

David Webb

Heidegger, Ethics and the Practice of Ontology



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Heidegger, Ethics and the Practice of Ontology

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To make a study of being, in my opinion, it is preferable to follow all the ontological deviations of the various experiences of being.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

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Contents

Acknowledgements	viii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	1
1. Continuity and Difference in Heidegger's <i>Sophist</i>	8
2. To Think as Mortals: Heidegger and the Finitude of Philosophical Existence	29
3. The Contingency of Freedom: Heidegger Reading Kant	47
4. Dimension and Difference: From Undifferentiatedness to Singularity	66
5. Heidegger and Weyl on the Question of Continuity	83
6. Continuity and the Experience of Language as Such	98
Notes	129
Bibliography	142
Index	147

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Chapter 3: 'The Contingency of Freedom: Heidegger Reading Kant', *International Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 36-1 (Winter 2004), 189–214.

Chapter 5: 'Heidegger et Weyl: nombre, mouvement et continuité', *Noesis* (Jan 2006), 85–102.

Ancient Greek lettering has been transliterated and italicized.

Abbreviations

- B M Heidegger, *Beiträge (vom Ereignis)* (1989), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* (1999), trans. P Emad and K Maly, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- BW M Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (1993), ed. D Farrell Krell, London, Routledge.
- CO H Weyl, *The Continuum: A Critical Examination of the Foundation of Analysis* (1994), New York, Dover Books.
- GA18 M Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie* (2002), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann.
- GA19 M Heidegger, *Platon: Sophistes* (1992), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *Plato's Sophist* (1997), trans. R Rojcewicz and A Schuwer, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- GA20 M Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitsbegriffs* (1979), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *History of the Concept of Time* (1985), trans. T Kisiel, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- GA21 M Heidegger, *Logik: der Frage nach der Wahrheit* (1976), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann.
- GA22 M Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der antiken Philosophie* (2004), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann.
- GA24 M Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (1975), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1982), trans. A Hofstadter, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- GA26 M Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik* (1978), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (1984), trans. M Heim, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- GA29/30 M Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit* (1983), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude,*

- Solitude* (1995), trans. W McNeill and N Walker, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- GA31 M Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit. Einleitung in der Philosophie* (1982), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *On the Essence of Human Freedom: The Essence of Human Freedom: An Introduction to Philosophy* (2002), trans. T Sadler, London, Continuum.
- GA33 M Heidegger, *Aristotele, Metaphysik Θ 1–3, Von Wesen und Wirklichkeit der Kraft* (1981), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *Aristotle's Metaphysics Θ 1–3, On the Essence and Actuality of Force* (1995), trans. W Brogan and P Warnek, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- GA34 M Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit: zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet* (1988), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *The Essence of Truth* (2002), trans. T Sadler, London, Continuum.
- GA62 M Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen ausgewählter Abhandlungen des Aristoteles zur Ontologie und Logik* (2005), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann.
- GA63 M Heidegger, *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität)* (1988), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity* (1998), trans. J van Buren, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- GMM I Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1983), Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (1964), trans. H J Paton, New York and London, Harper and Row.
- KRV I Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1992), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp: *Critique of Pure Reason* (1983), trans. N Kemp Smith, Macmillan, London.
- MET Aristotle, *Metaphysics I–IX* (1933), trans. H Trendelenburg, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press and William Heinemann.
- NE Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1926), trans. H Rackham, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press and William Heinemann.
- PH Aristotle, *Physics* (1929), trans. P H Wicksteed and F M Cornford, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press and William Heinemann.

- PIA Heidegger, 'Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles (Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation) (1989), *Dilthey Jahrbuch* Band 6/1989, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht: 'Phenomenological interpretations in connection with Aristotle: An indication of the hermeneutic situation', trans. M Baur, in Martin Heidegger, *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond* (2002), ed. John van Buren, Albany, SUNY Press, 111–145.
- PLT M Heidegger, *Poetry Language and Thought* (1971), trans. A Hofstadter, New York, Harper and Row.
- SZ M Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1986), Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag; *Being and Time* (1980), trans. J Macquarrie and E Robinson, Oxford, Blackwells.
- US M Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *On the Way to Language* (1982), trans. P Herz, San Francisco, Harper and Row.
- WM M Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (1967), Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann: *Pathmarks* (1998), ed. W McNeill, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

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Introduction

The relation between ontology and ethics in Heidegger is embedded in the question of Being and the thinking of ontological difference. For this reason, it does not lend itself easily to the language that we use to describe things, and can appear remote from the more concrete concerns over how we live our lives. While this distance may be regarded as a good reason not to expect much in the way of ethics from Heidegger's work, it is also why attending to the relation between ontology and ethics in Heidegger may challenge our habitual way of thinking about these matters. However, the ambiguity that suffuses the issue of ethics in Heidegger also works the other way around: the pull towards existence as it is lived threatens to displace Heidegger's thought from the deeper reaches of the question of Being. This is why raising the question of ethics with regard to Heidegger is sometimes regarded as a distraction from the more serious business of ontology. Yet it is also why elements of the question may elude the more firmly established framework of Heidegger's thought and for this very reason present themselves as a challenge to the usual ontological reading of Heidegger's work.

Aristotle's well-known declaration that things are said to be in a variety of ways traditionally leaves ontology facing a dilemma; either it must discover a unity to the different significations of Being, or it must concede that not only is there a profound ambiguity to any talk of Being, but there may be no basic or fundamental sense there to be had at all. The various paths beaten and followed by ontological thought from Aristotle to the present day could all be understood as different responses to this problem. Most have sought to discover a unifying principle of some kind, and a few have explored the possibility of an ontology given over to multiplicity or difference. For example, in different ways, Bergson, Bachelard, Serres, Lyotard, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze have all disputed the assumption that every event by which things are given in experience may be accommodated within a single form. Their influence on my approach to Heidegger comes to the fore in the concern with multiplicity and contingency that lies behind many of the questions I pose. In this respect, the work of Serres and Foucault has

been particularly influential for me, though I have not adopted their problematics or their methodologies directly here; my intent is not to criticize Heidegger for what he didn't do, but rather to allow the concerns of such writers to open up lines of inquiry from deep within Heidegger's own work.

Heidegger's great contribution to philosophy is the idea of the ontological difference: the difference between beings and Being, and the recognition that Being cannot be conceived using the same terms and categories we apply to beings. The ontological difference opens up a new dimension for philosophical thought, making it possible to pose questions in new ways, and to pursue them in new directions. However, in one fundamental respect, Heidegger's thought remains faithful to the ontological tradition, and that is in its insistence on unity as a condition of thinking Being. This condition appears in different guises throughout his work: for example, as the unity of the horizons of ecstatic temporality, as the simplicity of Being, as the silence in the Saying of Being in language, and as the uniqueness of the ontological difference that is everywhere the same. However, although unity, in its various forms, lies at the very heart of his work, Heidegger also welcomes its problematization. Pursuing this problematization allows one to broach the question of the relation between ontology and ethics in Heidegger's work. However, before considering how this becomes possible, it has to be acknowledged that from a Heideggerian point of view the idea of a challenge to the unity of Being and the uniqueness of the ontological difference is barely even coherent. Historically speaking, it contravenes the condition of unity that Aristotle placed on any fundamental treatment of the significations of being. In Heidegger's own terms, the question leads back to the priority of the form of givenness over the particularity of each concrete event in which a being is given, and thus to what is for Heidegger the priority of Being over beings. According to this principle, anything that *is* will be given in a way consistent with a single form of givenness; one that was, in Heidegger's earlier writing, based on the temporal structure of Dasein's transcendence. Indeed, one might go further and say that any such thing *must* be given in a way that is consistent with the most fundamental form of givenness, otherwise it would not 'be' at all. To acknowledge that there is any sense whatsoever in speaking of Being as such and as a whole is already to suppose that such a form of unity exists, however ill-defined it may be for the most part. Yet at the same time, the very radicality of what is supposed shields the idea of fundamental ontology from criticism, and does so by setting up an apparent dilemma; one must either accept the premise of unity and reject the question, or accept the question

and reject the premise. In effect, one is immediately forced into a position of being either with Heidegger or against him. This seems unsatisfactory. My proposal, which the chapters in this book seek to explore, is that one avoids the dilemma by finding a way for the unity of Being and the uniqueness of the ontological difference to become questionable from *within* Heidegger's work.

To open up this question requires an examination of what Heidegger describes as the return of ontological thinking to the ontic dimension that is its point of departure. Inevitably, the motif of a departure from the world of beings to the ontological domain followed by a return recalls the imperative to descend back into the cave that, in the *Republic*, Socrates and Glaucon agree must lie on the shoulders of the one who pursues philosophy and leaves the world of shadows for the light above. In Heidegger's terms, it may be regarded as equivalent to the methodological requirement that phenomenological interpretation develop and renew itself through what he calls the hermeneutic circle; the formal truths of phenomenology are empty until fulfilled in the concrete life of the thinker, and it is easy to see this movement as one of departure and return, or ascent and descent, as though the phases were quite distinct from one another. By contrast, the studies in this book argue that the movements by which ontological thought arises from the ontic and returns to it are inseparable from one another, and that it would be more accurate to say that ontological thought never really leaves the ontic dimension at all. One way to account for the sameness of the departure and return is to describe the movement between them as continuous, which conjures up images of circularity quite consistent with hermeneutic practice. However, there is more to this idea of continuity. Already in his early writing, Heidegger conceives of the event of disclosure as a form of movement and, following Aristotle, understands all movement to be grounded in a formal dimension characterized by continuity. In Aristotle, continuity is associated with wholeness, and similarly in Heidegger we find that continuity is linked both to the sense of Being as a whole with which fundamental ontology engages, and to the finitude of Dasein as a site of disclosure. To describe the movement between the ontic and the ontological as continuous is therefore to say that these levels belong together, but also to expose a certain condition underlying the relation between the ontic and the ontological, and therefore the very idea of the ontological difference. For this reason, the theme of continuity is pivotal to most of this book. The thesis that emerges is that if movement is indeed fundamental to the way Heidegger conceives the event of the ontological difference, the continuity of that movement entails that the

ontic and ontological aspects remain bound to one another in such a way that the simple priority of the ontological over the ontic can no longer be sustained and the relation is revealed as a loop of influence back and forth, or as a continual two-way communication. Now, there is a contingency and multiplicity to the ontic that can be constrained within a singular form only by electing from the outset to ground them in a fundamental unity, allowing the revisionary movement of the turn and return, the hermeneutic circle, to sanction such troubling characteristics as merely provisional. To adopt this reading would be to move back towards the usual sense of the hermeneutic circle. By contrast, if the challenge posed by the contingency and multiplicity of the ontic to the fundamental unity of ontology is acknowledged as genuine, the indefinite character of the understanding of Being will derive not from the revisions that lie ahead, but rather from a more deep seated, and perhaps ineliminable, incompleteness; or, as it were, an essential relation to impossibility on the part of ontological thought. This amounts to conceding a challenge to fundamental ontology. However, to doubt the possibility of addressing Being as such and as a whole, or of discovering a single fundamental form of givenness, does not necessarily mean retreating to an acceptance of 'regional' ontologies in the absence of any account capable of engaging with their common ground. Heidegger's thought itself moves in the direction of an alternative, though perhaps not as far as it might.

The possibility of thinking ontologically, in a sense profoundly inspired by Heidegger, while still acknowledging the problematic character of the unity and simplicity of fundamental ontology arises from Heidegger's own preoccupation with the concept of continuity. As a key term for Aristotle, it enters directly into Heidegger's thought. But whereas other concepts that Heidegger has taken over from Aristotle – such as potentiality, actuality, movement, *praxis*, *phronesis*, *sophia*, not to mention *ousia* and the Aristotelian account of time – have been subjected to a rigorous critique and the transformations that they have undergone in their adoption carefully charted, the same cannot be said for continuity. Its role, and the changes it undergoes, are far more discreet, but no less important for that. What one finds, I argue, is that Heidegger performed an ontological radicalization of continuity that removed from it problematic references to spatial characteristics and relations that belong to an ontic perspective. With a simple interpretation of continuity as constituted by limits set aside, the sense of unity associated with it becomes tied more closely to the nature of the relations within the continuous element, which in order to be continuous at all must involve precisely the kind of two-way relation in which no one