

TRUTH (ALETHEIA) IN THE CONTEXT OF HEIDEGGER'S CRITIQUE

OF PLATO AND THE TRADITION

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Kant's refutation of Descartes amounts to the provocative claim that if Descartes is right, he must be wrong. If Descartes is correct in his assessment of the nature of self-consciousness, he must be incorrect in his assessment of the method of doubting everything external to him. Conversely, if he is right about the method of doubting the external as a means to arrive at an understanding of self-consciousness, he must be wrong about his evaluation of self-consciousness. Kant does more than argue that Descartes' position is simply mistaken; he tries to show that even if Descartes' initial position were correct, the consequence he attempts to draw does not follow. In Kantian terms, since self-consciousness consists in the comprehension of the conditions which makes the unity of experience possible, and that experience always has its touchstone in the reception of sensations from outside of or external to ourselves, Descartes could neither correctly nor consistently maintain a theory of self-consciousness which dispensed with the external world. In short, the external world is, according to Kant, a necessary condition for one's experience of one's self.

The problems of understanding the nature of subjectivity, of self-consciousness, of one's comprehension of the contents of sensation, and one's encounter with objects and the 'external', were no less concerns for ancient Greek philosophy than for Descartes and Kant. In the twentieth century, Heidegger introduced a highly controversial and innovative assessment of Pre-Socratic thought which places these early thinkers at odds with Plato. In Heidegger's view, the fateful demise of the West has its origin in Plato, and not the earlier thinkers in whose doctrines Heidegger finds a more primordial grasp of Being. The so-called 'external' as such arises only with the radical bifurcation of subject and object, only when a certain kind of disengagement takes place in knowing which sets the knower apart from the known. This subject-object dichotomy, which marks the fateful fall from Being in the West, Heidegger finds for the first time in Plato.

What I should here like to argue is that if Heidegger is right, he must be wrong. If he is correct in his assessment of Pre-Socratic experience of aletheia or "truth", and their experience of it as phusis, logos, and moira, he must be wrong in finding the decline of the West in Plato since that same doctrine can be defended in Plato's Philebus and Timaeus, although not in the same terms. I will concern myself to show that Plato cannot mark the "decline of the West" in Heidegger's own terms, that if Heidegger is right about the Pre-Socratics experience of Being, a harmony named by aletheia or "truth", he must be wrong about Plato's role in this ontological drama of the 'fall' from this experience of ontological harmony. To accomplish this project I shall (1) examine Heidegger's assessment of the Pre-Socratic view of truth as unconcealment, and how this essential meaning of truth is transformed by Plato, thereby

marking both the origin of what Heidegger calls the Western Tradition and its decline; (2) consider Heidegger's own project of the fourfold, as a twentieth century expression of truth as unconcealment, and view it as a constructive response to the shortcomings of the Tradition; and (3) show that one way of reading what I shall call the fourfold in Plato's later work, the Philebus and Timaeus, is to see Plato's project as the very one which Heidegger sets out to accomplish and what he denies to Plato.

## I

Heidegger's task is to affirm a view of the world which locates the full reality of Being in the phenomena of beings, a view which permits distinction between Being and beings and yet does not declare the reality of one to be greater than the other. To express this, Heidegger insists that both Being (Sein) and beings (Seiendes) name the same (das Selbe); but this Sameness is not an expression of a simple and uninformative identity. The Same names the unity of Being and beings, and that unity is a unity of differences. This unity of differences, Heidegger finds in the Pre-Socratic experience of a-letheia or truth as unconcealment. According to Heidegger, this a-letheia names the experience of "unconcealment" or "unhiddenness" (die Unverborgenheit); in the Pre-Socratic experience, a-letheia or truth as unconcealment characterizes a process whereby Being discloses itself as beings; in its self-disclosure as plurality, Being conceals its unity. But truth also names the process whereby beings disclose their unity and reveal that all beings are gathered together in Being, at the same time concealing the plural nature of beings. Stated concisely, truth, which the Pre-Socratics called aletheia, the fateful (das Geschickliche) unfolding of the two-fold (die Entfaltung der Zwiefalt) — Being and beings — characterizes what is, and not how we know. Heidegger identifies the so-called Tradition, and thereby the fate of the West, with those for whom Truth has come to mean, not the ontological disclosure of Being and beings, but some sort of a relation between a subject or subjective state and an object, and that relation is expressed in the structure of a proposition or, more generally, in language. The meaning of truth has been transformed; truth has come under the province of epistemology, a study of knowing, and in such a way that the knower and the known are somehow separated. This Tradition finds its origin, according to Heidegger, in Plato, and not in the thoughts of his predecessors.

In Plato, Heidegger sees a transformation of the meaning of truth, a transformation which arises from what Heidegger judges to be, in effect, a two-world theory of reality. True reality or the truth real no longer comes under the province of unconcealment which points to the equal reality of Being and beings. Rather the distinction between Being and beings becomes a distinction between the truly-real and the not-truly-real, and identifies Being with the truly-real called the Idea; consequently, beings or phenomenal existence (= the not-truly-real), can no longer be equated with the real. Being and beings no longer name the Same. When truth as the experience of the unconcealment of Being and beings is transformed to mean correctness of perception, a transformation made possible

only by the identification of Being with the Idea, then the intimate relation between Truth and Being has been severed. Truth as correctness of perception names a process in which there arises an issue of conformity or correspondence between the contents of perception and the comprehension of the essence or reality of that perception; the natural consequence is an hypothesized bifurcation between a subject whose mental activity alone gains access to Being and an object — a being — whose ontologically deficient state can never contain Being as such. This transformation of the meaning of truth, Heidegger claims, marks the origin of the Tradition in the West, a tradition for whom assessments of self-consciousness and the 'external' world have proceeded from an unquestioned assumption of the separateness of subject and object.

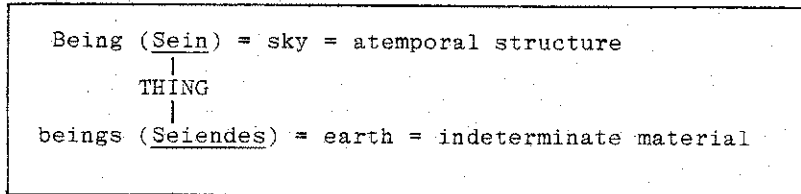
From Plato onward, Heidegger sees the Tradition engaged in a process of trying to get hold of Being. The Tradition is constituted by those thinkers who, in their attempt to get hold of this most abstract entity, have turned Being into a thing. Heidegger finds this Tradition responsible for reifying Being, and by making Being into a thing which can be grasped, turned the primordial question "What is Being?" into the derivative question, "What is [this] being?". The consequence of this maneuver is this; either: (1) philosophers turned their attention to an attempt to reconcile two-worlds, the one which we meet in everyday experience which is not truly real, and the other which may be grasped by the intellect when it passes beyond these mere transient beings and contemplates eternal Being, or (2) philosophers stopped asking entirely about the Being of particular beings under investigation, that is, failed to move beyond an investigation of the world as a collection of things to be grasped. Heidegger's critique of the Tradition, then, begins with the objection that the history of philosophy, from Plato onward, has turned Being into a thing; in trying to get hold of this most abstract thing, the problem of Being has been turned into the problem of beings. With this transition as fundamental, philosophers either turned to develop two-world theories, to account for an opposition between transcendent Being and immanent beings, or dropped the concern for "transcendent" Being altogether — as irrelevant or uninformative — and thereby rendered ontology into an investigation of [immanent] beings alone.

## II

Heidegger's constructive project seeks to re-view this historical inheritance which consists of two separate issues which must be brought forth and resolved together: (1) the two-world or dualistic theory which disengaged Being and beings, viewed at various times as a conflict between transcendence and immanence, essentia and existentia, truly-real and not-truly-real; and (2) the relation between Being and being-human, which raises for us the problem of self-consciousness and its relation to the world.

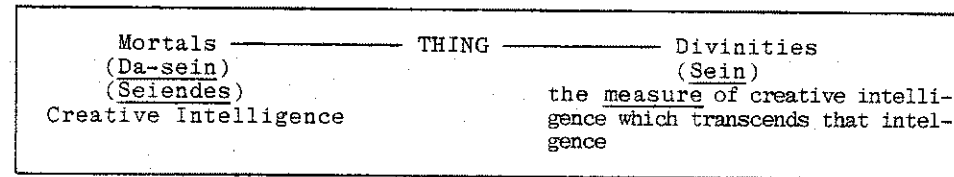
Concerning this first problem, Heidegger rejects any account of the world which introduces a two-world theory of explanation; no less insistent is his rejection of a one-world theory which dismisses Being and raises only the problem of individual beings. Heidegger affirms

the view that declares Being and beings are the Same. His insistence is that we must grasp the world in terms of the convergence of two aspects: the Being of Becoming and the Becoming of Being — two aspects of one-world. Put in a different parlance, the relations between Being and beings requires a new view of the interaction between atemporal structure or Form and indeterminate material encountered in a world conditioned by space and time. In the later work, this tension is presented in the relation of sky and earth. However, in Heideggerian terms, in the intersection of Being and beings we find the nature of a thing.



The second problem, the relation of human consciousness to its world, is taken up in Heidegger's work as the relation between Da-sein and Sein; in the later work it has been presented in the relation of mortals and divinities. Heidegger maintains that human-being and Being belong together. There can be no Sein without Da-sein; Being comes-to-be only with human-being, and that is because Da-sein, human-being, is the constitutor of his world. The world, as Heidegger attempts to show in his critique of Descartes, is not the 'external', it is a region of our concern; the world arises from and as a part of our "caring" and "concerned" nature. When Da-sein is authentic, human-being encounters his world in that expanse, that opening in which Sein is for Da-sein alone, that openness in which human-being finds himself, comprehends his own self-consciousness in the activity of constituting a world in which he has on-going concerns. Heidegger's critique of Descartes forms a part of his critique of the Tradition, and the subject-object dichotomy which it takes as fundamental.

The role of Da-sein as constitutor of the world is presented, later, in terms of mortals. In a way, mortals bring forth the aspect of beings, as the temporal, since the meaning of "mortality" is, in part, obviously related to our experience of finitude and confrontation with death. The nature of a thing, however, is not merely revealed by this mortality, but as in the intersection of Being and beings discussed above, in the intersection of mortals and divinities. Mortals are the constitutors of their world, but the constitutor has a measure in something outside itself, the divinities. Put in a different parlance, we must view the interaction between creative intelligence (= mortals) and a purposeful measure in an intelligence which transcends the finite and temporal (= divinities). The nature of a thing is found in the intersection of Da-sein and Sein, called Mortals and Divinities.

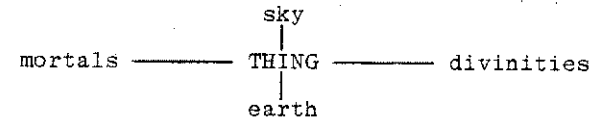


In the essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking", Heidegger speaks of the decisive feature of being human. "Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth". Bauen means "to build" in German; the Old High German word for building, baun, means "to dwell". The same bauen, buan, bhu, beo, appears in the conjugated forms of Sein: ich bin, du bist; "I am, you are", or "I dwell, you dwell". To be a human being is to dwell on the earth.

But on the earth already means under the sky. Both of these also mean remaining before the divinities and include a belonging to men's being with one another. By a primal oneness of the four -- earth and sky, divinities and mortals -- belong together in one.

Having established that to be human is to dwell, and to dwell consists in a belonging together of earth and sky, divinities and mortals, Heidegger claims, "The simple oneness of the four we call the fourfold". This is the "later" Heidegger's way of saying that the meaning of Being is comprehended only in the meaning of being-human.

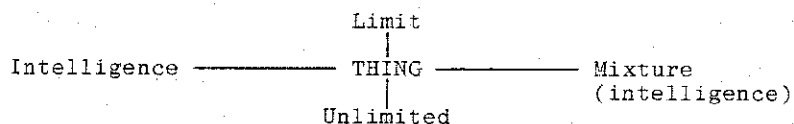
For the Pre-Socratics, the primordial experience of Being and being-human coincided in the experience of truth as unconcealment; in Heidegger's later work, the experience of unconcealment comes in the experience of dwelling, as the preservation of the fourfold in its presencing. As in the Pre-Socratic experience, we seek to understand the unity of Being in its presencing as beings, and we seek to understand presencing in terms of what is present. So, in this later work, we grasp Being in the presencing of the fourfold, and we grasp the fourfold in its simple oneness.



Heidegger's critique of Plato is very much a "conventional" interpretation. In agreement with many commentators, Heidegger observes that (1) Plato's reality consists of two-worlds, Being-Idea vs. beings-phenomena, later formulated in the distinction between essentia and existentia; and (2) human being is one being among many, for Plato — that is, human being is, at best a discoverer of the nature of things, but never a constitutor of that world.

In evidently "late" dialogues like the Philebus, according to those like G.E.L. Owen, Platonic ontology is reviewed; in the Philebus and other "late" dialogues, Plato is concerned to show the "Being of Becoming", the Being of the ever-changing beings or phenomena. The strong claim advanced here is that Plato indeed stops to re-view the nature of beings, and explicitly rejects the two-world theory. That is, in my estimation, precisely an objective of the Philebus.

In that dialogue, Plato attempts to bring together two problems in one resolution: (1) the integration of Being and beings, discussed in the relation between pure, eternal, structure called the Limit and indeterminate material called the Unlimited; and (2) integrate Being and being-human in the discussion of the Pure, creative Intelligence called Nous, and the world thought as a production which arises from a union of form and matter, called the Mixture. This discussion at Philebus 23C-31A is Plato's fourfold of Being. Being is comprehended in the nature of a being and that being is a thing whose nature is defined at the convergence of the fourfold.



The Philebus presents us with a fourfold which seeks to overcome the hiatus between Being and beings; rather than express a two-world theory of reality, the Philebus undermines precisely that doctrine by affirming a one-world theory of the real.

In the second problem, at the same time, the nature of human being is re-cast in a different light. The discussion of the Pure Intelligence comes by way of the macrocosmic-microcosmic argument; the Pure Intelligence in the Cosmos itself is the same intelligence which characterizes the meaning of being human, mutatis mutandis. The Intelligence is the structurer of the world; without it there could be no world. As such, it is also its constitutor. The Philebus implicitly shows that to ask about a world, a production which comes forth from the intersection of structure and material without the agency which makes that production possible, is a meaningless inquiry. But, the world which comes forth by means of this Pure Intelligence is, as the macrocosmic-microcosmic argument insists, nothing but varying degrees of intelligence, presented in the structured-material called "bodies", some of which are capable of becoming conscious of themselves. In that "full" self-consciousness, human beings comprehend themselves as that same intelligence which brings forth the world. The importance of Pythagoreanism in Plato's "late" period emphasizes the central doctrine of homoiosis, or "assimilation" in the divine, Cosmic Intelligence. The project of being human is to become like — the strongest case of which is to become one with — that Pure Intelligence, one's true or essential value, in microcosm. That Intelligence brings forth itself as the world; it is the constitutor that comes to discover itself. But, as for Heidegger, the measure of that activity of constituting lies in a different measure — that macrocosmic

Intelligence, a measure Other than one's present conscious state but the Same as our true, hidden nature. There is no problem of showing that the measure of being human lies outside of or external to ourselves. That measure, that Pure Intelligence which is Divine, with which human beings seek to gain assimilation, is the measure that is contained within oneself. It is that eternal nature which is native to us but of which we are somehow unaware. To reach it we must transcend our own temporality to find our essential nature, the nature which we truly ARE. Plato affirms a view that human beings are an interaction between that Being and being, an eternal nature which we ARE and an ever-striving, ever-about-to-become but never-are. I suggest that this is a provisional view of the fourfold.

Kant's critique of Descartes is that if Descartes is right, he must be wrong. However, when Kant criticizes the Cartesian Idealism, he takes for granted, unquestioningly, a dualism of subject and object, bequeathed to this inheritor of an epistemological priority. When Heidegger criticizes Plato, he too takes for granted a view which attributes a two-world reality to the dialogues. How could this great mind have failed to see that Plato affirms a view so close to his own? --- Perhaps every great thinker has a blindspot; perhaps in the unconcealment which brings to light what discloses itself, invariably something withdraws into the concealment which eludes that great thinkers grasp. If Heidegger is right about the Pre-Socratics view of truth as unconcealment, he must be wrong about Plato, who not only affirms this unfolding of Being and beings as the Same, but also experiences it in precisely that context and in those terms which — in the belonging-together of the fourfold — Heidegger himself finds so adequate. In Heidegger's own terms, Plato cannot mark the 'decline of the West' and thereby the origin of the so-called Tradition. But, if Plato cannot mark the fateful decline of Being into concealment, the fall from accord, then what of Heidegger's theory of history, the history of Being, the theory upon which the fateful consequence of Heidegger's own constructive project rests?