, essential*

<sup>22</sup>Richardson, Heidegger, 18.

<sup>23</sup>Steiner, Martin Heidegger, 31.

<sup>24</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 88.

*powerlessness of modern metaphysics to know its own essence and the ground of that essence. The talk about "metaphysics of knowledge" remains within the same misunderstanding. In truth, it is a matter of the metaphysics of the object, that is, of beings as object, of the object for a subject.<sup>25</sup>*

According to Heidegger (in fragment VI), it is Hegel who would begin the "completion of metaphysics" with the latter's insistence on the metaphysics of absolute knowledge as powered by the Spirit of will.<sup>26</sup> How does Hegel's thought initiate the "completion"? And in what does this completion consist? His thrust towards the absolute character of certitude is the culmination of the subject-centeredness started by Descartes and developed by Kant.<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, however, adds that Hegel's thought only starts the completion but does not conclude it, since the will had not yet revealed itself in Hegel as the will to will.

It is Nietzsche's Will-to-Power (as explored by Heidegger in fragments XI-XII) which proves to be the consummation of the subject-centeredness of modern philosophy.<sup>28</sup> According to Heidegger, Nietzsche's metaphysics represents the second to the final stage of the uncovering of will as the will to will, which brings the latter's thinking closer than ever to the completion of metaphysics. Nietzsche uncovered and voiced out the totality of the world as Will-to-Power. His recognition of the undercurrent of constitutive power in the operations of human reason does, on the one hand, make for a transcendence of the old metaphysical value systems. He proclaims the Death of God to show the end of the old, supposedly eternal, supra-sensible values. Nietzsche proposes a "transvaluation of values" through the Will-to-Power's positing of "new values" (in both truth and in art), but for Heidegger, the Nietzschean activity still reduces to a metaphysics of the subject, and thus still keeps Being in oblivion. Nietzsche remains trapped, therefore, in the very nihilism he sought to overcome, according to Heidegger, for he did not overcome the oblivion of Being that was brought about by his uncovering of a Will-to-Power that does not overcome itself. He names the Will-to-Power but stays in the Will-to-Power, never realizing that in it, the innate polarization of the

<sup>25</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 88-89.

<sup>26</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 89.

<sup>27</sup>Richardson, Heidegger, 19.

<sup>28</sup>Richardson, Heidegger, 19.

world into subject and object remains. Being (Sein) stays in the double-trap of subjectivism and objectivism, and thus remains a mere being, bereft of its real, “lightening” nature.

Nietzsche’s Will-to-Power hides the will to will, and it is that oversight, as it were, that keeps Nietzsche from ultimately overcoming the metaphysical history he intends to transcend. In Heidegger’s assessment:

*The being of the will to power can only be understood in terms of the will to will. The will to will, however, can only be experienced when metaphysics has already entered its transition.*<sup>29</sup>

Nietzsche’s idolization of the embodiment of the Will-to-Power, the Übermensch, as genius, as creator of values is still, according to Heidegger, an insistence on the imperialism of subjectivity.<sup>30</sup> The obstinacy of the Nietzschean subjectivity towards the persistence of being is seen in his assertion that the eternal recurrence of the same is what truly is. It is in this sense that Heidegger says that subjectivity, object and reflection belong together.<sup>31</sup> Being (Sein) is determined as objectivity by a subject that grounds the truth of everything in re-presentation (repraesentatio). Re-presentation in its turn is grounded on reflexio, in asking the relation of beings to the self-as-subject. Thus the whole of modern philosophy for Heidegger is grounded in a metaphysics that always returns to the self as ground, and thus, is essentially egoistic:

*With Nietzsche’s metaphysics, philosophy is completed. That means: It has gone through the sphere of prefigured possibilities. Completed metaphysics, which is the ground for the planetary manner of thinking, gives the scaffolding for an order of the earth which will supposedly last for a long time. The order no longer needs philosophy because philosophy is already at its foundation. But with the end of philosophy, thinking is not also at its end, but in transition to another beginning.*<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 95.

<sup>30</sup>Steiner, Martin Heidegger, 70.

<sup>31</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 97.

<sup>32</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 95-96.

## The Age of Technology and the Will-to-Will

Where else is philosophy as philosophy to go after Nietzsche? The will to will inherent in the whole history of metaphysics but which only gradually revealed itself through time and finally disclosed itself in modern philosophy can go no further in its own path. What Nietzsche initiated was the start of the total unmasking of the will as will to will. From Descartes' will-to-certainty to Hegel's will-to-absolutize to Nietzsche's Will-to-Power, what actually remained lurking underneath, in Heidegger's assessment, was pure willfulness, the will-to-will. It is the pure insistence of the human will to subsist as itself over and above everything else, naturally to the detriment of Being. Metaphysics is completed in this total unmasking, and the essence of philosophy in this age is revealed to be anthropological,<sup>33</sup> which means that the "thinking" (as it were) always goes back to the human thinker as ground. This is what Heidegger calls "egoity," which comes to its fullest expression in history in the present age, the age of technology.

The will to will guarantees itself absolutely. It does not subscribe to anything outside itself, and it does not let anything outside itself be unless it happens in the will to will's sphere of control. Everything is in correct order only in so far as they submit themselves to the will to will. Modern technology (and modern science, as well—Heidegger sees the two as essentially the same) is the uttermost expression of the human will:

*The basic form of appearance in which the will to will arranges and calculates itself in the unhistorical element of the world of completed metaphysics can be stringently called "technology." The name includes all the areas of beings which equip the whole of beings: objectified nature, the business of culture, manufactured politics, and the gloss of ideals overlying everything. Thus "technology" does not signify here the separate areas of the production and equipment of machines. The latter of course have a position of power, to be more closely defined, which is grounded in the precedence of matter as the supposedly elemental and primarily objective factor.<sup>34</sup>*

The essence of technology is the total mastery of beings.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 99.

<sup>34</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 91.

<sup>35</sup>For a more thorough discussion of the essence of technology, please see Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 307-341.

Modern technology aims to put all beings into place under its jurisdiction, which is why Heidegger calls this attempt an “enframing” (Ge-stell):

*The essence of technology lies in enframing. Its holding sway belongs within destining. Since destining at any given time starts man on a way of revealing, man, thus under sway, is continually approaching the brink of the possibility of pursuing and promulgating nothing but what is revealed in ordering, and of deriving all his standards on this basis.<sup>36</sup>*

The technological project of domination over the earth unveils for our current era the oblivion of Being, the forgetfulness of the ontological difference. Technology reveals the will to will as guaranteeing itself as power itself.

The extreme egoism in technology can be seen in the many ways it turns abusive. The current ecological problem is a prime example. No other species on earth can actually physically transform the whole world (in its own image?). The insistence of human beings on endless production strains and eventually exhausts natural resources. The tragic flooding caused by Typhoon Ondoy a few years back attests to the power of technology to reshape the earth (and human lives, of course). Everywhere one goes, the problem of garbage disposal, air, noise and light pollution, and dwindling natural resources loom threateningly.

All these of course point to the capability of humanity in the present era to impose itself on its world and its resources, shaping the world according to its own needs, and worse, wants. In such and the like does humanity make itself “master of what is elemental.”<sup>37</sup> Never before in any other epoch had humanity attained the level of control that it now has over its world. Technology therefore is the possibility of the impossibility that enables humankind to exert the control it has at present over its own dwelling place.

In connection with this, Heidegger in fragment XXVI of “Overcoming Metaphysics” enters into thinking about the current state of “war and peace.” Humanity again attempts to master the elemental by endlessly consuming beings for the creation and use of armaments. But both war and peace are subsumed in this

<sup>36</sup>Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology,” 331.

<sup>37</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 103.

“escalating manufacture of what can be manufactured.”<sup>38</sup> The grip of the Cold War had over all nations in recent world history attests to this. But even in the present millennium, the world’s preoccupation with war compels it to allocate the overwhelming majority of its resources for military expenditures.<sup>39</sup> How much resources, both financial and otherwise, are participating countries expending in order to continue fighting the war against the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Only a small fraction of such expenditures are actually allocated to helping the innumerable refugees produced by the fighting. “Peace” for most countries’ leaders can only mean a military-technological “solution,” i.e., the “escalating manufacture” of the machinations of war. And even the poorest of nations subscribe to such a thinking, pre-occupying themselves with arming up, even in the most peaceful of times. At the bottom of this world-fascination for “hardware,” for things military, is an itching for power to dominate, master, or control what is outside the self, outside the subject.

Fragment XXIV is particularly insightful about the question of power. Here Heidegger remarks:

*...one thing is still covered up here: the fact that this struggle is in the service of power and is willed by it. Power has overpowered these struggles in advance. The will to will alone empowers these struggles. Power, however, overpowers various kinds of humanity in such a way that it expropriates from man the possibility of ever escaping from the oblivion of Being on such paths.<sup>40</sup>*

Our absorption in technology for the sake of power forsakes Being into abandonment. But because of this, technology, since it is concerned not with Being but with its emptiness, will always be an organization of a lack, its expression in machinations the subsistence of nihilism.

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<sup>38</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 104.

<sup>39</sup>That is, with the creation of armaments for use in war. War is being created in order for equipment to be used.

<sup>40</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 102.

## The Meaning of the Overcoming

*How then do we overcome metaphysics, taken in the Heideggerian context?*

Joan Stambaugh comments in her footnote to explain Heidegger's title "Overcoming Metaphysics" that the word *Verwindung* (*verwinden* is "to get over") is more appropriate to mean Heidegger's "overcoming" than *Überwindung*.<sup>41</sup> When *verwunden* overcomes, it does not leave behind what is overcome, but incorporates it in order to continue on. The example Stambaugh gives is pain: one cannot simply go beyond it; one must learn to live with it by recognizing it first. Only then can one go on with one's life. Overcoming then is accepting the reality of the history of metaphysics as such. The past of metaphysics cannot be severed and left behind, as if it were some dark secret better forgotten. Metaphysics is imbedded in who we truly are. One does not actually "go beyond" metaphysics. A clearer appreciation of this issue can spring from understanding that the original German title of the essay is "*Überwindung der Metaphysik*"—the genitive case indicates that the "overcoming" is not simply to transcend metaphysics, it is an "overcoming" on the part of metaphysics. The overcoming is considered in the context of the continuing history of Being.

"Metaphysics cannot be abolished like an opinion," remarks Heidegger.<sup>42</sup> Metaphysics is the history of where our thought has been, and as such it is a part of us, and like one's childhood, one can never truly leave it behind. It will always remain there, somewhere inside, as a continuing force that shapes us, but which we always try to overcome. The comparison with childhood is apt: how does a mature adult recover his/her child-like sense of wonder? For Heidegger, the openness of the Pre-Socratics to Being is like the wonder of our earliest days, when everything was still new. All beings then were wonder-full in their presencing in *φύσις*, which was the actual origin of that wonder. But one inevitably grows up through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood; and one cannot deny that one learns through that lengthy period. But

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<sup>41</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 84.

<sup>42</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 85.



one finds oneself in his/her maturity to have lost that sense of wonder of those earliest childhood years; one has become, in a word, petrified. One at this point can think in the sense that one has gone through years of schooling, even graduate school. But one hardly remembers what it is like to have a fresh thought, immersed in pure openness.

Heidegger's *Überwindung* develops throughout his career. As early as *Sein und Zeit*, he already talks of a needed *Destruktion* of metaphysics.<sup>43</sup> One must discern *Destruktion* in the sense of *Abbau*, a "taking down," a "dismantling" of the empty representations in the history of metaphysics in order to arrive at the fundamental question<sup>44</sup>—the *Seinsfrage*. Heidegger's sense of the *Überwindung* is to be experienced in a turning (*Kehre*) from the banality of metaphysics. The point therefore is that we have not yet learned how to think:

*We must learn thinking, because our being able to think, and even gifted for it, is still no guarantee that we are capable of thinking. To be capable we must before all else incline toward what addresses itself to thought—and that is what of itself gives food for thought. What gives us this gift, the gift of what must properly be thought about, is what we call most thought-provoking.*<sup>45</sup>

The challenge therefore is to survive metaphysics in the process of learning how to truly think.

## Thinking and the Shepherd: A Conclusion

Thinking that overcomes metaphysics must occur as anamnesis, a rupture from the forgetfulness of Being.<sup>46</sup> One must remember and try not to forget—what? Being (*Sein*) itself. But what must be clear here is that the overcoming cannot simply come as an effort on the part of *Dasein*, or else it will become just what it intends to overcome—the imperialism of subjectivity, the will to will. The overcoming originates from Being itself.<sup>47</sup> *Dasein*

<sup>43</sup>See Chapter 6, "The task of Destroying the history of ontology," in Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 41-49.

<sup>44</sup>Michael Gendre, "Translator's Preface," in Janicaud and Mattéi, *Heidegger from Metaphysics to Thought*, xi.

<sup>45</sup>Martin Heidegger, "What Calls for Thinking?" in *Basic Writings*, 381.

<sup>46</sup>Janicaud and Mattéi, *Heidegger from Metaphysics to Thought*, 4.

<sup>47</sup>Janicaud and Mattéi, *Heidegger from Metaphysics to Thought*, 6.

can only wait on Being in wonder-filled anticipation.

Heidegger talks of the human being as the “shepherd of Being,” an image so far removed from the uniformed, technological *das Man* bent on securing order for the world. The whole history of metaphysics from Plato and Aristotle down to the moderns and finally ending in contemporary technological society has been a history of the human being asserting him/herself over Being itself, relegating Being into the darkness of oblivion and elevating mere beings into supremacy. Metaphysics has been throughout its history the story of humanity’s violence towards Being, forcing Being into what it is not, eradicating the all-important ontological difference. Heidegger’s shepherd, on the other hand, waits on Being rather than violates it. The shepherd gathers the flock when the time comes to return to the fold. In this sense, the shepherd has the gathering quality of the *logos* and not the mechanizing attitude of the technological man:

*Shepherds live invisibly and outside of the desert of the desolated earth, which is only supposed to be of use for the guarantee of the dominance of man whose effects are limited to judging whether something is important or unimportant for life. As the will to will, this life demands in advance that all knowledge move in the manner of guaranteeing calculation and valuation.*<sup>48</sup>

Modern technology is precisely the apogee (in the sense that it is farthest from its ground) of metaphysics. Technology, the completion of metaphysics, is humanity’s ultimate domination of the earth. Technology trespasses; it oversteps its possibility. Who could have known the splitting of the atom and the breaking of the genetic code would one day lead to human beings declaring themselves gods? The nuclear bomb and the possibility of human cloning show that there are limits to technology, in the sense of proper boundaries (one may get lost by walking away from paths and veering away from clearings). Boundaries are set by the uncovering of Being itself, for technology is still borne by Being, not by *Dasein*. The danger exists when *Dasein* becomes too fascinated with technology and takes it to be everything, and in the process, forgets Being. *Dasein* thus forgets as well that s/he too is an artist, a poet, because s/he begins to assume that all human life

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<sup>48</sup>Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 109.

is a matter of genetics, all human interaction determined by who has the bigger bomb.

Technology, according to Heidegger, makes even the impossible possible; it transgresses into the realm of that which only humanity's insistent willfulness dare enter. This constitutes a violation of the granting of Being. The ontological difference is transgressed when humanity assumes that it can disregard the Being that grants everything and presumes humanity itself can perform the granting. As Heidegger puts it:

*In whatever way the destining of revealing may hold sway, the unconcealment in which everything that is shows itself at any given time harbors the danger that man may misconstrue the unconcealed and misinterpret it. Thus where everything that presences exhibits itself in the light of a cause-effect coherence, even God, for representational thinking, can lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance. In the light of causality, God can sink to the level of a cause, of causa efficiens...<sup>49</sup>*

In actuality, even such technological creations as bombs and cloning are granted by Being; the problem is when Dasein assumes that such technological marvels subsume everything, s/he forgets that s/he is the "There" of Being, and as such is an artistic, poetic being. The danger of such technological constructs is that in them, Dasein tends to denigrate human beings, including her/himself, into the level of mere "resource." The ontological difference is violated whenever humanity assumes it can disregard Being, which grants everything, and presumes humanity itself can do the granting.

This is why beyond "philosophizing," Heidegger recommends as the model the work of the artist and the poet. They do not intend to lord it over Being, but humbly wait on Being to unconceal itself, all the while paying their respects to that which remains concealed, which is mystery. Heidegger muses:

*It is one thing just to use the earth, another to receive the blessing of the earth and to become at home in the law of this reception in order to shepherd the mystery of Being and watch over the inviolability of the possible.<sup>50</sup>*

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<sup>49</sup>Heidegger, "Question Concerning Technology," 331.

<sup>50</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 109.

Artists and poets dwell in the world, they listen in silence for the often unheard call of Being. The Kehre therefore is truly a great, but humbling, task, for it entails the death of egoity. One has to overcome the self in order to enter transcendence genuinely. Given that metaphysical thinking is a natural part of humanity, what genuine thinking requires is for us to go against our very natures, tendencies, and predilections.

The shepherd patiently, silently waits on Being, recognizing it as Ereignis, the Event of Appropriation. Heidegger derives this term, which in ordinary German usage means “event,” from er-äugen, meaning to discern with the eyes, to see “what is proper.” Ereignis thus is not just a simple happening, but an appropriate event. Being is a certain appropriate manifestation or call to which Dasein must appropriately respond. Heidegger clarifies:

*Let us call the owning that conducts things in this way—the owning that bestirs the saying, the owning that points in any saying’s showing—the appropriating [Ereignis]. Appropriating dispenses the open space of the clearing into which what is present can enter for a while, and from which what is withdrawing into absence can depart, retaining something of itself while all the while in withdrawal. What the appropriating yields through the saying is never the effect of cause, nor the consequences of a reason. The owning that conducts, the appropriating, grants more than any effecting, making, or grounding can grant. What appropriates is appropriation itself—and nothing besides.<sup>51</sup>*

It is Ereignis that appropriates the human being and Being in their essential togetherness.<sup>52</sup> Ereignis makes Being historical, for the call is historically appropriate. It is in Ereignis that Dasein and Being truly reach each other by escaping the pre-determinations metaphysics holds for both of them. Beyond traditional metaphysics, Dasein must attempt to reach the essence of Being as abyss (Abgrund). Abgrund, however, is neither absolute nothingness nor dark chaos, but Ereignis itself.<sup>53</sup> This going-beyond is necessary in order for Dasein and Being to be “appropriated” to each other. The Heidegger scholar Joseph J. Kockelmans may help us understand this point in this way:

<sup>51</sup>Martin Heidegger, “The Way to Language,” in *Basic Writings*, 415.

<sup>52</sup>Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Martin Heidegger: A First Introduction to his Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965), 168.

<sup>53</sup>Kockelmans, *Martin Heidegger*, 168.

*Ereignis expresses the correlation between Being and thinking in terms of a mutual eyeing: Being casts its eye on man (appeal), and Dasein catches Being's eye in return (response). Yet the word Ereignis also refers to the verb eignen, "to be suited for, to be characteristic of, to be the property of." Ereignis thus also expresses the process in which Being appropriates to man his essence in order to appropriate him thus to itself.*<sup>54</sup>

The shepherd must watch over the inviolability of the possible, make sure only the appropriate do come into being. The shepherd, the poet and the artist do not attempt to rule over the world; instead, they simply surrender themselves to it and are ruled by it, in recognition of Ereignis. Heidegger clarifies:

*It is one thing just to use the earth, another to receive the blessing of the earth and to become at home in the law of this reception in order to shepherd the mystery of Being and watch over the inviolability of the possible.*<sup>55</sup>

Thinking does not mean an abandonment of technology. It does not mean leaving metaphysics behind. These are also manifestations of Being. Thinking at this point in human history (and there is always no other) means a resistance to the egoity of the will-to-will which is not willfulness itself. Such is only possible due to the granting that Being does and not because of any attempt of Dasein to control. That is why the thinker needs the quiet, listening attitude of the poet, the creative (in the sense of a letting-unfold) sensibility of the artist, the ever-patient waiting of the shepherd. Only then can something fresh, the way the world was fresh to the Pre-Socratics, unfold itself to our banal selves, and the call of Being answered appropriately. Thus Heidegger gives a sort of an ending to "Overcoming Metaphysics" with these words, *logoi*, in the form of a challenge:

No transformation comes without an anticipatory escort. But how does an escort draw near unless Appropriation [Ereignis] opens out which, calling, needing, envisions human being, that is, sees and in this seeing brings mortals to the path of thinking, poetizing, building.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Joseph J. Kockelmans, *On the Truth of Being: Reflections on Heidegger's Later Philosophy* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), 59.

<sup>55</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 109.

<sup>56</sup>Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," 110.

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