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Martin Heidegger and his Way to Ontotheology

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I. AN INTRODUCTION

Martin Heidegger's philosophical effort is conceived in the search for the way to being¹. His thought is commonly divided into two periods. The first is connected with the publication of "Being and Time" in 1927. This book was well-received and its author intended for it to be the first part of a great work related to a large-scale project involving the search for the proper foundation of reality, that is, being (*Sein*). According to Heidegger, being itself has been forgotten in the history of philosophy, concealed by giving attention to "what" (*τὸδε τι*) rather than to "is" (*εἶναι*). In "Being and Time" Heidegger tried to reverse this process, beginning with the analysis of human existence as *Dasein*. He called this attempt fundamental ontology and it was intended to result in the discovery of being through the study of the human entity revealing itself in the context of being "there" (*sein da*).

As Heidegger quickly realized, the project was a failure. Consequently, in the second half of the 1930s, the famous "turn" (*Kehre*) occurred in his thought, leading to the rejection of fundamental ontology in favor of something that the author called the "enowning" (*Ereignis*) of being². Heidegger carefully described this process in his work „Contributions to Philosophy (From

Enowning) ["Contributions to Philosophy (Of Event)"]", which remains one of his most mysterious works 3.

In *Contributions...* Heidegger tries to carry out probably only one possibility of opening up to being itself, through the "passing of the last god." This is a radical departure from the previous ontology, but also from the previous thinking of God. The last god is fundamentally different from the gods of the past. In Heidegger's idea of the last god, there is no reference to the God of faith, but the "theological" problem remains hidden as "ontotheology" 4. In this article, I try to briefly show what is the meaning of god for revealing being itself and how Heidegger tries to go to ontotheology.

II. THE BEING

The disclosure of being from enowning is a process that Heidegger describes in "Contributions..." as an essential swaying (*Seyn west*). It is important to remember that he uses the term *wesen* only in reference to being. The verb translated as "to hold sway" is now obsolete in German and we may say Heidegger restored it in philosophical language. In the past, German *wesen* was the equivalent of the verb *sein* – to be, and Heidegger linked *wesen* with "being" (Heidegger 1983: 76-77; Inwood 1999: 53). Generally, *wesen* has been retained in past forms of the verb *sein* as *war* and *gewesen*. However, in contemporary German it is mostly used as the noun *Wesen*, which means essence, in scholastic tradition referred to as *essentia*. This form of entity (being) is expressly mentioned by Hegel, who claims that the entity has gone forever, its time has ended and it has become an essence that has ceased to exist but has remained as "something." In this meaning, for Hegel the grasping of existence is always late, because in the dialectic process we can only explore what has already passed, what has become the past, in other words, what has transformed from "is" to something that "was," i.e., to essence-*Wesen*. This meaning is reflected in the past form of the verb *sein* – the above-mentioned *gewesen*

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¹ In this article, I always use the word "being" for the German terms *Sein*, or *Seyn*. On the word *Sein*, especially in the context of Heidegger's "Contributions to Philosophy" and in the Old German form of *Seyn*, see the extensive *Translation's Foreword* to the English translation of this book by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly: Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, XXII-XXIII.

² I am convinced by the arguments of Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Heidegger 1999: XIX-XXII) and in this text I use the English word "enowning".

³ There are two English translations of this book: *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. Trans. by P. Emad, K. Maly. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1999; *Contributions to Philosophy (Of Event)*. Trans. by R. Rojcewicz, D. Vallega-Neu. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2012. Both translations differ significantly from each other. We can say that they represent different visions of Heidegger's "Contributions...". I prefer the translation of P. Emad and K. Maly.

⁴ Heidegger's concept of "the last god" was strongly influenced by his reading of Schelling's texts. For more on this topic, see: Seidel 1999: 85-98.

(Hegel 2010: 337). Whatever is – and first of all, whatever will be – is subject to the process of becoming and existing, which Hegel understood as a dialectical process of transition from thesis to antithesis, then to their synthesis, etc.5.

Heidegger, however, uses the verbal function of the word *wesen*, which is no longer used in German. As a verb, it should be translated as “to hold sway,” because it refers to the presence or appearance of something. This is quite important, because it is closely related to the word *das Anwesen* and its derivatives: *die Anwesenheit*, *abwesen*, *das Unwesen*, so it alludes to “presence,” “appearance,” or their opposites (Inwood 1999: 54). Thus, essential swaying must refer to making present, appearing or becoming, at the same time pointing to the dynamic character of the phenomenon with the used verbal form (Heidegger 1994: 484; See Emad 2007: 29; Esposito 1995: 41). We can briefly say that on this basis Heidegger presents his critical assessment of traditional philosophy, which in his opinion is based on forgetting its ground, its proper foundation. In language it is manifested in the discontinuation of the verbal form *wesen* in favor of the static, non-dynamic nominal form *Wesen*. Thus, according to Heidegger it is possible to approach the whole history of philosophy as process in which there was a transition from the verbal form *wesen*, expressing movement, to stability and constancy expressed by the noun *das Wesen*. Philosophy has become the metaphysics of entity (actually, its static, constant essence – *das Wesen*), abandoning the reflection on being, the process of being, *sein*, *wesen*, i.e., on the swaying and presence of entity. Metaphysics has become the reflection on a “what” of that which is and not on the “is” of that which is.

III. THE WAY TO BEING

According to Heidegger, the swaying of being is the core and return to doing “authentic” philosophy; it is the key to building a proper ontology, which will overcome the metaphysical crisis of the false – because ontic – approach to what is the beginning, ground and foundation of everything. The philosopher stresses that the swaying of being (since it is being that holds sway or is present) is performed through a sign (*Wink*). It is the enowning (*Ereignis*) and it is disclosed to human being-*Dasein* – in this we can see a clear distinction between entity and being (Esposito 1995: 41-42). For Heidegger, entity is the expression of departing from and forgetting being. But this forgetting is not absolute, as even in forgetting the visage of being is revealed, flashing through the entity though remaining hidden. This is based on the Parmenides’ postulate of the unity

(identity) of being and thinking, strongly emphasized by Heidegger: when we think and express “thinking”, we think and express being (Heidegger 1994: 432-434; see Esposito 1995: 40-41; Herrmann 1989: 48-54; Herrmann 1994: 64-84). For example, phrases such as: entity “is departing” or entity “is forgetting” refer to being, since the “is” used in these phrases expresses “being.” But in this very thinking (and expression) being is hidden, camouflaged, we might say disguised as a link or a connect occurring in a judgement or sentence. Heidegger suggests that we should see the primacy of being over entity, the primacy of concealed being whose essence lies in remaining in this state and which can only be disclosed by the proper approach to what entity really “is” (Heidegger 1994: 255-256). We can understand it as the process of disclosing being or making it come to light, which is the dynamic enowning, acceptance, authenticity of “is” and also the authenticity of human being as *Dasein* 6. This process also involves the relationship with one more important element, since according to Heidegger it holds sway or is ownmost in a sign (*Wink*). The function of the sign seems to be unquestionable, because the sign is necessary. It seems to be the essential sway of being itself. Being is revealed in a sign (or through it) – although being remains closed, concealed, in the sign it stimulates *Dasein* to reflect on (not as intellectual reflection but as motivation to think and ponder) and experience itself. The sign is also something like a beckon or summoning gesture, so it includes some dynamism, which manifests itself in calling the last god, even if it is unclear whether the last god is coming nearer or moving further away (Heidegger 1994: 385, 409). It is the experience of evanescence: with help of the sign, man recognizes and realizes that entity conceals being, or – we may say – that being hides itself behind entity, which seems a complete abandonment of being (Nancy 2008: 169).

IV. A SIGN OF THE LAST GOD

As I have already mentioned, Heidegger refers to being itself in his thinking. He criticizes the earlier metaphysical tradition whose object was entity as entity (*ens inquantum ens*). In that tradition, nothing is considered the opposite, an absolute exclusion of entity – it is its logical negation. Heidegger stresses that in the

⁵ “Die Sprache hat im Zeitwort Sein das Wesen in der vorgangenen Zeit “gewesen” behalten; denn das Wesen ist das vergangene, aber zeitlos vergangene Sein”. Hegel 2003: 3. See Hegel 2010: 337.

⁶ We must understand what means “authenticity”. Heidegger uses the term *Eigentlichkeit*, which in German is related to the root *eignen*, i.e., all that is included in enowning, owning, or property. The English term authenticity does not include this relationship at all. Still, I use it, following K. Sipowicz, who explains in detail why he suggests using this term with reference to Heidegger’s thought. Thus, authentic *Dasein* would mean *Dasein* that is gifted, enowned, and actually (*eigentlich*) existing (i.e., ontologically) in contrast to the ever-present inauthenticity of *Dasein* in an ontic (i. e. entity) context. Cf.: Sipowicz 2007: 9-13. In English, authenticity is related to value, for example W. J. Richardson writes: “So I suggest that Heidegger does propose authenticity as a value. And he has two main ways of defending or justifying this value to us”. Richardson 2012: 168 (See more: 168-172).

area of the proper, other question as part of other beginning, contesting the positive nature of nothing cannot be justified. In his opinion, for philosophical reflection to be accurate, it must involve insight into "the most essential finitude of be-ing." To enter this area, one needs to be prepared for accepting the last god. Heidegger calls this process connected with attitude "the long-term inkling of the last god," this state being the effect of a specific situation: entity, the traditional God and everything connected with him must be rejected (Crownfield 2001: 218; Gall 2013: 30). According to Heidegger, the God of tradition is mostly the God of Judeo-Christian monotheism. But for him such a God has died. The death of God reflects the condition of the metaphysical and religious tradition and all the "-isms" connected with it. Monotheism, theism, or atheism are the effect of conceptualization and a metaphysical approach to the God of religions (Heidegger 1999: 288-289). For Heidegger, the bankruptcy of this tradition is an obvious fact. The God of religions, the revealed God, the only Creator of the world has been logicized and reduced to the content of entity. Thus, God was linked to entity. Obviously, such a God has died, lost his importance, left mankind and man, is dead just like the whole metaphysics of entity (Greisch 2008: 247). Heidegger diagnoses: "With the death of this god, all theisms collapse. The multitude of gods cannot be quantified but rather is subjected to the inner richness of the grounds and abgrounds in the site for the moment of the shining and sheltering-concealing of the hint of the last god" (Heidegger 1999: 289). He attributes the fundamental historic role to the last god. The last god ends the former "history" and initiates other beginning (*andere Anfang*) – actually, he is part of an other beginning, entry to an other history. This entry related to the passing of the last god as a "unique uniqueness" opens history to a new possibility it gives man the possibility of being as a disclosed possibility. Heidegger stresses that the last god makes the previous history come to its absolute end, but this does not exhaust it, merely transforming it into a closed, past history. He uses the word *Verenden* to describe this state. In German it means finishing or ending, but at the same time, it connotes certain inexhaustibility, making the term signify something askin to an infinite process of approaching the end. Thus, the metaphysics of entity gives way to the metaphysics of being, and the last god announces this breakthrough. It is the breakthrough of disclosing/revealing of being, which must always be connected with the end or completion of the history of entity. Disclosing itself, being opens "other" possibilities; it also opens the proper history for man as *Dasein*. The disclosing being includes the fullness of absolute possibility with all the positively approached contents, as well as openness to the possibility of "what is," "what is-not," "what is not-yet" – all which is connected with transition and movement. (Crownfield 2001: 221). The

last god gives a sign to such a move, such a transition. He passes by *Dasein* and reveals to him – through a sign – this openness to possibility. History occurs, so it reflects movement, transformation and readiness to disclose being (its truth). Disclosure of being in history is enowning, gifting *Dasein* with the truth, i.e., what is not-concealed, unconcealed, aletheic in its essence, i.e., in entity. Preparation and readiness of history to enowning being is the transformation and readiness of man and is connected with the coming of the last god. Heidegger writes: "Preparation for the appearing of the last god is the utmost venture of the truth of be-ing, by virtue of which alone man succeeds in restoring beings" (Heidegger 1999: 289; see McGrath 2008: 117). The last god also discloses the truth of being to man, what consequently seems to be decisive for him, since he obtains his entity; his own entity is restored to him, i.e., the awareness that he is something and in this context the realization of being-there (*Sein da*), i.e., transformation into the essence in which being has been disclosed: transformation into *Dasein*. Man with this attitude encounters being through the passing/evanescence of the last god (Nancy 2008: 170). Heidegger points out that the greatest nearness of the last god occurs in the situation of refusal-resistance.

Karol Tarnowski tries to cast some light on the Heideggerian sense of refusal in the presented context. According to him, Heidegger first of all assumes that the truth of being is revealed in the other beginning and disclosed in several degrees of difficulty. Hence, it is a quasi-mystical path that needs to be gone through in philosophical experience, which ultimately leads to the proper foundation, but also to the construction of a proper attitude by the philosopher (Tarnowski 1990: 348). So, in his view, the essence of truth might first be read as "the clearance for concealment," because Heidegger understands truth "aletheically," i.e., as non-forgetting, a reminder, or discovering what is covered or concealed. The sign (*Wink*) is revealed here, originally pointing to the relationship between divinity and being, and basically their association, i.e., to the disclosure of aletheic divinity and being. For Heidegger, metaphysical tradition understood the truth of being as a ground, which gave him reason to assume that in the proper understanding, the truth of being must be *Ab-grund*, which may be translated as abyss. But identifying the truth of being with the abyss does not explain much. The meaning becomes clearer when we dig deeper into the German original, which better shows what signifies the "abyss," or *Abgrund*. The key seems to be the German *ab-* usually means "un-," but it may also be used to add power to the activity it is linked with. For example, we have *ab-arbeiten*, which originally means to execute, handle or process something, but also to slave away, work extremely hard. The first dictionary meaning of *Abgrund* is abyss or chasm, but when connecting "ab" with ground, we would get meanings such "to prepare a



good, solid ground.” This, however, is only one possibility. Another one is an opposite process, i.e., separation from the ground, getting rid of the foundation, remaining without ground, that is, in a way becoming immersed in the open abyss. The role of the last god could therefore be reduced to the following: passing by *Dasein* the last god gives him a sign, which in turn leads to a groundless-abgrund. And it should be opening to the truth of being (Emad 2007: 37-40).

In my opinion this is the core of Heidegger's understanding of the process of a transition from metaphysics of entity to metaphysics of being. For in this process, determined by the passing of the last god, we – in a way – get rid of the foundation and become immersed in the “abyss” of “something” (I have to use this word, although, as we know, Heidegger does not have in mind anything like an object) that is non-grounded, or groundless, so in this sense, ultimate and near the end (Crownfield 2001: 222-223). This “something” is disclosed but at the same time it is always concealed, but yet not grounded by anything else, holding sway in aletheic enowning. We receive such a sign during the passing of the last god and a path to being itself seems to be open. This process becomes a bridge between being itself and *Dasein*, so it is a way to ontotheology.

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