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History as Decision and Event in Heidegger

Abstract: *This paper explores Martin Heidegger's critique of previous approaches to history, his differentiation of history as object of inquiry and temporal enactment, and his attempt in the late 1930's to engage the past and rethink history from an inherently futural—and not merely subjectively or objectively grounded—decision and “enowning event” (Ereignis). Works of history are neither simply factual nor socially constructed for Heidegger but exhibit a hermeneutical or communicative event of disclosure—via understanding, interpretation, and appropriation—and concealment in relation to the facticity and possibilities of historical existence.*

Key Words: *Heidegger, Geschichte, Event, Decision*

1. Introduction

The following remarks address Martin Heidegger's thinking of history as decision and event in the posthumously published works of the late 1930's. The importance of the question of history to Heidegger's thought is undeniable and yet his significance for the philosophy of history remains underappreciated. Beginning with the early Karl Löwith and Herbert Marcuse, Heidegger's stress on approaching history through the history of philosophy was judged as distancing his thought from the materiality of real historical processes, structures, and agents. In Heidegger's analysis, however, philosophy does not signify a derivative or superstructural intellectual history; it confronts questions of how and formally indicates the ways in which human beings exist, i.e., the basic comportment and disposition of human existence as being-there (*Dasein*) temporally in-the-world. Heidegger's destructuring confrontation with the history of ontology and metaphysics has a critical and transformative dimension by engaging ordinary and everyday ways of behaving, as structured by tradition and average public life, rather than remaining in the intellectual “life of the mind.”

Heidegger's trajectory was repeatedly impacted by historical occurrences from the First and Second World Wars to the Cold War that elicited further historical reflection. After notoriously actively and enthusiastically supporting National Socialism in its first years in power, a well-documented commitment deserving ruthless criticism, Heidegger began by the mid-1930's to confront its destructive gigantism, machination, racial biologism, and totalitarian integration in the context of the unfolding of western metaphysics. These historical reflections are informed and distorted by the crisis of his times and reveal a significant—if not unproblematic—questioning of previous and contemporary approaches to and stagings of the historical that continue to speak to our contemporary situation. It is this “other beginning” in Heidegger's thinking of history that I hope to explicate in the subsequent reflections.

Heidegger's works of the late 1930's resonate with while transforming his so-called “existential” account of history in *Being and Time*, which was developed in the context of the threefold “ec-static” character of temporality. These later reflections radicalize in particular the interruptive force of the future as well as his earlier distinction between history as an external object of inquiry and history as an on-going event and performative enactment of being. In his historical writings, we can observe how Heidegger practiced history. Although primarily oriented toward the history of western philosophy and its modern consequences, including basic features of modernity like technology and bureaucracy, they can be interpreted as an exemplar or conditional model for historical inquiry. Heidegger attempted in these works to encounter the past not “as it was”—as a retrieval of the past in its past presence, the identity of pure unsullied origins, or of the “first beginning”—but from the non-identity and interruptive force of what he called the “other beginning,” which is accessible in its relation to and difference from the first. Instead of reifying the past in its empirical factuality, or reducing it to a construct imposed on it by the present, Heidegger articulates the dynamic temporal relationality of the historical as well as a different relation with history in which the present can encounter and respond to the past. Such historical responsiveness, a letting or releasement allowing beings to be immanently encountered and engaged on their own terms, would move toward the past phenomenologically as it shows itself from itself even as that past escapes and remains irreducible to present efforts—whether narrative or causal—to grasp and manage it.

Whereas descriptive-analytic approaches to history risk missing the present situation in which the past is received and interpreted, due to the historicity and temporal difference of past and present, historical constructivism threatens to idealistically reduce the alterity of the past to the sameness of the

present or a current system of signifiers such as consciousness, language, or society. Heidegger's works suggest rethinking history through the possibility of encountering and responding to the past in its historicity, in both its continuity and discontinuity with the present, by pursuing the temporality of being as an inherently future-oriented—and thus not merely subjectively or objectively grounded—decision (*Ent-scheidung*) and enowning event (*Ereignis*).¹

This interpretation of history has significant implications for contemporary reflection on history and historical inquiry, since it entails that historical events have an ontological as well as ontic dimension. That is, history involves a relational way or manner of being as much as it does objectively and instrumentally available entities and structures. If the historical is both relational, constituting a between (*Zwischen*) or a nexus (*Zusammenhang*) from and to which understanding proceeds, and asymmetrical, such that there is an unavoidable alterity in relating past, present and future, then it is insufficient to consider history as consisting of temporally equivalent factual occurrences or socially constructed objects. Likewise, historical works disclose and allow a world to be encountered and engaged. They do not only descriptively reproduce events or replicate subjective and intersubjective interests and preferences. Beyond history construed as reproducing the empirically given or the socially constructed, and truth as consisting of correspondence with the actual or the coherence of a system of statements, the historical more fundamentally and constitutively occurs as the performative enactment, disclosure, and appropriation of a world. In disclosing and concealing, gathering together and dispersing, and closing off and opening up, historical works constitute a world and a way of being in that world.

Although Heidegger's "being-historical thinking" (*Seinsgeschichtliches Denken*, as thinking history in the context of the history of being) is not a methodology or program for historical inquiry, it has repercussions for such inquiry by diverging from history conceived of as the construction of first-person narratives and third-person causal explanations according to teleological, causal, and authorial schemas. In this deviant history, which risks hearing the other and unsaid of history, historically mindful reflection (*Besinnung*) elucidates a hermeneutical event of disclosure—via understanding, interpretation, and appropriation—in the context of its standing-outside-of-itself and expropriation in the facticity and possibilities of historical being.

¹ I refer to *Ereignis* as "event," and sometimes "enowning event," in order to avoid overly technically interpreting the word in its translation. Although it should not be understood as an ontic or empirical happening or fact, it seems imprudent to drop the ordinary German sense of "event" for "appropriation" or "enownment" given that *Ereignis* is also described as "dis-appropriation" and "disowning" (*Enteignis*).

2. The Question of Decision

“The historical does not denote a manner of grasping and exploring but the very event (*Ereignis*) itself. The historical is not the past, not even the present, but the future, that which is commended to the will, to expectation, to care.”²

“But just as little [as it is the past] is this happening (*Ereignis*) the present. The happening and the happenings of history are primordially and always the future, that which in a concealed way comes toward us, a revelatory process that puts us at risk, and thus is compelling in advance. The future is the beginning of all happening. Everything is enclosed within the beginning.”³

One fundamental task of Heidegger’s posthumously published *Contributions to Philosophy*⁴ is to prepare for a possible decision. Heidegger asks *what* this decision is about and answers that it is about history and the loss of history, i.e., of belonging to being or to non-belonging in the abandonment of beings (GA 65: 44, 100). This decision is about historicity and the lack of history, and is a decision for or against history (GA 65: 13, 32, 504). It is a decision that is not about history, neutrally evaluating and explaining it from outside, but a decision enacting history in its historicity or the specificity and singularity of its historical being.

Heidegger asks *who* is to make this decision and responds with seemingly contradictory answers. It is being (*Sein*) who decides; it is the few and the

2. Martin Heidegger, GA 45: *Grundfragen der Philosophie*. Second Edition. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1992), 40-41. Translation: *Basic Questions of Philosophy*. Tr. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). All Heidegger references are to the pagination of the *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976-ongoing) unless otherwise noted (hereafter referred to as GA, volume number, and page numbers). Other volumes cited include: GA 21 (1995) *Logik. Die Frage nach der Wahrheit*. Second Edition; GA 51 (1991) *Grundbegriffe*. Second Edition / (1993) *Basic Concepts*. Tr. Gary Aylesworth. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; GA 56/57 (1987) *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*; GA 60 (1995) *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*; GA 61 (1994) *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles*. Second Edition; GA 65 (1989) *Beiträge zur Philosophie: (Vom Ereignis)* / *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*. Tr. P. Emad and K. Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); GA 66 (1997) *Besinnung / Mindfulness*. Tr. P. Emad and T. Kalary (London: Continuum, 2006); GA 67 (1999) *Metaphysik und Nihilismus*; GA 69 (1998) *Die Geschichte des Seyns; (IM) Einführung in die Metaphysik*. Fourth Edition (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976) / *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Tr. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

3 Martin Heidegger, GA 45: 36-37.

4 *Beiträge zur Philosophie: Vom Ereignis*, hereafter *Contributions*. The best introduction to this complex and admittedly off-putting work is Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

rare who decide (GA 65: 96); it is “everyone” who decides (GA 65: 100). Who then decides? It is the singular, the few, and the many (GA 65: 97) that decide even in not deciding and not wishing to decide (GA 65: 100). Heidegger inquires into *how* this decision is to be made. It is not “made” but occurs, and it transpires in such a way that it can be intimated and prepared for or not. What then does this decision about history signify and how is this decision itself historical? Who decides history and who is it that is thereby historically decided? These are the guiding questions of Heidegger’s thinking of history as the history of being in the mid and late 1930’s. It is a time of pain and trauma, crisis and violence, of gigantism and machination—a time of distress and of deciding and evading decision in response to this distress and abandonment.

To help understand these questions, it is relevant to consider how Heidegger intensifies the strategy of historical destructuring (*Destruktion*), first developed in his reading of early Christianity in the early 1920’s and familiar from *Being and Time*, as confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) in the 1930’s. *Auseinandersetzung* is a setting-apart-from-one-other and differentiation through the responsive releasement or letting of a non-violent encounter and non-dominating confrontation. Deeply concerned with issues of violence, power, and domination during this period, Heidegger replied to the brutality of his time not by abandoning the agonistic dimension of his thought but by speaking of non-power (*Ohnmacht*) as something other than a vice as well as of a non-violent and non-coercive contest and struggle that would contrast with and contest its ideological deformation in the self-assertion of the will and struggle for existence.⁵ It is interesting to note in this regard that whereas Heidegger himself embraced the language of the assertion of the will in 1933, notably in the *Rektoratsrede*, a few years later he would reject such self-aggrandizing of the subject, its authorship and willing, arguing for the priority of the work over the agency, genius, and will of the subject and that “all willing should be grounded in letting” (IM, 16). This questioning of power and violence, its gigantism, interventionism, and totalization, makes the *Contributions*—as Reiner Schürmann argued—a highly political work.⁶

A significant feature of the *Contributions* and related manuscripts is Heidegger’s articulation of history (*Geschichte*) as intimating an alternative to ordinary understandings of history and the dominant models of historiography and

5 Despite Heidegger’s rejection of the pseudo-Darwinistic notion of the “struggle for existence” (*Kampf ums Dasein*), Levinas equates his agonistic thinking with it. For an important discussion, see Robert Bernasconi, “Levinas and the Struggle for Existence” in Nelson, Kapust, Still (eds.), *Addressing Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

6 Reiner Schürmann, “Riveted to a Monstrous Site.” in *The Heidegger Case: On Philosophy and Politics*, edited by Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 313-314.

the philosophy and science of history (*Historie*). Heidegger indicated the traces of the *other* of this history, an other history to the present history of totalizing and destructive machination. Contrary to the reduction of the past and future to the interests and projects of the present, Heidegger seeks to open up history through another history. This history is not “future-oriented” in the usual sense that the future will merely continue and reaffirm the prejudices of the present. It is rather oriented by the unfamiliarity and noncalculability of the futural always-still-other “not yet,” a not yet that would not continue and reproduce the present but place it into question and potentially disrupt it. This other history, which would let history to be open to the other of history that evades historical understanding and calculation, is the history of the “other beginning.” The other beginning can only be articulated in thoughtful confrontation with the history of the first beginning, as it unfolds from the birth of metaphysics to the totalizing technological world view of modernity. Heidegger’s critique of the narratives and explanations of historiography and the philosophy of history point toward an-other history—history as the history of being rather than of beings, the history of the other beginning that begins to be heard and said through the historical encounter with and remembrance of the first beginning.

Heidegger begins *Die Geschichte des Seyns* from 1938-40 with the words: “‘The history of being’ is the name for the attempt to bring the truth of being as enowning event into word for thinking, and familiarize the word and its sayability as an essential ground for historical humans” (GA 69: 1). Heidegger’s enunciation of history through the question of the history of being, as the happening of the truth of being, is an alternative to the narrative and explanatory models of historiographical and philosophical approaches to history—with all their political implications—and their basis in the metaphysics of the first beginning that thinks being as constancy and presence (GA 65: 31) and time as conforming with the present (i.e., presentism). The history of being reveals a heightening and intensification of, a re-turning to and turning of, the understanding of history as facticity and decision articulated in his earlier thought.

3. History in the Early Heidegger

In this section, I briefly discuss Heidegger’s approach to history in *Being and Time* and the even earlier lecture-courses. Already in §74 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger rethought the Dilthey-York distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*. Heidegger contrasts history as enactment and occurrence (*Vollzugsgeschichte*) and history as the representation and science of objectively present objects (*Objektsgeschichte*). History (*Geschichte*) points toward the absolutely originary history (*ursprüngliche Geschichte schlechthin*) as the fundamental temporality of being and event of existence (*Dasein*). History (*Historie*), however, objectifies,

reifies, and forgets the *Geschichte* that Dasein essentially is. Whereas *Geschichte* refers to history articulated from the horizon of the question of the meaning of being, which is rearticulated as the history of the event and truth of being, *Historie* refers to the models of history found in the ordinary understanding of history as presence and re-presentation, and which continue to inform historiography and the philosophy of history. These understandings of *Historie* presuppose the “vulgar concept of time” analyzed in *Being and Time* as underlying everyday and philosophical understandings of time—whether linear or cyclical. According to Heidegger, these understandings block access to the history of being, obscuring rather than clarifying the history that we are.

Heidegger’s philosophical interest in history arose earlier in the context of the defeat of the Great War, the collapse of the old regime, and crisis of revolution and counter-revolution that saw the emergence of the Weimar republic. It is from this situation, and his post-war reading of *Lebens-* and *Existenzphilosophie*, that Heidegger first spoke of history in light of the priority of event (*Ereignis*) and enactment (*Vollzug*), which are used in his first lecture courses in opposition to the traditional concepts of subject and object, and from which the difference between “lived history” (*Geschichte*) and historical science (*Historie*) unfolded. Insisting that he is concerned with the question of “historical life” in its motility and facticity as opposed to the science and philosophy of history that presupposes without addressing that life (GA 60: 32, 34), Heidegger advocated turning from historiology and object oriented history (*Historie* or *Objektsgeschichte*)—that for him is typical of previous German historical inquiry—to originary history (*Geschichte*; GA 60: 84) as a lived or existential enactment (*Vollzugsgeschichte*; GA 61: 2).

The intensification of the historical moment as an originary and absolute historicity is, Heidegger contends, “unrepeatable” (GA 60: 88). Yet Heidegger criticizes irrationalist absorption in the pure immanence and brute singularity of factual life, emphasizing instead the need for formalization—via formal indication and hermeneutical anticipation—in order to open up the concrete multiplicity of that life. Rather than celebrating the intuitive self-certainty of life and power, their fragility and uncertainty is revealed. The singularity and uniqueness of the moment (*Augenblick*) is a crisis calling for an individuating decision (*Entscheidung*) and resoluteness in response to the situation. This dynamic and unstable moment destabilizes pre-existing concepts and habits, even while it evades and resists normalization and being subsumed under categories, classes, and universals.

For the young Heidegger, the Neo-Kantian focus on individuals acting according to universal concepts never begins to access more fundamental questions of the historically singular being, which is in “each moment” called to

decide who it is by how it is, and the occurrence and enactment of that being's individuation in relation to others, its world, and itself. Whereas previous philosophy—including historicism and Dilthey—remains in the security and self-satisfaction of derivative *Historie*, according to Heidegger, *Geschichte* needs to be existentially broached in relation to life that it is. That life shows itself in the security and questionability of the hermeneutical situation and generation to which it belongs, and which does not only enable and open up concrete possibilities but also inevitably disquiets, limits, and shatters them. The historical situation is therefore as much a burden as it is a fulfillment of life (GA 60: 31-33, 37). Its disquiet threatens historical human existence (i.e., Dasein) with its own questionability and tendency towards ruination (*Ruinanz*) such that understanding agonistically occurs and is enacted through counter-ruination and *Auseinandersetzung*, understood as an interpretive differentiation (GA 61: 2).

This sketch of the early Heidegger leaves us with two questions: (1) How does Heidegger understand history differently than the everyday, traditional, and scientific conception that he criticizes and, given that some of the terminology is the same, (2) what change does the *Contributions* introduce with reference to Heidegger's earlier portrayal of history, in particular since he himself criticizes his earlier thought as remaining caught within the paradigm of the philosophy of the subject?

4. *Historie* and *Geschichte*

Heidegger's elucidation of history in the 1930's is less concerned with the question of existential individuation than with the history of being, which initially seems abstract and removed in comparison with his earlier more emphatic and individualistic language. The distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* remains in play even as the meaning of these basic words changes. The history of being is ensnared in the history of its concealment and forgetting in metaphysics, and involves the entangled difference between the calculability of historiography and the science of history (*Historie*) and the immeasurability and singularity of occurring history (*Geschichte*) itself (GA 66: 75-76). It might appear as if historiographical history is more interested in the different, individual, and singular in focusing on empirical plurality and individuality, yet it is attentive to these for the purposes of comparison, categorization, and calculation (GA 65: 151). The science and philosophy of history can obstruct contact with the question of historicity, of the singular and unique in its occasion and happening. Heidegger therefore comments that "historiographical comparison grasps the differences only in order to place them into a wider and more entangled field of comparability. All comparison, however, is essentially an equalizing, a referral back to the

same that as such never even enters into knowing awareness but rather makes up what is self-evident in terms of which all explanation and relating receives its clarity” (GA 65: 151). As such, it not only fails to broach but hinders questioning that which is singular and unique.

This is not accidental. It turns out that the narratives and explanatory schemes of historiographical history are implicated in the calculable and designed world of modernity that culminates in the reduction of the meaning and truth of being (*Sein*) to being abandoned amidst beings (*Seiende*). This view of history belongs to the history of metaphysics, in which this history emerged as onto-theology and theodicy and was subsequently secularized in humanism, beginning in the cyclical repetition of nature and the divine and concluding with the idea of progress, culture, and values. In theodicy, traditionally defined as the justification of God’s justice in the face of worldly evil and suffering, history becomes the product of God’s providence, whereas in humanist thought, history is the product of human activity. Despite their apparent difference and continuing conflict, both share the presupposition that history consists of creating and producing. Their identity can be seen in Vico’s *Verum Factum*, the true is the made, and their proximity in the thought of Hegel and Marx. This model of history as something made and produced relies on problematic notions of agency, design, intentionality, and decision. God reveals Himself according to monotheism through an ultimate narrative assigning meaning to all things. Human agents produce narratives and explanations allowing them to consciously decide and practically design their world.

As Adorno and Horkheimer argue in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, progress is identified with the increasing domination of nature and the rationalization of human society in which human freedom and happiness are undermined by efforts to realize them. After the Holocaust, and philosophers such as Adorno and Heidegger, the philosophy of history is in crisis. History as a product or construct of divine and human activity, as the creation of an inherently meaningful and good order, has fallen into doubt even as such models continue to inform the ambitions of authoritarian leaders and dreams of their followers. Heidegger questions history interpreted as a creation, design, making, planning, and producing because such models are inherently calculative in instrumentally reducing beings and their significance to a further being and its purposes. This questioning remains salient given the continuing power and violence of this instrumental paradigm that does not allow beings to have their own immanent and self-generating—rather than externally imposed—significance.

Just as historicity is clarified through facticity in his early thought, a facticity that resists and withdraws from the intentionality of consciousness, history is articulated in the 1930’s beyond the activities of the subject through the self-

generativity of “*Ereignis*.” In ordinary German it signifies “event” and, because of the verbal sense of *er-eignen*, has been translated as the event of appropriation, propriation, and enownment. In these texts from the 1930’s, Heidegger envisaged history as the history of being—thus moving, at least on a surface reading, from the more Dasein-centered perspective of *Being and Time* to the being-centered perspective of his later thought—and explored this history as *Ereignis*, the enowning and disowning event of being in its disclosure and concealment.

What does *Ereignis* signify? It is the self-generating event of history itself, what makes history as the immanent event and enactment of a being—and thus historiographical narrative and explanation—possible. It furthermore names the other of history entering into and potentially interrupting and transforming existing historical life. It intimates the continuity of history, its epochal breaks, and the irremovable caesura between the history of the first beginning and that of the other beginning (GA 65: 177). Nevertheless, this does not imply the “end” of totalizing narrative and reductive explanation in history or the impossibility of history as theodicy or a determinate teleological order, whether in its divine or secular variants, because “we” historically situated finite mortals still dwell within this “end” and have not yet crossed over to a “totally other” thinking and dwelling.

The history of Western ontology concerns history in respect to the history of the disclosure and concealment, the forgetting and remembering of being. This remembering, which Heidegger later describes as the “step back” in opposition to the recovery and absorption involved in Hegelian recollection, does not make the past present but “is a matter of becoming aware of our essential abode in history” (GA 51: 92-93). It is a remembering oriented toward the future (that is, the not yet and non-present) rather than the kind of remembering that “can only remember from out of and by appealing to something present and something that has been present . . .” (GA 65: 257). Thus, in Heidegger’s portrayal, “In the other beginning . . . a being is never actual in the sense of this ‘being-present.’ Even where this being-present is encountered in constancy, it is the most fleeting thing for the originary projecting-open of the truth of being” (GA 65: 257).

The dismantling of history emerges as both the possibility of confronting what is past and of being responsive to the unsaid. In this sense, hermeneutics remains a possibility of individuation in relation to the tradition that it discloses and conceals; it occurs through a dialogue that inherently sets-apart. This strategy of receptivity through confrontation, informs both the early Heidegger’s thinking of facticity and his later thought of the event. Hence, for example, in receptivity to the event, to think with the self-interrupting movement of Heidegger’s *Contributions*, one comports oneself to the “origin” in order to think it

in relation to the excess and other of that origin. Heidegger called this the “other beginning” of the first beginning and the “always-still-other” of the same (GA 65: 52). The “other beginning” is the “origin” as interruptive break (*Ab-bruch*). It is not a cause, a reason, a motive, a principle, a mover or creator, nor a ground in the sense of condition. It is the ground that is an *Ab-grund*, an “inexhaustable abyss” (GA 65: 29), and therefore the recollection (*Erinnerung*) of an origin is relentlessly confronted by difference. This difference calls for thoughtful remembrance (*Andenken*). The thought of the “always-still-other,” which escapes thought and recollection, hints at Heidegger’s earlier understanding of temporality. Time is not a series of discrete now-points or pure presence. The present or today is never simply or self-identically itself. It is structured by a past that it can never retrieve and open toward a future that is unknowable. Heidegger questioned the idea that the future only continues the present, the calculable future of planning, in favor of a divergent future springing from another history, i.e., from the other beginning (GA 69: 16). These writings suggest a more radical temporal facticity than his earlier thought; that of a past that never was and a future that is always other due to its discontinuity with the present. Heidegger’s thinking of the event remains hermeneutical in hinting at the “hermeneutics of facticity” and the “hermeneutical circle” even as these are further decentered.⁷

Yet what does this mean? Heidegger rejected the ordinary model of understanding that finds its primary expression in the standard view of historiography. For Heidegger, “Man is either ready for what is always original, or he knows better. Knowing better also reigns where man seems to subjugate himself to a divine world-plan. This knowing better begins in Western historiological consciousness. The rise and universal currency of historiological science and its varied utilization and exploitation, however, are already the late development of man’s calculating ‘attitude’ toward history” (GA 51: 6-7). As such, the conflict of worldviews has been displaced by what he would later call enframing (*Ge-stell*) as the world-picture or *Gestalt* of technological modernity.

5. Who “Understands Better”?

Understanding is frequently interpreted according to a model of “understanding better” that finds its clearest expression in the hermeneutical maxim

⁷ Heidegger noted the circularity of phenomenology, as a primordial nonobjective and pretheoretical science, in his first lecture courses, where it helps explicate the indeterminate-determinate character of life as significant (GA 56/57: 14-16). Hermeneutical circularity allows the immanent and implicit indeterminate-determinate significance of life to become explicit, an explication infinitely dependent on the implicit and unsaid.

that “one should understand the author better than the author does,” or “understand a tradition better than the tradition understands itself.” Exemplars of this interpretive strategy, which consumes its objects leaving them without any intrinsic significance, is the Christian appropriation of Judaism and Greek philosophy, and the sublimating mastery of the other in dialectics. Although there are a variety of ways of interpreting the maxim of “understanding better,” from the principle of charity and maximizing rationality to immanent critique, the hermeneutic model of understanding better entails for Heidegger that what is being understood “contains a content in which we ourselves can grow” (GA 25: 4-5).

“Understanding better” should not be the repetition and deepening of identity, it indicates instead the need for a different interpretation that does not make others understandable only by reconstructing their position from our own perspective. Understanding better involves a responsive “understanding appropriately” or it is not an understanding of the other *as* other at all. Thus, Heidegger suggests, “‘Understanding appropriately’ as ‘understanding better’ is no mere rejection of what is understood but rather is giving it ‘validity.’ A philosophy truly has ‘validity’ when its own power is released and the possibility is provided for it to deliver a shock and to make a difference” (GA 25: 4-5).

Understanding better implies understanding differently from out of the difference, the material alterity, of what is to be understood. The validity given to it in my understanding is its own occurrence and self-generating validity. On the one hand, this involves giving oneself over to what is to be thought and understood. This *Hingabe* is a “letting” and releasement toward the being rather than a reconstruction or imposition of an extrinsic meaning. On the other hand, this receptivity is not an indifferent passivity. It ensues through the struggle of interpretation, a contest or *agon* leading to the question addressing and questioning not only the other but oneself, such that conflict and confrontation are involved in all interpretation (GA 25: 4-5); in particular when it is responsive. To responsibly understand the other is to risk oneself and one’s own understanding in encountering the other rather than “understanding better” from the self-certain security of one’s own understanding.

In Heidegger’s pluralistic hermeneutics, the responsiveness of understanding demands differentiating confrontation and destructuring if it is to be truly responsive to and responsible for the question to be thought. Heidegger’s thinking of *Auseinandersetzung*, for which destructuring is preliminary (GA 66: 68fn), culminates after 1935 in his being-historical thinking of the originary confrontation of the first beginning, the truth of beings, with the other beginning, the truth of being (GA 49: 189-190). Thinking from this other beginning throws metaphysics and its thinking of history from out of the presence of the present into question (GA 49: 5, 10).

Understanding better can be a mastering, however, if it subordinates this difference to the logic of identity and construes others as the raw material for its own activities. Contrary to Heidegger's thinking history as historical confrontation in relation to that which is unique (GA 66: 75), dialectics is a model in which the other is to be assimilated or excluded, mediated or canceled (*Aufhebung*). This "mediating" way of enacting understanding risks refusing the question of its own self-understanding in encountering what is other. Against the risk of exposure to the depth of otherness—in the other, the world, and the self—it reinstates narrative and teleological representation against its breakdowns, failures and limits. Every limit is "transgressed" in order to be "re-appropriated." This progressive model privileges one moment of temporality over another and operates according to a line of development in which the other is to be sublimated and eliminated as a "lesser" moment or version of myself. In strong versions of teleology, as in Hegelian dialectics, history is not interpreted according to its character of the facticity and possibility of an event. Its possibility and "being underway" is subordinated to the necessity of a final outcome or result.

In strong teleological accounts, history is prescribed a narrative of purpose proceeding from origin to goal (condition to result). It is a narrative judging history through the assumption of privilege based on an order of progress, regress or cycles. For Heidegger, in contrast to the setting up and reification of an external purpose governing history and time; "Seeking itself is the goal. And this means that 'goals' are still too much in the foreground and still take place ahead of being—and thus bury what is needful" (GA 65: 18). Not only does the reification of history as determined by an ultimate outcome do violence to all the moments of the past in denying them any inherent significance, goal-oriented calculative thought misses the way and being underway of thinking, its very questionability. By contrast, being itself undermines these goals and projects revealing their limited and conditional character in in the interruption and breakdown of explainability (GA 65: 477).

Explanation, including its teleological and efficient-causal variants, is criticized by Heidegger for spatializing temporality (whether imagined as the line, cycle or circle) and repeating the "vulgar concept of time." Heidegger analyzed this vulgar concept, which involves serializing time into equivalent and symmetrical moments as well as the reduction of ecstatic temporality to the monistic identity of the present. Although Heidegger inadequately developed this critique in *Being and Time*, it remains applicable. Spatialized time condenses the spontaneity and receptivity of worldly relations of meaning and sense to an explanatory schema of those relations, such as one finds in causal explanation, eliminating the asymmetry, distance, and interval between occurrences and the

temporal “*ecstases*” of past, present, and future. This critique of spatializing time is deepened in the late 1930’s (GA 67: 127).

The return involved in remembrance (*Andenken*, which should be distinguished from Hegelian *Erinnerung*) does not eliminate distance and difference in order to be submerged in the “origin,” as this nostalgic strategy—which Heidegger has himself been accused of by Adorno and others—stays within representational and explanatory thinking: “But returning into the first beginning (the ‘retrieval’) is not displacement into what has passed, as if this could be made ‘actual’ again in the usual sense. Returning to the first beginning is precisely distancing oneself from it. It is taking up that remote-position that is necessary in order to experience what began in and as that beginning. For *without* this distant-positioning—and only the positioning in the *other* beginning is a sufficient one—we always stay insidiously too close to that beginning, insofar as we are still covered over and pinned down by what issues from the beginning” (GA 65: 185-186). In the differentiating distancing encounter with the first beginning, the possibility of the other beginning and thinking steps forward from that difference and distance itself.

Heidegger calls attention to how such explanatory forms prevent the recognition of the inexhaustible strangeness of the unfamiliar (GA 51: 82-83). The history of being opens up the possibility of encountering this strangeness and confronting totalizing accounts, including teleological reconstructions, insofar as “there is no privileged standpoint at the end of philosophy, simply a different standpoint, one that is as much defined by what it lacks—a word for being—as by its positive characteristics.”⁸ The history of being—being in its forgottenness, oblivion, and withdrawal—does not itself operate as an explanation. According to Robert Bernasconi: “Nor can the oblivion of being serve as a principle of explanation, so long as we understand by explanation a referring of the unknown to the known. The oblivion of being is in principle an unknown; the history of such oblivion errancy.”⁹

Instead of assuming the identity of history, thought exposes itself to the unfamiliar for the sake of genuinely encountering the historical *as* historical. Already in the early 1920’s, Heidegger challenged the traditional hermeneutical model of “understanding better” with the practice of *Auseinandersetzung* (GA 25: 3-5). *Auseinanderstezung* literally signifies setting-apart-from-each-other. What it suggests, nonetheless, is a responsive confrontation. It is a confrontation in dismantling reified structures, and responsive in that it dismantles precisely in order to listen to what is said and left unsaid. Such historical confrontation is intensified in his thinking of the upsurge and event of being (GA 66: 76-77).

8 Robert Bernasconi, *The Question of Language in Heidegger’s History of Being* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1985), 7.

9 *Ibid.* 8.

6. Historically Mindful Reflection

Heidegger distinguished in *Besinnung* (GA 66, translated as *Mindfulness*) the disruptive history of the “other beginning” from the narratives and explanations (*Historie*) of the origin (GA 66: 275). This restates the difference between historical understanding, as historically mindful reflection (*Besinnung*), and calculating explanation operating according to cause and effect and origin and goal. The “origin” sought in explanation operates as a condition and reduces phenomena and the plural givenness of things to a first cause or principle (whether divine or natural). In the history of the first beginning, God is the unconditional and infinite ground of being and cause of beings (GA 66: 242). It is this explanatory and reductive use of God that Heidegger confronted in the destructuring of Western metaphysics as onto-theo-logy. In confrontation with the first beginning, the prehistory of the other beginning emerges, the other beginning hinting at being as the enowning event and upsurge of the unfathomable non-ground or abyss (GA 66: 242). Without hierarchical subordination to a first cause or condition, being is the open horizon and crossing of the “between.”

The “other beginning” elicited through *Besinnung* is the other of the “first beginning,” the metaphysical origin. Interrupting the identity inspiring metaphysics, it is the “always-still-other” (GA 65: 52) that can neither be explicated nor considered the condition of all phenomena. While *Besinnung* asks the question “*who?*,”¹⁰ and concerns the *who* deciding its history in its distress, the question “*why?*” asks for a cause, ground, reason or condition reducing one phenomenon to another (GA 66: 271-274). Heidegger questions whether “the ‘why’ can still be made into a tribunal before which being is to be placed?” (GA 65: 509). The “why” cannot approach being insofar as it already presupposes an answer to it. The why question is not the neutral beginning imagined by science, as it already presupposes an answer as “what”—essence and substance—and thus an interpretation of beings as entities. The priority of the “why” question demands the explanation of one event through another, one thing through another, linking modern calculative thought with metaphysics as “onto-theology.” The question “what?” also resides in the dominion of the explainable and intelligible. In contrast to seeking the why and the what, the basic questions of western metaphysics, Heidegger remarks that it is the question “*who?*” that transformatively transposes the questioner into the belongingness of the hiddenness of being (GA 66: 148).

10 Heidegger would at various times express the priority of the “*who?*” question, like when he asked “*who is time?*” in the early 1920’s.

The difference between *Geschichte* and *Historie* remained, to briefly recapitulate, a central theme from the early “hermeneutics of facticity” to his later history of being. Historicity is crucial from his consideration of the finitude and uncanniness of Da-sein in the 1920’s to his revised questioning of history as the history of being in the late 1930’s. Uncanniness and violence are historically interconnected, and emerge in a particular configuration in the history of the West. These issues continue to resonate after Heidegger’s so-called “turn” (*Kehre*). In Heidegger’s inquiries of the late 1930’s, there is a renewed attempt to think the relation of preparatory thinking of *Besinnung* and history in the notion of event (*Ereignis*). Heidegger approaches the historical through “*seinsgeschichtliches Denken*” (to think history from out of the history of being), *Ereignis* (the event of history and the “other” of history, the event of appropriation that expropriates human existence, and the disclosure and withdrawal of being in history), and the “always-still-other” (*Immer-noch-Andere*) disclosed in historically interpretive thought (GA 65: 52). In such historically mindful reflection (*Besinnung*), questions of the facticity and alterity of being come to the fore in challenging strong holistic and teleological accounts that integrate history according to a common pre-determined purpose. In encountering the historical as irreducible to such a project, understanding and interpretation must take other routes to questioning the sense of the historical, and do so through asking “who?”

It seems odd to ask “who is the event?” Who is addressed by such a question and what would it mean to answer it? The translation of *Ereignis* continues to be controversial, as some argue that translating it as “event” reduces it to another ontic occurrence. Translating it as appropriation or enownment, however, makes it even more mysterious. The word event is appropriate if it is understood as equally the ontological as well as ontic happening of history and the other of history entering into the historical. It is the continuity of history as event, according to a singular plural logic typical of Heidegger’s thought, and the impossibility of history. Heidegger does not speak the messianic language employed by Benjamin and Levinas. Even though the event shares the interruptive force of the “weak messianic moment,” described by Walter Benjamin as a radical “now time” that cannot be assimilated by history, it also potentially upsets the ideological reification of the strong messianic moment—apparent again in some contemporary tendencies—that justifies violence and dominion in the name of the sacred, the holy, and the ethical, disciplining time and history anew.

Engaging the history of Western metaphysics reveals the history of the disclosure, concealment and forgetting of being. Being is itself the ontological difference and intersection of being and beings, which cannot be included under the same concept or mediated without reaffirming metaphysical tendencies

toward reduction and closure. This reductive conception of history means: “The ascertaining explaining of the past from within the horizon of the calculative dealings of the present. Beings are hereby presupposed as what is orderable, producible, and ascertainable (...)” (Heidegger, GA 65: 493). Heidegger questions both contemplative and instrumental-teleological conceptions of history, resisting the illusion of mediation, since transition is not mediation but *Ent-scheidung* (“decision” as the cut of differentiation, GA 66: 405).

This paper has shown how Heidegger articulated the difference of history as *Geschichte*, as open to its event, and history as explanatory and narrative *Historie*, which assumes intelligibility in order for dominion to be exercised (GA 65: 493). The assumption of complete intelligibility and explainability closes off other possibilities for being that are still hinted at in poetic works and interpretive reflection (GA 66: 63; GA 67: 172). Historically mindful reflection takes place, contrary to this closing presumption of explanation, as a preparatory thinking that can respond to what is other than itself. Historically mindful reflection lingers in the expectancy and tension of the “always-still-other” (*Immer-noch-Andere*) and “other beginning” seemingly lost in the always-still-identical and first origin that would condition all. In Heidegger, we find the paradox of a narrative of the history of ontology that operates as a counter-narrative challenging narrative and explanatory order. Perhaps it can defy rather than reaffirm narrative and teleology by remaining in the tension between history as event and history as the continuation of the first beginning in the history of metaphysics, and the difference between being (*Sein*), which cannot be narratively spoken or described (GA 69: 59), and the incomplete narratives of finite beings (*Seiende*).

7. Conclusion: Deciding Beginnings

Two significant aspects of Heidegger’s approach to history are: (1) how it confronts and differs from the model of calculation, design, and production (*Herstellung*) and (2) how history is displaced from the subject to being and from “what” to “who.” This “who” is addressed in history as a historical being and who yet must decide about this history. This who decides on the basis of a history of being that does not provide a univocal narrative but involves the open and the hidden, disclosure and withdrawal. Instead of a progressive narrative about a beginning and end, origin and goal, history is the opening space of the question, the question of the first and the other beginning, of the “always already” and the always still not and still other (*immer noch nicht*). History is accordingly moved from the realm of a calculating subject to that being “who” is addressed through history and compelled to decide about that very history.

Decision has to be rethought. Dismantling the reification of the historical through *Auseinandersetzung* offers the opportunity of confronting how the past has been handed down by tradition and of responsiveness to what is unsaid. In receptivity to the disownment or expropriation of the enowning event, which evades the mastery of appropriation and ownership sometimes ascribed to Heidegger, one comports oneself to the “origin” for the sake of what exceeds and overflows that origin. Heidegger called this the other beginning, which is the “origin” as break (*Ab-bruch*) and which resists being posited and manipulated as a cause, reason, motive, principle, or the result of production. It names a ground that is the lack thereof, an abyss or *Ab-grund*, entailing the recollection of an origin that is a remembrance faced by the differentiating cutting apart of decision (*Ent-Scheidung*). Such decision is for Heidegger not the “activism” or “decisionism” of a subject or its will, it is a historically-situated preparation and readiness: “Readiness to confront the inception can originate as genuine only from the necessities of history into which we ourselves are placed” (GA 51: 9-10).

Decision is not solely a human “doing” or “making.” Nor is it a “doing” and “making” of another being or being as such. Heidegger’s critique of explanation and the paradigm of production place such categories of the done and the made into question. Contrary to Vico’s axiom, the true is the unmade rather than made. If such interpretive strategies are inadequate, decision should be thought differently. What hangs in the balance in decision is not making and designing but how one responds or does not respond. The human response to being in its historicity is at issue, and decision is the responsiveness and non-responsiveness of Dasein to being and its abandonment, to the earth which it preserves and cultivates or allows to be destroyed, and the openness which it lets be open or encloses, enframes, and forgets.

The argument developed above elucidates Heidegger’s thinking of historical beginning as disclosing the “other beginning” and the “always still not.” The other beginning is the other of metaphysics, and the other of our history. It presents another possibility that is already at work in the Western tradition and can only be articulated in confrontation with that tradition. This possibility of a past that never was is impossible to think without the future, “the always still not,” that draws near without becoming present, and which opens other possibilities for contemporary thought. Heidegger is then a philosopher of beginnings; not of nostalgic origins located in past presence, but of renewing and beginning anew other possibilities. Although Heidegger no longer explicitly employs the language of facticity, it provides a clue about this relation between the old and the new. An old that is “before time,” or at least any temporal horizon, and a new that is always “after time.” The old and new are present in their “non-presence” in time and history, as traces intimating what is other than that time and history.