Illuminating the Meaning of 'Being' in the Later Heidegger Through Aspects of the Theologies of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart

BY

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In memoria di madre Maria

1917- 2010

con amore eterno e graditude

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Introduction- The negative turn

Heidegger's *Seinsfrage,* the question concerning the meaning of being, continues

both to provoke a critical response and to inspire creative expressions of thought.

Nevertheless the fundamental identity and value of Heidegger's enterprise is still a matter

of ongoing debate. All too naturally, the essential identity of Heidegger's project is at

least superficially connected with methodological questions. There is a huge body of

literature which explores Heidegger's employment of the transcendental,

phenomenological and hermeneutical methods. Scholars often debate fine points of how

and the extent to which these methods are utilized by Heidegger. Yet this exploration of

issues of methodology rarely succeeds in illuminating the central concern of Heidegger's

work: the question concerning the meaning of being. Doubtless the complexity of

methodological concerns in Heidegger's work contributes to this problem. All too easily

the investigations of these concerns become ends in themselves, while the central aim of

Heidegger's employment of these complex methodologies, the *Seinsfrage*, is neglected.

There are at least two viable responses to this situation. The first is to assess the

conclusions of the most current state of understanding of the methodologies which are

universally acknowledged to be actually present in Heidegger, and then to explicitly

make the connection to the question concerning the meaning of being. While this

approach is feasible, it risks the twin dangers of either a superficial treatment of the issue

of methodology in Heidegger, or of becoming bogged down in the quagmire of

methodology without making a successful connection to the *Seinsfrage.* The second

response, the one actually followed in this dissertation, is to attempt to illuminate the

central concern of Heidegger's life's work through a methodology which is not explicitly present in Heidegger at all. Risks abound in such a bold approach, above all the dangers which are inherent in taking any voyage to realms unexplored without the benefit of familiar guides. Nevertheless this second approach contains significant potential for illuminating Heidegger unencumbered by a complex and over-determined methodological apparatus. Paradoxically, such an approach can succeed only through an acute awareness of the methodologies which are explicitly present in Heidegger. Only an informed awareness of the nature of the transcendental, phenomenological and hermeneutical methods and how they are employed in Heidegger can provide the basis for knowing the precise points at which any of these can be safely and effectively bypassed.

This type of idiosyncratic   approach to Heidegger interpretation would not have been possible without the groundbreaking work of the contemporary thinkers of the "theological turn" movement which has taken place in continental philosophy in the last twenty-five years, most notably that of Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. The "theological turn" in modern continental philosophy in part describes the involvement of the projects of certain thinkers in the negative theology of Meister Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius. The concept of a "theological turn" on the part of a philosophical thinker might well send out alarm bells warning of methodological danger. Yet significantly enough, the "theological turn" in modern continental philosophy can be understood at least in part to be essentially methodological. Derrida, for example, sees the presence of negation which lies at the very center of the work of Dionysius and Eckhart to form a

paradigm for thinking about philosophical issues.[1] Derrida's fascination with the work of

Dionysius and Eckhart essentially involves the attempt to apply the paradigm of negative

theology to his own project of deconstruction. In the case of Jean-Luc Marion, who is

both a philosophical and a theological thinker, the connection to negative theology is

essentially ontological. Inspired by Heidegger's critique of what he called

"ontotheology,"[2] and persuaded that the primal Christian heresy has been the fateful

identification of God with being, taking Dionysius as a guide Marion sets about to think

the meaning of God apart from the categories of Western metaphysics.[3] The manner in

which Derrida and Marion see and apply paradigms of negative theology in working out

their own projects suggests a tantalizing possibility for Heidegger interpretation. Might

some of the same paradigms of the negative theology of Dionysius and Eckhart be

utilized to illuminate Heidegger? There are many reasons to support such a bold

enterprise. First, as we will discover, Heidegger's critique of ontotheology is both a

critique of metaphysics and a critique of our inherited God concepts. Both of these

aspects are also deeply present in the thinking of Dionysius and Eckhart. Eckhart's

enactment of the movement from God to Godhead is carried out under the necessity of

rethinking the concept of God as ground. Might Eckhart's critique of the inadequacy of

God as ground help to illuminate Heidegger's critique of grounding ontology? Might

Eckhart's argument for the necessity of moving from God to Godhead illuminate

Heidegger's critique of ontotheology as a critique of our inherited God concepts?   Since

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[1] Cf., Jacques Derrida, "How to avoid Speaking: Denials" in <u>Derrida and Negative Theology,</u> ed. by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992) pp.75-142.

[2] What Heidegger calls "ontotheology" has in part to do with the way in which in the Western tradition our God concepts have been massively influenced by metaphysics. We will deal extensively with this concept, as well as other meanings this term has in Heidegger in Chapter Four.

[3] Cf., Jean-Luc Marion, <u>God Without Being</u>, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)

Heidegger's critique of grounding ontology is intimately related to his attempt to raise anew the question concerning the meaning of being, an affirmative response to the former question would put us solidly on the right track of understanding how being is to be thought in the later Heidegger. With regard to Derrida's insight that the primacy of negation in the work of Dionysius and Eckhart contains a paradigm for thinking about philosophical issues, might this paradigm be applied directly to Heidegger's *Seinsfrage*, the issue concerning the meaning of being? The manner in which Heidegger systematically rejects ways of understanding being in terms of beings, while affirming the priority and the necessity of the being question, puts us at the very center of the problematic of negative theology. Might the way in which affirmation and negation are related in the problematic of knowing and speaking about God in negative theology illuminate the problem of the meaning of being in Heidegger?

Based on the above, it should be clear that there is more potential in negative theology than what can be described as methodological. This potential is also ontological. Briefly put, thinkers in the negative tradition are frequently exploring the same ontological landscape as Heidegger. For these reasons, interpreting Heidegger through methods and through insights and paradigms which are not explicitly present in Heidegger makes what may initially have seemed like a questionable approach now assume real plausibility. In terms of our earlier metaphor, the potential benefits of such a journey to unexplored realms now appears to outweigh the dangers.

To carry out such a project will require that the area to be illuminated in Heidegger be sharply focused. Our focus will be on the central concern of Heidegger's life's work—the *Seinsfrage*--the question concerning the meaning of being. We will begin by asking: what

does Heidegger mean by the question concerning the meaning of being? How is this question unique and different from all other metaphysical questions? In exploring this question we will follow Heidegger's own directions. We will regard fundamental ontology and the analytic of *Dasein t*o be a preparatory phrase for raising the being question. Accordingly, after becoming familiar with Heidegger's project as a whole in chapter One, and after laying the foundations for an understanding of negative theology in Chapter Two, we will begin in Chapter Three to turn our direction toward the later Heidegger. Although Chapter Three formally initiates the turn toward the later Heidegger, it does so in terms of an attempt to illuminate the *Seinsfrage* and what intelligibility about being is contained in the early Heidegger based on our newfound understanding of the negative theology of Dionysius and Eckhart laid down in Chapter Two. In Chapter Four our turn toward the later Heidegger is complete, and there we will examine Heidegger's critique of ontotheology both as a critique of our inherited God concepts and as a critique of metaphysics, and do so in terms of Eckhart's understanding of the necessity of rethinking the concept of God as ground. In Chapter Five we will focus on what intelligibility concerning being is contained in the later Heidegger, specifically in terms of Heidegger's attempt to think the meaning of being as "difference" or "difference as such" contained in The Ontotheological Constitution of Metaphysics.

Chapter One- The early Heidegger and the question of the meaning of being.

(I)   RAISING ANEW THE QUESTION ABOUT THE MEANING OF BEING

(a) *Reawakening our perplexity*

In his first major published work, <u>Being and Time,</u> Heidegger announces the issue which will essentially define his life's work, the issue of being. The book begins with a quote from Plato's *Sophist* (244a): "For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression 'being.' We however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed."

In the commentary which immediately follows the quote Heidegger laments the fact that the perplexity concerning the meaning of being is apparently not shared by us moderns. "But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression 'Being'? Not at all."[4] Heidegger's project in <u>Being and Time</u> of "raising anew the question of the meaning of being"[5] (*die Frage nach den Sinn von Sein)* begins with an attempt to reawaken a sense of perplexity concerning the meaning of being. This reawakening of perplexity follows the classic Socratic paradigm wherein the recognition of ignorance becomes a requisite feature for knowledge. A sense of perplexity needs to be reawakened precisely because, as Heidegger will shortly attempt to demonstrate, we today still do not actually know what we mean by being.

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[4] Martin Heidegger, <u>Being and Time</u>, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) p. 1.
[5] Ibid.

In the pages that follow some of the history behind our lack of perplexity becomes explicit. The question of the meaning of being provided the greatest stimulus for the thinking of Plato and Aristotle, Heidegger argues, but since has been neglected and forgotten.[6]

(b) *Problematic aspects of the above*

At this early stage some obvious questions arise. First, what precisely is the question concerning the meaning (*Sinn)* of being? Can this be formulated as one specific and unique question, different from all other ontological questions; or is the question concerning the meaning of being synonymous with what we might call 'the issue of being,' which actually subsumes under it many other ontological questions? Second, how has either the question concerning the meaning of being, or the 'issue of being' in general, been neglected and forgotten?   In the seventeenth century ontological concerns were replaced by epistemological ones, just as in the twentieth century the newly formed epistemological model initiated by Descartes was once again displaced by philosophy of language;[7] by virtue of these facts the defining paradigm of Western thinking has been ontological.[8] Nevertheless, Heidegger's claim that the meaning of being has been

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[6] Ibid., p. 2.
[7] Cf. Richard Rorty, Introduction to <u>The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method</u>(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) pp. 3-35.
[8] This version of the history of philosophy famously expressed by Rorty, and now widely accepted by analytic philosophers, would certainly be challenged by Heidegger, for whom being has always been the driving issue in philosophy, even in neglect and forgottenness (*vergessenheit*). In the case of Descartes Heidegger attempts to demonstrate how beneath epistemic concerns Descartes was wrestling with the issue of the meaning of being but was prevented from developing an adequate ontology because of an *a priori* presupposition of being as substance. Cf<u>. Being and Time</u> pp. 123-128. For a more developed exposition of the same topic see Heidegger's <u>History of the Concept of Time</u> trans. by Theodore Kisiel (Indiana: Indiana

neglected and forgotten is not meant to implicate only modern thought, but is directed to the very center of Western philosophy, and will not spare even Aristotle. How, then, in light of the fact that by all accounts the Western paradigm has been clearly ontological, has the question concerning the meaning of being been neglected and forgotten?

(c) *The meaning/nature distinction*

  To approach the second question first, standard commentators address this issue by making a distinction between the 'nature of being' and the 'meaning of being.'[9] Traditional ontology treats the former question. The essential question of ontology is 'what is being?' In response to this question there is no shortage of attempts in the history of philosophy to provide answers. Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Hegel, and Marx can all be said to have presented us with theories of being which directly address this question. Being for Spinoza is nature, for Marx historical-dialectical matter, for Hegel Absolute Spirit. The 'meaning' of being on the other hand is a question about the significance of existence for human subjects. To make an analogy we might distinguish between the questions (a) 'what is a human being?' and (b) 'what does it mean to be human?' The former question is one which is addressed in the science of physical anthropology. This question already presupposes that human existence is an object on a continuum with nature. Proceeding within this naturalistic framework scientific anthropology seeks to determine the uniqueness of human beings in relation to other

University Press, 1992) pp. 172-185. Whether we accept Heidegger's or Rorty's reading of the history of philosophy,   the defining paradigm still remains ontological.
[9] Cf. Stephen Mulhall, Heidegger and Being and Time(London and New York:Routledge, 1996) p. 7. See also Michael Gelvin, A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time(Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989) pp.7-11.

natural phenomena, particularly that of animal life. On the other hand the question about the meaning of human existence is in a different realm entirely. It is a philosophical-existential question for self- reflection, rather than one which can be addressed in a purely objective manner. The second question cannot be adequately dealt with within the methodology of science because in engaging this question human beings are already part of the horizon they are observing. It is not then accidental that the second question is explored in art and literature rather than in science. It is also addressed in philosophy by those thinkers who explicitly reject the adequacy of the paradigm of science for the examination of philosophical issues. Soren Kierkegaard, who famously challenged the adequacy of the paradigm of scientific objectivity for issues of human meaning, dealt with this question extensively.[10]

(d) *Evaluating the meaning/nature distinction*

Perhaps then the question about the 'meaning of being' is more analogous to the question about the 'meaning of human existence.' If this is the case then indeed the question about the 'meaning of being' shows potential for emerging as unique. The meaning/nature distinction then has serious potential for illuminating the fundamental issue in Heidegger, but requires more in the way of textual support. It is however not completely unproblematic. As indicated earlier, the question about the meaning of being appears to be a question for human subjects. Yet as we will see, Heidegger will for good reasons reject any view of what is real which is grounded in the radical opposition

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[10] Cf. Soren, Kierkegaard, <u>The Concept of Anxiety</u>, trans. by Reidar Thomte (Princeton:Princeton Universtiy Press, 1981)

between subjective knower and object known. In these terms the primacy of the subject, embodied in the tradition of transcendental subjectivity from Descartes to Husserl and including Kant, and the objectivist paradigm of positivism, are two sides of the same epistemological error. At the risk of jumping ahead of ourselves we can go so far as to say that the primacy of epistemology itself in modern philosophy and the many puzzles and paradoxes it engenders is itself a symptom of an inadequate ontology. If the nature/meaning distinction is to endure it must come to terms with what will turn out to be Heidegger's ontological critique of the 'worldless' subject.[11] This cannot be accomplished without serious qualification of the distinction itself.

(e) *Another problematic aspect of the meaning/nature distinction*

Here a second objection might be raised, namely that there is something which is disconcerting about the simplicity of the nature/meaning distinction. The suspicion is that it will not hold up under analysis. Returning to some of our previous examples of thinkers who have addressed being in terms of 'nature' rather than 'meaning,' we might take the case of Marx. Marx attempted to explicate the nature of being as historical-dialectical matter. Did he thereby entirely neglect the issue of the meaning of being? A powerful argument can be made that Marx laid the foundations for an exploration of the meaning of being in human existence, precisely by demythologizing and challenging an inadequate understanding of being contained in Hegel. Many examples can be adduced of Marxist philosophers who address the issue of the meaning of being from a materialist perspective. The fact that they do so with the aid of categories which are shamelessly

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[11] Heidegger deals with this extensively in the early part of Being and Time. Cf 53-188.

borrowed from Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein*,[12] to say nothing of his critique of

technology, indicates both that the meaning/nature distinction requires clarification, and

that there is some unique perspective on the 'meaning of being' expressed by Heidegger.

This perspective can be invaluable even for one whose starting point is with 'nature'

rather than 'meaning'. Let us then attempt to clarify the meaning/nature distinction and to

disclose Heidegger's unique perspective by following the course of his exposition in the

early part of Being and Time.

(II) THE INADEQUACY OF COMMONLY ACCEPTED ANSWERS TO THE

SEINSFRAGE

In the first introduction to Being and Time Heidegger attempts to reinforce the

necessity of raising anew (*wiederfragen*) the question of being in terms of a failure of

very commonly accepted answers to the question. He undertakes to examine and refute

three traditional answers. We will examine each of these to see what insight they contain

which might illuminate the question about the meaning of being.

(a) *Being is the most universal concept*

Here the claim is that we arrive at the concept of 'being' by an exercise of progressive

abstraction. Beginning for example on the level of 'dog,' we abstract to form the concept

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[12] The critical theory of the "Frankfurt School" of Marxism represented by such figures as Max
Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno and Herbert Marcuse may serve as a prime example. In his book Heidegger
and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History (London:Routledge Press, 2005) Andrew
Feenburg traces the dependence of Marcuse's concepts on Heidegger's fundamental ontology.

'animal'. From 'animal' we abstract to form the concept of 'living thing,' from 'living thing' to 'nature.' Each level of abstraction brings us to a higher genus until finally arriving at the concept 'being.' 'Being' is therefore the most universal genus or general type. Heidegger does not doubt that being is in some sense a general, even the most general, concept. What he rejects is the claim that the question about the meaning of being can be exhausted by this insight. Simply put: "Being transcends any universality of genus."[13] Hurbert Dreyfus is very helpful on this point. Essentially 'being' transcends the universality of genus because it does not behave like an ordinary universal.[14] If we take for example the predicate 'red,' no doubt a universal or general type; when presented with a number of objects, fire engines, tomatoes, cherries, it is perfectly obvious that these share in common the general feature of redness. If 'being' is essentially a universal concept, albeit the most universal, then by hypothesis it should be possible to make an inference from the set containing waterfalls, subatomic particles and thoughts to 'being.' Yet this is clearly not the case. The fact that 'being' does not behave as an ordinary universal indicates that it has a unique status in our experience. This fact in turn supports the view that the question about the meaning of being needs to be explored further.

Here the argument is powerfully reminiscent of, even identical in structure to, the one used by Kant in his first critique, to lead into his main argument which proves the *a-priority* of space and time. To demonstrate that space and time are forms of intuition Kant has to first disable the view that they are objectively inherent features of things. This Kant does in the "metaphysical deduction," by arguing that space and time obviously do not share the features of ordinary objects of experience. It is possible to

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[13] Ibid., p. 22.
[14] Hurbert Dreyfus, Being-in-the-world (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) p. 10.

'think away' any or every object of experience and to retain the concept of empty space. It is not possible to abstract from space and retain any coherent concept of an object.[15] The same is true of time. Only when Kant has by appealing to our experience indicated something unique about the status of space and time does he in the "transcendental deduction" develop his primary argument that as forms of intuition these make pure mathematics possible.[16]

Heidegger notes that awareness of the fact that being is not a true universal has been present in Western philosophy since the time of Aristotle. "Aristotle himself knew the unity of this transcendental 'universal' as a *unity of analogy* in contrast to the multiplicity of the highest generic concepts applicable to things."[17] For Aristotle being is properly predicated only of substances. Yet substances are given in a multiplicity of types. Aristotle denied that there was a unity among these substances. When we use the word 'being,' we do so not univocally, as when we refer to the concept of 'human substance,' but rather analogously.[18] Dissatisfaction with Aristotle's conclusion regarding the manifold meanings of being, as well as awareness of how deeply this doctrine has influenced Western ontology, had a decisive effect in convincing Heidegger that the question of being needed to be raised anew.[19]

The fact that Aristotle did not detect any unified sense of being and evidently saw no need for further inquiry on the matter again raises the question: why does Heidegger press on to make 'being' into a problem? Why not simply rest with Aristotle's

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[15] Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A-24.

[16] Ibid., B-41-B46.

[17] Being and Time, p. 22.

[18] Cf. Dorothea Freda, "The Question of Being:Heidegger's Project," in The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, ed. by Charles B. Guignon(Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1993) p.45.

[19] Cf. Martin Heidegger, "My Way to Phenomenology," tran. by J.L. Mehta in Martin Heidegger: An Ilustrated Study, ed. by Walter Biemel(New York and London: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich,1976) p. 9.

conclusion that 'being' has no univocal meaning? What reasons does Heidegger provide for thinking that Aristotle's conclusion was in fact preemptive? We must address these questions as we proceed.

(b) *Being is not definable*.

This claim derives from the supreme generality of the concept. It is not possible to subsume being under a higher concept in terms of which it is adequately comprehended; but all that this demonstrates is that being is not an entity, that the status of being in our experience is unique. Heidegger wholeheartedly endorses this conclusion but rejects the idea that it proves that being is not for that reason worthy of further inquiry. "But does this mean that Being no longer offers a problem? Not at all."[20]

(c) *Being is self- evident*.

Here Heidegger can at least partially agree with the conclusion but denies that it offers any basis for neglect of inquiry into being. Human beings do have a pre-reflective understanding of what it means to be. Yet this ordinary everyday understanding is still shrouded in mystery. In the pages that follow Heidegger will attempt to mine this pre-reflective understanding of being, thus reinforcing the claim that it is self-evident, while demonstrating that this fact is a starting point, not a resolution of the question.

(d) *Reflection on Heidegger's responses*

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[20] <u>Being and Time</u>, p. 23.

We should pause at this point and examine the implications of Heidegger's three responses for our earlier attempt to clarify the question about the meaning of the being question. The first response might at first seem to indicate that Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* seems to involve something in terms of understanding the 'nature of being.' It might be asked: what if being were a true universal? Presumably, then, further inquiry into the meaning of being would be superfluous. In such instance our questioning concerning the meaning of being could come to rest in the form of a very determinate answer.   This is however not the case. The point is that failure of being as a universal concept is one more indication of its unique status in our experience. It is then impossible to do justice to the meaning of being in the manner of other concepts or entities, i.e. by an appeal to higher or more universal concepts. This fact invites rather than obviates the need for further inquiry. Based on the above the first response points strongly away from thinking that the *Seinsfrage* involves an understanding of 'the nature of being.' At this point we begin to develop a real sense of what is inadequate about some of the traditional metaphysical responses to being indicated earlier. The claim that being is nature, God, or historical-dialectical matter all involve the subsumption of being under a higher or more universal concept. In traditional metaphysical systems the 'ground' of the system functions in effect as the highest universal concept. In the case of 'God as ground' this fact, as well as its unacceptable theological implications, was recognized by Duns Scotus and became the impetus for developing a more adequate ontology.[21]

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[21] Duns Scotus also recognized the philosophical inadequacy of traditional ontology and the medieval philosopher's attempts to develop an adequate ontology had a decisive effect on Heidegger's own development. Cf. Dorothea Freda, "The Question of Being in Heidegger's Project," op cit. pp-45-50.The influence of Duns Scotus on Heidegger has been well documented. For an excellent and penetrating

The conclusions above are further reinforced by the second response. Since being is not an entity at all, the *Seinsfrage* can't be a question about the 'nature of being,' or an attempt to delineate its essential features in a manner which is on a continuum with entities. With this second response we begin to develop a sense of how the inquiry into being will require a unique methodology. We come to understand the genuine appeal which the nature/meaning distinction offers to commentators, as well as its limitations. If the *Seinsfrage* is not about the 'nature of being,' then it is tempting to wholeheartedly endorse the claim that it is about the 'meaning of being.' While this contains some insight, it also harbors a great danger namely that the *Seinsfrage* is reduced to the realm of pure subjectivity. The requirement of a unique methodology arises from the unique status of being in our experience. The endorsement without qualification of the view that the *Seinsfrage* is a question about 'meaning' does not do justice to the requirements of a unique methodology. It was precisely the inadequacy of a methodology which reduces being to the realm of purely immanent consciousness which led to Heidegger's break with Husserl.[22] It still remains to be seen what type of methodology can do justice to the meaning of being in our experience without succumbing to the subjectivism and solipsism which seem to be implied in this alternative.

With regard to the third response, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the fact of being as self-evident. With this response we begin to understand Heidegger's refusal of Aristotle's conclusion that there is no univocal sense to being. It is rejected because it is not adequate to the meaning of being which is already present in human

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philosophical summary and analysis see John B Caputo, "The Grammatica Speculativa: A Study in Heidegger's *Habilitationschrift*" in *Journal of the Society of British Phenomenology*, Vol. 5, 1974.
[22] Cf. Herbert Spiegelberg, The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction Vol. I (The Hague:Martinus Nijhoff, 1965) pp. 282-283

experience, even if this understanding is also shrouded in darkness. The claim that being

is self-evident requires support, and in the succeeding pages Heidegger will attempt to

provide it. The third response also gives us a clue about Heidegger's methodology. If the

fundamental starting point of the inquiry will be with an understanding of being as it is

present in human awareness, then his methodology will be one which attempts to draw

out or make explicit something which is already contained in human understanding;

hence it cannot be the methodology of empirical science with its radical disjunction

between subject and object. Such an approach obviously lies open to the charge of

'circular reasoning,' and this charge will at some point have to be addressed.

(III) <u>THE VALUE OF THE BEING QUESTION</u>

(a) *Why the question of being should be raised at all*

The task of inquiry into the meaning of being raises the question, why should the

question of being be raised at all? What merit can we hope to gain through the endeavor?

Here the danger is that the question might turn out to be an exercise in abstraction which

is ultimately not constructive. Heidegger is aware of this objection: "Does it simply

remain--or is it at all--a matter for soaring speculation about the most general of

generalities, or is it rather, of all questions, both the most basic, and the most concrete?"[23]

It is the latter view which Heidegger endorses, and in the first introduction to <u>Being

and Time </u>the claim is supported in two ways. In essence the question of the meaning of

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[23] <u>Being and Time, p</u>. 21

being is the most fundamental of all questions because it is both ontically and

ontologically prior to all other questions. (p.28-35) Let us examine each of these reasons.

(b) The ontological priority of the question of being: Heidegger's arguments

The question about the meaning of being is ontologically prior to the sciences because

an understanding of being is already presupposed by the sciences. "The question of Being

aims therefore at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of the

sciences which examine entities as entities of such and such a type and, in do doing,

already operate with an understanding of Being, but also for the possibility of those

ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their

foundations."[24]

We might call this first argument an argument from the nature of science. The upshot

of it is that science deals with particular realms of being--biology with the realm of living

things, chemistry with the composition of substances, etc. Each of these investigations

presupposes an understanding of being in general, or in the broadest sense, yet in none of

these investigations is this meaning clarified or made fully explicit. This is, or should be

the task of ontology.

A second argument which is presented first deals with the progress or the development

of science. It begins in the following way: "The real movement of the sciences takes

place when their basic concepts undergo a more or less radical revision which is

transparent to itself. The level which a science has reached is determined by how far it is

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[24] Being and Time, p. 31.

capable of crisis in its basic concepts."[25]   The essence of this argument is that the real

movement or development of the sciences takes place not on the basis of its day-to-day

functions, i.e. collecting and analyzing data, but in the foundations of a science. Often it

is a crisis in the foundations of a science which is the prelude to its development.

Sciences develop and grow out of these crises.   Examples are given from biology and

physics:

> The relativity of *physics* arises from the tendency to exhibit the interconnectedness
> of nature as it is 'in itself.' As a theory of the conditions under which we have access
> to Nature itself, it seeks to preserve the changelessness of the laws of motion by
> ascertaining all relativities, and thus comes up against the question of the structure
> of its own given area of study--the problem of matter. In *biology* there is an awak-
> ening tendency to inquire beyond the definitions which mechanism and vitalism
> have given for 'life' and 'organism,' and to define anew the kind of being which
> belongs to the living as such.[26]

*(c) The ontological priority of the question of being: evaluating Heidegger's
arguments*

What can be said by way of evaluation of the above arguments, and how can they

help to clarify our understanding of the question of the meaning of being? First, the

argument that ontology forms the basis of science is not new. What is historically new is

the concept of the autonomy of science. Historically the modern sciences developed out

of philosophy; philosophy has always been seen as the foundation of knowing more

determinate aspects of what is real that is expressed in science. Once the sciences began

to develop into the specific branches we are familiar with today, as they did in the

seventeenth century, philosophy was still understood to reside at their foundations. A

classic form of this view was expressed in the seventeenth century by Rene   Descartes.

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[25] Ibid., p. 29.
[26] Ibid., p. 30.

In Descartes' analogy knowledge forms a tree in which the sciences are the branches and metaphysics is the root.[27] Descartes' claim regarding the foundational status of metaphysics derives from the fact that the sciences are not fully reflective enterprises, although some basic forms of reflection are necessary in order to evaluate the results of the theories and hypothesis in terms of which science operates. Nevertheless, the nature, scope and limits of a science, what its proper objects of inquiry are, is not established by the sciences themselves but in the reflective space inhabited by philosophical reason. Since the sciences cannot determine their own scope and limits, neither can they reflectively establish their own foundations. In our own time a refurbished mode of Descartes' argument has been repeated in a powerful form both by modern Thomists and by Edmund Husserl.[28] The conclusion of the Thomist argument is that the enterprise of science is not fully intelligible apart from a wider context of meaning. For this context to be real and enduring it must be ontological.[29]

   In terms of an evaluation of Heidegger's argument it should be pointed out that when the claim is made that the question about the meaning of being is ontologically prior to the sciences, the type of understanding of being which he has in mind is not that of traditional ontology, which is a flawed enterprise, but his own "fundamental ontology." (*die Fundamentalontologie*) On the basis of this claim many commentators on <u>Being and Time</u> defer evaluation of the argument at this early point because to do so first requires an explication of the program of fundamental ontology, which will take up the first half

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[27] This claim appears in the preface to the French edition of Descartes *Principia Philosophiae* written in Latin and translated by Claude Picot, published in 1647. The preface was originally written as a letter to Picot. An English translation of this letter can be found in <u>Rene′ Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence</u> ed. by Roger Ariew (Indianapolis:In: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000) pp. 221-230.

[28] Cf. Edmund Husserl, <u>Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology</u> (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999) pp. 1-7.

[29] Cf. Jacques Maritain<u>, An Introduction to Philosophy</u> (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959) p. 86. Here the entire chapter VI-"Philosophy and the Special Sciences,"pp.83-92 is helpful.

of the book.[30] This approach is only partially correct. Heidegger's argument wavers between (a) explicating the presence of an understanding of being which is at the basis of science, and (b) concluding with the imperative to think the meaning of being in a more adequate way so as to provide a basis for scientific development and progress. To paraphrase (a), the sciences are concerned with particular realms of being; the question of being deals with the meaning of being as such and so is prior to the inquiry of the sciences. The argument here is merely formal because no clear claim is established to the effect that clarity concerning the meaning of being can enhance understanding in science. However, (b) is much more ambitious. The clear implication of (b) is that clarity concerning the meaning of being is at the very foundation of the forward movement of science. Heidegger even goes so far as to say that ontological understanding can and often does "run ahead" of the sciences.[31] Since the formal character of (a) makes it very difficult to evaluate we will concentrate on the more ambitious (b).

Historians of science can easily agree that a giant leap forward was made in physics when we moved from a mechanistic view of nature, as presented by Newton, to that of nature as a unified field of energy as is expressed in the theory of relativity. At the bottom of this distinction lies the issue of the nature of matter itself. Something similar is true in the case of biology. Real progress and development is made at the foundations. A decisive step forward was made when biologists began to understand the structure of life on the molecular level. This new dimension in turn offers a new perspective on the nature of organisms. Such a change cannot help but impact our understanding of the nature, scope and limits of the science of biology itself. Here the point is that if progress

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[30] Cf. E.F. Kaelin, Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reading for Readers (Tallahassee:Florida State University Press, 1987) pp.26-27.
[31] Being and Time, p 30.

in science is made at the foundations, and these foundations have to do with the nature of the objects of scientific inquiry-- matter in physics, organisms in biology--we are moving so to speak 'dangerously' close to the realm of ontology. The wider context of matter and living things is 'being.' This insight can be put in a more determinate form, namely that some understanding of the meaning of being was already present with Newton and formed the context out of which his research developed. In the case of Newton being was understood within the framework of what Heidegger will call substance ontology.[32] Likewise it is not too far-fetched to think that suspicions concerning the adequacy of a view of the universe consisting of a series of interchangeable parts formed the context of the research of Einstein, which succeeded in ultimately replacing Newton's mechanistic view with the theory of relativity. In either case it is difficult to believe that research which deals with truly foundational issues of a science takes place in a realm which is ontologically neutral. Evidence in favor of this view might be adduced in the form of the fact that once scientific theories are produced, attempts to explicate their meaning and relation to previous theories is not ontologically neutral. Some understanding of being must be presupposed as a context in terms of which the shift in paradigm from Newton to Einstein makes sense, or can even be recognized as a shift in paradigm. We should note the similarity between Heidegger's argument and that of modern Neo-Thomism. In the modern Neo-Thomist argument ontology forms a context of meaning for science because the former represents a purer or more sublime form of knowing; in the same way that knowledge which is based on universal principles represents a higher form of knowing than that which is based on

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[32] Heidegger discusses substance ontology in relation to Descartes in detail on pp.125-134. What is said there would appear to apply to Newton as well.

sense experience, the highest or the most universal principles are supplied by metaphysics.[33] Heidegger's view is also hierarchical.[34] This fact will become clearer once we examine in the next section concerning the issue of the ontical priority of the question of the meaning of being.

   (d) *the argument from the human sciences*

  Another issue to keep in mind when evaluating Heidegger's claim is that for English-speaking readers the term 'science' inevitably has the connotation of empirical science, whereas Heidegger is employing the term in a much broader sense, in the sense of what is contained in the German term *Geisteswissenschaften.* This term, which means 'sciences of the human spirit' or 'human sciences' includes the study of literature, sociology, psychology, biblical studies, aesthetics, history, law and theology. It is clear that Heidegger has this wider sense of science in mind since he mentions specifically *"those humane sciences which are historiological in character" (historischen Geisteswissenschaften),* adducing theology as an example.[35]

   (e)   *Evaluating the argument from the human sciences.*

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[33] Cf. Jacques Maritain, <u>Degrees of Knowledge,</u> trans. by Gerald Phelan(Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999) p. 267.

[34] Heidegger's hierarchical ontology, which is grounded above all in an attempt to recapture an originary sense or meaning of being, will prove to be a major stumbling block to Derrida. Cf<u>. Of Grammatology,</u> trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) pp.19-24.

[35] <u>Being and Time</u>, p. 30.

Hopefully at this point we have at least established the plausibility of Heidegger's claim regarding the empirical sciences. The fact that his argument includes the 'human sciences' now opens the entirely new possibility that the argument for the ontological priority of the question of being is better exhibited in the human sciences than in the empirical sciences. We will now attempt to explore this option.

We might take the example of psychology. If the object of psychology is human psychical life, it is impossible to think that this realm is ontologically neutral. Some understanding of the nature of the psyche and its relation to that which is non-psychical must be at the starting point of psychology even if this is never made explicit. Where the psyche is understood as an entity within the temporal, spatial, causal nexus of nature with no awareness of viable alternatives, there an empirical psychology dominates. What is unavoidable is the task of understanding the nature of the psyche in its relation to the world. This however is a task for ontological understanding It is precisely at this point that the question of the meaning of being is most relevant. It is reasonable to think that an entitative understanding of being would be correlated with a substantalist doctrine of the psyche. Likewise recognition of the inadequacy of being as substance leads to suspicion with regard to its adequacy for understanding psychical life.[36] Heidegger also adduces theology as an example: "*Theology* is seeking a more primordial interpretation of man's being toward God."[37] Here once again an understanding of the meaning of being impacts an understanding of how human being is thought, and so the relation between human beings, as well as the relation of human beings to a world or to God. Once being

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[36] In History of the Concept of Time, op cit., pp. 123-126 Heidegger provides a critique of personalistic psychology along similar lines. The problem with it is that while personalistic psychology attempts to begin with a unified understanding of 'personhood' which is behind the performance of acts, the ontological status of this primary datum is never clarified.

[37] Being and Time, p. 30.

is understood in an entitative manner, as some form of substance, it is inevitable that God as the ground and origin of substance is understood as the highest or the purest form of substance. Human beings as created substances are dependent on divine substance. The relation between human being and God is then clearly one of one substance to another. In Thesis I of Chapter Three we will explore this dynamic in some detail. What we should gain at this point is a sense that theological issues thought on a foundational level are directly influenced by an understanding of being. In the absence of serious inquiry into the question of the meaning of being, inevitably one understanding of being prevails by default.

   Based on this it would appear then that the priority of the question of being is more fundamental in the case of the 'human sciences,' supporting the imperative to think the meaning of being in a more originary way.

   (f) *The ontical priority of the question of being: understanding of being as a characteristic of Dasein's being.*

 By "ontic" Heidegger means the kind of understanding which is appropriate to entities. A good approximation of the term ontic would be empirical. Ontic would then be opposed to ontological. When applied to human beings ontic understanding reveals objective features and processes of human beings as entities within the nexus of nature. These are the aspects which are studied by the science of anthropology. However Heidegger says that "*Dasein* is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological."[38] By this cryptic formulation is indicated that when we look at human beings from an ontic perspective seeking to determine our most distinctive feature we discover something

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[38] Ibid., p. 32.

which is not ontic at all but ontological, namely that being is an issue for us. This fact

includes first of all an awareness of being as such, the ability to raise questions

concerning the meaning of being. *"Understanding of Being is itself a definite*

characteristic of Dasein's Being."[39] It is only a human being which can ask questions

concerning the meaning of her life in the context of the whole of existence. Nevertheless

the term "ontological" here does not mean merely that human beings develop formal

ontologies of the kind we study in philosophy books. Rather it has to do with the

condition for the possibility of formal ontologies. *Dasein* can develop formal ontologies

only because in its very being, being is an issue for it. It is therefore critical to understand

the aspect of being "at issue." Part of this has to do, as indicated above, with an

awareness of being and all of the implications which come with this fact. But this cannot

be its complete meaning. The question we must ask is: how is *Dasein* at issue in its very

being? Rather than address this question specifically at this point, it will be more

effective to allow a response to unfold in the course of our exposition. The question will

also be reconsidered again in Chapter Three.

(g)   *Undermining entitative understanding of being-human, Dasein as a relation.*

At this point it is most helpful to remember that *Dasein* is not something which is on

a continuum with other entities in nature, rather the term is meant to overcome the type

of entitative understanding which is implied in traditional language such as 'mind,'

"subject,' *'animal rationale,'* etc. Each of these involves the presupposition that human

being is an entity essentially constituted by the paradigm of substance, juxtaposed beside

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[39] Ibid., p. 32.

or present within the objective space of the world. Heidegger's term *Dasein* is meant to undercut these ontological presuppositions. It is employed as an abrupt reminder that human existence is never worldless. Likewise 'world' is not an objective area in which human beings are contained, but an aspect already present as a distinctive feature of being human. Accordingly the term *Dasein* does not describe a substance but a relation, the relation of self to world. It is in that relation that the true ontological identity of human existence derives. The classical attempt to find the identity of human being in a fixed essence is for Heidegger a misguided enterprise precisely because it confuses the ontological basis of human existence in the relatedness of self to world with something 'founded,' namely the self as a substance: "…And because we cannot define *Dasein's* essence by citing a 'what' of the kind which pertains to a subject matter[*eines sachhaltigen Was*], and because its essence lies rather in the fact that in each case it has its Being to be, and has it as its own…"[40] Paradoxically the ontology of substantialism which Heidegger works to overcome can be put to work in the effort to illuminate its shortcomings. Thinking in terms of 'essential qualities' which are the stock and trade of substantialism, if we can by hypothesis accept the claim that the essence of a human being is found only in relation to world, the natural question which arises at this point is: what is the most essential feature of that relation? To this Heidegger answers that it is in the fact that the self transcends itself in a dynamic and purposeful manner in its involvement with world. There is then both a directionality and a dynamism to *Dasein.* The directionality is from *Da* to *Sein*, from the situationedness of the self to being as such. The dynamic aspect has to do with the fact that there is, to use phenomenological language, a kind of intentionality to the relation between self and world. Intentionality

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[40] Ibid., p. 32-33.

refs to the fact that consciousness is always consciousness of something. In classical Husserlian language the concept of a conscious act, a *noesis*, apart from a *noema* is unintelligible.[41]Likewise for Heidegger the concept of a 'worldless' subject is an unintelligible abstraction. The inexorable projection of self toward world is a condition of its intelligibility. Its name is *Dasein.*

(h)   *The self- understanding of Dasein and temporality*

  If on an ontological level Dasein is an entity that is a relation rather than a self- contained substance then there should be some confirmation of this on the level of our reflective life and this is indeed the case. "*Dasein* always understands itself in terms of its existence, in terms of a possibility of itself."[42] The overcoming of the ontology of substantialism brings with it the critical importance of time and the relation of time to being. Substances are what endure over time. Thus it becomes impossible to conceive of substance apart from time, even if in the ontology of substance the focus is on the way in which substances such as 'mind' and 'person' endure *despite* the passage of time. In the transition from substance to relational ontology the way in which time forms the horizon for being becomes fully explicit. *Dasein'*s projection toward plans and possibilities can only be conceived *in terms of* time. *Dasein's* self- reflection is immediately transparent toward plans and possibilities which are directed toward a future time.   The above should give us some indication of how *Dasein* is "at issue." It is so because the structure of

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[41] Cf. Edmund Husserl, Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, trans. by W. Boyce Gibson (London: Collier Books, 1962) p. 229.
[42] Ibid., p. 33.

Dasein is temporal, never identical with itself but projected into the future defined in terms of possibilities.[43]   This fact assures that *Dasein* remains always "at issue."

(i)   *Heidegger and the tradition: on being human*

At this point we should not fail to notice the way in which Heidegger's answer to the question of what the most distinctive feature of human beings is diverges markedly from the traditional one. Going back to Aristotle, the most distinctive feature of human beings is rationality. Needless to say, Heidegger is not denying rationality to human beings, but denying that rationality is our most distinctive feature. This is because rationality is never given as a purely objective feature. Human beings do not possess rationality in the same way that computers possess certain features of intelligence, analytical abilities or memory. Rationality in human beings is not intelligible as an intrinsic feature but is one more function of a projection towards being. From the above it should be clear why the question of being is ontically prior to other questions. It is so because unlike other questions, the question about the meaning of being is an explicit formulation of fundamental aspects of *Dasein's* being, an understanding of being and a projection towards being which is going on in experience all the time. The ontic priority of the question of being works to forestall any attempt to obviate the question on a theoretical level.   If Heidegger's description of *Dasein* is accurate, then the legitimacy of the question of being is already established on the "pre-ontological" level of human existence where being is already "an issue."

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[43] Ibid., p. 38.

(j)   *The ontic priority of the being question and being as self- evident*

The ontic priority of being also helps to provide real content to a claim made earlier, namely that being is self-evident. So much is this the case that the term now appears weak and ineffectual. We frequently use the term "self-evident" to refer to what is obviously or intuitively clear. It is self-evident that two aspects which are equal to one another are equal to a third. It is now apparent that the familiarity of *Dasein* with being is deeper than what is involved in a simple inference. Understanding of being belongs to *Dasein* long before it is expressed on a reflective or theoretical level. To make an analogy we might say that human beings also have an understanding of space on a deep or fundamental level. Long before the concepts of 'space,' 'spatiality,' and 'geometrical relations' are formed we are already orienting ourselves in space.[44] Nevertheless the term "self-evident" is deliberate. It is meant to refute the claim that the meaning of being does not require clarification.

(k)   *The ontic priority of the being question and being as self- evident*

How has understanding the ontological-ontical priority of the *Seinsfrage* helped to clarify its meaning? It has done so by providing much substance to our earlier suspicion that there is something which is deeply flawed about the meaning/nature distinction. Upon encountering Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* for the first time it is all too natural to attempt to clarify it and understand its meaning within our inherited epistemological and

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[44] This is more than a mere casual analogy since Heidegger will actually discuss the spatiality of *Dasein* in a very similar way. Cf. Being and Time, 138-148.

ontological frameworks. Immediately the shopworn concepts of 'subject' and 'object,' so irreducible in the philosophical tradition, are put to work. These become expressed as 'meaning' and 'nature.' Yet these concepts inevitably distort Heidegger's meaning from the start. In working through the ontological-ontic priority with Heidegger we come to develop some genuine sense of how and why these frameworks are mistaken. In the final analysis the nature/ meaning distinction is ontologically flawed. It is based on a presupposition that being is an entity over and against knowing subjects.

In working through the ontological-ontic priority of the question of the meaning of being we already begin to develop a sense for what Heidegger will later describe as the unconcealing or the disclosure of being. Being is not an object over and against *Dasein* but it is only through *Dasein* that being is disclosed.[45] Heidegger's doctrine of disclosure, which includes an understanding of truth as *alētheia* (unconcealment), is meant to do justice to the unique situatedness of human being in relation to being as such. Here the problem is that if neither being nor *Dasein* is a substance, how should we describe the way in which being is known by *Dasein*? Above all such a description must come to terms with the fact that we are always already (*immer schon*) familiar with being. Heidegger attempts to capture this unique situation by saying that *Dasein* is the clearing (*Lichtung)* or the place through which being is illuminated.   In these terms the *Seinsfrage* is indeed a question about the meaning of being, but this meaning can never be opposed to nature understood as that which stands over and against it.

We come to understand that the *Seinsfrage* as a question about the meaning of being is indeed both unique and prior to all other ontological questions. It is unique because it is a question about the meaning of being which nevertheless does not reduce the issue to

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[45] Ibid., p. 256.

one of purely subjective meaning. It is one which comprehends what is implied in attempts to express the nature of being without surrendering to the substance ontology which is most often implied in these endeavors. It is more fundamental in relation to other questions because most ontological endeavors either presuppose or require intelligibility about the meaning of being, even while blocking full access to this realm and the intelligibility it might disclose through an *a priori* starting point which cannot do justice to the character of being as it presents itself.

(l) *Gaining access to being: how the ontic-ontological priority of the being question has clarified its meaning*

Once Heidegger has established both the ontical and the ontological priority of the question about the meaning of being, the issue of how to gain access to being is raised. The most basic answer to this question has already been established. It has been established that *Dasein* is not simply one being occurring alongside other entities, but that it is only in *Dasein* that anything like the meaning of being is first disclosed. Both understanding of being and openness toward being are constitutive states of *Dasein'*s being. The strategy then becomes one of laying bare the relationship of *Dasein* to being as the horizon for understanding the meaning of being. This task involves the analytic of *Dasein* as an exercise in what Heidegger calls fundamental ontology *(die Fundamentalontologie*). The meaning of being is then revealed in the existentials *(existenziale)*: the various ways in which *Dasein's* orientation toward being and understanding of being is expressed. The existentials can be understood after the

paradigm of the Kantian categories. Like the Kantian categories they have a transcendental function. They are never actually given in experience, but make experience possible. But whereas the Kantian categories make phenomenal existence possible, the existentials are categories of Dasein's actual involvement in being. While a cultural anthropologist might identify any number of categories which form the basic constituents of human existence, derived from experience, the existentials are ontological structures which lie at the basis of the empirical. Where human beings mate, gather food and form communities there is already an involvement in being, a projection toward being, an understanding of being which is articulated in the various existentials. The existentials begin with the one which is most general, being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-Sein*). This is followed by worldhood (*Weltlichheit*), being-with (*mit Dasein*), projection (*Entwurf)* and others. The most primordial existential is Care (*Sorge)* because it it the most encompassing. *Sorge* makes explicit what is already contained in the other existentials. It describes the dynamic manner in which *Dasein* stands out to or projects toward being. In *Sorge* the temporal basis of Dasein and the way in which time forms the horizon for an understanding of being becomes illuminated.

(IV) <u>ASAPECTS OF NEGATION</u>

(a) *The negative existentials and anxiety*

It is impossible for any serious consideration of the ontology of <u>Being and Time</u> to neglect what we might call, broadly speaking, the negative elements--aspects of lack,

privation, finitude and limitation--expressed in such existentials as being-towards-death

(*Sein-zum-Tode*), fallenness (*Gefallen)*, and thrownness (*Geworfenheit)* as well as the

phenomenon   of anxiety (*Angst*). These aspects are essential because of the way in

which they impinge upon and define the final meaning of the affirmative aspects. If we

take for example being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-Sein*), this existential reminds us that

da and *Sein* are a unitary phenomenon*. Dasein* dwells in a world with which it is always

already familiar. But *Geworfenheit* also refers to being-in-the-world. *Dasein* does not

simply dwell in a world in an idyllic fashion, but rather its being is already "thrown"

being-in-the-world.[46] Anxiety also impinges on being-in-the-world. *Dasein* is anxious

for its being-in-the-world. Likewise we have already touched upon the claim that *Dasein*

is defined in terms of its potentiality. Yet the potentiality which is most uniquely

*Dasein'*s own is being-towards-death. Finally, both the concept of being-in-the-world and

projection express the way in which *Dasein* transcends or surpasses every attempt to be

comprehended as a substance. Yet *Dasein* as projected toward world, as being-in-the-

world, is already fallen. Fallenness refers precisely to the way in which *Dasein* is liable to

understand itself not in terms of possibilities, but in terms of entities within the world.

The negative aspect of fallenness then works to neutralize or negate the positive or

affirmative aspects of dwelling in a world and projecting toward possibilities. Any

attempt to address the issue of the meaning of being in <u>Being and Time</u> would ultimately

have to do so in terms of the play of affirmative and negative aspects. Such an endeavor

would have to address questions such as: what kind of understanding of the meaning of

being emerges from <u>Being and Time?</u> How does this meaning coincide or conflict with

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[46] The concept of *Dasein* as "thrown being- in- the- world' as well as the phenomenon of anxiety will be explored further in Chapter Three.

that which is expressed in the major traditions of Western philosophy? Is being for the early Heidegger finite or is it infinite? If being is finite then what can be said of *Dasein's* understanding of being and openness toward being, which clearly appear to be expressions of a transcendence of finitude? If being is infinite then what of the powerful expressions of finitude which permeate and limit being at every point? Is being something like a plenum which becomes permeated with negativity, or are the negative aspects finally overcome or negated in being's disclosure? Do the traditional concepts of finite and infinite simply no longer apply in a Heideggerian ontology? If so, then what of the negative aspects which clearly appear to be expressions of finitude? Questions such as these must be squarely addressed if we are to arrive at any kind of coherent understanding of the meaning of being in the early Heidegger.

(b) *Recapitulation and redeeming the meaning/nature distinction*

It might be helpful to reflect at this point on what conclusions we have come to thus far before going further. We have seen how Heidegger's project in Being and Time begins with the fact of our vague, average understanding of the meaning of being, one which requires clarification. We have established both the ontical as well as the ontological priority of the being question. The former has pointed toward *Dasein* as the primary route toward access to the meaning of being. We have also noted the importance of coming to terms with the negative aspects of anxiety, thrownness, and fallenness. At this point the question becomes sharply into focus: what is the meaning of being for the early Heidegger? The necessity of squarely addressing this question is implied in the very

nature of Heidegger's enterprise of raising anew the question about the meaning of being.

Nevertheless Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, specifically the way in which

metaphysics reifies being, or more strongly Heidegger's attempt to overcome

metaphysics and the reification of being which is implied in metaphysics, would seem to

make any objective, discursive, theoretical understanding of being impossible. This

problem is compounded if we take into account Heidegger's critique of the worldless

subject. Meaning as in the phrase "meaning of being" is in traditional language

intelligibility, which arises from the side of consciousness, it is meaning about an

objective world. But have we not said that meaning should not be opposed to nature in

Heidegger? Does this mean that when seen through Heideggerian eyes there is nothing at

all problematic about the classical metaphysical endeavor to express the nature of being?

This question must certainly be answered in the negative. For Heidegger there is a real

necessity for surpassing, passing beyond, overcoming, destroying,[47] which is to say

negating metaphysics. It is only in and through the negation of metaphysics that the

meaning of being can emerge. Yet if negation is employed in the way in which it is

operative in the dominant traditions of metaphysics, which is to say as the simple

opposite of affirmation, then the negation of theories concerning the nature of being

would indeed result in meaning as a subjective phenomena. If we are to redeem the

meaning/nature distinction, to take advantage of its legitimate insights while avoiding its

pitfalls, then a more complex understanding of the relation of affirmation to negation in

the meaning/nature distinction must be worked out.

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[47] Heidegger's project of the *Destruktion* of the history of ontology while not simply synonymous with
what we normally understand by the English destruction involves a real attempt to overcome and surpass
inherited forms of ontology embodied in the Western tradition. Cf. Ibid., pp.41-49. Here Derrida's term
"Deconstruction" is not far from Heidegger's meaning.

(c) *The promise of negative theology*

  A reader of Heidegger struggling to address the question of the meaning of being in terms of the many ways in which the relation between affirmation and negation impinge on the question might be struck with the resemblance of this problematic to that of negative theology. The primary starting point of the tradition of negative theology is with conditions of lack--of negativity uncertainty, limitation, and ignorance, in modern language--what we might call epistemic impotence. In its Christian expressions, represented by such figures as Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, negation is expressed in terms of the impossibility of knowing the divine being. Since all of our knowledge is derived from finite human experience, and the divine being transcends what is finite not merely in scope but also in kind, the possibility of obtaining any real theological knowledge might appear to be all but impossible. Based on the above one might conclude that negative theology must simply renounce all possibility of knowledge of the divine and follow a path of silence. Yet this is not the case. In its classical Christian expressions negative theology remains committed to the project of knowing God, even if such knowledge must be shrouded in darkness and mystery. This fact suggests a tantalizing possibility for Heidegger interpretation. Might the way in which the relation between the negative aspects represented by the impossibility of knowing God and the affirmative aspects represented by the quest for divine illumination clarify

the relation between the affirmative aspects represented by the necessity of raising anew the being question and the negative aspects represented by the repudiation of the reification of being implied in metaphysics in Heidegger?   Could a paradigm of negative theology also help to illuminate the relation between the affirmative aspects such as being-in-the-world and *Sorge* and negative aspects represented by *Geworfenheit* and anxiety, in such a way as to clarify the meaning of being in Heidegger?

To explore this possibility will require a solid understanding of the nature of   the Heideggerian project. Above all this involves understanding that the analytic of *Dasein* which is central to the project of fundamental ontology is meant to lay the ontological groundwork for raising the question of being.[48] Accordingly, without neglecting the *Seinsfrage,* and while attempting to address the understanding of being contained in the early period represented by <u>Being and Time</u>, we will place more emphasis on the later period. It is in the later period that Heidegger puts aside the elaborate exercise of fundamental ontology expressed in the analytic of *Dasein* and, beginning from the perspective of the direct involvement of human being in being, most directly addresses the issue of the meaning of being. We will discover that in the later period the necessity of relating negative to positive aspects discussed earlier is not only present but present in a more acute form. Accordingly, what we will call the 'dialectic of negation'--what will turn out to be the paradigm of the relation between affirmation and negation expressed and embodied in negative theology--will be especially helpful in illuminating the meaning of being in the later Heidegger. To carry out such an endeavor will require a solid grounding in the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart. To an examination of these figures we now turn.

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[48] Ibid., pp. 36-49.

Chapter Two A- Pseudo Dionysius

(I)   HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

(a) *The question of identity*

Virtually the only thing known about the historical figure behind the Dionysian

corpus is that he lived sometime between the close of the fifth century and the early sixth

century. It was during this time that the earliest citations of his writings appear. From

these early citations and extending up until about the fifteenth century it was believed that

the author of the Dionysian corpus was identical to Dionysius the Areopagite (judge)

mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 17:34). Doubtless the conviction that the

author of the Dionysian corpus was none other than the first Athenian convert of St. Paul

greatly enhanced the status of his writings, lending them a kind of apostolic authority.[49]

For this reason discussion of the Dionysian texts figured prominently in various

theological debates leading up to the Lateran Council of 649, where in particular the

authority of Dionysius was frequently cited against the Monothelite heresy.[50] However by

the fifteenth century profound doubts concerning the apostolic origins of the Dionysian

corpus began to emerge. These doubts concerned such issues as 1) the influence of neo-

Platonism, 2) The striking similarity between the Christological language of the Council

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[49] Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality," in <u>Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works</u>, trans. by Colm Luibheid and Paul Roem (New York:Paulist Press, 1987) p.22.
[50] Cf., Andrew Louth<u>, Denys the Areopagite </u>(Conn:Geoffrey Chapmann, 1987) Chapter 1.

of Chalcedon (451) and that of the Dionysian texts, and 3) the total silence of the earliest Church Fathers. By the nineteenth century, with the development of greater historical awareness and methods of textual analysis, the theory of apostolic identity was no longer tenable. Henceforth the author of the Dionysian corpus became known as "Pseudo-Dionysius," or "Dionysius the Pseudo Areopagite."[51]

(II) THE DIONYSIAN TEXTS

(a) *Major works*

The major works of Dionysius are The Divine Names, The Mystical Theology, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, The Celestial Hierarchy, and ten letters. At various points in the above mentioned works the author makes reference to two of his other works, The Theological Representations and The Symbolic Theology, but these texts are no longer extant.

There is some consensus that the works of Dionysius form a unity around the central motif of the problem of speaking about the divine, which by its nature utterly transcends human knowledge. Accordingly The Celestial Hierarchy is ostensibly a work of ontology which concerns the hierarchical structure of being, and The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy an analysis of the hierarchical structure of the church as a reflection of the celestial hierarchy. Yet at bottom both of these works concern the hierarchical structure of reality as it relates to the problem of religious knowledge. In both of these works the

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[51] Cf. Karl Fried, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century," in Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, op cit., p. 38

attempt to articulate the hierarchical structure of reality will give rise to an 'ascending' and a 'descending' pathway. Epistemologically expressed, these pathways are the affirmative (cataphatic) and negative (apophatic) aspects of knowledge of the divine. Likewise The Divine Names has been described as a work of cataphatic theology; it involves an attempt to articulate what can be positively known about the divine being. Yet this positive aspect will not stand apart from the negative. It is in The Mystical Theology that Dionysius outlines his methodology, which involves both cataphatic and apophatic modes in the context of religious knowledge. For this reason The Mystical Theology provides a kind of master key to an understanding of Dionysius's works.

(III)   THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

(a)   *The two poles of the Dionysian project*

Undoubtedly the most fundamental presupposition of The Mystical Theology is that of the incomprehensibility of the divine being. In fact it might be said that the whole of the Dionysian corpus involves an attempt to systematically articulate this starting point. Here methodological considerations, and hence the The Mystical Theology, are paramount because, as both Marion and Derrida hold, the incomprehensibility of God, which is Dionysius's starting point, is not simply and only incomprehensibility but is itself part of a discourse about God.   In this way it might be said that the fundamental problem of The Mystical Theology is how to understand the divine being which by its nature is incomprehensible. There are then two poles of the Dionysian project: first the

incomprehensibility of the divine being, and second the imperative to know and articulate

this incomprehensibility in a systematic way. In the second chapter of <u>The Mystical</u>

<u>Theology</u> Dionysius identifies these two poles as the negative and the affirmative aspects.

In the first paragraph of chapter one Dionysius overwhelms the reader with the negative

aspect:

> For this I pray; and, Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a
> sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived
> and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, and all that is
> not and all that is, and with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward
> as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and know-
> ledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself, and everything,
> shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of divine shadow
> which is above everything that is.[52]

Thus it would seem that the nature of the divine being obviates any possibility of

comprehension since God is not only beyond perception but beyond understanding as

well. Yet already in the first chapter Dionysius speaks of the divine being in positive

language as well, namely as cause.[53] This markedly affirmative language

immediately introduces the question of the relationship between the positive and the

negative aspects. If the divine being is utterly incomprehensible, beyond both

perception and understanding, then in what sense can it be named as cause?

Dionysius's answer, although hardly adequate by itself, is significant, because it

opens up a pathway in which the complex relationship between affirmation and

negation will be explored. "Since it is the cause of all beings, we should posit and

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[52] Psudo-Dionysius, <u>The Mystical Theology</u>, Chapter I, 997A-1000A All quotes from Dionysius are from <u>Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works</u>, <u>op cit</u>.

[53] Cf. 1000B.

ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and more appropriately,

we should negate all those affirmations, since it surpasses all being."[54]

The first part of the above quote follows a classic pattern: affirmative language is

appropriate because the divine being has at least as much reality as any finite being.

Yet in the second part we are told that these affirmations must then be negated. Here

it seems that affirmative language, far from introducing any epistemologically

ampliative aspects of the divine being, any aspects by which we can truly amplify

and expand our knowledge, instead plunges understanding into the same darkness and

unknowing which characterizes the negative aspect. Clearly what is required is some

way of relating the negative to the positive aspects in a systematic way. In Chapter

two Dionysius responds to this imperative. Its subtitle is: "How one should be united

and attribute the praises to the Cause of all things who is beyond all things." It is here

that Dionysius describes the affirmative and negative aspects of theology as

descending and ascending.

> When we make assertions, we begin with the first things, moving down through
> intermediate terms until we reach the last things. But now as we climb from the
> last things up to the most primary we deny all things so that we may unhiddenly
> know that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing
> amid all beings, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all
> the light among beings.[55]

As Dionysius indicates in the third chapter, in the affirmative descending way we

begin with those aspects which are the most congruent with the divine being. Along

this pathway we can claim that God is "good," "existent," "life," "wisdom," and

"power." By contrast, in the negative ascending way we attempt to find aspects which

are appropriate to the divine being only to discover the void of infinite qualitative

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[54] Ibid. 1000B.
[55] 1025B.

distinction between the finite and the infinite. This void is filled by negativity. It is only possible to say what God is not. Like the affirmative descending way, the ascending way takes place on different levels. In the process of negation the mind ascends from gross to more refined levels: "when we deny that which is beyond every denial, we have to start by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we have to attain."[56]

The divine being is obviously not material or physical or spatial. Yet that obvious negative insight forces understanding 'upward' to more subtle qualities such as 'spirit,' "life," "plentitude," "fullness," and "power," only to discover that these too are inadequate.

(b)   *Possible questions*

The foregoing helps to introduce some systematic unity between the affirmative and negative aspects, yet it raises many serious questions, the most obvious of which has to do with the connection between the ascending and the descending ways. If understanding begins on the descending pathway where there resides some positive intelligibility concerning the divine being, what then initiates the ascending turn? Why not simply remain on the descending pathway where possession of certain knowledge of the divine being is assured? Secondly, if this upward turn is initiated, since the result is the destruction of all positive intelligibility it would seem that this would collapse the integrity of the descending movement entirely. If indeed the upward or negative movement has precedence, as might be expected in a negative theology, then what value

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[56] 1033C.

remains for the positive? Moreover, if the negative movement has precedence must not all speech about God finally end in silence?

(c)   *Negation and affirmation*

To make any sense of the Dionysian project it is necessary to renounce both the concept of a simple opposition of negation and affirmation as well as that of the priority of negation over affirmation. In the very first chapter Dionysius is careful to forestall these errors. "Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposite of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion."[57]

Negation is obviously the simple opposite of affirmation, and as such they are intrinsic aspects of the identity of any object. This being the case, neither negation nor affirmation alone can have any deep ontological priority. Denys Turner uses the concept of 'existence' as an example.[58] The claim 'God exists' is inadequate because there is an infinite qualitative difference between human and divine existence. Given the inadequacy of affirmation it is natural and inevitable that the mind tends toward negation, yet there it can find no resting place, since the simple negation of 'God exists' is the equally inaccurate 'God does not exist.' Neither can it be confidently stated that the divine being is dissimilar to existence, since dissimilarity itself presupposes certain shared or similar features in terms of which others are not shared.

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[57] Ibid., 1000B.
[58] Cf. Denys Turner, <u>The Darkness of God </u>(Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 47.

Here the following objection might be raised. Are the above conclusions not relative to individual properties or predicates? Obviously existence is a unique feature. But what of the properties of materiality, or changeableness, or perceptibility? Certainly it would be more accurate to say that God is 'immaterial' or 'unchangeable' rather than 'changeable' or 'perceptible.' Then at least in regard to those particular properties negation would have priority over affirmation.

In replying to this objection it can be freely admitted that certain negative attributes seem to be more appropriate to the divine being than others. Nevertheless, we must avoid the temptation to think that such terms are adequate since all attributes whatever remain wedded to finitude. Specifically the terms 'unchangeable' or 'imperceptible' implicitly require a being in which those properties inhere. Once this untenable assumption is rejected claims about the divine being in which these attributes are featured collapse into incoherence. In chapter five Dionysius speaks to the point: "We make assertions and denials of what is next to it but never of it."[59] Thus when we claim that God is 'unchangeable' or 'imperceptible,' we don't mean that these are inhering properties in the divine being, but only that God is not like other beings in which these properties do inhere.

(d) *A metaphor*

Is the term 'negative theology' then entirely a misnomer? In an attempt to address this question Denys Turner suggests a wonderfully illustrative metaphor, that of a person

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[59] 1048B.

at a loss for words.[60] Imagine a person who is questioned with regard to an experience,

perhaps a very ordinary experience, but one of deep personal significance. No words

seem to be adequate to capture its meaning. When pressed every response is in the

negative. "No it was not like that …I am not sure how to explain it….I would not

describe it that way at all." Here it would be woefully inadequate to claim that this

person has found an effective way to communicate the significance of his or her

experience, the way of negation. Rather the employment of negation is testimony to the

inadequacy of conceptual language to represent the irreducible uniqueness of a human

experience. Just as logicians fully admit that natural languages contain an excess of

meaning which is not expressed in transition to artificial language, so nothing guarantees

the absolute congruence of either natural or artificial language with being. One form of

excess significance which is not fully expressible in any rational language has to do with

the irreducible uniqueness of the experience of human subjectivity. No objective

conceptual language can express what it means to be a unique, concretely existing

individual person; just as no ethical system can do justice to the irreducible elements of

risk, commitment and involvement which are intrinsic to any ethical life experience. It

was awareness of these insights which led Soren Kierkegaard and other existentialist

philosophers to formulate a sustained critique of traditional philosophy with its emphasis

on objective systematic understanding. The foregoing suggests that negation plays a

deep role in our human experience with regard to knowledge. Specifically it embodies a

poignant awareness of dimensions of our human experience which are not cognizable in

terms of the binary thinking of categorical logic. For Dionysius the experience of the

sacred is one of those dimensions. Yet here we must ask: does this exhaust the meaning

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[60] Cf. Denys Turner, op cit p. 39.

of negation in Dionysius's system? Does negation then simply have a limiting function?
It will appear that this is not the case.

(e) *Pushing the metaphor a step further*

   To return to the above metaphor, and in order to make the best use of it, we should
push it a step further. If the irreducible uniqueness of our human experience can issue in a
loss for words, nevertheless silence is rarely taken as the 'last word' about a situation of
significance.   Rather the void of silence is inevitably filled with attempts at speech, even
if these attempts prove woefully inadequate. In a similar way negation as a primary
ground of Dionysius's vision is hardly an independent or autonomous mode which can
function apart from affirmation. The inextricable connection between affirmation and
negation forms a basis for the methodology implicitly at work in The Divine Names,
which involves a commentary on the meaning and significance of the conceptual albeit
biblical names of God (goodness, light, beauty, justice, etc.). At the foundation of the
attempt to articulate the significance of naming God lies the subtle play of apophatic and
cataphatic modes. In the final sense the transcendent God remains nameless since none
of the many names of God succeed in capturing the divine essence. Yet paradoxically
this insight is reached only in and through the enterprise of naming. "This surely is the
wonderful name which is above every other name and is therefore without a name….And
yet on the other hand they give it many names…"[61]
   The above illustrates in a precise way how the apophatic and cataphatic modes must
be connected as part of the ongoing process of knowing the divine. The namelessness of

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[61] The Divine Names, Chapter 1, 596A.

God is not happenstance, as one who has yet to be matched with a suitable name. Rather no possible name of God is adequate. It should then be obvious that awareness of the inadequacy of naming can paradoxically only be concretely realized in and through the process of naming. It is only through the enterprise of naming that naming itself can be brought to its limits.

A similar situation occurs in The Symbolic Theology (not extant), as described by Dionysius in The Mystical Theology. Whereas The Divine Names treats only of the conceptual names of God, in The Symbolic Theology images of God are taken from perceptible things. "In my Symbolic Theology I have discussed analogies of God drawn from what we perceive… I have spoken of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hung-over, of his oaths and curses…"[62] The very concept of taking images of God from perceptible things would appear to be contrary to any reflective theology, yet such a practice is commonplace in the biblical, particularly the Old Testament tradition, and in The Celestial Hierarchy Dionysius provides a compelling argument for its reasonableness.[63] Dionysius reasons that perceptual images of God might be actually thought of as superior to conceptual thoughts. When the divine being is thought in abstract conceptual terms such as Being, plentitude, or cause, there is a natural tendency to think that these concepts actually reflect the divine essence itself, e.g. "God as pure Being,' 'God as ultimate cause,' By contrast, perceptual images of God are so obviously incongruous with the divine that they are self- transcending. In and through the utter untenableness of perceptual images the mind is forced beyond them to a state of emptiness.

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[62] The Mystical Theology, Chapter 3, 1033A-1033C..
[63] Cf. The Celestial Hierarchy, Chapter 2, 141A.

We have argued that for Dionysius negation of a particular type has a kind of limiting function in our human experience. It embodies an awareness of a transcendent dimension not expressible in the language of categorical logic. We have also seen that negation cannot be effectively realized apart from affirmation. Based on the above passages from The Symbolic Theology and The Celestial Hierarchy it might appear that the connection between affirmation and negation is largely superficial; specifically it is didactic. It is simply difficult for the human mind to effectively utilize the concept of pure negation. In the case of The Symbolic Theology affirmation is employed as an indirect route to negation. However, by consulting one of Dionysius's own analogies developed in The Mystical Theology we learn that the connection between affirmation and negation is in fact more substantial.

(f)   *Dionysius own analogy*

In an attempt to explore the meaning of negation we introduced Denys Turner's analogy of a person at a loss for words. It might be helpful to further explore this analogy as a route to the examination of one of Dionysius's own analogies. Earlier we observed both how silence is a response to ineluctable subjectivity and how nevertheless this silence is inevitably filled with speech. At this point a natural question to ask is: why is this the case? If some aspects of our human experience in principle resist and oppose all attempts at objectification, would not the most prudent response to this situation be one of a respectful silence? Can any speech which is a response to what is unsayable possess any claim to legitimacy? To the extent to which Turner's analogy is correct, exploring

these questions might help to further illuminate the way in which affirmation and negation are connected in Dionysius's vision.

The fact that silence is inevitably filled with speech is an indication that the two are connected in inextricable ways. Upon reflection it is clear that the deepest silence, silence which is a response to irreducible subjectivity, is itself a basis upon which authentic speech is contrived. Reflecting on this fact, Marion is disparaging of the early Wittgenstein's relegation of *das Mystiche* to the realm of total silence.[64] This sharp distinction is rejected for the same reason it was rejected by the later Wittgenstein, because it is ultimately simplistic and untenable. It would be simplistic to think that our experience of ineluctable subjectivity is the simple binary opposite of objectivity in a manner which would allow the former to be hermetically quarantined without doing violence to our human subjective experience. Rather the manner in which these elements are inextricably connected is intrinsic to our identity as human persons. For these reasons some of the highest expressions of art, literature and philosophy involve an attempt to express and embody ineluctable subjectivity even if these attempts must ultimately prove to be inadequate. In Marion's language, it is only the unspoken which can be properly seen as the simple binary opposite of what is said. We can be silent about the unspoken but never about the unspeakable because the unspeakable is the wellspring from which the most significant forms of human speech issue forth.

The foregoing suggests a much deeper connection between affirmation and negation than what was discussed previously. This deeper aspect is indicated in one of Dionysius's own analogies: that of Moses's ascent to Mt. Sinai. It is clear that Dionysius

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[64] Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, "Denys," in <u>The Idol and The Distance:Five Studies</u>, trans. by A. Carlson (New York:Fordham University Press, 2001) p. 193.

sees the upward movement of negation after the paradigm of the ascent of the soul to

God. Since the time of Philo of Alexandria, Moses's ascent up Mt. Sinai has been seen

as a symbol of the spiritual life, a paradigm which reached its purest form in Gregory of

Nyssa, a thinker who undoubtedly exerted a profound influence upon Dionysius.[65] So

long as the effort of negation is seen in terms of the paradigm of ascent it is reasonable to

ask: what is it that drives the upward movement of the soul to God? Dionysius provides

us with a clue in his opening prayer:

> Trinity!! Higher than any being,
> Any divinity and goodness!
> Guide of Christians!
> in the wisdom of heaven!
> Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
> up to the furthest, highest peak
> of mystic scripture,
> where the mysteries of God's word
> lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
> in the brilliant darkness of hidden silence.
> Amid the deepest shadow
> they pour overwhelming light
> on what is most manifest.
> Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
> They completely fill our sightless minds
> with treasures beyond all beauty.

It is tempting to think that the movement of negation is driven by a pure vision of

oneness, as each step upward is purged in the fires of negation, yet nothing is more

foreign to Dionysius than a pure form of affirmation. It is not knowledge and

illumination which drives the soul upward but what is "beyond unknowing and light."

Likewise if it is the Trinity which is named as the driving force behind the upward ascent,

it is a Trinity which is veiled in darkness and silence. In Moses's actual ascent, once at

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[65] Cf. Paul Rorem, Pseudo-Dionysius : A Commentary on the texts and an introduction to their influence (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1993) pp. 189-193.

the highest level "he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing."[66] Here it

is difficult to conceive how what is negative can be the driving force behind negation.

Yet we must consider that if pure affirmation is foreign to Dionysius's vision, then so is

pure negation. Describing Moses's actual ascent up Mt. Sinai in the same chapter,

Dionysius at times speaks in affirmative terms: when every purification is complete, he

hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming

abundantly."[67] Then further on in the same paragraph Dionysius writes: "This means, I

presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or

the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent

One. Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown…"[68]

Here the language is affirmative but not purely so. Certainly the "Transcendent One"

can be viewed as a symbol of pure affirmation, but it is a transcendence which is never

experienced or known; rather it is known only in and through that which is below. What

is it then which finally drives the upward ascent? The manner in which affirmation and

negation are intrinsically connected makes it difficult to provide a clear and unambiguous

answer. If it is affirmation which drives the ascent, it is an affirmation which only

achieves its intrinsic identity through negation. If negation, then it is not a pure form of

negation but one which is grounded in the affirmation of a transcendent ideal. In the final

sense it might be said that the transcendent ideal drives the upward ascent, but it does so

only in a disguised and concealed form.

   (g) *Beyond affirmation and negation*

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[66] The Mystical Theology, Chapter 1, 1000A.
[67] Ibid., 1000D-1001A.
[68] Ibid., 1000D-1001A.

While it is critical to understand the deeply dialectical relationship between apophatic and cataphatic modes, it is not possible to make sense of the Dionysian project purely in terms of affirmation and negation, and so we must seriously consider Dionysius's claim that the divine being ultimately transcends both. Marion has made this point a central focus of his appropriation of Dionysius:

> But it is necessary to understand the meaning here correctly. It especially does not mean that negation constitutes the last word of the discourse on God. For in being taken only as an inverted affirmation, negation would persist in its categorical pretension. In place of saying what God is, it would say what God is not. Who does not see that the same intention is at work, which in both cases, means to reach the essence of God, as if it were organized around any essence whatsoever? Negation if it remains categorical remains idolatrous.[69]

So long as we remain on the level of affirmation and negation we are committed to categorical thinking whose goal is to construct and articulate the nature of a being defined by certain essential features. Yet nothing could be more deeply antithetical to the Dionysian project than an essentialist understanding of divine nature. Instead the goal of The Mystical Theology is to indicate how and why the divine being transcends any understanding in terms of essence. The starting point of Marion's argument is with a section of chapter one of The Mystical Theology quoted earlier.[70] Earlier this passage was employed in order to articulate the dialectical relationship between affirmation and negation. While the relationship between affirmation and negation is certainly dialectical, in this passage Dionysius clearly indicates that in the final sense the divine being transcends both. If there is to be any access to the divine

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[69] Jean-Luc Marion, "Denys," op cit., p. 147.
[70] Footnote 9, 1000B.

through rational discourse, it must be in terms of a modality which neither affirms not

denies and is reflectively aware of the limitations of both. It is only in terms of a

"third way" that the truly subversive character of Dionysius's thinking begins to

emerge, for this type of thinking strikes at the very center of the Aristotelian

metaphysical tradition.

> Before going any further, let us observe that the shift to the lexicon of the
> mountain climber, as strange as it might be, indicates at the very least that
> one is attempting to undo oneself from the binary terms of the metaphysical
> (in fact Aristotelian) doctrine of judgment and truth: the third way is played
> out beyond the oppositions between negation and affirmation, synthesis and
> separation, in short between the true and the false.[71]

Here the key terms are true and false. In the final analysis affirmation and

negation as aspects of truth and falsity are expressions of the binary thinking which

characterizes and defines metaphysics. The divine being then transcends not only

affirmation and negation but truth and falsity as well. The goal of theology is thus no

longer to construct or articulate an ontology of divine nature. Any attempt to

understand God in terms of essential features would have to be seen as fundamentally

misguided.

(h)   *A challenge*

One of the deepest challenges of Dionysian thinking can be put in the following way:

Is it possible to think the divine being in a way which transcends metaphysics? What

would such a thinking be like?

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[71] Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name, How to Avoid Speaking of it, in <u>In Excess :Studies of Saturated</u> <u>Phenomena</u>, trans. by Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) p. 137.

The question is significant not only for understanding Dionysius. Insofar as Heidegger has assigned himself the task of thinking the question of Being apart from metaphysics, it will be significant for understanding the later Heidegger as well. There is a natural tendency to associate the ending of metaphysics with the ending of thought, yet as we have argued, careful consideration of the text of The Mystical Theology indicates that although silence plays a significant role in a non-metaphysical thinking, such thinking would not simply be equivalent to silence. With regard to the importance of silence in Dionysius it is clear that silence is an ever-present concomitant of speech which purports to transcend metaphysics. If we may regard the upward affirmative phase as paradigmatic for speech, at each successive stage of the upward movement speech becomes ever more precarious. At the highest level of ascent to the divine speech finally threatens to pass into silence. In The Divine Names Dionysius advises "honoring the unspeakable thinks with a sober silence."[72] Yet once again, no single aspect of divine knowing can be taken as autonomous. Ultimately even silence before the divine must be given in continuity with speech. Commenting on this passage, Marion says: "But this silence still speaks, or rather completes a discourse that is sublimated into silence."[73]

The continuity between speech and silence might be articulated in the following way: In metaphysical thinking speech, like presence, functions as a primary mode; in non-metaphysical thinking this is reversed and silence is primary. So much is this the case that silence itself becomes the primary ground of speech. If we might regard silence as an aspect of negativity, a non-metaphysical thinking must be thoroughly infused with deep aspects of negativity. In ordinary language this implies that non-metaphysical thinking is

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[72] The Divine Names, Chapter 1, 589B.
[73] Jean-Luc Marion, "Denys," op cit., p. 143.

necessarily and deeply ambivalent. It is a type of thinking which has renounced its claim

to clear and unambiguous knowledge. Not surprisingly, in this type of thinking

symbolism and paradox play significant roles.

Chapter Two B- Meister Eckhart

(I) <u>BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MEISTER ECKHART</u>

Meister Eckhart was born in Hochheim, Germany in the year 1260. He was a member of the Dominican order and studied both theology and philosophy at the University of Paris. Throughout his life Eckhart held a number of both administrative and teaching positions. In his later years Eckhart was formally accused of heresy. Summoned before Pope John XXII, Eckhart attempted to mount a reasoned defense against the charge. He died in the year 1327 before he could learn the outcome of his trial, and in 1329 twenty eight of his propositions were condemned in a papal bull as heretical.

(II)   <u>THE QUESTION OF SOURCES</u>

Meister Eckhart's writings are divided between his formal scholarly works, composed in Latin, and the less formal vernacular works, which were written in what is known today as middle-high German. One might expect serious scholarly interest in Eckhart to be focused on the Latin works; this is however not the case. In the last thirty years a large body of scholarship has been concerned with Eckhart's vernacular works, particularly his sermons. Nor is this fact merely accidental. As a member of the Dominican order, the *ordo praedicatorum* (order of preachers), at various points in his

career Eckhart occupied positions in which his major activity was preaching.[74] Many

Eckhart scholars believe that the primary focus of Eckhart's creative energies was

directed toward his role as *Lebenmeister* (spiritual master) in which preaching was an

essential function.[75] On the assumption that this is the case, the scholarly attention given

to Eckhart's vernacular writings would appear to be appropriate. There were apparently

substantial reasons why the Rhineland master reserved his most creative expression for

oral communication in the form of preaching. These reasons reach to the very center of

Eckhart's identity as a thinker. Commenting on Eckhart's relation to scholasticism,

Reiner Schürmann writes:

> Two families of languages confront each other: the ecclesiastical institution at the
> end of a great period stiffens with an already curdled terminology, which can only
> lead to the condemnation of one who breathes a new form into the old body of meta-
> physical dogmata.[76]

Schürmann's metaphor of a confrontation between families of languages is a powerful

one.   It suggests that the dispute between Eckhart and the ecclesiastical authorities, a

dispute which resulted in his formal condemnation in 1329, was entirely linguistic.

While this is not literally the case, the metaphor heightens our awareness concerning the

way in which linguistic and conceptual aspects are inextricably intertwined in issues of

thought[77]. Eckhart challenged scholastic metaphysics in subtle yet profound ways.

Inevitably such challenges to prevailing ways of thought are accompanied by significant

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[74] <u>Meister Eckhart:The Essential Commentaries, Treatises and Defense</u>, trans. by Edmund Colledge and
Bernard Mcginn (New Jersey:Paulist Press, 1981) Cf. the Introduction by Colledge pp.- 1-15.

[75] Cf. John Caputo, "Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart," in <u>Derrida and
Deconstruction</u>, ed. by Hugh J. Silverman, p. 37.

[76] Reiner Schürmann, <u>Wandering Joy</u> (Massachusetts: Lindesfarne Books, 2001) p. 30.

[77] An excellent account of the whole matter of Eckhart's condemnation and defense is provided by Bernard
McGinn in an article, "Eckhart's condemnation reconsidered," in *The Thomist,* July, 1980. In this article
McGinn demonstrates the extent to which Eckhart's formal defense was marked by a persistent failure of
communication between him and his accusers. This fact lends much support to Schürmann's metaphor.

disruptions in established modes of communication and speech. Often inherited

vocabulary proves all too inadequate for the expression of thoughts which have outgrown

their linguistic forms.[78] On this assumption Eckhart's preference for oral

communication would not have been merely circumstantial; rather it was at least in part a

creative response to the over-determined meanings of scholastic vocabulary. While we

must at all costs avoid a simple opposition between an orthodox, scholastic

metaphysician of the Latin writings, and a creative-deconstructionist innovator of the

vernacular,[79] there is no denying the fact that contemporary 'theological turn'

philosophers such as Derrida and Marion find the ways in which Eckhart undermined

scholastic metaphysics to be most deeply expressed and embodied in the vernacular

writings, particularly the sermons. This, coupled with the fact that some of Eckhart's

most characteristic themes, such as *Gottheit*, are found nowhere else but in the vernacular

provides an ample basis for us to focus our attention entirely on the vernacular.

(III) <u>APPROACH</u>

Our analysis of Eckhart's sermons will focus upon three major themes: (1) the critique

of God and religion, including the concept of *Gottheit* (Godhead) (2) the concept of

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[78] Another excellent article on Eckhart's dispute with the ecclesiastical authorities is Oliver Davies' "Why were Eckhart's propositions condemned?" in *New Blackfriars* Vol. 71, issue # 7, 1990. In this piece Davies begins with the fact of Eckhart's near-universal rehabilitation in the world of theological orthodoxy and attempts to explain the condemnation in political terms. The fact that Davies finds the condemnation of Eckhart's propositions to be inexplicable on a purely doctrinal level again lends support to the claim that the dispute between Eckhart and his accusers was characterized by serious miscommunication.

[79] Cf. Bernard McGinn, The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart (New York:The Crossroads Publishing Co., 2001) p.33. While there is actually still much debate in Eckhart scholarship concerning the relationship between the Latin and the vernacular writings. McGinn argues that no hard and fast distinction is possible.

sunder war umbe (without a why); and (3) the concept of

Abgescheidenheit/ichgebundenheit (detachment) or *Gelâzenheit* (releasement).

(IV)   CRITIQUE OF GOD AND RELIGON

 (a)   *Critique of religion*

One of the deepest ironies of Eckhart's teaching is that such a God-obsessed thinker,

a friar "from whom God hid nothing," should have issued the very first critique both of

God and of religion in Western civilization. Like the violent assaults of Marx and

Nietzsche   upon Judaeo-Christian foundations which were to follow five centuries later,

Eckhart's critique of God begins with a critique of religion; indeed there is a natural

organic progression from the latter to the former. All too significantly, the point of

departure for Meister Eckhart's critique of God and religion is essentially religious in

character. In a well-known sermon, "*Intravit Jesus in Quoddam Castellum,*" Eckhart

denounces all forms of attachment which might deprive the Christian believer of perfect

freedom to serve the will of God:

> Attachment to any work (*ichgebundenheit an irgendwelches Werk)* which
> deprives you of the freedom to serve God in this present now and to follow
> him alone in the light by which he instructs you what to do and what not to
> do, free and new in each now (*frei und neu in jedem Nun*) as if you did not
> possess, nor desire, nor indeed could do anything else; every such attachment
> (*jedliche Ichgebundenheit*) or every premeditated work which deprives you of
> this ever new freedom, I now call it a year, for your mind does not bear fruit
> as long as it has not accomplished the work that you held with attachment.[80]

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[80] Schürmann, op. cit., p. 4, Although Schürmann's text includes a translation of Eckhart's sermons from
the original German along with his commentary, the text is entirely in English, I have provided translations
of key parts of all quotes from Eckhart with the assistance of Meister Eckhart:Deutschen Predigten und
Traktate, ed. and trans. by Josf Quint (Munich:Carl Hansen, 1963) p. 160. Hereafter abbreviated as Quint.
Translations are into modern German rather than the original middle high German in which Eckhart wrote.

The imperative to separate oneself from worldly attractions that provide an obstacle to spiritual life has deep roots in the Christian tradition, ultimately reaching back to the gospels.[81] Yet the attachments which Eckhart names are not worldly in character, but essentially religious. Specifically they are the attachments of prayer *(an Gebet)*, fasting *(an Fasten)*, vigils *(an Wachen),* "and all other external exercises and mortifications."[82] *(allerhand äußerliche Übungen und Kasteiungen.)* These ubiquitous religious paraphernalia provide a particularly insidious obstacle to spiritual life because in and through them attachment *(ichgebundenheit)* itself assumes spiritual guise.

> Some people want to see God with their own eyes *(mit den Augen ansehen)*,
> just as they see a cow; and they want to love God *(wollen Gott lieben)* just
> as they love a cow *(wie sie eine Kuh lieben)*. You love a cow because of the
> milk and cheese and because of your own advantage *(deines eigenen Nutzens)*.
> This is how people act who love God because of external riches *(außern
> Reichtums)* or internal consolation *(inneren Trostes)*.[83]

Here *äußern Reichtums* and *inneren Trostes* are placed on exactly the same level. If one seeks God because of some advantage, the spiritual quest has been corrupted. God is then worshiped not in spirit and in truth but rather as a means to an end.   In a famous sermon entitled "*Omne Datum Optimum*" Eckhart writes:

> Know that when you seek anything of your own, you will never find God
> because you do not seek God purely *(weil du nicht Gott ausschließich suchst)*.
> You are seeking something along with God *(du suchst etwas mit Gott)* and you
> are acting as if you were to make a candle out of God in order to look for some-
> thing with it. Once one finds the thing one is looking for, one throws the candle

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[81] for example, the parable of the rich man, Matthew Chapter 19.
[82] Schur. p. 4/Quint p.160.
[83] <u>Meister Eckhart:Teacher and Preacher,</u> ed. and trans. Bernard McGinn and Frank Tobin (New York:Paulist Press, 1986) p. 278. Tobin and Mcginn's book is also a translation from the original German rendered entirely in English. I have again provided portions of the German text with the help of Quint- p. 227. Hereafter Tobin and McGinn's translation will be abbreviated Tobmac.

away.[84]

The type of utilitarian arrangement in which God is sought as a means to an end, even if that end is a 'spiritual'(*geistig)* one in the form of enlightenment, edification, or eternal life essentially trades one thing for another *(das eine um das andere geben)* and thus ultimately reduces an affair which should be spiritual and divine *(geistig und göttlich)* to a business deal *(Weise markten).*[85] This insight has profound implications for the nature of spiritual life. First, it is impossible to encounter Eckhart's critique without asking: are not all spiritual practices ultimately utilitarian in character? If so, the autonomous identity of the very concept of a spiritual practice itself becomes radically called into question. Second, we must also ask: what about the notion of a spiritual quest? The identity of any activity is constituted at least in part in terms of its goals. Goals are compared and the resources of life are apportioned according to the relative value of each. This being the case, the spiritual quest is also utilitarian. Earlier we argued that attachment corrupts the spiritual quest. Yet if the spiritual quest is utilitarian, then once again the very identity of an authentic spiritual quest becomes problematic.[86] And what of the concept of God? Eckhart's argument makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that God is the partner in the business deal in which religious practices are services offered in the hope of being exchanged. Thus Eckhart's critique of religion leads inevitably into a critique of God.

(b) *Critique of God*

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[84] Tobmac p. 250/Quint p. 170- 171.

[85] This argument as well as the above italicized German words are found in *Intravit Jesus in templum,* a sermon in which Eckhart reflects upon the story of Jesus driving out the money changers in the temple. (Matthew chapter 21) See Quint pp. 153-155/Tobmac p. 240-241.

[86] It is significant that nowhere in the sermon *Intravit Jesus in templum* are the terms 'spiritual life,' or 'spiritual quest,' or 'spiritual practice' found. Indeed it is difficult to find these or even synonymous terms anywhere in Eckhart's sermons. This fact lends support to the above argument.

One of the deepest challenges posed by Meister Eckhart is that to a perfectly detached spirit the concept of God would become superfluous. This insight takes a quite explicit form in these startling words: "The noblest and the ultimate thing that a person can forsake is that he forsakes God for God's sake (*Das höcheste und das Äußerste, was der Mensch lassen kann das ist, daß er Gott um Gottes willen lasse).*[87]

Nevertheless Eckhart's imperative to forsake God is itself solidly grounded within a theistic framework. Like his master Aquinas, Eckhart never doubts that the final cause of nature which presumably includes human existence is God. "Nature in its most inner self seeks and strives secretly for God *(heimlich im Innersten sucht und strebt die Natur nach Gott)*."[88]

Yet paradoxically the natural striving of the mind toward its supernatural end ineluctably requires a forsaking of God insofar as God can be known and represented in any objective form. In a sermon, "*Modicum et iam non videbitis me,*" Eckhart describes in a very poignant way how the longing of the soul for its ultimate ground must lead it inevitably beyond God:

> The intellect penetrates within. It is not satisfied with goodness or with wisdom or with God himself. In good truth it is as little satisfied with God as with a stone or a tree. It never rests, it breaks into the ground from which goodness and truth comes forth *(sie bricht ein in den Grund, wo Gutheit und Wahrheit ausbrechen),* and perceives it [God's being]in principio, in the beginning, where goodness and truth are going out (*wo Gutheit und Wahrheit ihren ausgang Nahmen*) before it acquires any name, before it bursts forth.[89]

This originary source or *Ursprung* towards which the highest part of the mind (*die Oberstes teil der Stelle)* transcends is none other than the Godhead (*Gottheit).* Toward an examination of this most fundamental concept we now turn.

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[87] Tobmac p. 268/Quint p. 214.
[88] Tobmac p. 313/Quint p. 346.
[89] Tobmac p. 315/Quint p. 348.

(c) *The Godhead*

Unfortunately Eckhart is not consistent in his terminology, often using the term *Gott* (God) where *Gottheit* (Godhead) might be more appropriate. Nevertheless, the hiatus which separates the two concepts is unmistakable. God and Godhead are as distinct as heaven and earth *(Gott und Gottheit sind so weit voneinander verschieden wie Himmel und Erde).*[90]

In distinction from *Gott, Gottheit* is not a separate entity which can be known and understood in any objective manner. Thus it would be quite impossible to delineate objective features of *Gottheit.* At once we should note the distance between Eckhart and the traditional scholastic view. In the latter God possesses a number of clearly defined features and properties such as immutability, eternity and goodness.[91] Speaking of *Gott* but clearly intending, *Gottheit* Eckhart writes:

> Unsophisticated teachers say that God is pure being(*lauteres Sein*). He is
> as high above being(*er is so hoch`über dem Sein*) as the highest angel
> is above a gnat. I would be speaking incorrectly in calling God a being (*wenn ich
> Gott ein Sein nennte),* as if I called the sun pale or black. God is neither this
> nor that. A Master says: whoever imagines that he has understood God, if
> he knows anything *(etwas erkennen)* it is not God that he knows.(*der erkennte
> God nicht*).[92]

The last sentence summarizes the manner in which *Gottheit* must resist and oppose all attempts at predication. Consequently the appearance of predication in language is a certain sign that we are not in the presence of a concept of *Gottheit.* In a sermon

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[90] Schur. p. 111/Quint p. 272.
[91] Aquinas, <u>Summa</u>, Ia. q.4-10.
[92] Tobmac p.256/Quint p. 196.

ironically entitled *Unus Deus et Pater Omnium* (one God and father of all) Eckhart refers

to *Gottheit* as *Verneinen des Verneinens* (negation of negation).[93] We have encountered

the same term in Dionysius. For Eckhart the act of negation is an attempt to catch hold

(*erfasse)* of an aspect of the divine being. This intention is doomed to be frustrated; hence

the mind is forced to posit a second negation. Eckhart's own example, goodness

(Gutheit), can be misleading. We must negate the goodness of God because goodness as

it is present in the divine being has no commonality with human goodness. Yet this

obvious example is open to an obvious objection: namely what of inherently negative

qualities? Can these not be predicated of God without further qualification? Can it not

be accurately claimed that 'God is not an unjust ruler,' or 'God is not an evil tyrant' or

'God is not an ignorant fool?'

Denys Turner effectively eliminates this possibility.[94] Negative predicates already

presuppose a background of commonality in which they operate. For this reason the

more two things have in common, the easier it is to make negative statements about either

of them. Any two animals, e.g. a horse and a dog, share so much in common that it

becomes quite easy to indicate how they are different: 'a dog does not have hoofs', 'a

horse does not bark'. The assignment is more difficult in the case of an animal and a

number, or a number and a mountain range. This highlights just how critical the

background of commonality is for making negative statements. If we begin by

hypothesizing that a pair of objects have nothing whatsoever in common, and hence no

positive predication is possible, negative statements become equally impossible. The

statement 'God is not an ignorant fool' appears to be tenable because it surreptitiously

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[93] Tobmac p. 281/Quit p. 252.
[94] Denys Turner, "Tradition and Faith," in *The International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol. 6. no. 1, Jan. 2004, p. 27.

imports positive predicates which function as a background for the negative. Thus the statement implicitly presupposes that God is a being sharing some features with other beings. Once that presupposition is rejected, all value contained in the negative statement itself dissolves. Thus Eckhart concludes that *Gottheit* can only be described as *Verneinen des Verneinens*. This does not supply *Gottheit* with any objective content but rather leads thinking into an utter abyss (*ganzen Abgrund*).[95] All too naturally two of Eckhart's favorite metaphors for *Gottheit* are desert (*Einöde)* and wasteland *(Wüste)*.[96] Are these then negative images of God? Not in the sense of concepts which actually embody some substantive content by way of negation. Rather they are like symbols which point toward ultimate unknowability.

(d)   *God and Godhead*

The fact that the terms *Gott* and *Gottheit* are used in the sermons almost interchangeably, even though they are distinct concepts, raises fundamental questions concerning their relationship. The Sermon "*Nolite Timere Eos"* contains one of the most remarkable passages in all of Eckhart's vernacular writings. In it this relationship is explored in a very original and poignant way.

> God becomes where all creatures enunciate God (*Gott wird wo alle Kreat-Uren Aussprechen*). There God becomes. When I stood in the ground, the soil, the river, and the source of the Godhead (*Quell der Gottheit*), no one asked me where I was going or what I was doing. There was no one there to question me. But when I went out all creatures cried out: "God." If some one were to ask me: "brother Eckhart, when did you leave home?" This would indicate that I must have previously been inside (*dann bin ich*

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[95] Tobmac p. 268/Quint p. 213.
[96] Tobmac p. 263/ Quint p. 206.

Drin gewesen). It is thus that all creatures speak of God. And why do they not speak of the Godhead? *(Und warum redden sie nicht von der Gottheit?)* Everything that is in the Godhead is one, and of this nothing can be said (*Alles das, was in der Gottheit ist, das ist Eins, und vavon kann man nicht Redden*).[97]

The genre of the passage is clearly that of a poetic myth. Like all authentic poetry it is resonant with meaning. With lyrical charm it beguiles the reader to extract an interpretation while defying a univocal translation into the language of prose. In the manner of an archetypical creation myth it tells a story which expresses powerful philosophical truths in symbolic form. The story is told of the primordial time in which Eckhart dwelled in the Godhead and of his 'going out.' Accordingly, *Als ich (noch) im Grunde, im Boden, im Strom, und Quell, der Gottheit stand* (when I stood in the ground, the soil, the river and the source of the Godhead) does not express an actual historical time but an ontological condition, the condition in which created existence is united with the infinite ground of its possibility.[98] In this state, mythically expressed as primordial time, the concept of a *premium ens* is quite impossible. Indeed the concept of *Gottheit* is likewise impossible insofar as it represents an objectifiable ground which stands opposed to created existence. The most that can be said of the Godhead is *alles das, was in der Gottheit ist, das ist Eins, und davon kann man nicht reden* (Everything that is in the Godhead is one, and of this nothing more can be said). Concepts of the divine are only possible to the extent to which created existence is alienated from its ground. *Also reden alle Kreaturen von „Gott"* (Thus all creatures speak of God). The mythical context of the passage also allows for the expression of something of the human drama

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[97] Schürmann p. 111./Quint p.273.

[98] For this insight I am indebted to Paul Tillich's interpretation of the Biblical story of the fall of man In Genesis Chapters 1-3. Cf. Paul Tillich, <u>Systematic Theology Vol II</u> (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 29-31.

which accompanies issues of ultimate meaning. *Als ich (aber) ausfloß die Sprachen alle Kreaturen „Gott!"* (But when I went out, all creatures cried out:"God!").

Alienation from the ground can be described on a human level as a profound spiritual decadence. A certain sign of this fallen state is the frenzy to articulate and defend God-concepts.

Although Eckhart does speak of *Gottheit* as the *Grund* (ground) of God, from the above it should be clear that *Gottheit* cannot be the ground of God in the same way as Aquinas can speak of God as the ground of the world. This cannot be the case because God and *Gottheit* are not two separate entities. Rather God is a founded mode which is destined to utterly dissolve. Neither can we simply replace God with *Gottheit*, for this would be to miss the fundamental character of Eckhart's criticism of God. *Gottheit* is preferable to God only because the former concept itself uniquely embodies something of the impossibility of all God concepts. As we have seen, *Gottheit* is not a substantive concept at all. It is rather a symbol which leads us toward an ultimate conceptual asceticism, to the desert of the mind in which conceptual representation is replaced by unknowing.

   (V) (WITHOUT A WHY) (*sunder war umbre*)

   (a) *The challenge to the ontology of grounding*

One of the most significant and innovative concepts in Eckhart's sermons is that of *sunder war umbe.* The concept is significant for its striking originality. The central

challenge which confronts any serious interpretation of Eckhart's sermons involves the

assignment of sorting out the tangled web of threads which intersect with and impinge

upon any fundamental theme. These historical roots, to name only the most significant,

are Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Patristic, and Biblical. Doubtless a similar

challenge confronts the attempt to understand any historical figure in the Western

tradition. Philosophical thinking arises out of an historical stream and often the point of a

thinker's greatest originality is that point at which historical roots converge in her

intellectual life only to be abandoned when a radically new perspective beckons upon the

horizon of creativity. In this respect the concept of *sunder war umbe* is unique. As we

will discover, *sunder war umbe* is a revolutionary concept, and like all revolutionary

concepts it is given in continuity with past forms of thinking, but this is not the continuity

of a measured progression but of a mutation in which the presence of what is new is

experienced with such powerful suddenness as to make the fact of continuity itself all but

invisible. In a sermon titled *Mulier Venit Hora* Eckhart provides a succinct

introduction to this rather remarkable theme:

> Someone could ask a good man: "Why do you seek God?"-"Because he is
> God."-"Why do you seek the truth?"-"Because it is the truth."-"Why do you
> seek justice?"-"Because it is justice." Such people's attitude is the right one.
> All things that are in time have a why. Thus when someone asks a man:
> "Why are you eating?"-"In order to gain strength."- "Why are you sleeping?"-
> "For the same reason." And so with everything that is in time. But if someone
> asked a good man: "Why do you love God?"- "I do not know, because of God."-
> "Why do you love the truth?"- "Because of the truth."-"Why do you love just-
> ice?"-"Because of justice." "Why do you love goodness?"- "Because of good-
> ness." "Why are you living?"-"My word, I do not know! But I am happy to be
> alive."[99]

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[99] Schur. P 54/Quint p. 384. Wer zu einem guten Menschen spräche:„Warum suchst du
Gott?"- „Weil er Gott ist!" ."*„Warum liebst du die Wahrhiet?" „Um der Wahrheit
willen" „Warum liebst du die Gerechtigkeit?"-„Um der Gerechtigkeit willen!" Um
solche Menschen steht es recht. Alle Dinge, die in der Zeit sind, die haben*

In and through the playful tone it is possible to detect something deeply subversive in
the above passage. Clearly, here Eckhart is attempting to undermine the conviction that it
is necessary to establish grounds for fundamental aspects of our human experience.   The
attempt to establish grounds for what is livable has a long history in Western philosophy
ultimately reaching at least back to the Republic of Plato, and survives in various forms
even to this day. We can illustrate the nature of this enterprise with the example of moral
experience, which plays a prominent role in the above passage.   A fundamental
presupposition of the quest to establish grounds for moral experience is that there is
something essentially ambiguous about our most basic moral concepts. Human beings
don't really know what goodness or justice or virtue is. In the absence of clear moral
concepts it becomes impossible to be certain that our actions are truly moral. The
philosophical attempt to establish enduring grounds for moral experience is thus more
than merely speculative; it arises out of an urgent human need to find orientation in the
practical affairs of moral life. In the philosophical and religious world of the fourteenth
century, following the great synthesis of St. Thomas Aquinas, it was believed that the
foundation of our moral experience is God. By the eighteenth century this transcendent,
supernatural foundation had been replaced by reason. Thus an understanding of the
nature of a moral foundation has shifted throughout Western civilization, but what has
remained constant is the manner in which moral life is grounded upon an ultimate

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ein Warum. Wer beispielsweise einen Menschen fragte:„Warum esst du?"-
„Damit ich Krafte habe!" ."„Warum schläfst du?"„Zu damselben Zweck!" Steht es mit
allen Dingen, die in der Seit sind. Wer aber einen guten Menschen fragte:„Warum liebst
du Gott?"-"„Ich weiß es nicht, um Gottes willen!" „Warum liebst du die Wahrheit?"
„Um der Wahrheit willen!"Warum liebst du der Gerechtigkeit?"-„ Um der Gerechtigkeit
Willen!" „Warum liebst du die Gutheit?"-„Um der Gutheit willen!"Warum lebst du?"
„Traun, ich weiß es nicht! (Aber) ich lebe gern!"

foundation. The above passage is anomalous for the way in which it questions the need for any moral foundation whatsoever.

Eckhart's context in these sermons is pastoral rather than purely philosophical, and this fact is not only methodologically significant but constitutive for the very identity of his enterprise. Through use of some of the same rhetorical techniques that are present in a successful dramatic narrative, insights are unveiled with apparent suddenness rather than forming the conclusions of syllogistic arguments. Even though Eckhart does not provide formal arguments for his position, it is not difficult to construct them from the material provided. In the above passage the concatenation of questions represents the process which is entered into with the raising of the question 'why?' To pose a 'why' question in a formal way is to commit to a process of following a chain of reasoning to completion. This itself presupposes that more intelligibility is to be found at the end of the chain than at any step along the way. However, in the case where we begin with fundamental issues such as *Gott*, *Wahrheit*, *Gutheit*, or *Gerechtigkeit* the chain never actually reaches completion in a self- illuminating basis or ground. Thus any question about human motivation (*„Warum liebst du die Wahrheit?,"* *„Warum liebst du die Gerechtigkeit?"*) or action (*„Warum issest du?,"* *„Warum schläfst du?"*) inexorably leads to the most fundamental question that can be asked about human motivation: *„Warum lebst du"* (why are you living?) This question has formally completed the chain but has hardly brought it to closure in a foundational mode of awareness. In the case of the question *„Warum suchst du die Gerechtigkeit?"* the interlocutor refuses to follow a chain of reasoning toward what would hypothetically serve as its ground. His response, *„Um der Gerechtigkeit willen!,"* exhibits an implicit awareness that if there is any basis to

justice it cannot reside at the end of a chain of reasoning but must be immediately known and experienced in the compelling power of justice.

In the second round of questioning the chain is followed to completion with „*Warum lebst du?"* If we were to pose this query in formal language the question 'what is the purpose of human existence?' would have little trouble finding a response in the fourteenth century scholastic world: 'The purpose of human existence is to see and know God.' The „*ich weiß es nicht!"* of the interlocutor does not represent agnosticism concerning the formal answer. Here the small word *traun* which precedes the phrase speaks volumes*. Der gute Mann* who exclaims it is too startled and amazed by the fact of existence to make easy reference to a formal response. Neither can this wonder and amazement be passed off as merely a subjective state. Rather it represents the inadequacy of formal responses to do justice to what includes these subjective states as phenomena to be explained. Taking this fact into account it is clear that the correctness of a formal objective response is quite irrelevant. Thus the „*Ich lebe gern!"* speaks out of another mode of existence entirely--that of gratitude.

(VI)   DETACHMENT/RELEASEMENT

(a)   *Eckhart and the Christian tradition/detachment vs. releasement*

The most significant concept in Eckhart's vernacular vocabulary is that of *Gelâzenheit.*(releasement). Closely related to *Gelâzenheit* is the concept of *Abegescheidenheit*(detachment). We have already encountered the latter concept in our

examination of the sermon *Intravit Jesus in Quoddam Castellum.* It refers to a state of being without any attachments (*eigenshaft)* which prohibit the perfect freedom to serve the will of God.

The concept of detachment has a long history in the Christian tradition, to say nothing of the Stoic and neo-Platonic traditions. Even if Eckhart's concept of detachment remains in continuity with its Christian roots while assimilating aspects of other traditions, it is also unique.[100] *Gelâzenheit* is from the root word 'let,' so it can be translated as 'letting be,' 'abandonment,' or 'releasement.'[101] Once again it refers to a state of perfect freedom from all attachments, of being without any constraints that impede perfect union with God. From the foregoing it is evident that it is difficult to establish a hard and fast distinction between the concepts. Indeed for many commentators they are entirely synonymous,[102] while for others[103] *Gelâzenheit* represents a more thoroughgoing state of abandonment to divine will. In the latter view detachment is a matter of degree. The soul might be on the pathway of detachment in which the goal of this journey is the perfect freedom of *Gelâzenheit.* The latter view is problematic because of the way in which it imputes an autonomy to spiritual life, a view which we have already found questionable. Fortunately for our purposes, it is not necessary to settle this dispute, so that with some attention to where a distinction might be necessary we may employ the concepts interchangeably.

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[100] Cf. Bernard Mcginn, "Eckhart's Condemnation Reconsidered," in *The Thomist,* Vol. # 44 July 1980, pp. 390-414.

[101] *Gelâzenheitt* is the actual middle high German word which Eckhart used. The modern German form is *Gelassenheit.*

[102] Cf. John D. Caputo, <u>The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought</u>(New York: Fordham University Press, 1986) p. 119.

[103] Cf. Tobmac. P. 399.

The concept of *Gelâzenheit* intersects in a powerful way with Eckhart's critique of God and religion as well as with his concept of *sunder war umbe*. We will examine each of these aspects individually.

(b) *Detachment and the critique of God and religion*

We have seen how paradoxically familiar religious accoutrements, whether conceptual or practical, may provide an insidious obstacle to spiritual life. Yet religious concepts and practices, and above all the concept of God, are not casually or easily abandoned. *Gelâzenheit* then represents an ideal of spiritual freedom. Only when perfectly released is one able to abandon traditional religious practices. It is certainly possible to support this view with isolated quotes from Eckhart, for example from the section quoted earlier from *Intravit Jesus in Quoddam Castellum*. Yet we have seen in passages which followed, particularly in the 'utilitarian argument' extracted from *Intravit Jesus in Templum*, that the very notion of a spiritual goal or quest has become problematic. Accordingly we might expect to find that *Gelâzenheit* is likewise understood as a point of departure or presupposition of spiritual life. In making this point Eckhart quotes the words of Jesus in Luke 14:26, "No one hears my words nor my teaching unless he has forsaken himself," and then comments upon the verse as follows: "Who would hear the word of God must be totally detached"*(Denn wer Gottes Wort hören soll, der muß vollig gelassen sein).*[104] Likewise reflecting on Luke 9:23, "Whoever wants to become my disciple must leave himself," Eckhart writes: "If the spirit knew its utter detachment *(Erkennte der Geist sein reines Abgeschiedensein),* it could not incline itself

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[104] Tobmac p. 267/Quint p. 213.

toward anything *(so könnte er sich auf kein Ding mehr hinneigen)* but would have to remain in its utter detachment *(er müßte vielmehr auf seinem reinen Abgeschiedensein verharren)*.[105]

The latter quotation obliterates the concept of *Abegescheidenheit* as a project that is to be accomplished through strenuous effort. If there is an sense in which *Abegescheidenheit* represents a project, its ultimate goal is to realize what has already been accomplished. If this is the case, goal oriented action achieved by means of strenuous effort collapses into a fateful acceptance of divine destiny beyond all human comprehension and striving.

The fact that Eckhart can claim scriptural authority makes his perspective no less revolutionary. Now spiritual life can no longer be conceived as analogous to practical endeavors with clearly defined goals. Without clearly defined goals the autonomy of spiritual life collapses into aimless activity.

The deepest challenge posed by *Gelâzenheit* is to the concept of God. We have seen how God-concepts are founded modes arising out of separation and distance from *Gottheit*. Accordingly the presence of God-concepts becomes the deepest obstacle to perfect releasement*(vollig gelassen sein)*. So much is this the case that Eckhart's doctrine could be easily confused with that of atheism.[106]

(c) Detachment and sunder war umbre

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[105] Tobmac p. 265/Quint p. 205.
[106] Cf. Denys Turner, "The Art of Unknowing: Negative Theology in Late Medieval Mysticism," in *Modern Theology*: 14:4 (October 1998)

We have seen how Eckhart undermines the claim that actions require an ultimate ground. Yet once again the quest for ultimate foundations is not easily or casually relinquished. Eckhart has comprehended that the quest to secure unshakable foundations represents a deep and abiding aspect of the human spirit, but in the final sense is one which is on a continuum with more mundane aspects. A higher or more authentic aspect is represented not by the drive to secure ultimate foundations, but by the ability to relinquish the demand for security inherent in the quest to establish ultimate unshakable grounds.

What then is the relationship between *sunder war umbe* and *Gelâzenheit?*   Our answer must comprehend the manner in which *Gelâzenheit* is a presupposition and an aim.   Accordingly as an aim, only the soul that has achieved the level of perfect releasement can abandon the need for ultimate grounds and is thus able to act *sunder war umbe.* Contrariwise as a presupposition, only one who is perfectly released can act *sunder war umbe.*

Chapter Three- Illuminating the question and meaning of Being in the early Heidegger.

(I) UNDERSTANDING BEING IN THE .LATTER HEIDEGGER

(a.) *Understanding being in the light of the critique of metaphysics*

We have seen how at least since 1927 Heidegger has been guided by the 'single star' of the question of being. Nevertheless it is only in the later writings that Heidegger attempts to deal with the question of being without regard to its being grounded in beings,[107] that is to say with the issue of being as such. It is in the later writings then that we should be entitled to ask questions such as: Where has the long journey through "the neighborhood of being" taken us? What intelligibility concerning being which may have been absent at the start of our journey do we now possess?   In the final sense what can be said about being according to Heidegger? Here it is essential to bear in mind that whatever significance concerning being that is present in the later Heidegger is provided in terms of a relentless criticism of metaphysics. It would therefore be essentially misguided to expect from Heidegger one more theory of being in a manner which is on a continuum with those of Hegel, Plato or Spinoza.   Nevertheless the enterprise announced in Being and Time of raising anew the question of being requires that there be at least a minimum of intelligibility which has emerged from the inquiry, notwithstanding the fact that such intelligibility cannot be continuous with the type of

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[107] Cf. Martin Heidegger, On Time and Being, trans. by Joan Stanbaugh (New York and San Francisco: Harper Torch books, 1972) p. 2.

systematic, discursive expositions of being which has characterized Western

metaphysics. There are therefore two fundamentally opposed interpretations which we

must inexorably come to terms with in understanding the later Heidegger: (1) The

imperative to renounce or transcend any attempt to reify being and therefore to relinquish

all attempts at systematic understanding of being. (2) The need or requirement to extract

some significance which can be expressed in a unified way from the enterprise of raising

anew the question of being.[108]   To follow the first pathway over the second would

involve wandering through the "forest paths" of the later Heidegger's occasional

writings, abandoning all attempts at unified or systematic understanding.[109] Along this

pathway we would never raise pointed questions such as: how precisely is being

understood in the later Heidegger? How does this understanding differ from that of

traditional metaphysics? Where precisely has the enterprise of raising anew the question

of being led us? What understanding of being have we achieved, and in what way does

this improve or correct the understanding of traditional metaphysics?   Following the

second pathway would be to inevitably dull the edge of Heidegger's critique of

metaphysics. Along this route the sharp edges of the Heideggerian text are polished until

the whole body of work is able to fit the mold of a traditional theory of being.[110] Is there

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[108] This dilemma is expressed and addressed in different ways by commentators. George Patttison expresses it as the choice between renouncing all attempts to establish continuity in Heidegger's project, dealing with the later Heidegger as a separate entity, and one in which continuity is preserved. Only the second option allows us to address an issue such as where the question of being has led us. Cf. The Later Heidegger (London: Routledge Philosophy Guidebooks, 2000) Chapter One, "Is There a Later Heidegger?," pp. 1-14.

[109] Most often where commentators have opted for this choice it takes the form of unifying Heidegger's later writings around central themes such as the philosophy of art, or the critique of technology and culture, while marginalizing the philosophy of being. Julian Young points out the shortsightedness of this approach since the *Seinsphilosophie* (philosophy of being) is the basis of all of the characteristic themes of the later Heidegger. Cf. Heidegger's Later Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp.1-4.

[110] An example *par excellence* would be Herman Philpse, Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: a Critical Interpretation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) The author sees themes in the early and later period as inherently connected by a single preconceived concept of being, which represents a thinly

a way to avoid this dichotomy--that is, to maintain the pointed edge of inquiry into what significant intelligibility has been achieved by the last stages of Heidegger's inquiry into being--while squarely coming to terms with the critique of metaphysics? An attempt at an affirmative answer will require a solid grounding in the early Heidegger.

(II.) THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SEINSFRAGE

(a) *Clearing a pathway*

It is not uncommon for texts treating of the later Heidegger to do so without substantial reference to the *Seinsfrage.* Nevertheless, since the texts of the later Heidegger are essentially an attempt to address the *Seinsfrage,* the question about the meaning of being first announced in <u>Being and Time</u>, such an approach appears to be on very weak ground. The shortcoming of such an approach is reinforced by Heidegger's claim regarding the uniqueness of the *Seinsfrage.* If the question of being were on a continuum with other metaphysical questions then an approach to the later Heidegger without reference to the question of being would not be problematic. This however is not the case. Squarely addressing the question about the meaning of being as a question affords the benefit of establishing a solid framework in terms of which a response to the question might be evaluated. In short it will become clear how clarity concerning the *Seinsfrage*, to use a Heideggerian metaphor, will "clear a pathway" in which the meaning of being in the early period unfolds.

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disguised post-modernist concept of the sacred, in which God is replaced by being. For an excellent critique of this work see Taylor Carman, "On Making Sense (and Nonsense) of Heidegger," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (November 2001) pp. 561-572.

(b) Reevaluating the meaning/nature distinction

In chapter one we saw how the attempt to clarify the *Seinsfrage* in terms of the meaning/nature distinction, while having some value, also has the potential of leading us dangerously astray. This insight might be developed to further advantage. Accordingly we shall now see if there is a way to obtain the value that this distinction offers while avoiding its pitfalls.

Upon reflection it should be clear that the problematic aspect of meaning/nature has to do with the inadequacy of this distinction, to do justice to uniqueness and irreducibility of being. Heidegger is quite aware of this fact and in the early part of Being and Time adopts the hermeneutic method as an alternative approach.[111] The hermeneutic method is characterized by a repudiation of the adequacy of the methodology of empirical science to deal with issues in the *Geisteswissenschaften* or human sciences. Practitioners of the hermeneutic method argue that in the 'human sciences' the observing subject is part of the horizon which is being observed. Accordingly the 'hermeneutic circle' replaces the paradigm of pure scientific objectivity in hermeneutic interpretation.[112] Undoubtedly the hermeneutic method is at work in Being and Time.   Nevertheless there is an essential openness to the hermeneutic approach which would seem to invite and require further insight in order to come to fruition. In this regard the hermeneutic method is often described as a project whose goal it is to 'find' a method which is adequate to issues in

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[111] Heidegger, Being and Time, op cit, p. 62.
[112] Cf. Richard E. Palmer, Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Heidegger (Chicago: Northwestern University Press,1969) p.55.

the human sciences.[113] Strictly speaking hermeneutics should be described as an

approach rather than a method because it does not carry with it the specific *a priori*

directions for understanding which we associate with methodology. In terms of

nature/meaning the hermeneutic approach can indeed tell us that there is something amiss

in this distinction. One schooled in the hermeneutic approach is uneasy with this

distinction because it rests squarely on the paradigm of empirical science even while in

the dichotomy the priority is placed on meaning rather than nature. The hermeneutic

approach can also tell us that neither meaning nor nature can be an absolute starting

point, and if there is any value in the dichotomy each aspect must be understood in terms

of the other. It does not however   provide us with any further direction on how this

understanding is to be achieved. The hermeneutic approach then cannot be taken as a

self-sufficient guide to the easy resolution of complex issues in Heidegger. The epistemic

starting point in the repudiation of the adequacy of science and even of metaphysics in

the realm of the human spirit makes for a kind of methodological openness which solicits

illumination from sources outside the hermeneutic approach itself.

(III) <u>INQUIRING INTO THE   BASIS OF THE SEINSFRAGE</u>

 (a) *The Ontological difference*

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[113] Hans-Georg Gadamer, perhaps the world's foremost proponent of the hermeneutic approach, argues that not only the paradigm of empirical science, but also that of Western metaphysics is inadequate for understanding in the human sciences. This position helps to support our point regarding the methodological openness of hermeneutics to the point of making for a powerful convergence at some points between hermeneutics and Derrida's project of deconstruction. Cf., Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," in <u>Dialogue and Deconstuction: The Gadamer- Derrida Encounter</u>, ed. by Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press) pp. 22-51.

Before we seek out sources of inspiration which might lie outside of Heidegger we must first be certain that we have utilized Heideggerian concepts to maximum advantage. We must therefore ask: is there a seminal concept in Heidegger which might provide a framework of understanding in terms of which we can locate the *Seinsfrage*? The temptation is to answer in the negative, since time and again we are told that the question about the meaning of being is the most fundamental of all questions.[114] Nevertheless this does not preclude the possibility that this question has presuppositions. To elaborate on this with an example: Heidegger traces ontological understanding, as every historian of philosophy does, to the early Greeks.[115] Why, we might ask, did the sublime thought of being arise, take hold and flourish at that particular place and time? Historians of philosophy and culture have long since attempted to address this question by identifying the constituents of the shift from a mythological to a philosophical mode of thinking, that is a change in the underlying convictions concerning the basic intelligibility of what is real.[116] But here we are asking about the ontological presuppositions of the thought of being. Heidegger's thinking is nothing if not ontological. Whether he is treating of ethics, or science, or epistemology his methodology involves an attempt to "lay bare" or to expose the ontological basis in terms of which inherited modes of thinking arise. It is all too natural then that given the question of being Heidegger would attempt to find

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[114] Cf., Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, tr. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) p.2. Although in this work the *Seinsfrage* is posed as Leibniz's question: "Why are there beings rather than nothing?" As Richardson observes, the true essence of this question for Heidegger is not metaphysical, it is not a question about the ultimate origin of being, but one about the disclosure or unconcealment of being. "For Heidegger the question means: how is it possible that beings (independently of 'where' they might have come from, or 'who'or 'what' 'caused' them, as metaphysics understands these terms) can be manifest as beings". William J. Richardson, Through Phenomenology to Thought (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963) p. 14.

[115] Cf., Heidegger, "The Anaximander Fragment" in Early Greek Thinking, tr. by David Farell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975) p.27.

[116] Cf., H. and H.A Frankfort, John Wilson and Thorkild Jacobson , Before Philosophy: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East (Middlesex England: Penguin Books, 1967) pp. 252-262.

ontological presuppositions for it. The inquiry might seem to be redundant but is not actually so. We have already identified one ontological presupposition of any kind of explicit thinking about being to be in the fact that *Dasein* is a being for whom being is at stake. Nevertheless *Dasein's* being is no less at stake when a mythological mode of thinking dominates than in Pre-Socratic philosophical thought. What then are the ontological presuppositions of the sublime thought of being? To address this let us conceive of being in the widest possible sense. Whether being is conceived as a ground or as nature, or as God, or even as Heidegger holds it was actually conceived by the Pre-Socratics[117] in fundamental reciprocity with beings, in all of these the concept which is being aimed for, 'being as such,' inherently involves the exercise of distinguishing being from what it is *not*, or from what does *not* immediately show itself, or what is *not* immediately obvious or apparent. We can imagine this type of awareness dawning on the shores of ancient Greece, shattering the unity of experience as the concepts of being as such, and of not-being as well as deep questions concerning their relation, were first formed. Heidegger calls this awareness "the ontological difference" and describes it as "the difference between being (*Sein)* and beings (*Seindes*)."[118] It is clear that the concept of ontological difference has enormous significance for Heidegger. It is cited as the basis of all genuine philosophical thinking.[119] At times it is introduced as a preamble to the

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[117] The relationship between Heidegger and the Pre-Socratics is a complex matter. At the risk of oversimplification it might be said that Heidegger's fascination with the thought of the Pre-Socratics has to do with the way in which these precursors of Western philosophy wrestled with the meaning of being, and the difference between being and beings, before an understanding of being was hardened into a doctrine. Cf. "Anaximander's Saying," in Off the Beaten Track (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 257-259. Heidegger notes that the distinction between being and becoming, so important to subsequent philosophy, is nowhere to be found in Anaxamander. Rather being and becoming are both aspects of the unconcealment of being.

[118] Cf. Heidegger, The Basic Problems of Phenomenology, trans. by Albert Hofstadter(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988) p. 17

[119] Ibid.

being question,[120] the clear implication being that the *Seinsfrage* itself is a response to an awareness of the ontological difference.   At other times the claim becomes much more direct and explicit.[121] In the later period the importance of the ontological difference becomes transformed into an imperative.[122] Raising anew the being question will require above all an attempt to rethink the ontological difference.

The above indicates that the concept of ontological difference occupies a seminal place in Heidegger's project, nevertheless it remains problematic.   First, the fundamental characterization or definition of the ontological difference is still not entirely clear. At least in the early period, the "difference between being and beings" is the closest thing that we ever come to a definition. The reader is left to decipher this phrase, cryptic in its generality, as well as to understand its significance both for philosophical thinking generally and more specifically for the question of being. One commentator suggests that the ontological difference is an expression of the reflective ability of human consciousness, which in its purest expressions gives rise to philosophy, to an awareness of being as such and ultimately to the question concerning the meaning of being. [123]   This appears to be consistent with our discussion of ontological difference above, yet it still leaves much to be desired. At this point we are compelled to ask: if the ontological difference is simply equivalent to the reflective activity of human consciousness, how then is it unique? Without understanding how ontological difference is unique it is

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[120] Cf., Heidegger, <u>Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy</u> tr. by Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis:Indianna University Press) pp. 5-8.

[121] In support of this claim Richardson in <u>From Phenomenology to Thought</u> <u>op cit</u>., pp. 12-13 quotes from Heidegger's *Holzwege*(Frankfurt:Klostermann, 1950) p. 336 "Die Seinsvergessenheit ist die Vergessenheit des Unterschiedes des Seins zum Seienden" (The forgottenness of Being is the forgottenness of the *difference* between Being and beings).

[122] We will deal directly with this claim in Thesis III.

[123] Cf. Graham Harman, <u>Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenology to Thing</u>, (Illinois: Carus Publishing company, 2007) p. 46.

difficult to assess its significance for the question of being. As the awareness of being in

distinction from beings, ontological difference is significant in marking the beginning of,

and of understanding, the requisite features of philosophical thinking. As such it deserves

an honored place in introductory textbooks, but it is hard to see how this concept can

represent any thing like a paradigm for philosophical thinking. If it is a paradigm at all it

is one which is already present in philosophical thinking rather than an ideal which

guides thinking into new horizons.

    (b) *"Reading Heidegger backwards*"

 One possible strategy for clarifying the meaning and significance of the

ontological difference is to begin with how the concept is understood in the later period,

represented by such texts as "The Ontotheological Constitution of Metaphysics." We

could then take the understanding of the ontological difference as it is present in the later

period and read it back into the early Heidegger of Being and Time.   This strategy, first

introduced by Reiner Schürmann, of "reading Heidegger backwards" has real

hermeneutic plausibility.[124] It is based on the fact that the coherence and even the

identity of philosophical concepts are progressively developed by a thinker over time. A

mature concept taken from a later period can illuminate concepts contained in an earlier

work, even where the concept is not explicitly present in the earlier period at all. The

hermeneutic plausibility of this approach is greatly enhanced if we can show that the

fundamental identity of a concept found in an earlier period requires its mature form in

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[124] Cf., Lain Thomson, " On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Heidegger Backwards: White's
Time and Death," in *Inquiry* 50:1 (2007), pp. 103-120.

order to inhere. This is precisely the situation we are facing in Heidegger. We began

with the presence of ontological difference in the early period and found that it had the

features of an inchoate concept lacking an essential identity and form. We hope to show

that in the later period a recognizable characterization of ontological difference is

realized.   In the case of Heidegger, although the concept of ontological difference is

clearly present in the early period the fullest significance attached to the idea belongs to

the later. It is also significant that in the early Heidegger the "difference between being

and beings" is often introduced as a seminal concept for thinking without being actually

named as ontological difference.[125] This strongly suggests that the character of the

concept was only fully formed in the later period.   Moreover in the later period the

ontological difference is indeed thought as a paradigm for authentic philosophical

thought. In the later period it is essentially failure to adequately think the ontological

difference which gives rise to metaphysics and the neglect of the being question.[126] Here

the clear implication is that by holding up the ontological difference as a paradigm, by

adequately thinking the ontological difference, we gain entrance into the *Seinsfrage.*

(c) *The Meaning of ontological difference in the later Heidegger*

The question now becomes more pressing. How precisely does Heidegger

conceive of the ontological difference in the later period? Although full support will

have to wait until Thesis III, essentially in the later period Heidegger assigns for himself

the enterprise of thinking the ontological difference *as* difference (*Differenz alz*

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[125] Cf. Heidegger, The Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy, op cit., pp. 5-8.
[126] This is quite clear in the statement from *Holzwege*, a work from the later period quoted earlier.

Differenz). This is to say that the most essential feature of the ontological difference is difference, or negation. Upon reflection it should be clear that this is already implied in our attempt to understand the nature of ontological difference earlier. Earlier it was said that the attempt to conceive of being as such inherently involves an exercise of distinguishing being from what it is not. This requires that in the act of conceiving 'being as such,' what might initially be thought as a positive or affirmative act, negation essentially has priority. The claim that there are different degrees of awareness of ontological difference also becomes explicit in the later period as well.[127] By implication it follows that a more pure or paradigmatic form of ontological difference is one which more fully embodies, or is more thoroughly grounded in, negation. These claims are not only consistent with references to the ontological difference in the early Heidegger but also illuminate them in a new way. Earlier we referred to the ontological difference as disturbing to the unity of experience. This is crucial. For a non-philosophical mode of awareness experience is a plenum. Philosophical thinking interrupts this unity with the thought of difference: the difference between beings as they are actually experienced and known and being as that in terms of which experience is possible. Difference is also present in the form of not-being. To illustrate this we have only to think of a non-reflective mode of awareness, that of animal consciousness. It might be said that what separates reflective human awareness from unreflective animal consciousness is an awareness of the radical contingency of experience. Animal consciousness is once again a plenum. There is no awareness of the contingency of experience itself, of finitude, of the very possibility of not-being.

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[127] This is implied in the claim made in the later period that the ontological difference has not been adequately thought. We will deal with Heidegger's attempt to correct this deficiency in Thesis III.

The claim that the key to ontological difference is negation also fits quite coherently with what we know of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, specifically with the charge that metaphysics reifies being. When metaphysics thinks of being as an ultimate substratum the ontological difference as the difference between being and beings is indeed operative but not in a pure or paradigmatic form. On the one hand, where being is seen as an ultimate substratum we can observe the ontological difference at work as the difference between being as substratum and beings which are understood as the phenomenal basis of this substratum. On the other hand, an ultimate substratum is clearly a paradigm which is taken from the realm of beings. Therein being is understood in terms of beings and the ontological difference is lost. There would seem then to be a paradox at the very center of metaphysics which derives from the tension between thinking the difference between being and beings, and preserving this difference in an essential form. The project of thinking the difference in order to come to closure would seem to require preservation of the difference in an essential form. Nevertheless once this is achieved being has been reified and the sharp edge of ontological difference has been lost. Is there a way to overcome the paradox of metaphysics? Heidegger's thinking in the later period indeed suggests an affirmative answer.

(d) *Overcoming the paradox of metaphysics*

A mode of thinking which addresses the paradox of metaphysics would seem to require, to employ a very seminal word from Derrida, an "elliptical" approach.[128] To adequately address the paradox of metaphysics above all requires a methodology which

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[128] Derrida will often use this word to describe his own approach in the context of a discussion of the deconstruction of metaphysics. Cf., Jacques Derrida, Positions, tr. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) p. 14.

has fully come to terms with and is adequate to the fact that being has a unique status in our experience. Being is simply not like any object of our experience. No straightforward approach to understanding the meaning of being can do justice to this insight. Contrariwise, to fully come to terms with this insight already brings into focus what the nature of this elliptical approach must be like. The fact that being is *not* like any object of our experience tells us that this approach must be negative. The ontological difference must be thought in such a way that the aspect of negation is fully expressed and embodied; thus the difference between being and beings does not easily collapse into the identity of being with some paradigm taken from the realm of beings. Operating with a cataphatic mode of thinking such a collapse is inevitable since, as we have seen, in a cataphatic mode of thinking negation acts as a mere corrective to affirmation. In the dominant traditions of Western philosophy, both the method and the results which are to be achieved through the application of method, affirmation is primary. The goal of philosophical thinking is to demonstrate or establish some aspect of what is real, be that reality ethical, ontological, religious, logical or political. In this process negation plays a subordinate role to affirmation.   Negation tells us what is not true, correct or sound. It is left to affirmation to bring the process of thinking to closure by forming conclusions about the nature of what is real.   It is clear that such a mode of thinking can never adequately address the paradox of metaphysics.   What is required is a mode of thinking which abides in the realm of difference even while difference is preserved in the form of a metaphysical concept.

    (e) *Problematic aspects of the above*

This line of thinking has promise but by no means provides us with smooth entry into the *Seinsfrage,* or an understanding of being which results from raising the *Seinsfrage*. First,   the application of this approach requires that we squarely address the question: what does it mean for thinking to 'abide in the realm of difference' while thinking the difference between being and beings? Would not such a mode of thinking collapse into negation in the same way as a cataphatic mode collapses into affirmation? What type of understanding of being would a thinking which 'abides in difference' produce? Fortunately, despite the above difficulties, a strategy begins to emerge. If the center and ground of ontological difference is negation, if we could observe the working out of the ontological difference in a form of thinking in which difference is fully expressed or embodied this could provide us with a paradigm for how it is thought in Heidegger. With this goal in mind we are now able to state Thesis I.

(IV)   <u>STATEMENT OF THESIS I</u>

The dialectic of negation as it is contained in the work of Dionysius and Eckhart expresses and embodies a paradigmatic form of what Heidegger calls the ontological difference. The implicit presence of ontological difference in the negative theology of Dionysius and Eckhart, particularly as it functions in the attempt to rethink the concept of ground, helps us to understand the nature and significance of the ontological difference in Heidegger, to clarify the meaning of the Seinsfrage, and to illuminate the

understanding of being which emerges in the early Heidegger in response to the

Seinsfrage.

(V)   <u>DEFENSE OF THESIS I</u>

(Va) *Summary of relevant points concerning Dionysius and Eckhart covered in*
previous sections.

<u>THE DIALECTIC OF NEGATION IN DIONYSIUS AND ECKHART</u>

(I)Dionysius

(a)   In Dionysius the perspective of negation is first introduced in response to the

darkness and incomprehensibility of the divine being. (Chapter Two A, III:a)

Hence the <u>Mystical Theology</u> explicitly calls for an abandonment of anything

either perceptible or understandable. Based on these facts alone we might fully

expect this text to follow a path of pure silence, but this is not the case. Instead

the darkness and incomprehensibility of God are data for a thinking response to

divine knowing. Hence immediately dialectic is established between the

negative, apophatic (incomprehensibility and darkness) modes and the

affirmative, cataphatic (imperative to know) aspects (Chapter Two A, III:a).

(b)   Dionysius's path represents a kind of thinking which never comes to rest

(Chapter Two A, III:c-d). For this reason the relation between affirmation and

negation is truly dialectical. The incomprehensibility of God inspires a negative approach to divine knowing. Yet this negative approach is also deemed to be inadequate. Hence it again gives rise to affirmation, but one which is now permeated by negativity (2A, III:e). There is no point at which the play between negation and affirmation reaches closure. This fact will have powerful implications for the age-old issue of knowing or proving God.

(c)   The dialectic which is the basis for any thinking about God represents a new concept of ground, one which stands in marked contrast to the theory of ground as it is expressed and embodied in the major traditions of Western philosophy, where ground is understood after the metaphor of a rock or a foundation. For Dionysius the dialectic is the basis of divine knowing because it is the ever-present concomitant, the ubiquitous context in which divine knowing takes place. Nevertheless as permeated with negativity this context is not a solid foundation. If the dialectic is the basis of what we can know about God it is also the basis of unknowing, of uncertainty, of darkness and mystery. (Chapter Two A, III:h. This new concept of ground as both a foundation and an abyss can only be indicated with language which is oxymoronic, e.g., "luminous darkness."

(d)   There is an essentially iconoclastic thrust to Dionysius's investigations, one which is expressed in terms of the dialectic of negation and directed against all conceptual idols. Every positive image of God is refused, negated and destroyed, while the divine reality which transcends all images is affirmed (Chapter Two A, III:g). Since the God which is affirmed is not a being but is beyond anything which we can know or name as being (*hyperousios*), this

affirmation in no wise can represent a point of closure. This fact makes
Dionysius's vision far removed both from all forms of skepticism and from the
modern attempt to establish or prove the existence of God.

(II) Meister Eckhart

Eckhart's dialectical method is expressed in terms of finite and infinite, or
creation and God. Because we can draw on our summary of Eckhart from Thesis I
we can be brief.

(a) Eckhart's critique of religion leads to a critique of God, and to the untenability of
the concept of God as the highest and most perfect being. (Chapter Two B, IV: a
and b).

(b) Eckhart's attempt to rethink God leads him to develop a purely relational ontology
where the poles of human being and God have no substantial or permanent
identity; rather each is defined from out of the other. (Chapter Two B, IV:d).

(c) Eckhart's relational ontology, an ontology which is fully dialectical, where at no
points are the poles of human being and God known as autonomous or substantial
centers of identity, contains a powerful critique of both substance ontology and
representationalism. (Chapter Four, V:e)

(d) The name of the dynamic reciprocity between finite and infinite, creation and
God, human being and God, is Godhead. Godhead represents a basis for any

authentic or fundamental thinking about divine or human reality. (Chapter Two B, IV: c and d)

(e) Although Godhead represents a basis for thinking, it stands in marked contrast to the concept of ground as it is expressed and embodied in the major traditions of Western philosophy. If Godhead is the basis for knowing, it is also the basis of unknowing, of darkness, mystery and incomprehensibility; hence once again the only language which seems adequate to describe such a state of affairs is oxymoronic. (Chapter Four, V:I)

(f) As is the case with Dionysius, there is also a deeply iconoclastic thrust to Eckhart's thinking expressed in terms of the dialectic of negation.

(V-b) *The ontological difference in negative theology*

Clearly in the texts of Dionysius and Eckhart which we have examined an attempt is made to express and embody difference, but can it be accurately stated that the ontological difference is present in these texts, or more strongly that in a fundamental sense these texts involve an attempt to think the ontological difference? Based both on what we know about the texts of Dionysius and Eckhart, as well as about the ontological difference itself, a quite plausible claim can be made to this effect. We begin with the fact that the ontological difference is already present in the traditional approach to God represented by St. Thomas's Five Ways.[129]   To conceive

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[129] John Caputo supports this explicitly in claiming that St. Thomas's doctrine of God as pure *esse* in distinction to *ens* has already invoked an incipient form of the ontological difference. Caputo goes on to argue that the more mature form expressed by Heidegger in "The Ontotheological Constitution of

of God as the highest being and the basis of all being requires a conceptual clarity concerning the difference between created being and God as the basis of creation. At the center of this difference is negation. Only when all claims regarding the autonomy of finite being are negated can there emerge an understanding of God as the infinite ground of what is finite. It is clear that the Thomistic doctrine of God attempts to maintain, in Heideggerian language, an 'open space' between God as pure being and finite or created beings, hence it contains at least an incipient form of the ontological difference. Nevertheless, to the extent that God is conceived as one particular being, albeit as the highest and the most perfect being, the highest potentiality contained in the Thomistic concept of God remains unrealized. In Thesis II we will provide further support for the claim that the Eckhartian doctrine regarding the necessity of moving beyond God to Godhead involves an attempt to address the philosophical inadequacies of the Thomistic concept of God. Specifically these limitations have to do with the inadequacy of the concept of God as ground. Here we are at the very center of the ontological difference. Because classical Thomism finally collapses the 'open space' between God as the ontological basis of all being and created beings, it cannot serve as an adequate ground for created being. If an incipient form of the ontological difference is already present in Thomism, if negative theology involves an attempt to bring the logic of Thomism to conclusion by rethinking the concept of God as ground, then it is apparent that a more paradigmatic form of ontological difference is present in negative theology.

Metaphysics" remains unthought by Thomas. Cf. John Caputo, <u>Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay in Overcoming Metaphysics</u> (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982) p. 148.

Let us now summarize how God is thought in negative theology. As in classical Thomism we begin with an act of negation. God is *not* any aspect of the natural process. Nevertheless we have seen that for Dionysius and Eckhart this 'first act' of negation is by no means sufficient. For Eckhart an affirmation of the authentic ground of what is finite requires a transcendence of God into Godhead (this chapter,Va, II:a, d, e and f).   For Dionysius the authentic ground of what is finite can only reside in God who is beyond being (*hyperousios*) (this chapter, Va I:d).   Thus God and being must be surpassed. Essentially then the ontological difference is thought in Dionysius and Eckhart through a series of sustained and systematic negations such as occur in the exercise of iconoclasm. These negations are systematic in the sense that the exercise of iconoclasm, in order to be successful, requires above all rigorous consistency. Each and every objective representation of God must be negated. Nevertheless the method of Dionysius and Eckhart is not purely negative. Their method remains dialectical. In the exercise of iconoclasm, while every objective image of God is negated the God which transcends objective representation is affirmed, even if this affirmation is itself permeated by negativity (this chapter, Va, I:d) and Va, II:f).

It is important to reflect on where the dialectic of negation in Dionysius and Eckhart has led us. Unlike the results of binary, linear thinking the results of dialectical thinking are difficult to characterize. On the one hand thinking in Dionysius leads us to God beyond being, or in Eckhart to Godhead; on the other hand these are not resting places or fixed destinations. Each is characterized by relentless motion (this chapter, Va, I:b and Va, II:c). Attempts to describe Godhead or God

beyond being in binary terms consistently fail, inevitably giving rise to the language

of paradox (Va, I:b and Va, II:a and b)

   (V-c) *Seinsfrage clarified*

   If the key to understanding the *Seinsfrage* lies in the ontological difference, then

negation lies at its very center (this chapter, III, a-c). Following the paradigm of

negative theology, negation is given in a dialectical relation to affirmation (this

chapter, Va, I:b and Va, II:c). Entry into the question of the meaning of being thus

begins with an act of negation. This is not a simple act of negation, as it is present in a

cataphatic mode of thinking, but following the Dionysian and Eckhartian paradigm it

is a series of systematic negations such as is operative in the exercise of iconoclasm.

We have seen how the series of negations required by the exercise of iconoclasm

already contains an affirmation at its very center. Iconoclasm would not be what it is

apart from the drive to preserve the God- concept from idolatry.   This paradigm is

repeated quite clearly in Heidegger. It is the imperative to preserve the ancient and

venerable question of being inviolate from reification and triviality which gives rise

to the series of negations.   Above all it is necessary to understand that being is not an

entity or substance, or a universal concept.   A response to the question of being

cannot involve positing the nature of being according to a theory and then elaborating

its essential features. From the beginning this affirmative method proves impotent to

understand the nature of Heidegger's project in raising anew the question of being.

Heidegger tells us that the question of being must be raised anew because it has been

neglected, trivialized, and forgotten. Operating in the affirmative, cataphatic mode of thinking the conclusion is unavoidable that the problem of traditional metaphysics is essentially one of lack of focus. Philosophy has pursued political, ethical and logical and epistemological issues while neglecting those of ontology. Doubtless this aspect is present in Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, but it is hardly adequate. Moreover, following this line of interpretation makes it impossible to understand two aspects of the *Seinsfrage*: (1) The question of being has been the driving issue in philosophy even in its neglect.[130] (2) The question of being has been neglected, trivialized and forgotten even where issues of being are thought about most explicitly, namely in metaphysics.

We saw in chapter one how standard commentators, recognizing that the 'nature of being' alternative leads to an impasse, immediately seize upon the 'meaning of being' as the key to the *Seinsfrage.*   Doesn't Heidegger explicitly tell us that the *Seinsfrage* is a question about the meaning of being? What could be plainer? Why should this be made into a problem? We saw in Chapter One that this is in fact problematic, since in our inherited vocabulary meaning is contrasted with nature. Indeed we saw how commentators accept this implication explicitly and proceed to articulate the *Seinsfrage* as an issue concerning the meaning of being, where meaning is opposed to nature. The problem with this is that it reduces any intelligibility which might be ascertained about the meaning of being to solipsism.   Instead of following the

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[130] Much evidence can be adduced in support of this claim. For example, the 'nature of truth' has not been thought to be an ontological problem. Since the time of Aristotle, truth has simply been defined as an ad-equation between intellect and thing. Attempting to 'lay bare' the ontological foundation of truth leads Heidegger to the conclusion that the issue of truth and that of being are one and the same. The clear implication of this is that to the extent that philosophy is driven by the quest for truth, the issue of being lies at the core of philosophical thinking. Cf. The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic, trans. by Michael Heim(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992) pp.128-138. The corresponding sections of Being and Time are pp. 256-273.

meaning/nature distinction, once the first act, or rather series of negations is performed, following the paradigm of negative theology, negation immediately gives rise to affirmation (this chapter Va, I:b). This affirmation becomes the meaning of being, or rather the context in which the meaning of being is thought. This meaning is not the other side of nature, the simple opposite of nature, but rather its dialectical opposite. As such the meaning of being which arises in response to the first act of negation is only given in and through nature. When Heidegger talks about the meaning of being, this is not phenomenological meaning given on the side of consciousness but meaning which only emerges in the actuality and specificity of *Dasein's* involvement with being. The fact that meaning is the dialectical opposite of nature also tells us that the meaning which emerges from the inquiry is permeated by negativity. Here however we have gotten ahead of ourselves. We must take a step back and ask: how does the meaning of being emerge for the early Heidegger?

(V-d)   *The meaning of being in <u>Being and Time</u>*

In <u>Being and Time</u> being is given in various existentials--for example being-in-the world, (*in-der-Welt- Sein*) being-towards death (*Sein-zum -To*de), worldhood (*Weltlichkeit*) and being-with (*mitsein*) which are uncovered in the analytic of *Dasein*. The most primordial of the existentials is care (*Sorge),* whose basis is temporality. A case can be made to the effect that the existentials are all ways in which being is at stake for *Dasein.* This derives from the fact that at least the ontical priory of being which launched the analytic of *Dasein* has to do with the fact that

Dasein is not merely a being who understands being but one for whom being is always at stake. What does it mean to say that *Dasein's* being is at stake? This phrase replete with meaning suggests a fate which is continuously 'weighed in the balance.' *Dasein's* fate is never decided but always to be determined. Being at issue inevitably involves the possibility of a loss. If a person's health is at issue it might improve, or it might worsen. Being is never given for *Dasein* as a static presence but as a dynamic process which is always underway. *Sorge* is the most primordial existential because it represents the ecstatic character of Dasein's projection toward being which is embodied in each of the others. These existentials describe not substantial structures but possibilities of *Dasein's* being. The possibility which is most determinative and which is most uniquely Dasein's own is being-towards-death.

It is impossible to understand Being and Time without developing a sense of how for the early Heidegger being is permeated by negativity. This becomes fully explicit in such phenomena as being-towards-death and anxiety (Angst).[131] Anxiety is disclosive of *Dasein's* being-in-the-world in its pure facticity as well as its fallenness (*Verfallen*) and thrownness (*Geworfenheit*).

In section 19 of Being and Time Heidegger took direct aim at the substance ontology which resides implicitly at the basis of Western ontology. Heidegger argues there that the ontological identity of things is not to be found in things at all, but in how they function in a relational context. Accordingly entities we encounter in our everyday dealings are "equipment" (*das Zeug*), "ready-to-hand" (*zuhandenheit*). The hammer, a piece of equipment "ready to hand," is employed "in order-to" (*etwas um-*

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[131] Heidegger, Being and Time, section 40 page 228-235.

zu) hold something fast, towards building a house. The "towards which" (*das wozu*)

aims toward the "for-the-sake-of which"(*warum-willen*). A house is built for the sake

of securing a place for *Dasein* to dwell. The upshot of the analysis is that being is not

something "present at hand." The "presence-at-hand" of things, what some

commentators translate as "occurrence," is a founded mode. Its deeper ontological

basis is the concernful absorption of *Dasein* in the referential nexus of equipment.

The real ontological identity of things cannot be established by the exercise of

isolating and identifying substances.

The phenomenon of anxiety considerably deepens and transforms the

understanding of being contained in the earlier analysis. We are told that anxiety

discloses being-in-the-world as well as fallenness and thrownness. These are

essentially aspects of being-in-the-world. *Dasein* is anxious for its being-in-the-

world. In the state of anxiety it is as if the referential nexus, the for-the-sake-of-

which is *Dasein* suddenly loses its significance. "Here the totality of involvements of

the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand discovered within-the-world is, as such of

no consequence; it collapses into itself."[132]   Each of these are fundamental

expressions of finitude. Here it is critical to understand how these differ from the

obvious fact of human finitude which must be expressed in any accurate and

reflective philosophy of human existence. The phenomenon of anxiety offers us a

powerful and practical refutation of the 'worldless' subject by providing an insightful

glance into the unique placement of human being in relation to being. Anxiety "lights

up" or illuminates the dispersion of *Dasein* into multiple ways of being-in-the-world.

Through the lens of anxiety the world appears not as a modern or medieval cosmos,

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[132] Ibid., p. 231.

an objective arena into which we step, but the realm which opens from within the concern of human *Dasein.* This is in effect Heidegger's doctrine of disclosure. World is not juxtaposed beside *Dasein's* being but disclosed in and through *Dasein.*

It should be clear how the insights above make a traditional theory of being impossible. Nevertheless the phenomenon of anxiety provides us with a fundamental insight into the meaning of being. Through the mood of anxiety *Dasein's* being-in-the-world is experienced and known in a direct and intuitive manner. This is likewise the case with thrownness. *Dasein* is thrown into the world not as a determinate object into an objectively defined context, but thrown in the sense of dispersed or scattered into multiple ways of involvement with the world.   Thrownness then is connected to the complex web of associations which make up the referential nexus whose ultimate end is the "for-the-sake-of- which" of human *Dasein.* Here we must remember that this complex web of associations is historical or rather temporal, owing to the fact that they are encompassed by the most primordial existential which is *Sorge*. The roots of *Dasein's* thrownness then extend into the past and project into the future. Temporality however is ecstatic.[133] This means that correctly understood *Dasein's* thrownness also projects into a past from out of the future.   In this light Heidegger's doctrine of thrownness has little to do with subjective psychological states. It is an attempt to describe the meaning of being, albeit through insights which invalidate an objective theory of being. Throwness reveals that, precisely because of the way in which *Dasein* is involved in being, the meaning of being can never be given as a self-illuminating plenum. The 'riddle of being' can never be definitively solved in the manner of a puzzle.

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[133] Ibid., p. 377.

We should reflect for a moment on this analogy. A puzzle is defined by the paradigm of a complex objective problem. In solving a puzzle the player aims toward the moment of insight in which it is clear how all of the pieces fit together in the whole. If being is a puzzle, *Dasein* is an aspect of the puzzle itself. Moreover human *Dasein* is connected to other aspects in limitless and inextricable ways. A vision of how all of the pieces fit together in a whole becomes ontologically quite impossible. There is then something opaque, a darkness and void, an incomprehensibility which is at the center of anything we can know or name as being. For this reason Heidegger will often refer to being as "the mystery." Here we should not fail to note how this paradigm contrasts with that of the tradition. In traditional understanding the aspects of finitude, of mystery, of negativity and void appear as features of finite being which require illumination from a ground. For Heidegger, by contrast, anything we can know or name as being appears as permeated with aspects of negativity.

The powerful influence exerted by Kierkegaard on Heidegger's doctrine of anxiety is well known.[134] Kierkegaard's doctrine of anxiety is in turn significant because of the way in which anxiety is thematized as an expression of human finitude, a finitude which resides at the center of human existence and is constitutive of our identity. It is therefore instructive to ask: How is Heidegger's perspective on anxiety unique? Briefly expressed, in Kierkegaard the finitude of human existence which is reflected in the experience of anxiety is thematized against a background which is infinite, an infinite which is realized in the depths of human subjectivity. In Heidegger the

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[134] Cf. Mark A. Tietien, "Being-Anxious for Nothing: Heidegger and Kierkegaard on Anxiety," in *Dialogues: Journal of Phi Sigma Jav* (Vol. no. 47, April 2005, no. 2-3, pp. 67-78.

background of the infinite over and against what is finite disappears. One can say that in Heidegger finitude has become radicalized[135].

Is negativity and finitude then the last word about being in the early Heidegger? Following the lead of many commentators, a reader is easily led in this direction. Nevertheless to answer in the affirmative would be to miss something essential in Heidegger. What this answer misses is that despite the collapse of the finite-infinite, founded-foundational, becoming-being, grounded-ground distinction there is much more to Heidegger's understanding of being than that of an original plenum which is now permeated with negativity. This 'more' is essentially a sense of the meaning of being which transcends or rather is given in and through negativity. Once again this follows the Eckhartian and Dionysian paradigm. Thinking can no more come to rest in negation than it can in affirmation. The relation between affirmation and negation is always fully dialectical. We will comment on this latest aspect in terms of a summary of previous elements. Entry into the *Seinsfrage* required a series of systematic negations such as are operative in the exercise of iconoclasm. In and through these negations the 'meaning of being' was affirmed as a 'transcendent' ideal. The meaning which emerges is itself permeated by negation. Full adherence to the dialectical method requires that this negation cannot be the last word about being but is given in a dialectical relation to affirmation. Indeed this is the case in Heidegger. The radicalization of finitude, the darkness and void which is at the center of being, represents nevertheless a genuine disclosure of being. Once again negation gives rise to affirmation, or rather in and through negation affirmation arises. The opening toward being which arises from the center of negation and void is found at

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[135] I am indebited to Reiner Schürmann for this insight.

many points, most notably in Heidegger's understanding of truth. The permeation of truth with untruth immediately stands out as the most significant way in which Heidegger's understanding of truth contrasts with that of the tradition.[136] But taken as a 'last word' it is sorely inadequate. Truth is famously defined as "unconcealment"[137] (*alētheia*). Yet this taken alone is also inadequate. Understanding Heidegger's theory of truth requires that there be a dialectical relation between the negative aspects represented by untruth and hiddenness and the affirmative aspects represented by disclosure. Disclosure which is the essence of truth is simultaneously a concealment of the vast and mysterious background out of which truth arises. Concealment of this vast background is the ontological basis which makes disclosure possible. Truth only arises out of unconcealment. Heidegger's understanding of truth frustrates any attempt to see concealment and unconcealment as simply binary opposites. Moreover the nature of truth in Heidegger is inherently connected to his understanding of the meaning of being. The doctrine of truth is essentially an attempt to "lay bare" the ontological horizon out of which truth arises. Earlier we remarked on the permeation of being with negativity exhibited in the phenomenon of anxiety. While this is an essential ingredient in understanding the meaning of being, at this point it should be clear how this is inadequate as a final word about being. If there is a final word about being in <u>Being and Time</u> it is that being is unconcealment.

(V-e) *The Uniqueness of Heidegger's perspective*

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[136] Cf. Werner Marx, <u>Heidegger and the Tradition</u> (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971) pp. 248-256. Marx views this fact from a very unfavorable perspective which nevertheless serves to highlight the uniqueness of Heidegger's doctrine of truth in relation to the tradition.
[137] Ibid., p. 256-273.

Understanding the *Seinsfrage* as grounded in negation provides us insight into the limitations of traditional metaphysics as well as into how Heidegger's perspective is unique. Briefly expressed, the negative ground of the *Seinsfrage* ultimately frees our approach to being from conceptual fabrications so that the meaning of being can emerge in its essential form. Once again we have seen the paradigm for this in negative theology; the negative turn frees the concept of God from utilitarian calculation. In a similar way the perspective of negation frees thinking from solipsism in two forms: (1) The solipsism of traditional metaphysics purports to understand being in an objective manner. We have seen how this betrays the character of being as well as the unique situatedness of human beings in relation to being. Traditional metaphysics views being through the *a priori* requirements of human systematic understanding. (2) The Phenomenological solipsism reduces being to what is presented to consciousness.

In distinction from these Heidegger's perspective is unique. Paradoxically this perspective can embody the intention of traditional metaphysics to comprehend the nature of being without succumbing to the solipsism which is implied in making being into an entity. The negative turn avoids this pitfall by rejecting from the start the point of departure of cataphatic thinking, which is in the isomorphic identity between thinking and being. Renunciation of the ideal of total intelligibility creates a context for the affirmation of being in its concreteness and specificity. A response to the question about the meaning of being includes being as it is actually disclosed to *Dasein.* Its starting point is with *Dasein* who already dwells in being. Likewise the negative ground of the *Seinsfrage* also overcomes phenomenological solipsism. In effect the meaning of being

includes the 'nature of being' which is bracketed by the phenomenological suspension of the natural standpoint.

Chapter four- The Critique of Ontotheology

(I)   <u>THE PROBLEM OF TEXT SELECTION</u>

(a) The value of <u>The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics</u> for our

project.

 Our route into the later Heidegger will be through the text of <u>The Onto-Theo-</u>

<u>Logical Constitution of Metaphysics</u> (henceforth referred to as <u>OM </u>), which forms the

conclusion to a lecture course in Hegel given during the winter semester of 1956-1957.

Since there are many texts which might represent the later Heidegger to choose from,

why select this particular text? The answer has to do with both the richness and

complexity of <u>OM </u> and the manner in which its central themes converge with

fundamental insights of negative theology. In this text a number of characteristic themes

of the later Heidegger are present in a very explicit and powerful form. Contained there is

a critique of metaphysics, a critique of our inherited God concepts, an attempt to address

the question of being, an awareness of the critical importance of negation, and the

centrality of the ontological difference. Moreover, as we will discover, these themes are

connected in ways that illuminate the intrinsic identity of each concept as well as

Heidegger's project as a whole. Of special significance will be the critique of

ontotheology. Our strategy has been to illuminate Heidegger's understanding of being

through the work of Meister Eckhart and Dionysius. These however are essentially

theological thinkers. Their project fundamentally involves an attempt to think about the

nature and limits of our human knowledge of God. Heidegger's project involves an

attempt to think about the meaning of being. How then can the theological projects of

Dionysius and Eckhart illuminate the ontological project of Heidegger? They can do so

based on the ontological priority of the being question. We explored this theme in some

detail in Chapter One. There we discovered that since the being question is ontologically

prior to all other questions, a study such as theology already brings with it

presuppositions concerning the meaning of being. We saw how the ontological priority

of the *Seinsfrage* was meant to reinforce the imperative of raising anew the question

concerning the meaning of being. However the ontological priority of the *Seinsfrage* also

indicates that since an understanding of being is already present when theological issues

are thought about, the projects of Dionysius and Eckhart have an ontological basis. This

leaves open the possibility that when this ontological basis is made explicit and explored

it might illuminate the ontological project of Heidegger. In carrying out this endeavor we

will discover that negative theology's critique of God involves a critique of the

ontological presuppositions of our inherited God-concepts, an attempt to replace an

inadequate ontology with one which is more adequate and cogent. Our aim is to see how

negative theology's critique of God can illuminate Heidegger's critique of ontotheology,

his critique of metaphysics, and finally the attempt to address the question about the

meaning of being. For these reasons the text of <u>OM</u>, when employed in conjunction with

the texts of negative theology, commends itself as a uniquely powerful tool for entry into

the work of the later Heidegger Accordingly we will regard this text as primary for

understanding the meaning of ontotheology and supplement it with other relevant texts as

required.

(II) <u>THREE MEANINGS OF ONTOTHEOLOGY IN HEIDEGGER</u>

The first question to address is: what precisely does Heidegger mean by the term ontotheology? [138] In the   text of <u>OM,</u> which contains Heidegger's fullest statement on ontotheology, the term has at least three essential meanings.

(a)*Ontotheology as a critique of our inherited God concepts*

The first meaning refers to a concept of God. Heidegger charges that in the Western tradition our fundamental understanding of what the concept God means, as embodied in our religious traditions and reflected in philosophical awareness, has been formed under massive influence from the enterprise of metaphysics. Our God concepts are thus ontotheological.   Accordingly the philosophical category of being becomes an inevitable concomitant of an understanding of God.   Once the fateful choice has been made to understand God in terms of the category of being, this enacts a progression which inevitably leads to God as *causa sui.* For this reason Heidegger will frequently simply identify the God of ontotheology with *causa sui.*   This can lead to genuine perplexity. What is it about *causa sui* which Heidegger finds so objectionable? The answer has nothing to do with *causa sui* in and of itself; *causa sui* is a consequence. The original mistake which results in *causa sui* is the apprehension of God in terms of the philosophical category of being.   Accordingly the philosophical category of being becomes an inevitable concomitant of an understanding of God.

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[138] The term ontotheology is a neologism which originates with Kant. Kant first coined the term to indicate a kind of pure *a priori* argument for the existence of God as exemplified by the ontological argument. See <u>Critique of Pure Reason</u> A 629.

The above raises many intriguing issues and problems, the most obvious of which is that the metaphysical influence upon theology described by Heidegger is not an original observation but a universally acknowledged fact. Nevertheless in the major traditions of Western theology this influence has not been seen as anything problematic. The common opinion of theologians at least since the time of Aquinas is that theology and philosophy can and must work together. Philosophy provides theology with a complex language and system of thought in which to express and articulate its basic concepts. From this perspective theological concepts which are essentially based on revelation, biblical traditions, sacred history and personal experience require a   fully formed conceptual vocabulary, and a mode of logical and systematic thought such as the language and system of philosophy in order to be fully realized and expressed.[139] One might argue that the paradigm for the expression of theological concepts in philosophical language was established not by Aquinas but by the author of the New Testament Gospel of John, where in the very first verse Jesus Christ is identified with the Greek *logos*. If ontotheology consists essentially in understanding God in terms of the philosophical category of being, then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the author of the gospel of John was the first ontotheologian.   These difficulties notwithstanding,   speaking of God as *causa sui* Heidegger says scornfully:

> This is the right name for the god of philosophy. Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he

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[139] Addressing the issue from a Thomistic perspective, Jacques Maritain claims the theoretical independence of theology from philosophy but admits that such a state of affairs is practically impossible. Interestingly enough Maritain credits the practical impossibility of a fully autonomous theology to the difficulties of speaking about and knowing God. An autonomous theology would continuously risk the danger of slipping into idolatry by speaking about God equivocally. Philosophy when seen from a theological perspective then essentially contributes an analogical aspect to speech and knowledge of God. Cf. Jacques Maritain , An Introduction to Philosophy, trans. by E.I. Watkin (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959) p. 97-99.

play music and dance before this god.[140]

.   How and why the God of ontotheology is problematic is then obviously something

that needs to be addressed.[141]   Nevertheless, a critique of ontotheology is essentially a

critique of God or at least a critique of our inherited God-concepts and in that sense it

might be inscribed in the history of such critiques, a history which began in the 19th

century and includes such figures as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. We must

nevertheless attempt to discern to what extent Heidegger's critique of God is unique.

(b*)   The critique of* o*ntotheology as a critique of metaphysics*

The second meaning of ontotheology has to do with metaphysics. According to

Heidegger Western metaphysics is ontotheological.   Here metaphysics is defined as an

enterprise which thinks of beings as such and being as a whole. "Metaphysics thinks of

the Being of beings both in the ground giving unity of what is most general, what is

indifferently valid everywhere, and also in the unity of all that accounts for the ground,

that is, of the All-Highest."[142] The first part of the sentence is not different from what

can be found in any philosophy textbook. It tells us that metaphysics thinks about the

general features of being in such a manner as to establish grounds. Here the essentialist

understanding which is at the center of metaphysics is itself a ground-giving enterprise.

Once the most essential features of being are known they will then be understood to form

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[140] Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," in Identity and Difference, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 72.
[141] Merold Westphal spends the first chapter of his book Overcoming Ontotheology (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) wrestling with the issue of precisely what constitutes ontotheology. This is more evidence that this is not something which is fully explicit in Heidegger and needs to be addressed.
[142]OM ., Ibid., p. 58.

the enduring basis of beings in various phenomenal manifestations. The second part of the sentence tells us why ontological understanding must inevitably transcend its own concepts and categories. It is as if once the metaphysics of grounding is set into motion, the essential features of being which once appeared adequate now themselves become the object of metaphysical inquiry. A new round of questioning is initiated. How does being, now understood in terms of essential features, arise? What sustains and supports it? What is its essential origin? What is its basis and ground? Is there some principle which justifies and explains being as a whole? The only place in which the relentless inquiry which drives the metaphysics of grounding can come to rest is in a principle which serves as the ultimate explanatory basis of being and is also the sufficient explanation of itself. "The Being of beings is represented fundamentally, in the sense of the ground, only as *causa sui.* This is the metaphysical concept of God. Metaphysics must think in the direction of the deity because the matter of thinking is Being…."[143]

The second meaning of the term ontotheological is also inseparable from a critique. What needs to be criticized is the tendency of Western metaphysics to think about being in terms of grounds. It is this understanding of being in terms of grounds which enacts a progression which leads from grounds to causes, from causes to ultimate cause, inevitably ending with *causa sui* and the god of ontotheology. Here the critique required is a critique of the ontotheological character of metaphysics. Nevertheless once again it is not immediately or obviously apparent from OM how an understanding of being in terms of grounds is misguided or flawed, except that such an understanding inevitably leads metaphysics to ontotheology in the first sense described. It is possible to maintain, as classical Thomists have long done, that an understanding of being in terms of grounds

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[143] OM, p. 60.

represents a legitimate exercise of reason, and that God as *causa sui* is precisely the place, or rather the only place, where the relentless questioning of philosophical reason can come to rest.[144] In short, to make any sense of Heidegger's critique of the ontotheological character of metaphysics it will be essential to obtain some insight into precisely how an understanding of being in terms of grounds is misguided or flawed.

(c) *Ontotheology and the project of addressing the question of the meaning of being.*

The third sense which ontotheology has in Heidegger does not really represent a meaning of the term properly speaking, but how it is employed. In OM the ontotheological character of metaphysics is employed in such a way as to rethink the issue of being. Implied in this endeavor is the claim that ontotheology in both the first and the second senses is a serious error.   By taking a reflective step back from the enterprise of doing metaphysics we learn how the original issue of being became expressed as metaphysics with its inevitable descent into ontotheology. In the process Heidegger will discover a new way of thinking about being: as the "difference as such," (*Differenz als solche) a*nd finally as perdurance *(Ausdrag)*.

(d) *The relation among the three meanings of the term ontotheology*

From the foregoing it should be clear that no strict separation of the three meanings associated with the term ontotheological is possible. Granting the inevitable movement of

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[144] Cf. Daniel J. Sullivan, An Introduction to Philosophy: the perennial principles of the classical realist tradition,(Illinois: Tan books, 1992), chapter 17.

ontology into theology, a critique of ontotheology as metaphysics already involves a critique of our inherited God-concepts. Likewise it would be short-sighted to attempt a critique of the God of ontotheology without attempting to understand how our inherited God-concepts are fundamentally rooted in metaphysics. Finally it is essential to understand that for Heidegger's project in <u>OM </u>what he calls "the ontotheological constitution of metaphysics" includes ontotheology in both the first and second senses, and forms the basis of his attempt to rethink the issue of being.

In this second thesis we will attempt to focus specifically on ontotheology as a critique of God, one which highlights the movement from theology to ontology within the ontotheological constitution of metaphysics.

(III) <u>ADRESSING THE QUESTION OF WHAT IS PROBLEMATIC ABOUT ONTOTHEOLOGY</u>

(a) *The claims of Heidegger's argument*

At this point we should be willing to accept at least two claims   of Heidegger's argument. (1)   In Western civilization our major theological traditions have developed under massive but unexamined influence from metaphysics. The result has been that our God concepts are understood in and through the metaphysical category of being, and more specifically of being as ground. The following God concepts--the idea that God is the basis of being, the plentitude of being, the uncaused or self caused cause of all being, the highest and most perfect being, being itself--are all evidence of this ubiquitous

metaphysical influence. (2) The metaphysical concept of being as ground does not represent an irreducible context for thinking about God. To make sense of Heidegger's argument requires an at least implicit awareness that there are ways to think about God other than as ground, although to do so in any systematic manner is by hypothesis impossible within the concepts and categories of the dominant philosophical and theological traditions. Our work in Meister Eckhart and Dionysius should provide some intimation that this is the case.

.   Neither of these presuppositions appears to be invincibly problematic. They might easily be accepted by most historians of philosophy or philosophers of religion. We might go so far as to say that Heidegger's critique of ontotheology has elicited such a powerful critical response because it begins with an obvious fact, the fact of the historical and conceptual connectedness of our religious and philosophical traditions, rightly suggesting that this simple fact deserves some serious thought and explanation.   What is however not present in any of this is some explicit reasoning as to precisely why the God of ontotheology is untenable or problematic, incoherent or unacceptable.   This is a claim which hovers tantalizingly on the borders of Heidegger's argument in OM. Without a clear understanding of why ontotheology is flawed any imperative to overcome, transcend, or go beyond it is rendered superfluous. In response to this situation our strategy is to illuminate the missing piece of Heidegger's argument through the work of Meister Eckhart.

    (b) *Avoiding one possible danger*

Here the chief danger to be guarded against is that we might find cogent reasons for rejecting ontotheology within Eckhart which are nevertheless foreign to Heidegger. Contrariwise our highest ideal should be to employ Eckhart as a way of making Heidegger's own thinking more explicit. Only the latter can be properly named as an exercise of illumination. Based on our work in Chapter Two we can formulate at least two reasons why the route through Eckhart might have promise: (1) Eckhart's thinking contains a powerful critique of our inherited God concepts. (2) Eckhart's critique of God is closely connected to a keen awareness of the inadequacy and the limitations of traditional metaphysical language and conceptual categories for thinking about God. In short, the necessity of moving from God to Godhead which lies at the center of Eckhart's critique of God is impossible to effect within the inherited metaphysical concept of ground. It is only by rethinking the concept of God as ground that Godhead can emerge. The above gives us significant reason to think that Eckhart's critique of God is on an ontological continuum with Heidegger's critique of the god of ontotheology, and that where there is a missing piece in Heidegger's argument the former might illuminate the latter. To effectively apply this strategy requires that we extract a maximum of intelligibility from the text of Heidegger before seeking the assistance of Eckhart. This will insure that no aspect of Heidegger will be 'illuminated' by Eckhart which is not already clear and accessible, and also that what aspects are not transparent are thus genuinely illuminated. This strategy has the added benefit of keeping us close to the Heideggerian text so that we are better able to evaluate our results. In keeping with this approach we now formulate two 'lines of defense'. These represent what we hope are

the best possible responses within the Heideggerian text for answering the question 'what is problematic or untenable for Heidegger about the god of ontotheology?'

(IV) POSSIBLE DEFENSES FOR WHAT IS PROBLEMATIC ABOUT ONTOTHEOLOGY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF HEIDEGGER

(a.) *Defense one*

Ontotheology is a serious error because it violates the methodological distinction between philosophy and theology.

Going as far back as far as 1927, the period of Being and Time , Heidegger has exhibited unflinching   support for the methodological distinction between philosophy and theology.[145] Indeed his persistent silence about God, in the form of the conviction that ultimately philosophy has nothing to say about God, follows from this methodological distinction.[146] In what might be considered Heidegger's fullest statement concerning the relation between philosophy and theology, "Phenomenology and Theology," taken from a series of lectures given in 1927, the reasons for this methodological distinction become explicit.   In phenomenological language philosophy and theology each have their proper "object domains," the realms of which are the proper

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[145] This methodological distinction in was in fact already formed as early as 1921 when Heidegger gave a series of lectures on the phenomenology of religion. At one point he laments the influence of Greek philosophy upon Christianity and applauds Luther for exercising a contravening influence. See Heidegger, The Phenomenology of Religious Life (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) p.67.

[146] This point is developed systematically and with much textual support by Lawrence Paul Hemming in Heidegger's Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice (Indiana: University of Note Dame Press, 2002) pp. 65-70.

and natural objects of these studies. This is a doctrine which goes back to Husserl;[147]it

originates with the conviction that each object domain has a determinate way of revealing

itself. Our methodologies must be adequate to the unique and specific way in which

respective domains are disclosed. Music, rock formations, subatomic particles and

numbers each disclose themselves in different ways, and hence require different

methodologies for the disciplines which make them objects of investigation. We have

seen this doctrine at work in the early part of <u>Being and Time</u> where Heidegger

meticulously struggles to develop a method which is adequate to the way in which being

discloses itself. In "Phenomenology and Theology," the proper object domain of

philosophy is determined to be being, that of theology the Christian life, that of the ontic

sciences various respective beings.[148] Theology is then grouped among the ontic sciences,

in distinction to philosophy which is ontological. Based on this framework the

distinction between any empirical science and theology is only relative, since they are

both ontic. On the other hand, the distinction between philosophy, which is ontological,

and theology, which is ontic, is absolute.[149] In methodological terms theology would have

more in common with biology or mathematics than with philosophy

(b) *Problematic aspects of defense one*

The above classification would seem to produce some results which are

counterintuitive to say the least. Chief among them is the conclusion that theology, the

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[147] Edmund Husserl, <u>Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology</u>, trans. by Boyce Gibson (New York and London: Collier Books, 1962) p.45.
[148] Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology" in <u>Pathmarks</u>, William McNeil (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp 41-43.
[149] Ibid., p. 41

'science of God,' is not really concerned with God at all. Theology, an ontic science, is ultimately concerned with beings. Heidegger does not attempt to avoid this counterintuitive conclusion, instead maintaining and developing the above claim that the object of theology is a very determinate aspect of beings namely "Christianness" (*Christlichkeit*).[150] By *Christlichkeit* Heidegger means the Christian life, or the life of faith, a life which is centered upon the events of Christ's crucifixion, death and resurrection. This is the proper object domain of theology rather than with issues concerning the nature and being of God. At least one of Heidegger's most explicit statements in <u>OM</u> which we will have occasion to examine shortly supports this earlier view of the methodological distinction between philosophy and theology.

This 'line of defense' can go some distance in making explicit some of the reasons at the basis of Heidegger's criticism of ontotheology There is a methodological distinction between philosophy and theology at work generally in Heidegger, and <u>OM</u> is no exception. However, we would like to do more than make Heidegger's own reasoning explicit. We would like to take Heidegger's critique of ontotheology as a critique of our inherited God concepts which has some intrinsic merit. To accomplish this we must not lose sight of the issue of what might be intrinsically problematic about ontotheology. If our best answer to this question is that it violates the methodological distinction between philosophy and theology, this view is itself very highly problematic since the type of methodological distinction required to support this answer is a radical one, which is by no means universally acknowledged or accepted by theologians and philosophers, and is difficult to defend apart from a rigorous adherence to the phenomenological method. This view would have as at least one of its implications that theological concepts, no

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[150] Ibid., p. 43.

matter what paucity of evidence they are based on or how incoherent they may be, are

impervious to criticism.[151] It is difficult to conceive that many modern philosophers of

religion would support this view.   A more common view tracing back to Thomas

Aquinas and supported by modern Thomists[152] involves a   fundamental correlation as

well as a methodological distinction between philosophical and theological claims.[153] In

this view theology must respect legitimate demands of reason. Likewise philosophical

reason is entitled to examine the coherence and plausibility of theological claims.

Perhaps the most telling argument against the adequacy of this line of defense is that it

would make a critique of ontotheology impossible.   If philosophy and theology are

strictly methodologically distinct then there would be no basis except from the

perspective of theology to criticize God concepts. Moreover such a critique would have

no philosophical way of being determined to be cogent.   In short, if we had to depend on

a strict methodological distinction between philosophy and theology a critique of

ontotheology as a critique of God would be on very weak ground. Furthermore, when we

examine some of Heidegger's more explicit statements on the matter it becomes clear

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[151] Hugo Meynell, "Philosophy and Theology," in Philosophy of Religion, Brian Davies (ed.) (Washington: Gregorian University Press, 1992) p. 234. In this part of the essay Meynell is actually responding to an extreme version of the methodological distinction between philosophy and theology represented by Alvin Plantinga, indicating that this position when consistently held leads to absurd conclusions. He does not actually discuss Heidegger, but by virtue of holding to an extreme version of the same methodological distinction it would appear that Heidegger's position would also share some of the same unacceptable consequences.

[152] Cf. Alicia Jaramillo, "The necessity of raising the question of God: Aquinas and Lonergan and the quest for complete intelligibility,". The Thomist Vol. 71(2007) pp. 221-267. Using Longergan as an example of a modern Thomist the author argues that the primacy of the five ways in Thomism is at bottom a quest for the intelligibility of being. This orientation which arises from reason but only finds fulfillment in a transcendent horizon involves a profound and ongoing correlation between faith and reason and hence between theological and philosophical methodologies.

[153] The concept and the term "theology of correlation" was famously expressed by Paul Tillich in the first volume of his Systematic Theology. Nevertheless Thomism has always been a theology of correlation as expressed and embodied in the great Thomistic synthesis. The nature of Thomism as a theology of correlation and its similarity to Tillich's method is made fully explicit in a study by Donald J. Keefe, Thomism and the Ontological Theology of Paul Tillich (Netherlands:E.J. Brill, 1971) See especially chapter 1, "The Relation Between Ontology and Theology," pp 7-39.

that there is more basis to his critique than an issue of method. Consider for example the following: "Someone who has experienced theology in his own roots, both the theology of the Christian faith and that of philosophy, would today rather remain silent about God when he is speaking in the realm of thinking."[154] Apart from the very cryptic comment concerning what appears to be a philosophically based theology the clear implication is that ontotheology is an error because it is somehow theologically inadequate.   The metaphor of a root can be viewed as evidence of a methodological distinction, yet it contains much more. It suggests a wellspring, or source of power, implying that theology when it is not deflected by extraneous considerations, when it is solidly in tune with the source of its intelligibility, discerns something which is inherently flawed or untenable about ontotheology.   Based on this implication we are able to formulate a second, more promising line of defense for the problematic character of ontotheology

(c) *Defense two*

Ontotheology is theologically flawed because it is not based on autonomous or autonomous or authentic religious thinking or experience but rather on the unexamined influence of metaphysics. Specifically it is based on the implicit assumptions of representationalism, substance ontology, and the ontology of grounding.

This second line of defense is solidly based on the nature of Heidegger's project in OM   which is to think being as the "difference as such." Implied in this endeavor is that the ontological difference, as the difference between being and beings, has not been

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[154] OM, p. 54.

adequately thought. Neglecting to heed the *difference* between being and beings, instead

metaphysics represented being *in terms of* beings. Representationalism then forms the

basis of substance ontology.   From substance ontology there is only one short step to the

ontology of grounding where grounds are conceived after the paradigm of substance.

The exercise of thinking being as the "difference as such" is in part an attempt to

overcome this representationalism in substance ontology and the ontology of grounding,

which have all been implicit in the historic enterprise of metaphysics.

At this point the question 'what is wrong with the God of ontotheology?' is

beginning to appear answerable within the context of Heidegger. Given the connection

of God concepts with metaphysics, given Heidegger's understanding of the limits of

metaphysics, by implication the three outstanding suspects are representationalism,

substance ontology, and the ontology of grounding. The God of ontotheology is

represented as an entity or substance where this substance is understood as ground.

(d) *Problematic aspects of defense two*

The problem with this response is that although it will turn out to be technically

sound, it provides a mere textbook kind of response, and one which is finally not very

illuminating. To consider representationalism first: It would appear that the ability to

represent an object before a knowing subject is a requisite feature of all knowledge. It is

not clear how anything which we can name or know as knowledge can subsist apart from

this prerequisite. With regard to grounding ontology we have already seen how from a

theological perspective the theology of grounding can be viewed as a legitimate exercise

of reason. With regard to substance ontology, it is not clear why the philosophical

category of substance, if properly understood, that is, as a non-material substance, does

not at all apply to God. Finally, in an attempt to address the issue of ontotheology within

the context of Heidegger one begins to develop a powerful suspicion that concepts such

as substance ontology, ontology of grounding, and representationalism cannot be

criticized in the manner of common philosophical errors or fallacies.

Consider the case of representationalism.   One is clearly able to define the fallacy of

solipsism or of false cause and to illustrate by example how and why they are mistaken.

By contrast, the objective representation of objects before a subject is not an erroneous

practice.   It only becomes erroneous when it is proposed as a doctrine which claims that

in order to be real anything whatsoever must be capable of being objectively represented.

If this is a philosophical error, and Heidegger believes that it is, a critique of it must not

be in the abstract but with reference to specific cases.   The above suggests that it is not

possible to have an insightful or detailed understanding of why a concept of God, or even

of human beings which are objectively represented, is erroneous based on the concept of

representationalism itself. Here what is required is some insight concerning why God is

one of those concepts which cannot or should not be objectively represented. What is

required as well is some insight concerning what a non-representationalist understanding

of God would be like and how this non-representationalist understanding is more

adequate than a representationalist one.   Something similar can be said with regard to the

ontology of grounding. Extending insights from the text of Heidegger as far they will

take us leads us to conclude that failure to adequately think the ontological difference

leads to the ontology of grounding. This indeed provides us with a clue to what is

misguided about an understanding of God as ground. Nevertheless this is only a clue.
What is required is some detailed insight concerning what is inadequate about an
understanding of God as ground. What is required as well is some concrete
understanding of what the ontology of grounding is to be replaced with.

   Having demonstrated that the two best defenses for what is problematic about
ontotheology, although containing much truth still require support outside the
Heideggerian text, we now posit thesis two:

(V)   STATEMENT OF THESIS II

Meister Eckhart's investigations help to complete Heidegger's argument in OM *by
first informing us as to precisely what is problematic and untenable both philosophically
and theologically about ontotheology.*

  *Second, Eckhart demonstrates that God understood as the supreme being, as a
determinate entity in the horizon of possible experience, is wedded to finitude and cannot
in principle serve as an authentic ground, thus philosophically requiring a transcendence
of God into Godhead.*

  *Eckhart further clarifies what is problematic and untenable about the god of
ontotheology by providing a paradigm, represented by Godhead, of what a non-
ontotheological God concept is like and why this is more adeqate than an ontotheolgical
one.*

In enacting the movement from God to Godhead Eckhart clarifies Heidegger's critique of metaphysics by demonstrating the necessity of and providing an exercise in rethinking the concept of ground.

Eckhart's new understanding of God as ground represented by Godhead also helps to support Heidegger's critique of metaphysics by providing a paradigm of ground in terms of which the assumptions of representationalism and substance ontology implicit in the historic enterprise of metaphysics are illuminated as inadequate.

Eckhart's reflections also clarify Heidegger's critique of ontotheology as a critique of metaphysics, by providing us with a paradigmatic case--God as ground--in which the ontology of grounding fails. Insofar as we can accept by hypothesis Heidegger's claim regarding the centrality of God as ground in grounding ontology generally, by demonstrating the inadequacy of God as ground Eckhart illuminates Heidegger's critique of metaphysics by providing us with an intuition of the inherent weakness and instability of metaphysical systems.

(VI)   <u>DEFENSE OF THESIS II</u>

(a)   *Why God as ground is problematic for Eckhart*

Despite the fact that we will never find the term 'ontotheology' in Eckhart, nevertheless it is clear that Eckhart's polemic is directed against a certain understanding of God which coincides with what Heidegger has named "the god of ontotheology." Moreover this polemic is reinforced by powerful insights which, when made fully

explicit through the support of systematic arguments, are fatally disabling to the position of ontotheology.

Here we will engage Eckhart with careful reference to our investigations in section IV of Chapter Two B, which concern the doctrine of *sunder war umbe* (without a why), and also Eckhart's sermon *Mulier Venit Hora.*   In the latter *Eckhart* considered possible grounds for such phenomena as goodness, justice, and even human existence itself. As a 13th century scholastic Eckhart's understanding of grounds was powerfully influenced by a synthesis of classical Greek and Christian experience.[155] The concept of grounds itself as an ontologically constitutive realm of being was an inheritance from the Greeks. With the Thomistic synthesis of the thirteenth century this higher ontologically constitutive realm of being came to be identified as God. The reader is immediately startled by Eckhart's refusal to identify God as the ground of human experience. In Chapter Two we analyzed the text of Eckhart's sermon *Mulier Venit Hora in* detail. (Chapter Two B, V:a); what follows is a succinct summary of that analysis.

(a)   The traditional identification of God as ground is not immediately obvious from the data of experience. Rather it is inadequately supported by a formal process of reasoning which assumes and requires that there be more intelligibility at the end of the process than at any point within it.

(b.)   The requirements of the formal system specified in (a) are never actually satisfied. The most intelligibility is present at points along the chain of reasoning, where these points are based on the immediate data of experience. These points are represented by such things as the compelling power of love, justice and goodness. These points, or the

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[155] Cf. Oliver Davies introduction in <u>Meister Eckhart</u>:<u>Selected Writings</u> (London: Penguin books, 1993) xvii-xix.

human experiences to which they refer, are self-authenticating rather than the conclusion 'God as ground' in which they are adduced as 'founded' elements.

(c.) Based on the above it should be clear that in the ontology of grounding God serves as a kind of formal axiom, the point to which 'founded' elements are referred, from which they ostensibly derive their meaning. Nevertheless 'God as ground' is never apprehended in a manner which is truly axiomatic or self-evident in a way which illuminates, justifies and grounds 'founded' elements.

   (b)   *A second level of critique*

A thoughtful response to Eckhart's critique of God as ground must inevitably raise the question of why the enterprise of establishing God as ground is so dysfunctional. The question is more pressing given Eckhart's essentially Thomistic assumption regarding the oneness of truth. From this perspective philosophical and theological insights are inevitably correlated. Nothing is more foreign to Eckhart than an *a priori* rejection of the claims of reason in favor of supernatural faith.[156] Why then do 'founded' elements of experience not inevitably recognize their ground in God? This question is addressed in a second, more potent critique of God as ground. Eckhart's second level of critique might be summarized as follows:

   In the ontology of grounding God understood as the highest or most perfect being

   cannot in principle satisfy the requirements inherent in the most authentic concept of

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[156] Many commentators will point out that Eckhart in fact held a very extreme form of the Thomistic doctrine of the oneness of truth, one which neither classical Thomists nor Thomas himself would support. In Eckhart's doctrine even supernatural or revealed truths could be demonstrated by reason. Cf. Benard McGinn, The Essential Sermons, Commentaries Treatises and Defense (NY: Paulist Press) p.27.

ground as the essential origin and source of all finite being, thus requiring a

transcendence of God into Godhead.

    (c) *Rethinking the concept of ground*

  From the foregoing it should be clear that to enact the movement from God to

Godhead it was necessary for Eckhart to rethink the concept of ground. Indeed it

might be said that two questions are deeply present though not explicit in Eckhart's

reflection on God contained in the passages we have examined in the sermon *Mulier*

Venit Hora; these are: what must the nature of God be such that God can be

understood as the originary basis and source of finite being? And secondly: What

does it mean to say that finite being is grounded? Thus Eckhart's reexamination of

the nature of God's being becomes radically dependent on establishing criteria for an

authentic ground. Here it will be helpful to think about how these questions are

addressed in terms of the way in which the concept of ground functions in the

Thomist argument from first cause. Both classical and modern Thomists have long

maintained that the concept of God as an uncaused cause represents a ground of

experience in the sense that it is the only place where the relentless demands of

philosophical reason can come to rest.[157] Even granting, as St. Thomas himself did,

that the series of natural events might be infinite,[158] philosophical reason can never

come to rest with nature as a brute fact. Toward this end modern Thomists have

seized upon Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason to argue that if not in the order of

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[157] Once again Alicia Jaramillo's article "The necessity of raising the question of God, Aquinas and Lonergan on the quest for complete intelligibility", <u>op cit</u> is helpful here.
[158] Qoodlibet 12,q.2,a.2.

time, at least in the ontological order the series of natural events must have,

ontologically, an ultimate a constitutive principle.[159] For this principle to be final,

that is, to bring the incessant striving of reason toward grounds to closure, it must

simultaneously explain the series and be the sufficient explanation of itself. This can

only be the concept of God as *causa sui*.[160]

Here it is not difficult to imagine how Eckhart would respond to this neo-Thomist

version of the argument from first cause. Like the modern Thomist, Eckhart

identifies the driving force in the quest for grounds as intellect (Chapter Two B,

IV:b). The penetrating character of the intellect is a symbol for the way in which

intellect is driven beyond founded elements toward their ultimate basis and ground.

Nevertheless, once we have identified a recognizable entity in the horizon of possible

being, be it the highest or most perfect being, as a determinate entity it has effectively

been reduced to the level of something finite and can no longer serve as the basis and

ground of all finite being. Essentially Eckhart rejects the concept of God, the highest

being, as ground for what might at least be called an analogous reason why the

Thomist rejects any event in the natural series, or the series itself as adequate to

reason. In none of these cases can reason 'come to rest,' in all of them it is provoked

to drive onward toward a more originary basis and ground. Here the statement that

intellect "never rests"(Chapter Two B, IV:b) is clearly hyperbole. It cannot rest, as

Eckhart explicitly tells us, in goodness or justice or even God, but is driven to the

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[159] The principle of sufficient reason becomes quite explicit in modern Thomism, but as William Rowe demonstrates all versions of the argument from first cause known today as the "cosmological argument presuppose PSR. Cf. William Rowe, The Cosmological Argument(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) pp 60-110.

[160] Cf. Mark Nowacki, "Whatever comes to be has a cause of its coming to be: A Thomistic defense of the principle of sufficient reason," "*The Thomist*," July, 1962, pp 291-302.

source out of which these arise. Here *causa sui*, the place where intellect comes to rest in Thomism, has become one more founded mode itself in need of explanation.

(d)　　*Attempting to make sense of the paradox of Godhead*

The personal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition has traditionally intersected with philosophical reason at the junction of proof and demonstration. The concept of Godhead presents itself as a special challenge to reason because it represents something which in principle cannot be known as a determinate entity or substance. Perhaps the best way to approach the paradox of Godhead is in terms of Eckhart's understanding of the necessity of moving from God to Godhead and to see that necessity as what in terms of modern understanding is known as a transcendental argument. A transcendental argument attempts to establish the reality of something X based on the conditions of the possibility of Y, where Y itself is universally acknowledged to be real.[161] The classical form of this argument was presented by Immanuel Kant in Critique of Pure Reason.[162] Against Hume's skeptical arguments concerning causality[163] Kant argued that causality must be real because it represents the very conditions for the possibility of experience. For this argument to succeed it was first necessary for Kant to disable the view that causality is a feature of things. Either causality is a feature of things, in which case it is prone to Hume's skeptical arguments, or it is not a feature of things at all but belongs to the condition of their

[161] Cf. Barry Stroud, "transcendental arguments," in "*Journal of Philosophy*," Vol. 65 #9, (May 1968) pp.241-256.

[162] Cf. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A95-96, A111 - A114.

[163] Cf. David Hume, "Special doubts concerning the operations of the understanding," in An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963) pp.36-63.

possibility. It is only the latter which can endow causality with a true universality and necessity which is impervious to skeptical attack. A form of this disjuncture, hence what we might call at least a quasi-transcendental argument, is present in Eckhart's understanding of the necessity of moving beyond God to Godhead. Here the premise which Eckhart assumes to be universally acknowledged is that God must be understood as the originary basis of all being, the source from which all things derive and receive their meaning, the ultimate constitutive principle of experience and life. Once this premise is granted it will be necessary to steadfastly oppose any claim that this principle can contain any specific, determinate, objective features which belong to things. As the condition of the possibility of finite being, the source out of which finite being emerges, the ground of finite being, must be incommensurable with what is finite. The most authentic concept of ground will require a systematic refusal and negation of any recognizable entity which can be named or known as God. From this perspective it becomes clear that the negative images of God, images of abyss and desert, are symbols for what is required by an authentic concept of ground. Here we might go so far as to say that a form of this disjunction and hence of a quasi-transcendental argument is present in the Thomist's insistence that the completion of the argument from first cause requires not simply a numerically first member of the natural series of causes but an uncaused cause. It is only an uncaused cause, something which transcends the determination by nature and causality entirely, which can serve as the condition of the possibility of causality and the entire natural process. In this light, in arguing for the necessity of moving from God to Godhead, Eckhart is simply bringing the logic of Thomism to conclusion.

(e)   *Confronting the challenge of pantheism*

The necessity of transcending our inherited God-concepts into Godhead which cannot be known in any objective form inevitably summons the specter of pantheism. It is not possible to develop an understanding of the meaning of Godhead in Eckhart without seriously engaging this alternative. The first step in this process is an acknowledgment that pantheism is at least fully compatible with the movement from God to Godhead. Moreover, some of Eckhart's most explicit statements concerning Godhead make this interpretation very tempting. Recall the statement from the sermon *Nolite Timere Eos:* "everything in the Godhead is one and of this nothing more can be said" (Chapter Two B, IV:d). While it is not impossible to find some support for the pantheist reading of Eckhart,[164] this reading is rejected by the overwhelming body of scholars.[165] In the final analysis pantheism, like the dualism which it opposes is a very simple concept; it is simply a variation of substance ontology--one substance instead of two. Such an ontology is at loggerheads with Eckhart's dialectical method, which is as incompatible with simple identity as it is with unqualified difference.[166] Where identity is present in Eckhart it is never the simple identity of monism, but rather what Schürmann calls "operative identity."[167]

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[164] It is actually very difficult to find real detailed textual support for a pantheist reading of Eckhart. Where Eckhart is identified as a pantheist or a monist it is most often in the context of arguing for a larger thesis where very little textual support is actually given. Cf. C.T. Chan, "On the dialectical affinities between East and West," in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. no. 3, no. 3, pp. 199-221.

[165] Both Schurmann and Bernard McGinn soundly reject the pantheist reading. Cf. Bernard McGinn, The Essential Sermons, Commentaries and Treatises and Defense. op cit p.33., Reiner Schürmann, Wandering Joy,(Massachusettes: Lindisfarne Books, 2001) p.218.

[166] Bernard McGinn, The Essential Sermons, Commentaries and Treatises and Defense, op cit., p.56.

[167] Reiner Schurmann, Wandering Joy, op cit., p. 23.

This is defined as an identity which is not based on the selfsameness of an underlying substratum, but an ideal which is to be achieved on the road to detachment.

(f)   *Eckhart's alteration of the concept of ontology*

It should be obvious that such a shift in the meaning of the concept of identity is not possible without a profound alteration in the concept of ontology itself. We can see this alteration at work in the way in which for Eckhart the traditional roles of substance and accident are reversed. Ontology is now about relations; issues concerning underlying substance involved in those relations are merely accidental. Here it is crucial to indicate that Eckhart's reversal of traditional ontological categories is not based on mere creative innovation but is required by his renewed understanding of ground. Once the concept of God as ground is rethought as the most originary basis of experience, then the concept of substance can no longer apply to it accept in an accidental way. Eckhart's attempt to rethink the notion of ground involves a rethinking of the ground of human existence and hence a rethinking of human being which is grounded. Once Godhead is understood as the originary basis of human existence the relation between human being and Godhead is no longer a relation of two kinds of substances. The concept of substance becomes as irrelevant to understanding the essential nature of human being as it is to Godhead. Thus human being is no longer thought in an entitative way. Recall the series of questions from the sermon *Mulier Venit Hora* (Chapter Two B, V:a). We saw how Eckhart refuses the traditional answer to the question 'what is the purpose of human life,' in favor of

"I don't know but I'm happy to be alive." In terms of a casual reading this suggests a profound breakdown of philosophical reason, an abandonment of objectivity in favor of subjective whim. We observed how a more astute reading reveals an ambitious philosophical deliberateness (Chapter Two B, V:a). Once again the appeal to subjectivity is adduced as evidence that the data to be explained is not an entity or substance which can be comprehended with an objective response. The subjective human depths which are disclosed in the expression of gratitude can never find a purely objective explanation which can do it justice. Having rethought the nature of ground, Eckhart challenges the adequacy of the concept of substance for understanding both human being and the Godhead. Eckhart's rethinking of ground also involves a rethinking of the relation of human being to ground. Once both ground and human being are no longer to be understood after the model of substance, the relation of human being to ground can no longer be the relation of two substances. Therein lies the meaning of the phrase "when I stood in the river, the soil of the Godhead" from the sermon *NoliteTtimere Eos* (Chapter Two B, IV:d). Godhead is not a supreme substance after the model of a rock upon which finite substances reside but an encompassing context in which finite substances are thought. Finite things can be known from within Godhead; nevertheless as the encompassing context of all knowing Godhead cannot itself be objectively realized and known.   The pathway then lies open for Eckhart to develop an ontology of relations.

    (VII)   DIRECT APPLICATION TO HEIDEGGER

(a) *The failure of a defense against Heidegger's charge of ontotheology*

To summarize Eckhart's reflections provides us with powerful insight into the limits of the God of ontotheology. If we return for a moment to the Thomist defense against Heidegger's charge of ontotheology, this defense assumes and requires that there be an effective passageway from theology to philosophy and vice versa. It requires that categories such as human existence, human actions and the natural world, which are understood from a theological perspective as requiring grounding, can effectively be grounded in ontological reality. This is to say that the ontology of grounding appears from a theological perspective as a response to legitimate demands of reason. To be fully intelligible, aspects of human existence and the natural world require placement in a broad conceptual context which it is the job of ontology to provide. Likewise this defense requires that this context can never be fully adequate. Ontological categories expressed as the most general aspects of being, and the nature of being as a whole, themselves require grounding. This endeavor of grounding ontology can only come to closure in the nature of God as an uncaused cause. We can think of the passageway from ontology to theology and back as a kind of circuit or circle. The essential unity of ontology and theology which is required for a minimalist defense against Heidegger's critique of ontotheology requires a free flow of concepts, that is to say a free movement in both directions along the circuit. From a theological perspective Eckhart challenges the free movement from theology to ontology, but his thinking has implications for the reverse as well. Let us summarize what we have learned about each of these aspects separately.

(b) From theology to ontology :

.   Our study in Eckhart provided   insight into precisely why the 'ontology of grounding' is so 'dysfunctional.' It became clear how in this ontology God understood as the highest being, by virtue of being a recognizable and determinate entity, is wedded to finitude and cannot serve the requirements implied in the most authentic concept of ground represented in modern language as the 'conditions of the possibility' of finite being.   Eckhart's critique of God was then presented in the context of an attempt to rethink the concept of ground. We have argued that an understanding of ground as 'conditions of possibility' is already implied in the logic of Thomism as expressed in the classical Thomist doctrine of first cause. Insofar as this drive represents the natural aim of human reason to comprehend the widest conditions of the possibility of experience, reason can never find fulfillment in a penultimate explanation and hence requires a transcendence of God into Godhead.

Eckhart's reflections help to answer a question which hovers on the borders of any serious reading of OM, namely: what would a non-ontotheological God-concept be like? This is a question which is inevitably raised and must be raised in any critique of ontotheology. Would a rejection of the God of ontotheology require an adoption of primitive, totally unreflective God concepts, a return to biblical literalism?   It is easy to misread Heidegger and think that this might be the case. Nevertheless, the objections to this alternative are quite formidable. Among them are the fact that this would require a renunciation of all metaphysical concepts except those which are implicit, a position

which is obviously problematic to say the least, and one which is incompatible with Heidegger.   But this only makes the question more pressing. Once we have rejected ontotheology, what is it to be replaced with? A powerful and coherent response to this question is provided by Eckhart as an essential aspect of his critique of inherited God-concepts, and of his rethinking of the concept of ground. The alternative to the God of ontotheology is Godhead. Godhead provides us with a paradigm of an authentic God-concept, one which has been purged of ontotheological elements.   Not accidentally, Godhead is an essentially negative concept,   one which represents an iconoclastic refusal of all concepts and images which might represent God in any affirmative manner. From the perspective of Godhead we are able to understand why images of God must be negative--one of the things that are misguided about ontotheology. Hence from the perspective of Godhead we are able to discern precisely what is problematic and untenable in the   concept of God as *causa sui. Causa sui* is wrong not because the concept of causality does not apply to God, it is wrong insofar as and because it purports to represent God in an essential manner; to express the essential identity of God as an uncaused cause when this aspect is merely penultimate. To that extent *causa sui* is a conceptual idol which blocks a more authentic access and openness to the sacred. Godhead represents a paradigm for the overcoming of all such conceptual idols.

(c)   *From ontology to theology*

We have seen in Eckhart how, when God is conceived within   the categories of

 metaphysics, specifically after the inherited model of ground, a convincing connection

cannot be made between 'founded' elements of experience and God as ground in a

manner which authentically illuminates the founded' elements.   By extending insights

gained from Ekhart's critique of religion to a critique of God (Chapter Two B, IV:a- d)

we come to suspect that the concept of God as ground functions   in the service of very

human needs for systematic unity, without commending itself as   the inevitable place

where reason comes to closure. Insofar as we can accept by hypothesis Heidegger's

claim that the historic enterprise of grounding inevitably requires *causa sui* in order to

come to completion. Eckhart's conclusions block the movement from ontology to

theology which is necessary for a minimalist defense against Heidegger's claim that

Western metaphysics is ontotheological. Heidegger's claim thus emerges as more

credible. This is accomplished in three ways: (1) Eckhart tells us why, as we have

already seen, *causa sui* is flawed and hence cannot function as an authentic ground. (2)

Essentially by working 'backwards' from the concept of an authentic ground which is

Godhead, Eckart's reflections have the potential to illuminate how grounding ontology is

misguided and flawed from the start. To a limited extent we have already seen how this

is the case with substance ontology and representationalism, both of which are implicit

presuppositions of the ontology of grounding. In <u>OM </u>Heidegger operates with the

understanding that these presuppositions are flawed, although elsewhere he attempts to

demonstrate why this is the case.[168] Operating from the perspective of Godhead we are in

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[168] Heidegger's doctrine of language can be understood as a critique of representationalism. His argument is
essentially that language is one of those aspects of what is real which cannot with insight be represented
objectively. To represent language as an objective phenomenon, e.g. as a system of relations or as a tool,
essentially misses the essence of language as well as the relation of human beings to language and the
relation of human being to the world. Cf. Martin Heidegger, <u>On the Way to Language</u>, trans. by Peter D.
Hertz (San Francisco and New York:Harper and Row Publishers, 1971) pp.112-136.

a unique position to understand their flaws and limitations and hence why it would be misguided to employ these concepts in an ontology of grounding. Indeed with this insight the entire ontology of grounding becomes called into question. The same is the case with the ontology of substance. The attempt to coherently think the concept of Godhead inevitably involves a challenge to the ontology of substance. Godhead is not a substance, but the encompassing context in which everything including substances is conceived. Immediately this changes our conceptual landscape. The dissolution of the substantial identity of God casts a shadow over the claim that the essential character of human being can be known through the category of substance. If substance cannot be properly predicated of God then its value as a concept or category of understanding is reduced to the level of impotence. Human beings can no longer be finite substances juxtaposed beside a divine substance. The grounding of human existence cannot take place according to a physical model in which a supreme substance supports a lesser one. Rather the grounding of human existence will require us to think about the meaning of being human from out of the context of Godhead. Such an understanding must be relational rather than substantial.

(d) *Shaking the foundations of substance ontology*

(3) Although Eckhart's thinking is not essentially methodological, the methodological implications of his thinking have the potential to shake the foundations of all grounding ontology. In thinking through the critique of God as ground with Eckhart, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that grounding ontology generally functions in a

similar way. In each case we have what purports to be a self-sufficient, self-
authenticating basis of experience from which founded elements are derived and receive
their meaning. If this paradigm does not work in the case of 'God as ground,' for the
specific reasons Eckhart suggests, what reason is there to have confidence that it will
work for any others? The fact that grounding ontologies employ the same methods and
involve the same limited presuppositions suggests that it will not. This question is more
pressing given Heidegger's insight concerning the importance of God as ground in any
grounding ontology. In <u>OM</u> and elsewhere Heidegger tells us that the claims of
grounding ontology are never actually realized or embodied. For this reason metaphysics
is epochal. One ground commends itself in a particular age as an exemplary principle in
terms of which everything else is intelligible. With time the attractiveness of this
principle erodes and a new ground is posited. The history of metaphysics is therefore a
history of the rise and dissolution of ultimate grounds. Thinking through the critique of
'God as ground' with Eckhart gives us some insight into why metaphysics is epochal.
Eckhart provides us with a powerful intimation of how the exercise of establishing
grounds is an expression of deep human needs and expectations rather than the objective
endeavor it purports to be. Since a ground is not an embodiment of purely objective
meaning, no ground can be ultimate or final.

(e) *Derrida and the instability of metaphysical systems*

 Doubtless at least some of the interest of Derrida in the work of Eckhart and other
thinkers in the tradition of negative theology stems from the implication of Eckhardian

thinking for the instability of the texts of all metaphysical systems.[169] One of the reasons

Derrida continues to resist the label "deconstruction" is because the term implies a

systematic *a priori* methodological procedure which is to be applied in a formulaic way.

In actual practice Derrida demonstrates how the elements of deconstruction are already

present with metaphysical texts.[170] Deconstruction is then a matter of reading a text in a

way in which these are made explicit. Deconstruction has added considerable richness

and detail to Heidegger's understanding of the epochal character of metaphysics. The

problem with this is that Derrida introduces a complex language and vocabulary in the

context of his own project which does not always overlap with that of Heidegger. With a

limited vocabulary, and with an apparent innocence of ambitious methodological

ambitions, Eckhart provides cogent insight into the instability of metaphysical systems.

This insight can be illuminating to the projects of both Derrida and Heidegger.

(f) *Are our conclusions consistent with Heidegger?*

Employing Eckhart in this way raises the question of whether the illumination we

have received concerning the errors of ontotheology and its overcoming is ultimately

compatible with Heidegger. We have learned from Eckhart what is problematic and

untenable about what Heidegger calls ontothelogy. If Heidegger were more explicit on

this issue, would the reasons and arguments we have expressed concur with those of

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[169] Jacques Derrida, "Post Scriptum," in <u>Derrida and Negative Theology</u>, Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.) (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992) p. 290. Perhaps this point is best supported by part C of the essay, "How to avoid speaking: denials,"(contained in the same book) in which Derrida attempts to read Heidegger and the attempt to overcome metaphysics as in the tradition of negative theology. See pp.122-131.

[170] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's introduction to Jacques Derrida, <u>Of Grammatology</u> (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974) pp.lxxviii

Heidegger? This is to ask, have we genuinely illuminated not only what is problematic about ontotheology but what is problematic about it in the context of Heidegger?   This can be answered in the affirmative. This claim is supported by the fact that Heidegger's critique of ontotheology is provided in the context of and intimately related to his critique of metaphysics, or more specifically to a critique of both the metaphysics of grounding and representationalism.   For this reason Heidegger's critique of metaphysics does not lead to an abandonment of all metaphysics in the manner of positivism, or of operating only with an implicit metaphysics, but rather embodies a new way of thinking about being as ground.   This enterprise began in Being and Time with the analytic of *Dasein.* It is clear that the fundamental ontology which constitutes the analytic of *Dasein* is meant to provide a kind of basis for thinking about being. Yet this basis is in no wise a ground in the traditional sense, hence the difference between fundamental and foundational ontology.   If we take our cue from Being and Time, where a clarification of the meaning of being is the route to a more primordial relation to God which theology is seeking, then there is every reason to believe that the main obstacle which stands in the way of this goal is an unreflective and unclarified understanding of being. We have seen that where this is the case some understanding of being prevails by default. From this it is just one short step away from naming the same prejudices which have contaminated an understanding of the meaning of being in general and of human *Dasein* as blocks to a more primordial relation to God. These are none other than substance ontology, representationalism and the ontology of grounding. With regard to the later Heidegger represented by OM, this attempt to rethink the meaning of being as ground is named

"difference as such." In Thesis III we will see how Godhead as a groundless ground represents a kind of paradigm for understanding "difference as such."

   With regard to representationalism, it might be said that in the final sense the most fundamental mistake of metaphysics is the presupposition that being can be represented as an object. Yet Heidegger's critique of representationalism does not end with being. It is clear that an understanding of being in general and human being share the same fate. For this reason the enterprise of raising anew the question of the meaning of being has the benefit of bringing with it the potential to free our understanding of what it means to be human from the tyranny of representationalism.   Based on the above, it should be clear that when Heidegger names the God of ontotheology as *causa sui* there is again every reason to think that what is most problematic about this is the fact that God is represented as an object. We then conclude that there is good reason to think that employing Eckhart, as a route to understanding what is wrong about ontotheology in the context of Heidegger, puts us solidly on the right track.

Chapter five- Thinking being as the "difference as-such."

(I)   THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIFFERENCE

(a) *Heidegger and Hegel*

Let us begin by attempting to follow the path of Heidegger's thinking in OM. He

begins by asking how the approach of Hegel's philosophy is different from his own. The

contrast is clear: "For Hegel the force of each thinker lies in what each has thought, in

that their thought can be incorporated into absolute thinking as one of its stages… We,

however do not seek that force in what has already been thought: we seek it in what has

not been thought and from which what has been thought receives its essential space."[171]

  Heidegger's contrast between a Hegelian and a Heideggerian approach to the texts of

the tradition is a typical example of his approach to the history of philosophy. Heidegger

can never be relied on for providing a straightforward exegesis of a text. In each case the

text under examination becomes the occasion for developing his own thinking. In Being

and Time Heidegger provides a simple but compelling justification for this type of

creative exegesis. The goal of textual interpretation is not simply to understand what

another thinker has thought but to rethink the issue which is examined in the text.[172]

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[171] OM, p. 48.
[172] Being and Time, p.42.

Earlier on in OM Heidegger provided an added dimension to this novel approach to

textual interpretation based on the concepts of identity and difference.

> Therefore when we attempt a thinking conversation with Hegel, we must speak
> with him not just about the same matter, but the same matter in the same way.
> But the same is not merely the identical. In the merely identical, the difference
> disappears. In the same the difference appears, and appears all the more press-
> ingly the more resolutely thinking is concerned with the same matter in the same
> way.[173]

Suddenly the imperative to think the same matter in the same way has

metamorphosed into difference. How did we move from identity of the enterprise of

thinking being to difference? Although the move is quite startling, the argument for it is

already implied in the concept of thinking through the issue of being with Hegel. In any

straightforward exegesis of Hegel the goal would be to explicate an understanding of

being as it was thought by Hegel. In such an endeavor the specter of difference would at

least not explicitly appear. Heidegger's goal on the other hand is to think the issue of

being and to do so with Hegel as a guide or point of reference. The clear focus is not on

Hegel, but on being. Clearly then a difference emerges between being and what Hegel

thought. Thinking the matter of being through with Hegel, if it is genuine thinking and

not merely a perfunctory repetition of what Hegel thought (this would be the merely

identical), takes place in the space of the difference between what Hegel thought and the

matter of thinking which is being.

The natural question to raise at this point is, how then is thinking about being in

conversation with Hegel different from merely thinking the matter of being? We must

bear this question in mind as we attempt to illuminate the significance of difference in

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[173] OM., p. 45.

Heidegger. It turns out that difference will have a critically important role in OM. We must follow this insight concerning the importance of difference and see how it is developed. For now we may be permitted only a minimal observation, that Heidegger's method in OM begins with and highlights a remarkable fact, namely that difference, although it is not often understood to be an essential ingredient in major philosophical thought, nevertheless has an important role to play in philosophical and specifically metaphysical thinking. At the very least difference forms an essential background out of which philosophical thinking arises. Although Heidegger does not do so, we can attempt to apply this insight to Hegel. Hegel was focused not merely on understanding thinkers of the past, but on how their thinking represented moments in the coming to be of absolute spirit. Once again difference appears as a basis of Hegel's thinking. Without difference Hegel would have been merely an historian of philosophy. Heidegger's insights give us a new perspective on the history of thought. Upon reflection it would appear that the most creative innovations in the history of thought require difference. Consider for example the philosophy of Kant. The greatness of Kant's philosophy resides precisely in the way it blazes a new path, a different path from previous forms of thinking, most notably those of rationalism and empiricism. In time the sharp edge of this difference was dulled and the thinking of Kant hardened into a system. Descartes' can also serve as a good example. One can say that Descartes' thinking was grounded in difference. Descartes' aim was not to clarify particular aspects of experience, but to establish a sound basis for knowing in experience. In carrying out this ideal it was not possible to presuppose that any knowledge was possible. Descartes had to question the very foundations of experience, and in doing so overturned centuries of scholastic philosophy. The greatness

of Descartes' thinking consists in the way it presents us with both a paradigm and an exercise of thinking without presuppositions. In time the difference which formed the wellspring of Descartes' thinking was hardened into the identity of the Cartesian system, a system not unlike the one which Descartes had overturned.

(b) *Derrida and diff   érance*

The paradox of difference has been a persistent concern of Jacques Derrida. *Différance* is a neologism coined by Derrida based on the French stem *différ,* which means both to defer and to differ. The French word *différence* is indistinguishable in sound from Derrida's *différance*. There is a polemical function to Derrida's wordplay, namely to call attention to the aspect of deferring   which is at work in difference and to do so in a way which challenges the established primacy of speech over writing. What is the significance of the act of deferring? It has to do with negation. Derrida wants to say that in every act of differing there is also a deferring. Here we can think of the differing as an affirmative aspect, deferring as the negative. The act of indicating a difference aims toward the affirmation of meaning, but in the act of indicating a difference affirmative meaning is also deferred. Let us take one of Derrida's own examples, that of the unconscious mind. The act of indicating a difference of the unconscious from the conscious mind might aim toward establishing an integral identity of the unconscious through a contrast with the conscious mind. Nevertheless there is also the working of deferring in this act of difference. The unconscious is thus indicated as a vast and unknown realm which is nothing like the conscious mind. Derrida's understanding of

difference forms an integral part of his program of deconstruction. Although Derrida

will go on to develop an understanding of *différance* within the context of his own

project, an understanding which departs in significant ways from Heidegger's

"difference," the original inspiration of *différance* as a topic of thought was none other

than the idea of difference in <u>OM</u> [174]. This is true in the same way that Derrida's

deconstruction was originally inspired by the *Destruktion* of <u>Being and Time.</u> The fact

that *différance* begins with Heidegger's difference offers us the advantage that *différance*

in its most general form might provide us with an insight into difference. What is it that

Derrida sees as significant about *différance?* An answer to this question can be provided

in terms of Heidegger's own project. Addressing Heidegger's concern with being,

Derrida writes, "Since Being has never had a 'meaning' has never been thought or said

as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings, then difference is in a certain and very

strange way, 'older' than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being."[175] If

being requires non-being for its inherence then there can be no ultimate ontological basis

for the privileged status of being. This suggests that when in metaphysics being is made

the explicit object of investigation, it is 'non-being', 'becoming', 'beings'—all of the

aspects which are classically distinguished from being—which are at work in the

background making the inherence of being possible. Derrida's point is that this is the case

not only with being, but with philosophical concepts generally. The focus of

philosophical reasoning is upon those integral affirmative concepts, e.g. *energia, ousia,*

essence, origin, which form the center of a philosophical system, a center toward which

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[174] Douglas L. Donkel in <u>The Theory of Difference,</u>(Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2001) p. 9.
[175] Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in The<u> Theory of Difference,</u> <u>op. cit</u>. p. 296.

all other concepts are referred and in terms of which they derive their meaning.[176] For

Derrida this is enormously problematic, since as indicated above it is only the

marginalization of the lesser concepts—opinion by knowledge, existence by essence,

sensibility by reason—which grants the center the semblance of a privileged status.

Inherence of the center, then, requires and presupposes difference.

Derrida cites Nietzsche as a significant figure in the development of insights which

became explicit in the form of *différance.* In the writings of Nietzsche we witness a

continual assault upon identity, be it the identity of human being, of philosophy, of

reason, of good and evil. Thereby the primary centers of meaning which have been the

guideposts for Western thinking collapse into many fragments and differences. The

ideal of reason serves as a primary example. Under Nietzsche's analysis the primacy of

the conscious mind is challenged, as it is in Freud, by tracing its roots to unconscious

instinctual life energy.[177] For Derrida, what he has named as *différance* then represents

an attempt to make explicit insights which have been developing since the nineteenth

century and are even to a limited extent present in ancient thought.[178] These insights have

to do with the way in which the primary identities which are often presupposed and

which philosophical reason simultaneously attempts to establish and ground—mind,

reason, God, being, good—are not integral identities at all, but each requires and

presupposes qualification and difference. If we might be permitted to trace the

inauguration of the turn toward *différance* back to Kant, it might be said that from Kant

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[176] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences," in Writing and Difference trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge) p. 278.

[177] Ibid. p. 291.

[178] Derrida traces the origins of *différance* as far back as Plato, specifically in the *Khora* of the Timaeus as the "third species" between the sensible and the intelligible, and the concept of "The Good" which transcends being or essence in the Republic. Cf. Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in Derrida and Negative Theology ed, by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) p.p. 101-108.

to Derrida the status of difference has been steadily enhanced. Whereas negation has a strictly limiting function in Kant, by the nineteenth century negation increasingly takes on the role of genuine disclosure. Once again Nietzsche serves as the best example. It might be said that there is a dynamic driving impulse toward negation, *différance* at the very center of Nietzsche's project. Nevertheless Nietzsche's violent assault upon Western identity, values and metaphysics is virtually incomprehensible in purely negative terms. In virtually every case where we find Nietzsche 'philosophizing with a hammer,'[179] negation is a route to the discovery and affirmation of higher value.

(c) A *paradigm shift occurs*

Once difference becomes fully explicit with Derrida in the form of *différance* it becomes clear that more is at stake than the thematizing of difference as a limiting function or as a background of thought.   Here it would be no exaggeration to claim that with any measure of conceptual clarity the correct conclusion to draw from our consideration of Derrida and difference is that thought itself has become a background to *différance.* Now difference itself is understood as an originary basis of meaning. Clearly a major paradigm shift has occurred in Derrida, or rather in Heidegger, since Derrida is merely attempting to develop in his own way the insights about difference contained in OM.   The claim that difference forms a background to meaning might not require a paradigm shift and could perhaps be incorporated into our dominant ontological and epistemological modes of thought. But what would it mean to say that difference,

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[179] The metaphor is taken from Nietzsche's Twilight of the Idols, the subtitle of which is "how to philosophize with a hammer."

something essentially negative, forms the actual basis of meaning? Would not the presence of affirmative meaning not be required in order to be negated? In such a case difference would not actually be primary. Moreover, when it is claimed that difference is the basis of meaning are we not using the concept of a basis in a way in which it is never used, either in a philosophical or in an ordinary language context? In fact this will turn out to be the case; hence the meaning of "basis" must be made explicit. Here our problem is one which always accompanies paradigm shifts, namely that the alteration of the conceptual landscape is so profound that established meanings no longer function in the familiar manner in which they once did. To insist on understanding a paradigm shift in terms of inherited and familiar meanings is a strategy which is doomed to failure. Nevertheless, we must either find answers to the above questions, or find a way to explicate the shift in paradigm which makes questions of this sort superfluous. Since we are concerned principally not with Derrida but with Heidegger, it would be more fruitful to address the above issues in terms of how the paradigm shift is expressed in Heidegger.

(II)   FROM "DIFFERENCE" TO "DIFFERENCE AS SUCH"

(a)   T*he transcendental-phenomenological step back*

Following the course of Heidegger's thinking in OM, one of the primary ways in which the paradigm shift from meaning to difference is expressed is in terms of the attempt to think being as difference (*Differenz*) or "difference as such" (*Differenz als solche*).

…what do you make of the difference if Being as well as beings appear *by virtue of the difference*, each in its own way? To do justice to this question, we must first assume a proper position face to face with the difference. Such a confrontation becomes manifest to us once we accomplish the step back. Only as this step gains for us greater distance does what is near give itself as such, does nearness achieve its first radiance. By the step back, we set the matter of thinking, Being as difference, free to enter a position face to face, which may well remain wholly without an object.[180]

.   On the next page Heidegger will cite one of the primary goals of <u>OM</u> to be the thinking of the "difference as such." "In our attempt to think the difference as such, we do not make it disappear; rather we follow it to its essential origin."[181]

We have moved from an awareness of difference as a background of thinking, to the imperative to think being as difference. Here the many problems associated with an understanding of difference as a basis of meaning remain and are only compounded, as what we might call the turn toward difference is intensified. Now difference becomes a primary route to the disclosure of being. Without attempting to minimize the profound paradox in the idea of negation disclosing being, let us postpone consideration of the major problems which the deepening of the turn toward difference engenders and attempt to glean whatever intelligibility is here present.

Apart from attempting to explicate the full meaning of the term "difference as such," why does Heidegger think that difference or negation would be a route to the disclosure of being? What type of methodology is employed to reach this very counterintuitive conclusion?

The metaphor of a "step back" inevitably suggests the transcendental-phenomenological step back from experience, in this case from the experience of doing

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[180] <u>OM</u>., p. 63-64.
[181] Ibid., p. 65.

metaphysics to the conditions of its possibility. Yet if this is what Heidegger has in mind, the transcendental-phenomenological must be taken in quite a loose sense. In a strict sense the transcendental-phenomenological technique is a step back from the enterprise of doing metaphysics into a kind of reflective space in which it becomes possible to view something concerning the essence of metaphysics. In both the Kantian and the Husserlian senses the goal would indeed be a type of meta-philosophical awareness.[182] Heidegger's step back follows the classic phenomenological-transcendental pattern in the first aspect, in which a move is initiated away from the activity of actually doing metaphysics. What is achieved however is not something about the nature of metaphysics generally, but a more authentic disclosure of being than that which occurs in metaphysics.

Essentially Heidegger's strategy is the following. Since difference lies at the roots of whatever understanding of being is present in the tradition, while all the while the contribution of difference has been neglected, the result can only be an understanding of being which is solipsistic. From what we know of Heidegger's criticism of metaphysics, this comes as no surprise.   Expressed in the traditional language of metaphysics reification of being is at bottom a form of solipsism. What is new however is Heidegger's response to this solipsism. That response is to focus specifically upon that element which has been neglected by the tradition, that of difference, in the expectation that it offers a potential never seen before for the disclosure of being. Here we might be permitted a colloquial example. If certain minorities have made a significant though an unrecognized and unacknowledged contribution to American cultural life, we should expect to find that our reflective awareness in the form of cultural history should be, by

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[182] Because of the way in which it functions as meta-philosophy many analytic philosophers are expressing a renewed interest in phenomenology. Cf. Harold Allen Durfee, Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology (London: Springer Press, 1976) p.1-10.

virtue of this neglect, somewhat superficial and inaccurate. Likewise specific attention to those cultural contributions which have been omitted should yield a more in-depth and accurate understanding of the nature and origins of our cultural life. Nevertheless the power of our analogy is limited since its terms, mainstream and minority contributions to cultural life, are both intrinsic identities which can be made the object of investigation. By contrast, Heidegger's terms are being and negation. What does it mean to say that negation, which is not an intrinsic identity but the refusal and rejection of identity, should be the explicit object of inquiry?

(b)   *The specter of nihilism*

Once the boldness of Heidegger's move is made fully apparent, questions about it become impossible to ignore. By any account, a methodology which has negation function as a primary tool for the disclosure of being must appear at the very least to be counterintuitive. To make this explicit let us take a step back to the early period of Being and Time. In attempting to 'get a handle' on being Heidegger's primary route was through *Dasein,* the place where being is lit up or disclosed.[183] To the extent that this strategy is clear, that of OM must appear opaque. Here we are actually underestimating our difficulties, since it is not the case that negation will disclose being but that being is thought of as negation, as difference. In a real sense, difference has displaced the question of being, precisely the state of affairs suggested by Derrida. The goal is no

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[183] Martin Heidegger, History of the Concept of Time, trans. by Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1985) pp 144-150.

longer to articulate the significance of being, but to think being as difference. Now

negation is no longer a route to affirmation but has become an end in and of itself.

The concept of the predominance of negation over affirmation suggests the presence

of nihilism, where negation is inevitably understood in terms of a loss or depletion of

being, meaning, or identity. Within the context of Heidegger nihilism does not merely

represent a perspective on reality, but is an aspect of the self-disclosure of being which

occurs in and through human beings. The connection of human being and being leads

Heidegger to the point of claiming that human being has an essential share in nihilism.[184]

Based on the above it should be clear that nihilism is a complex theme in Heidegger. The

threat of nihilism cannot simply be banished or refuted, as it can in the context of an

Aristotle or a Kant. Nevertheless, in the final sense nihilism is an aspect of the

forgetfulness of being and so is a pejorative term in Heidegger. Where nihilism

threatens, being appears "within the horizon of what is calculable."[185] This suggests that

in nihilism human beings are in a distorted relation to being. Indeed an understanding of

being in terms of technology and nihilism is closely connected. In The Question of Being

Heidegger responds favorably to the Marxist Ernst Junger's claim that nihilism results

from technological domination.[186] A good part of the work is addressed to the question of

how technological domination and hence nihilism are to be overcome. "A topography of

nihilism, of its processes, of its overcoming is certainly needed."[187]

Based on this it should be clear that any attempt to understand what we might call the

negative turn which occurs in OM within the framework of the classical   ontology of

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[184] Martin Heidegger, The Question of Being, trans. by Janet T. Wilde and William Kluback (New Haven Conn: College and University Press, 1958) p.83.
[185] OM, p.35.
[186] Heidegger, The Question of Being, op cit., p.33.
[187] Ibid., p.85.

nihilism must be deemed to be fundamentally misguided. The problem here however is that there is no paradigm within the dominant traditions of Western philosophy with which to understand the primacy of negation which is not nihilistic. This is the case whether the phenomenon in question is Derrida's *différance* or Heidegger's attempt to think "difference as such." As witness, it is difficult to think of what Derrida means by deconstruction apart from a breakdown or a loss of meaning, an interpretation which Derrida has persistently rejected[188] and one which is refuted by his texts.[189]   Why this persistent misunderstanding in spite of the texts? Why is it necessary to reject an interpretation which the texts themselves explicitly refute? The answer is that nihilism has deep ontological roots. For Derrida these roots reside in the binary opposition between being and non-being in terms of which being is privileged. The ontological framework which supports nihilism is already brought to the texts, even if the texts themselves are meant to challenge it. If refuting nihilism were a matter as simple as locating the presence of a logical fallacy, then the relentless effort to rethink inherited meaning which occurs in Derrida's texts would be superfluous. Likewise for Heidegger the thinking of "difference as such" will shatter and surpass nihilism, but to reach that point it will be necessary to rigorously resist and oppose a view of negation which is nihilistic. Once again however this is problematic since we have no paradigm for how this can be accomplished, at least within the dominant traditions of the West.

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[188] John Caputo, (ed.) <u>Deconstruction in a Nutshell</u>: <u>a conversation with Jacques Derrida,</u> (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) pp 8-10.

[189] After explaining the loss of center which has occurred since the nineteenth century.   Derrida concludes with a joyous Nietzschean kind of affirmation of freeplay "of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation…" "This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as a loss of center." Cf. "Structure, sign and play in the human sciences," <u>op cit</u>., p.294.

How then do we gain insight into the meaning of the essential concepts of "difference" and "difference as such" which are critical to understanding Heidegger's argument in <u>OM?</u> While a careful analysis of the text is always the first line of defense, this proves inadequate since no broad-based introduction is provided. Neither does Heidegger provide any real insight into the meaning of "difference" and "difference as such" before they are put to work in a critique of metaphysics and an attempt to overcome ontotheology. Accordingly the reading proves to be quite challenging.

(c)   *The alternative of illuminating Heidegger through other texts*

We might attempt to illuminate the thinking of "difference as such" which occurs in <u>OM</u> by attempting to trace the development of this decisive turn toward negation in earlier texts. In this regard perhaps the ideal candidate would be the earlier (1927) piece "What is Metaphysics?" since there Heidegger for the first time makes negation the explicit theme of an entire piece. This is however problematic since the fact that a concern with negation becomes explicit does not in and of itself indicate a deeper or more thoroughgoing form of negation. A careful examination of the work will reveal that the doctrine of negation contained there is on a continuum with that of <u>Being and Time,</u> where negation forms the background in terms of which being appears. "For human existence, the nothing makes possible the openness of beings as such."[190] Alternatively we might select other works of the later period which embody the negative turn in its mature form such as <u>The Question of Being</u>, in which the concept of the 'crossing of

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[190] Marin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in <u>Basic Writings</u>, ed. by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1977) p. 104.

being' is featured.[191] Undoubtedly this route could be helpful, yet it is not unproblematic since we would ultimately run up against the same problem, namely how to understand the meaning and significance of a mode of thinking in which negation is primary. At some point this issue must be encountered, whether it be with the 'crossing of being' or with "difference as such."

(d)   *The primacy of the ontological difference*

In Thesis I of Chapter Three we attempted to explicate the sense and the significance of ontological difference as it lies at the basis of the *Seinsfrage*. We saw that in the early Heidegger the concept of the ontological difference as "the difference between being and beings," was a somewhat inchoate concept whose value in philosophical reasoning was not entirely clear. It is only in the later period represented by <u>OM</u> that the identity of the concept of the ontological difference comes sharply into focus. In the later period the essence of ontological difference is difference or negation. We saw this fact as highly significant for understanding the issue of the meaning of being. The imperative of doing justice to the irreducible uniqueness of being requires a unique and subtle methodology, one which above all respects the integrity of the fact that being is neither on a continuum with other objects of experience, nor a concept which is able to be subsumed under other concepts. Based on these considerations, the apophatic tradition represented by the thinking of Dionysius and Eckhart appeared as a powerful modality for gaining entrance into the *Seinsfrage*. In Chapter Three we also argued that an incipient form of the ontological difference is present in the traditional approach to God represented by St.

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[191] Martin Heidegger, <u>The Question of Being</u>, <u>op cit</u>., pp 87-108.

Thomas Aquinas's five ways, and a purer form of the ontological difference is realized in

Eckhart's enactment of the movement from God to Godhead. At this point it becomes

clear that the apophatic tradition has the potential to provide us precisely what is required

for the completion of our goal of illuminating the meaning of being for the later

Heidegger, namely a broad-based conceptual framework or paradigm with which to

understand Heidegger's project in <u>OM</u> of thinking the ontological difference as

"difference". Accordingly we now posit Thesis III:

(III)   <u>STATEMENT OF THESIS III</u>

The dialectic of negation, particularly as it functions in the exercise of iconoclasm in

Dionysius and Eckhart, illuminates   (1) the way in which negation forms a basis for and

"frees" thinking in <u>OM</u>; (2) the identity of "difference" (Differenz) and "difference as

such" (Differenz als solche) as forms of pure negation which are employed in

Heidegger's attempt to adequately think the ontological difference; and (3) the sense in

which the attempt to think being as the "difference as such" becomes expressed as

"perdurance" (Austrag.)

(IV)   <u>DEFENSE OF THESIS III</u>

(a)   *Negation as the basis of meaning: the opening up of ontological space*

Negation as it is operative in the exercise of iconoclasm (Chapter Three Va, I:d and Va, II:f) helps to illuminate Heidegger's understanding of difference in two senses. (1) It helps to illuminate the sense in which difference is the basis of meaning. (2) It helps to free us from the false assumption of the isomorphic identity of thinking and being.

This first aspect is thematized by Derrida and we should already have some sense of how it can be supported. Here it is not accidental that we described this earlier in terms of a loss of meaning wherein affirmative meaning collapses into difference. This once again has to do with the inevitable temptation to see difference through the ontology of nihilism, a framework which is not adequate either to Derrida or to Heidegger.

To understand how difference forms a background or a basis for thinking in Heidegger we must first ask: how does difference form a background or a basis for thinking in the negative theology of Dionysius and Eckhart? Operating in terms of the cataphatic mode, the starting point in the incomprehensibility of God (Chapter Three Va, I:a) leads to an impasse. Here we have only to think of Kant. The phenomenal realm represents a limit beyond which thinking cannot go. In Dionysius and Eckhart the first act of negation, which is a response to the incomprehensibility of God, is made in the context of a relentless drive toward divine illumination. We have seen especially in the case of Dionysius that this situation essentially opens up an ontological space in which meaning operates.(Chapter Two A, III:e) Meaning rushes in to fill the void created by the first act of negation. This meaning is itself permeated by negation. Because this meaning is permeated by negation it cannot be taken at face value, that is, it cannot be taken in the manner of an unequivocal affirmation. We have seen how the relentlessly dialectical relation between affirmation and negation makes for a type of thinking which never

comes to rest (Chapter Three Va, I:b), resulting in a new concept of ground, a ground which is both a foundation and an abyss (Chapter Three Va, I:c and Va, II:e). Here we would do well to reflect on the character of this ontological space opened up by negation, since in some ways it represents the center of the paradigm which will illuminate Heidegger. The main thing to observe here is the profoundly paradoxical character of this state of affairs: *negation opens up a space.* How can negation, something which is intrinsically limiting, magnify anything at all? By what mechanism does this operate? Can we find any analog for it in ordinary experience? Like any true paradox, the paradox of negation opening up a space is replete with meaning, hence there are perhaps many ways in which the question can be answered. One possible answer is already contained in our description of the process in Chapter Two. Negation opens up a space because it frees thinking in the same manner as a thought experiment. A thought experiment frees thinking but it limits thought as well. The hypothetical starting point of a thought experiment automatically limits the findings and implications of that experiment. If a starting point is hypothetical so must be its implications and findings. Yet a thought experiment initiated in response to a complex dilemma which seems to defy a more straightforward approach can be a very powerful methodological tool. *It frees thinking from the demand to either immediately demonstrate its authenticity or be dismissed as out of hand.*[192] In a similar way the ontology of negation represents a powerful methodological tool for thinking about issues of meaning. Here it would be no exaggeration to claim that the entire project of negative theology takes place in the space

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[192] Here no better example can be given than that of Kant's first critique. In the preface to the second edition Kant is quite explicit about the experimental thrust of the critical philosophy. "We must therefore make a trial whether we may not have more success in the task of metaphysics if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge." Cf. Critique of Pure Reason, Bxvi.

opened up by negation. In short, this insight answers the riddle of negative theology which is: why does the impossibility of speaking and knowing about God not lead to an impasse? Indeed in the cataphatic mode, given the starting point of negative theology, all knowledge and speech about God comes to an end. Nevertheless these continue in the apophatic mode. In this manner we can think of the perspective of negation as freeing thought. It also frees thought by showing us the limits of binary logic which is at the basis of cataphatic thinking.

    (b) A *challenge to the isomorphic identity of thinking and being*

At this point we have stumbled upon yet a second way in which negation opens up a space for thinking. *Negation opens up a space for thinking because it frees thought from the false assumption of the isomorphic identity between thinking and being.* (Chapter Three, V:e). Here we have once again reached a fundamental insight of the negative theology of Dionysius and Eckhart, and one which stands in marked contrast to that of the dominant traditions of Western philosophy: thinking and being are not isomorphic. There is no assurance that either language or thought precisely correspond to what is real. The fact that the reality of God infinitely transcends human knowledge shatters all presumption concerning the isomorphic identity of thinking and being.

We saw in the case of Dionysius how in the exercise of iconoclasm the relentless negation is given in a dialectical relation with affirmation (Chapter Three Va, I:c). In these terms it is clear how negation opens up a space in which thinking takes place. Viewed in the light of the paradigm of negative theology Heidegger's reflections provide

us with real insight into the basis of thinking. We come to understand how critically important negation is to the generation of positive meaning. Authentic thinking, which is to say thinking which is truly reflective and not determined by an implicit facticity, is one which is forged in the fires of negation.

(c)   Negation and freeing thinking of the past

It is only a systematic form of negation which can protect against both the ever present danger of reification of being, and the identification of thought with that of past thinkers.   In the context of Heidegger negation frees thought from an imperative it can never fulfill, the imperative to adequately represent being in thought. It is significant that Heidegger speaks of the criterion of what has not been thought, which we have identified as difference, as freeing thought. "The criterion of what has not been thought does not lead to the inclusion of what has not been thought into a still higher development and systemization that surpasses it. Rather the criterion demands that traditional thinking be set free into its essential past which is still preserved."[193]   The inclusion of previous thought in a system refers to Hegel, but we can read into that any speculative system of philosophy. In such systems thinking of the past is viewed through the lens of the system. Such systematic thinking must fail to do justice to the specificity and the uniqueness of determinate expressions of thought. By contrast, and very paradoxically, thinking which is grounded in difference is able to honor the integrity and the uniqueness of historical expressions of thought. In these terms, thinking is set free. Heidegger tells us above that thinking is set free into its past because individual expressions of thought belong to and

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[193] Heidegger, OM, op cit., p. 48.

arise out of a very particular historical context. "Being ever and always speaks as destiny and is thus permeated by tradition."[194] Only thinking which is grounded in difference has renounced all necessity of co-opting expressions of thought for the purposes of systematic unity, and hence is able to honor the integrity of thought in its historical context.

Based on the above, the profound distance between Heidegger's thinking which is grounded in difference and the a-historical thinking which attempts to operate outside of the past should be obvious. Once again a paradox emerges. Thinking which ignores its roots is haunted by the past in the form of the continuous threat that attempts to think anew in fact reproduce the mistakes and trivialities of the past. Thinking which is grounded in difference preserves the past. It is instructive to reflect on the roots of this paradox. These lie in none other than the identity of difference as a pure form of negation which is nevertheless given in a dialectical relation to affirmation. Thinking which is grounded in difference must begin by squarely encountering the 'other' of its past. "But only what has already been thought prepares what has not yet been thought, which enters ever new into its abundance."[195] This is true in the same way that the attempt to transcend God into Godhead is only possible based on the most serious encounter with our inherited God concepts. Thinking which is grounded in difference is never identical to its past. In affirmation of what has not yet been thought the past is simultaneously transcended, yet preserved by being set free from the conceptual manipulations of philosophical reason. In another work, Conversation on a Country Path, in explicit reference to Eckhart Heidegger adopts the term *releasement*

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[194] Ibid., p. 51.
[195] Ibid., p. 48.

(*Gelassenheit)* for the freeing of thought. For our purposes here it is sufficient to note the connectedness between what might be deemed to be a classical religious or spiritual doctrine, a doctrine of detachment, and philosophical reason. As we briefly explored in Chapter Two (Chapter Two, B, VI:a), Eckhart's doctrine of releasement grasps this fundamental connectedness in the form of an awareness that philosophical reason, like spiritual life, is not independent of subjective human interests. In the language of Conversation on a Country Path, it can be said that difference releases thinking into its past.

(d)   N*egation and thinking the "difference as such"*

(2) Negation as it is operative in the exercise of iconoclasm also helps us to understand the significance of one of the central goals of OM, which is to think being as the "difference as such." Essentially the terms "difference" and "difference as such" are on a continuum. They each represent an attempt to replace the cataphatic mode which is operative within the dominant traditions of Western philosophy with an apophatic one. The difference between the two is essentially one of emphasis. Heidegger most often employs the term" difference" in the context of making a contrast between his method and that of Hegel. This occurs in the early part of the essay, roughly in sections 42-50. The purpose of this, as indicated earlier, is to thematize the way in which difference forms a basis of meaning. Once this point has been made attention is turned toward the more fundamental goal of thinking the "difference as such," as a way of thinking about being. Here the term "difference as such" indicates that the focus will be on difference itself rather than on naming the specific differences which are the stock and trade of

metaphysics. Where metaphysics names specific differences, e.g. 'being is ground,

beings are what is grounded,' difference acts as a mere corrective in the process of

establishing affirmative meaning. In metaphysics difference functions in a manner which

is accidental rather than essential. Heidegger's method involves reversing this order of

priority, making what is for metaphysics an accident into an essential object of inquiry.

(e) T*he problem of thinking "difference as such"*

 How can difference--something negative--be made the explicit object of inquiry? We

have seen how difference forms a basis of affirmative meaning, nevertheless the

assignment of making difference the explicit object of inquiry remains counterintuitive.

Heidegger attempts to articulate this difficulty:

> Thus we think of Being rigorously only when we think of it in its difference with
> beings, and of beings in their difference with Being. The difference comes speci-
> fically into view. If we try to form a representational idea of it, we will at once be
> misled into conceiving of difference as a relation which our representing has added
> to Being and to beings. Thus the difference is reduced to a distinction, something
> made up by our understanding (*Verstand*). But if we assume that the difference is
> a contribution made by our representational thinking, the question arises: a contrbu-
> tion to what? One answers: to beings. Good. But what does that mean: "beings?"
> What else could it mean than: something that is. Thus we give to the supposed con-
> tribution, the representational idea of difference, a place within Being. But "Being"
> itself says: Being which is *beings*.[196]

  Heidegger concludes this discussion with a rare and amusing example: "It is as in

Grimm's fairytale *The Hedgehog and the Hare*: "I'm here already."[197]

    Here the issue is that although as we have seen, difference is essential to meaning,

and we neglect difference only at the peril of the neglect of meaning itself, nevertheless if

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[196] Ibid., p. 62.
[197] Ibid., p. 62.

we try and objectify difference it seems to vanish into the unity of being. This should come as no surprise. We turned toward difference as a way of doing justice to the irreducibility of being. Hence the reification of difference must be deemed to be as ontologically misguided as the reification of being. How then do we make difference into the explicit object of inquiry, without either reifying difference in the way in which metaphysics reifies being, or having difference collapse into the identity of being?

(f) *Addressing the problem of thinking the "difference as such:" the primacy of negation in Dionysius and Eckhart*

We have seen the same problem in the negative theology of Dionysius and Eckhart. Inadequacy of the cataphatic mode leads to a decisive turn toward negation. Yet this move appears as counterintuitive. If the affirmative mode is inadequate how can negation contain any efficacy except to express the impotence and despair of knowing? Does the turn toward negation not lead us to an impasse? We have seen how negative theology deals with this problem: the depth and power of negation is realized in negative theology in a dialectical relation to affirmation.

 Essentially Heidegger's attempt to think "difference as such" in <u>OM</u> follows this same paradigm. After demonstrating how difference isolated from affirmation leads to an impasse, Heidegger explores a second option.

> While we are facing the difference, though by the step back we are already re-
> leasing it into that which gives thought, we can say: the Being of beings means
> Being which is beings. The "is" here speaks transitively, in transition. Being
> here becomes present in the manner of a transition to Beings. But
> Being does not leave its own place, and go over to beings, as though beings

were first without Being and could be approached by Being subsequently. Being transits (that), comes unconcealingly over (that) which arrives as something of itself unconcealed only by that coming-over. Arrival means: to keep concealed in unconcealedness—to abide present in this keeping—to be a being.[198]

Here the attempt to think of the "difference as such" is expressed as a pure reciprocity between being and beings. We began with the ontological difference, the imperative to think being in its difference from beings. Yet this assignment leads us back to beings. "Being itself says Being which is beings."[199] Likewise it is impossible to think of the autonomy of beings. Beings only come to be in the unconcealment of being, an unconcealment which is simultaneously a concealment of being as such. Thus any attempt to think being or beings within the ontological difference is characterized by negation. Both the pole of being and that of beings are negated as intrinsic or autonomous identities. Once again the paradigm for this is established by negative theology. The turn toward negation is expressed in terms of the dialectic of negation, which involves a deeply dialectical relation between affirmation and negation. We have seen this at work in Eckhart, where the poles of God and creation are dissolved as autonomous, intrinsic identities and are defined in a manner which is purely relational (Chapter Three Va, II:b). The name of this pure relation in Heidegger is "perdurance" (*Austrag*).

(g) From the "difference as such" to "perdurance"

The difference of Being and beings, as the differentiation of overwhelming and arrival, is the perdurance of the two in *unconcealing keeping in concealment.* Within this perdurance there prevails a clearing of what veils and closes itself

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[198] Ibid., p. 64.

[199] Ibid., p. 62.

off and this its prevalence bestows the being apart, and the being toward each other, of overwhelming and arrival.[200]

The concept of perdurance might suggest something which endures, a stable center. There is indeed something stable in perdurance, but it is the stability of relentless motion: "Perdurance is a circling, the circling of being and beings around one another."[201]

Heidegger will speak of perdurance almost as if it is a force or a power which operates independently of human action. "The onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics has its essential origin in the perdurance that begins the history of metaphysics, governs all of its epochs, and yet remains everywhere concealed *as* perdurance, and thus forgotten in an oblivion which even escapes itself."[202]

How should we understand this curious statement, and how did we move from "difference as such" to "perdurance?" The move appears to be required by what is implied in thinking being as pure negation. Pure negation leads us, as we have seen, to a dialectical relation between affirmation and negation. If the relation between affirmation and negation is truly dialectical it takes thinking out of the realm of knowing subject and object known. The latter is the prerogative of metaphysics. It is metaphysics which represents being as an entity to knowing subjects. Once again Heidegger's thinking takes place in the transcendental step back from the enterprise of actually doing metaphysics. On that level the working of negation comes into focus. We are able to observe the importance of negation in the formation of metaphysical concepts even while in the metaphysical tradition itself negation is neglected and suppressed.

(h) *The historicity of the terms "being" and "beings."*

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[200] Ibid., p. 65.
[201] Ibid., p. 69.
[202] Ibid., p. 68.

We have seen how Heidegger uses the terms "being" and "beings" in order to explicate the reciprocity which is at the basis of metaphysics. It should be clear why this is problematic. The terms "being" and "beings" arise out of the metaphysical tradition, they indicate concepts which are univocal and fully formed, whereas Heidegger is attempting to reflect on the process whereby the formation of metaphysical concepts occurs. We have already encountered Heidegger's awareness of this fact. "It is still infinitely possible to represent 'Being' as the general character of particular beings. There is being only in this or that historic character."[203] Nevertheless these historic characters did not come into existence fully formed. In the transcendental step back Heidegger is attempting to articulate the ontological basis of this metaphysical history. It is on the ontological level that we observe the profound reciprocity between being and beings. At any stage of the history of metaphysics there is some understanding of being. Likewise at any stage there is an understanding of beings. Each of these is formed and developed in a continuous reciprocity with the other. In the actual history of metaphysics the reciprocity is frozen at a particular point in time. Being comes to be represented in a timeless historical manner as "Substantiality," "Objectivity," "Subjectivity," "the Will," the "Will to Power," "the Will to Will."[204] We have seen in part how this process operates in terms of the ontotheological constitution of metaphysics. We begin with the general character of being.

> Inasmuch as Being becomes present as the Being of beings, as the difference, as perduration, the separateness and mutual relatedness of grounding and of accounting for endures, Being grounds beings, and beings, as what *is* most of all, account for Being. One comes over the other, one arrives in the other. Overwhelming and arrival appear in each other in reciprocal reflection… [205]

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[203] Ibid., p.66.
[204] Ibid., p. 66.
[205] Ibid., p. 69.

On this level, the level of the ontological priority of the question of the meaning of being, a dynamic reciprocity is already present. We should note as well the presence of negation at the center of this reciprocity. This reciprocity tells us that being which grounds itself requires grounding in beings. As a true reciprocity there is a dynamic movement in both directions. Nevertheless this reciprocity is one short step away from ontotheology. "The deity enters into philosophy through the perdurance of which we think at first as the approach to the active nature of the difference between Being and beings."[206]

To understand this passage it is necessary to clearly separate different levels of activity. There is the level of the reflective step back from metaphysics—the ontological level of the origins of metaphysics, and the level of the actual enterprise of metaphysics itself. On the ontological level we have perdurance expressed as a fundamental reciprocity between being and beings. This reciprocity is actualized through the subtle play of difference. Being is different from beings. Being is ground, beings are what is grounded. On the ontological level this rigid separation fails to inhere as they dissolve in a dynamic reciprocity. Moreover on the ontological level of difference, a form of negation is always balanced or countered by one of affirmation. "The perdurance of that which grounds and that which is grounded, as such, not only holds the two apart, it holds them facing each other."[207] On the metaphysical level difference assumes a binary form. The insight that being itself requires grounding translates grounds to causes, leading inevitably to *causa sui.* Difference now appears final and irrevocable. Earlier Heidegger contrasted the two levels in terms of difference in a succinct way: "Since metaphysics

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[206] Ibid., p. 71.
[207] Ibid., p. 68.

thinks of being as such as a whole, it represents beings in respect of what differs in the difference, and without heading the difference as difference"[208] The stilling of the reciprocity between being and beings marks the beginning of metaphysical concepts, ideally suited to expression through the categories of binary logic.

(i) *Reexamining the ontological difference*

 Viewed in the context of negative theology it becomes clear why the ontological difference and with it negation is as it were unimpeachable in character. The unimpeachable character of the ontological difference is rooted in the reflective character of human consciousness. Consciousness will always resist and oppose an identification of reality, truth, being, and the good with what is given on the phenomenal level of experience. The concepts of truth, reality, being and the good already presuppose the ontological difference, since it is only a human being with a reflective consciousness which can formulate them. In this way the concept of Godhead or of being beyond being is merely a systematic working out of the qualitative difference between being and its ground which is implied in the ontological difference. Here the point is that, given the starting point of ontological difference, it is only an ontology of negation which can do it justice.

 It should now be clear why the methodology of negative theology is essential to Heidegger's project of thinking the ontological difference, and why a pure form of negation such as is operative in the exercise of iconoclasm provides a paradigm for this. Outside of the context of negative theology the concept of "difference as such" appears

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[208] Ibid., p. 70.

unintelligible. How can difference be conceived purely, without terms of difference? Within the context of negative theology we become familiar with a mode of difference which is systematic, that is, constituted not by a single act but by a series of negations. In these terms, given together with the fact that negation operates in a dialectical relation to affirmation, the concept of a negatively grounded form of thinking becomes fully intelligible. Such thinking does not operate in a void but in the space which is opened up by the *a priori* starting point of the incomprehensibility of God, or in the case of Heidegger in the *a priori* refusal to reify being. Here we can think of Heidegger's term "difference as such," as a polemical response to the threat of the collapse of difference into identity. This threat is realized in the form of thinking coming to rest in a specific difference between being and beings. In the context of theology it comes to rest in a specific being which embodies that difference. The concept of "difference as such," like the concept of Godhead, reminds us that the ontological difference is an ideal which can never be embodied in any concrete form. "Difference as such" is insurance against the danger that the rigorous exercise of thought involved in the thinking of being should ever come to rest. It maintains the open space between being and beings as required by the ontological difference.

(j) *Transcending metaphysical language*

If metaphysical language is language which has been developed in order to describe being qua being, an endeavor which Heidegger has always maintained is on a continuum with the attempt to describe particular aspects of being, e.g., science, then it is clear that

the terms "difference as such" and "perdurance" are beyond the scope of metaphysical language. "For what these words name, what the manner of thinking which is guided by them represents, originates as that which differs by virtue of the difference. The origin of the difference can no longer be thought within the scope of metaphysics."[209]   The origin of the difference can no longer be thought within the scope of metaphysics because origins, like causes and explanations, are all aspects of a metaphysical language which must be negated and surpassed as required by the logic of pure negation which is "difference as such."

(k) *The historicality and epochality of being*

"Difference as such" can also help us to understand the true sense of being as historical and epochal, and indeed Heidegger connects the two concepts in <u>OM</u>.[210]. Understanding "difference as such" after the paradigm of Godhead or "being beyond being" in Dionysius, what in each case emerges from the exercise of systematic negation helps to insure against understanding the historicity and epochality of being metaphysically. If Godhead is not a metaphysical concept but emerges from its overcoming, then this is likewise the case with "difference as such." On the surface, being as historical and epochal would appear to be worlds removed from the concept of Godhead. As many commentators have indicated, there is little historical sense in either Dionysius or Eckhart. Nevertheless what is at issue is again ontological difference. Godhead which emerges from the exercise of iconoclasm resists and opposes all attempts

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[209] Ibid., p.71.
[210] Ibid., p. 67.

to ground beings in a source which is on a continuum with beings. In Dionysius this becomes quite explicit. God what, corresponds to Godhead in Eckhart, is beyond being (*hyperousious)* (Chapter Three Va, I:d). Likewise for Heidegger, being as historical and epochal resists and opposes all attempts to characterize being in terms of universal objective features and categories. Historicality and epochality are not features of being, but as expressions of the ontological difference they are that in terms of which being appears. Being appears as *logos*, as ground, as Absolute Spirit, as historical, dialectical matter, but can never coincide with any of these expressions. The effect of the historicality and epochality of being is to shield being from reification. This is precisely what requires the move from God to Godhead. Each time being is thought as historical and epochal it is removed from the realm of what can be objectively identified and known.

(l) *Summary of Thesis III*

Negation as it is operative in the exercise of iconoclasm helps to illuminate Heidegger's concept of difference and "difference as such" in <u>OM</u> in two ways. First, it provides us with a paradigm of the necessity of a negative turn. This necessity begins in Dionysius and Eckhart with a deep awareness of the profound limitations of the affirmative, cataphatic mode of thinking. In Dionysius it takes the form of the incomprehensibility of God, in Eckhart of the impossibility of establishing God as ground (Chapter Three Va, I:a and Va, II:a). Essentially Heidegger's introduction into thinking of the concept of difference follows this paradigm. The turn toward difference is initiated precisely because the cataphatic mode of thinking has become untenable. It is impossible

to understand the concept of difference in Heidegger without first coming to terms with the radical impotence of the affirmative, cataphatic mode to do justice to the issue of being. To be sure, the impotence of cataphatic thinking has an historical aspect in Heidegger which is not present in Dionysius and Eckhart. Affirmative, cataphatic thinking has essentially run its course in the history of philosophy. Apart from the historical aspect, the paradigm of reaching an impasse through cataphatic thinking is powerfully embodied in the work of Dionysius and Eckhart. We might even say that in these authors there is embodied something like an originary or pure form of impasse insofar as cataphatic thinking when faced with its object, which is God, becomes utterly impotent. The impotence of the cataphatic mode becomes for Heidegger the unexpressed starting point of <u>OM.</u> .Being able to clearly view this paradigm and make it fully explicit helps to illuminate Heidegger's argument.

Secondly, the dialectic of negation as it is embodied in the exercise of iconoclasm helps us to see the identity of "difference as such" as a purely negative concept, a concept of pure negation. The manner in which negative concepts function in the Dionysian and Eckhartian paradigms in a fully systematic way, a way which is given in a dialectical relation to affirmation and is not merely methodological but ontological, resulting in a radically new understanding of ground, provides a key to understanding the meaning of the concept of "difference as such" in Heidegger. Finally, understanding the identity of "difference as such" as a concept of pure negation in <u>OM</u> helps us to understand the sense of thinking "difference as such" as a way of thinking a pure form of the ontological difference. Since the ontological difference is itself grounded in negation, it is only a mode of thinking which is wholly negative which can express the ontological difference

in pure form, one not characterized by the inner contradiction which plagues metaphysics. Thus the paradigm of pure negation as expressed in the exercise of iconoclasm helps to illuminate both the ontological difference itself as well as its relation to traditional metaphysics and how it is employed in Heidegger. Since metaphysics operates in the affirmative, cataphatic mode, the presence of the ontological difference in metaphysics will always be characterized by contradiction. Insofar as the ontological difference is an aspect of the reflective character of human consciousness it is at the basis of all philosophical thinking. Yet insofar as metaphysics operates in the affirmative mode, the ontological difference can never be fully realized in metaphysics. In the concept of Godhead or "being beyond being"(*hyperousios*) which emerges from the exercise of iconoclasm we glimpse for the first time a pure form of the ontological difference, expressed as the infinite qualitative difference between beings and their ground, a difference which is established and maintained by a systematic act of negation. This pure form of the ontological difference which is present outside of Heidegger provides us with a paradigm for how it is to be thought in Heidegger.

(V)   <u>TESTING THESIS III</u>

(a)   T*he ontological difference and the highest ideal of ethics*

Given Heidegger's claim that the ontological difference is at the basis of all philosophical thinking, together with our own hypothesis expressed in Thesis III that negation as it is operative in the exercise of iconoclasm is at the center of the ontological

difference, we should then be in a better position to detect the presence of the ontological difference outside of Heidegger and even outside of metaphysics. Moreover with the insight which our thesis provides we should be able to approach those expressions of thought in which the ontological difference is discerned with renewed understanding.

This is the case as can be demonstrated with the concept of 'the good' as the highest ideal of ethics. As the highest ideal, in principle no actual good can ever be equivalent to it. Here the fact that each expression of good is in principle different from the ideal insures us that only an act, or rather only a process, of systematic negation can open and maintain the distance between the two. An awareness of this is already present in Kant insofar as Kant welcomes the objection that it is not possible to adduce a single act which is a verifiable instance of acting for the sake of duty.[211]Thus the categorical imperative is grounded in ontological difference as the infinite qualitative difference between the ideal of duty and any acts which aspire to actualize that ideal. Here we should not fail to miss the deeply ontological intention of Kant's ethics. At the beginning of the Groundwork we are told that only a good will is good without qualification.[212] At last the ancient metaphysical ideal to find absolute and unconditioned being is realized; yet there is no contradiction between Kant's ethics and his first critique. The good will as an absolute and unconditioned reality is never actually given in experience.

(b)   *Derrida and the highest good of ethics*

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[211] Immanuel Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. by Lewis White Beck (Indiana: The Bobbs-Merill Company, 1959) p, 23.
[212] Immanuel Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. by Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 7.

Here it will be helpful to view the categorical imperative from the perspective of Derrida, whose thinking as we have seen has been powerfully affected by Heidegger's ontological difference. What follows is not Derrida's actual analysis of the categorical imperative, but a reading which is inspired by Derrida's own understanding of the nature of human ethical experience to which the categorical imperative is a response. Derrida makes a distinction between responsibility, which appears closely connected to the Kantian notion of duty, and obligation. Obligations are specified in a determinate way. I am obliged to return a book to the library, or to shovel the snow in front of my walkway. Responsibilities, on the other hand, have a complex and ubiquitous claim on us, in a way which makes them impossible to fulfill in a simple univocal manner. We are responsible to our parents, to our children, to future generations, to society, to individuals, to ourselves, even to past generations. Responsibility at no point comes to closure in the performance of specified acts. As Derrida puts it:"one is never responsible enough."[213]

What then does the categorical imperative tell us? It tells us that as rational agents we are compelled by a higher order of meaning, an ethical order, one which is qualitatively different from the hypothetical one which governs our daily endeavors. Nevertheless as qualitatively unique, the dimension of the ought can never in principle provide us with a finite list of actions to be performed, or of those which are prohibited which are equivalent to the moral ought. The imperative of duty will always transcend and exceed particular specifications. Because it exceeds specifications, it likewise contains much less than a casuistic principle which can be employed for the easy resolution of moral

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[213] Jacques Derrida, The Gift of Death, trans. by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) p.51.

difficulties. Moreover it is never entirely clear that any particular specifications embody duty at all.

All this is a way of saying that for Derrida *in principle a categorical imperative resists the ontology of full presence.* It is marked by the same essential paradox which we saw exhibited in both the ontological difference itself and Godhead. To insist on forcing the categorical imperative into the framework of the ontology of full presence would be to rupture the integrity of the qualitative uniqueness which defines it and from which it draws its power. It would be to reduce the categorical to the level of ordinary obligation. All too naturally the attempt to conceive of an absolute and unconditional dimension of meaning represented by the categorical imperative gives rise to negative language, indeed to an ontology of negation. A negative term is initiated in response to the impotence of the affirmative mode. The negation involved is not a single act of negation, but systematic and given in a dialectical relation to affirmation. The deeply dialectical relation between affirmation and negation involved in thinking the categorical imperative involves a kind of thinking which never comes to rest. Needless to say, all of this calls into question Kant's claim that ethics is based on pure reason. At most reason can only provide a penultimate basis. What makes ethics possible makes it in the strict sense impossible. Once again a ground is both a foundation and an abyss.

We can also detect the presence of the ontological difference in political philosophy as the qualitative difference between the ideal society and attempts to actualize or achieve that ideal. It can be detected as well in the difference between the ideals of political philosophy—ideals such as democracy, justice and equality—and attempts to realize those ideals. Once again Derrida is helpful. His political philosophy is based on the

radical displacement of political ideals from their inherited context in the ontology of presence. Accordingly the concept of the 'messianic,' with its inherently futuristic orientation, becomes a key political concept.[214] Before Derrida 'critical theory' represented by such figures as Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse essentially made the ontological difference, in the form of a relentless critique of modern technological society in terms of the highest ideals embodied in the Western tradition, the centerpiece of its political philosophy. Accordingly the term and the concept of negation became irreducible for critical theory. Significantly enough, it is a negation which is always given in a dialectical relation to affirmation[215].

The presence of the ontological difference outside Heidegger lends much support to its legitimacy as a philosophical concept. Our thesis that negation lies at the center of the ontological difference allows for an insightful reading of traditional texts in which the presence of the ontological difference is discerned. While Heidegger's claim that the ontological difference lies at the basis of all philosophical thinking would be more difficult to support, the exposition above suggests that this seminal concept is indeed present in some of our most reflective and enduring texts. By way of example, it would be difficult to argue the case that the ontological difference plays a central role in utilitarian-based ethics. However, the endurance of Kantian ethics against the utilitarian onslaught suggests something about its irreducible value in doing justice to our ethical experience. It is significant that in defending this value against utilitarian criticism Kantians will time and again point to the way in which an unconditional ought defines

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[214] Jacques Derrida, Spectres of Marx, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) p.163.
[215] Herbert Marcuse, Negations: Essays in Critical Theory (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968)

what is most essential about our ethical experience.[216]Despite the many problems of

Kant's ethics, some of which Derrida's reading actually addresses, no results-oriented

approach can ever do justice to our moral experience.

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[216] Cf. J.C. Paton, The Categorical Imperative(Pennsylvania:Pensylvannia University Press, 1971) pp-19-31.

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