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The Way to *Ereignis* as Transformative Event

<u>Transformation / Transformative</u>

Before we understand how *Ereignis* is transformative event, *Kehre* is transformative movement, and being itself is transformation, we need to say something about the meaning of transformation and the transformative in general, since these can mean different things in different contexts. There are three aspects to the philosophical idea of transformation that I'll highlight.

(1) *Praxis*. That transformation refers to a praxis means not just that it is "practical" but that it goes beyond being a concept, theory, object of knowledge, etc. It somehow concerns the wholenss of beings in their multi-dimensionality. Here we connect various meanings like enactment, actualization, realization, as well as aspects of life such as the social, economic, and religious. Transformation is inherently something that happens to and with beings in the whole of their being.
(2) *Relation*. We say a relation is transformative when the two parties in the relation are transformed by each other. The two archetypes of this relation are the Love and Strife of Empedocles, which explain how elements divide and unite to form the cosmic order. These two principles paticipate in the same transformational form: each term in the relation both performs and undergoes the transformation that takes place.
(3) *Nature*. Not in the modern scientific sense of material "nature" but more like what we find in Plato's and Aristotle's φύσις, which can connote εἶδος, ἐνέργεια, ἐντελέχεια and even being itself. In this sense it is the μετακόσμησις and μεταβολή that goes across and beyond the static state of things (μετα-μόρφωσις and trans-formation). Transformation as nature is both the substance and movement that constitutes the unity of the transformative relations and practices.

There are certainly other meanings of transformation in other contexts, but these three are the ones I find it necessary to focus on when we talk about Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* and the *Ereignis-Kehre-Sein* triad as transformative. But there is still a potential for misunderstanding, and the most common is, implicitly or explicitly, to force transformation to take sides in the subject-object debate. I think we—not just philosophers but human beings in general, especially in this age of technology—don't fully comprehend the extent to which our concepts are dominated by this dilemma, and for that reason the idea of transformation is difficult for us to grasp. For example, I might think that transformation is simply when I comprehend some theory well enough that I am able to take it and put it into a practice that is both distinct from and not necessarily consequent to the theory. Perhaps I "apply" some philosophical or religious maxim to my daily life. But how could I ever get to the point of applying a theory if the theory itself and I myself didn't first share the possibility of transformation in our relation and nature? The object of theory must already hold the possibility in itself of a crossover into practice, and vice versa.

You may recognize that the dilemma here is similar to that raised by Plato in *Meno* (the "paradox of inquiry"). Socrates' solution, to the question of how we can ever search for something without first

knowing it and how we can know it without first searching for it, is to refer to a domain of existence in which knower and known are no longer in conflict, in his case the soul. Our solution here is similar, and the idea of transformation marks out a domain that is *unconditioned* with respect to the conditions of the subject-object dilemma.

In order to deal with this dilemma which wants to convert transformation (and *Ereignis*) into, either, a mere tool or power of the human subject, or, an external mechanism into which humankind is caught up, it is necessary to return to Kant, in whom we find the greatest expression of the subjective-objective worldviews of our age. In particular, Kant's idea of *das Unbedingte*, and its relation to the *Dingen an sich* and to the *Bedingungen* of all *Bedingten*, gives us a way to think transformation as *really transformative*, and thus to distinguish *transformation* from the *transcendental* and the *transcendent*. The transformative is an option that Kant himself did not envision but that the *Kritik* gives us resources to think. In short: this should make it clear that with "transformation" I am thinking neither of a power of the human subject alone, nor of some entity out there over and against the human.

> *Transformation* is to be thought beyond the *transcendental-transcendent distiction*.

Within the strict confines of the subject-object antinomy it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to think the essence of transformation--*unless the transformation is carried out*. It is carried out when what was previously divided is brought back into the onefold of their transformative nature, and when beings turn to being-as-transformation and become more than subjects and objects. But the carrying out (transformation of and by beings) is not something separate from that into which beings are transformed. In one sense the transformation is thus "a priori", but in another sense, and due to the very nature of transformation, it *is* only in the carrying out. So it seems that transformation cannot be grasped as a structure or fixed essence of beings, since these would imply a being that was not transformative at all but only such accidentally through the activity of some unrelated being.

A consequence of transformation-as-being is that being cannot be thought solely on the conceptual plane of representation; since on that level of thought being will always be divided up in such a way that it is impossible to think its unity (which is the unity of the transformation and the transformed being). Transformation doesn't always "make sense" in that it fits immediately into a useable schematic and plan from which we can construct an image of it for objectively grasping its essence. That we run up against this limit in our discourse and concepts about being-as-transformation, doesn't mean that being is not transformation, but that we ourselves in our intellectual capacities, as beings of being, are being called on for something more than discourse, namely, transformation. This is why the discussion of transformation, and the *Seinsfrage* in Heidegger, always weaves two threads, the discursive and the transformative.

For those who only wanted the basic gist of transformation, I'll stop here and move on. For those that would like to dive deeper into this line of thought and see how Kant, Novalis, and Heidegger help us develop a philosophical idea of transformation that is equipped to take on the attempt by modern science and the information-technological age to convert all beings into subjects and objects for the purpose of putting them to use in a program or structure of production, you can see my *On the Difference Between Being and Object* (attached).

<u>Transformative Event</u>

It is my opinion that all of the above is packed into the *Sein* of Heidegger's fundamental ontological period, waiting to be unfolded. The proof of this (see also "The Proof of the *Kehre* in Heidegger's Thought") is in what comes next and weaves like a two-corded thread through the rest of his writings. *Sein* is transformative because its nature has all the aspects of transformation: it is a praxis (it is its nature to realize an activity and work), it is relational (in that it is the origin and overturning of its distinctions), and it is nature itself as the transformative substance and movement that goes across and beyond formation while remaining the same. It is due precisely to this belongingness of transformation to whatever we call "nature" and "being" that the nature of *Sein* cannot be a fixed structure or static nature but must also have a *transformative activity, movement, and relation in its nature*. Further, it doesn't just possess these latter but it must *be* these. Being is the source of and reason for the way in which beings appear to us to transform.

It follows from this that being is not any old thing that comes along and occasionally gets to work on something, but rather being belongs to the transformative activity that unfolds from it. *Sein* in this belongingness to the way in which it occurs (as transformation) is called *Seyn*, and that to which *Seyn* belongs in its transformative occurrence is *Ereignis*, or, *transformative event*. The transformation is not something that happens only when beings take up, enter into, and transform their being; it happens too when beings undergo the transformation. The possibility that something new and unexpected occurs in the world, in nature, and in human beings is rooted in this belonging of transformation to being itself, and being to the event of its unfolding.

> *Das Seyn west als Ereignis*.
> This says: *being-as-transformation occurs according to its nature as transformative event*.

This could be shortened and mean the same thing:

> *Seyn west*.
> This says: *being transforms* (with or without distinct direct object).

Or, knowing what we know about the nature of transformation (above), we could just say:

> *Sein/Seyn*
> *Transformation*

Or, finally:

> *Ereignis*
> *Transformative event*

I do not think that "transformative event" is necessarily always the best translation of *Ereignis*. The language of appropriation is often suitable for the task. That lived experience and being itself are appropriative and meaningful has an obvious connection to the fact that they are transformative, but the latter says more than meaningfulness. I also even grant that *Ereignis* can be thought of as an existential

"structure" at times, and Heidegger himself will sometimes use this word. But what we gain in comprehensibility through the existentiel-existential distinction comes at a cost, and the cost is the danger of falling away from the unity of the distinction (i.e., away from being-transformation).

There are moments when fundamental ontology breaks down, and it seems that the attempt to "enter in" and "take over" appropriation fails. In these cases the language of transformation gets to the heart of the matter, and this is especially true in the issue of the *Kehre*.

Two Examples: When the Subject Matter Itself Requires Transformation

There are two main issues in Heidegger's writings that led me to think of *Ereignis* itself as transformative: the ontological difference and the problem of its insufficiency; and the essence of modern technology and the problem of *Gestell*. These issues track through the breadth of his work and involve concepts present in all periods, which suggests to me that the "eventful" transformation that they both point to is not just a phase or a secondary concern but the consistent subject matter of his thought.

1. Ontological Difference

Ontological difference is a key theme of the fundamental ontological texts. It is defined as *der Unterschied von Sein und Seiendem* (GA 24: 454), and it functions as a formula and tool by which the themes of the *Seinsfrage* are always divided up into two aspects: the existentiel and existential, and the ontic and ontological. It servers its purpose for Heidegger to put thought onto the path of an investigation of being and to distinguish his *Sein* from the previous formulations in the history of philosophy. In this distinguishing, being is supposed to come to light not as a concept or object of thought but as existence itself.

But as this ontological difference is used repeatedly toward Heidegger's initial goal of "ontology", i.e., "philosophy as science", it tends to turn into a mechanical conceptual process that forgets being, converts "being" into just another term alongside "beings", and loses its power to bring the one who originally asked the question of being into the experience of wonder that launched *SZ*. Instead of turning one to the light of being (as Heidegger uses Plato's analogy), the ontological difference falls away from being and brings the philosopher with it. This possibility of falling away is inherent in the transformative nature of the subject matter of fundamental ontology (*in der Verwandlung der Seinsfrage einbezogen werden die Seinsvergessenheit und Wahrheitszerstörung*, GA 73.1: 113) and in general in the relation of the human being to being. It is thus the reason for the *Kehre* both in Heidegger's thought and in being itself.

Heidegger expresses this problem with ontological difference in many places from his middle and late period of writings. Some examples (cf. "The Overturning of Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology" for more):

This distinction between "ontic and ontological truth" is only a doubling of unconcealment... Thus what has been said hitherto only points the direction of an overcoming, but no overcoming is accomplished [vollzogen].

The ambiguous nature of this distinction: in terms of what has gone before, a step toward its overcoming, and yet a fateful link back to it that obstructs every path toward the originary "unity" and hence also to the truth of the distinction.

Here the essence of truth is conceived as "forked" in terms of the "distinction" as a fixed reference point, instead of the contrary approach of overcoming the "distinction" from out of the essence of the truth of beyng, or of first thinking the "distinction" as beyng itself and therein the beyings of beyng [das Seyende des Seyns]—no longer as the being of beings. (GA 9: 131-134)

It is essential that the differentiation of being and beings come to light expressly as the unity of the differentiation. The emergence of this differentiating is sought (GA 73.2: 1067).

What is required is an overcoming or *overturning* of ontological difference. But notice that this overturning does not now divid Heidegger and the *Seinsfrage* into two time periods with two separate concerns. Rather, it accomplishes just what the ontological difference original accomplished--to think being itself beyond its common reduction to thing, object of representation, transcendental subjectivity, logic, formal contentless categories, etc. Except that now the turning movement of the differentiating event, in which it *oscillates between falling away from and turning to being*, is made explicit. The original *Dasein* is awoken to this turning and "in between" of that which it always was in the ontological difference, and it becomes itself this overturning of ontological difference--it becomes *Da-Sein*.

We might attempt to visualize what "happens" in the overturning of ontological difference like this:

Ontological Difference 1: (being – beings)
Ontological Difference 2: (*being* – (being – beings))

We see that what happens in Heidegger's transformation of the ontological difference of fundamental ontology is that *Sein* is split into two senses: it is both a term in the distinction (OD1) and the name of the emergence, unity, truth, and event of the differentiation (*Aufbruch, Einheit, Wahrheit, Ereignis der Unterscheidung*) (OD2). This operation of splitting up *Sein* can recurse infinitely, and the *Sein* of OD2 could be taken in the sense of OD1, and so on. So we can imagine:

~~Ontological Difference 3: (being – (being – (being – beings))), and so on…~~

In this way we would never escape the trap of the recursive division--until, that is, we leap out of the chain of the regress and realize that everything after OD1/OD2 is mere formal repetition, while the meaning and truth of ontological difference lies in the transformative movement between OD1 and OD2. OD2 is the carrying out of the truth of OD1 (*die Differenz als der Austrag*). OD1 is thus *true*, but

it is not *statically so*: it entails OD2. Thus the truth of the ontological difference is neither some new "difference" nor a rejection of the original difference, but it is *the self-activity of the onefold of the difference*. OD1 and OD2 are not two different differences but only appear so when we tear asunder the original and only *Differenz*. Nowhere is this movement of the overturning more clear than in *Zum Ereignis-Denken* (GA 73.2) where Heidegger devotes chapter after chapter to destructuring ontological difference through a double gesture that both goes beyond the difference between and affirms the truth of the difference (*Die Unterscheidung gefasst als übersteigende Unterscheidung*), and relates this movement to *Ereignis* (*die Frage des Ursprungs der Unterscheidung hinausweist in Ereignis*). So the two ontological differences here are both the same and distinct in this sense:

> "Sein" = ontologische Differenz.

> "Sein selbst" = ontologische Differenz als soche (GA 73.2: 1479).

All this that happens, the distinction (*Sein*) and the overturning of it (*Sein selbst*/*Seyn*), is what is called *Ereignis*, and *Seyn* is the transformation on two levels because being occurs as this *Ereignis*. Many conceptual pairs relate in the same way in Heidegger's thought, because what *happens* with ontological difference is the heart and soul of what is *happening* between Heidegger and being throughout his texts:

> Being/Beings
> Ontological/Ontic
> Existential/Existentiel
> Truth/Distinction
> Unity/Gap
> Differentiation/Differentiated
> Seyn/Ereignis
> Sein/Dasein
> (Sein/Dasein)/(Seyn/Da-Seyn)

In one sense they are the same, while in another sense they are different. The unity of their sameness and difference is called transformation, or being. Heidegger in the fundamental ontological period focuses on the distinction, through which one first enters into the *Seinsfrage*. In the latter writings Heidegger focuses on the unity, or the carrying out (*Austrag*) of the truth of the distinction (*die Wahrheit der Unterscheidung*). From the unity, i.e., from an *Ereignis-Denken* that corresponds with the *Kehre*, they are the same focus and concern once we grant that *Sein/Seyn* is transformation and *Ereignis* is transformative event (with the nature of transformation as we have outlined it here).

So we can understand the transformation in the issue of ontological difference thus:

> *To preserve the truth of the ontological difference*
> This says: to think its essence as the transformative event [*Ereignis*] of the distinctions – and that as the truth of beyng. This thinking is: to be in correspondence with the turn [*Kehre*] in the "essence" of beyng (GA 73.2: 999).

And what about *die Kehre im "Wesen" des Seyns*? This means: the movement by which the things torn apart (being and beings) turn to each other in their transformative nature.

2. *Gestell* and Technology

There are cases where "appropriation" as existential structure works, but in the matter of the *Kehre* we're dealing precisely with the *overturning* of being as ontology, structure, and ordering of beings. If there were no *Kehre* in *Ereignis*, we could justifiably say that it is a structure of beings, and there would be absolutely no difference between it and the being of beings. There would also be no turn, not in Heidegger's thought and not in being, unless we mean "turn" as a *rote process and schematization* of being, a churning of the wheels of a mechanism that keeps beings useful and orderly for a purpose external to them. But Heidegger has another name for that phenomenon: *Gestell*.

Just as the fundamental ontological difference attempts to bring being to light at the cost of breaking its transformative nature up into terms of a formula, so *Ereignis as appropriation as existential structure of Dasein becomes indistinguishable from Ge-stell*. "Transformative event" has the potential to free being from this reduction of its nature to mechanical arrangement and technical know-how, because *Ereignis* has a transformative *Kehre* that can't be reduced to a mere *Vorgang* (process, mechanism, conversion), and it thus *resists* the attempt by modern technology to structure the end of humankind. It is in this context of Heidegger's identification of *Kehre* with a turning that allows being to potentially transform itself beyond the age of *Ge-stell* that there is a need to translate *Ereignis* as "transformative event". *Ereignis as transformative event names the overturning of being as Ge-stell*. None of this means that beings don't have structure, that they're structureless material wandering about with no direction or constitution; nor that Heidegger himself did not work out the structure of *Ereignis*. It just means that the very idea of *being as structure* happens to be what Heidegger was attempting to twist and turn his way out of with *Ereignis*.

But without a structure do beings then lose the possibility for meaning? It's in fact the other way around for Heidegger: meaning is lost in the reduction of their being to a structure. The transformative event eventuates the transformation and gives beings their being. This event is always meaningful because it is transfromative. Meaning in the information-technological age, which Heidegger only had glimpses of but understood well, is given and assured to us by *Ge-stell*, which places (*stellen*) all beings to use and orders (*be-stellen*) them into a program for the purpose of technological production (that which *Die Frage nach der Technik* works out at length). But here there is nothing transformative about the placement into a "form", as beings are merely *converted* to technological ends. The meaning of such ends is rooted in the essential *meaninglessness* that characterizes being in the age of *Ge-stell*, which threatens beings with the *Nichtung* and nihilation of their being as meaningful and transformative. The *Ge-stell* is *the schematization* of beings in their being that bars the way to a recollection of being as transformative and meaningful. Meaning and transformation thus originally go together, but in the age in which "meaning" says merely "mine-ing", the one way appropriation of the world to the individual, which hides the thoroughgoing conversion of all human activity and thinking to the aimless goals of technological production, the thinking of being as *transformative event* says something more than meaningfulness and has the power to awaken beings out of the slumber of the "mine-ing" of meaning and their reduction to resources in a pre-arranged calculation of the technological end of humankind.

The *Ge-stell* is the conversion of transformation into mere technological conversion, and is thus a turning away from being as transformation. It derives from the more originary phenomenon of *Gestellnis*, which itself is a saying of the transformative nature of the Greek *μορφή* of φύσις (cf. transformation as nature above). Here it is necessary to give a demonstration of Heidegger's derivation of *Gestellung* from the trans-formative nature of φύσις, which he does in *Vom Wesen und Begriff der Φύσις*. But for our current purposes now, it suffices to say that for Heidegger the μορφή of φύσις does not mean a "form" of nature, whether as a particular structure of natural things nor as an arrangement and formation of some material--but it is the way in which (1) nature *transitions* through and places itself into the forms and states that, from a schematic perspective, constitute the path of its movement, and (2) nature *turns into* natural things, and vice versa. In short, φύσις is synonymous for the way of being called transformation, and *Gestellnis* turns beings back *from* its turning away into *Ge-stell* and the reduction of being to schematization *into* its originary nature as the eventful way in which being and beings transform: *Ereignis*.

Our translation of Heidegger's definition (GA 73.2: 1474) of *Ge-stellnis* says: the passageway or *trans-ition* (*Übergang*) that brings beings *beyond* the mere *schematization* of being (*Ge-stell*) and into the transformative (and thus *eigentliche*) relation with the *transformative event* of being (*Ereignis*).

Whether the transformation can be taken hold of and "entered into" such that beings undergo the turn to the truth of the difference between *Ge-stell* and *Ge-stellnis*, or whether *Ge-stell* represents the final and irreversible transformation of human beings into machines, this is a question that can only be dealt with from an activity and thinking that lets being as transformation come into its own. And so in one of Heidegger's final notes on the topic, in which is contained the clearest expression of the consistent subject-matter of his thought, we find:

> Die *eigentliche Kehre*, d.h. die dem Ereignis gehörende:
> der Wandel des Ge-Stelles in die Ge-Stellnis
> als Vorbotschaft des Ereignisses (GA 73.2: 1479).

We translate this as:

> The *true turn*, i.e., that which belongs to *Ereignis*:
> the transition of the schematization of being into the provenance of schematization
> as harbinger of the transformative event.

A Final Note on the Issue

The meaning of being is transformative because being is the transformative nature of beings, and that nature is the original self-transformative activity of the "difference" between being and beings. Being as transformation explains why Heidegger is able to claim *continuity* from fundamental ontology to the later writings, even while there are clear and often profound contrasts. Fundamental ontology and what comes after are concerned with the same subject matter, insofar as we read Heidegger from the

transformative perspective of that same subject matter, because being is the same substance in its transformative differentiation and occurrence. Thus,

> [die] Kehre is not a change in standpoint from Being and Time, but in it the thinking that was sought first arrives at the locality of that dimension out of which Being and Time is experienced (GA 9: 328/250).

Die Kehre is the self-transforming (*selbst wandelt sich*) movement "in play" in *die Sache selbst*, and this latter is what Heidegger called both the *truth* of the difference between being and beings (being is indeed distinct from beings!) and the *going beyond* the difference, because being itself distinguishes itself as the unity of the mutual carrying out and trans-formative nature of beings-being. Calling this *Sache transformation* and its essential occurrence *transformative event* is helpful in situations, such as the overturning of ontological difference and the *Ge-stell* of technology, where the language of appropriation and existential-ontological structure are insufficient to *transform our being* beyond the decision between subjects and objects that we are forced into by representational and calculative thinking. Heidegger's *Ereignis-Kehre-Seyn* speak to us from a region in which is possible a transformative praxis, relation, and nature that resists reduction to both the "mine-ing" and objectification of beings.

I am not completely satisfied with "event" as the best noun for *Ereignis*, and perhaps "transformative appropriation" fills in the gap in those situations where it is crucial to highlight the fact that, in *Ereignis*, beings both enter into and undergo being. But that "transformation" and "transformative" excel at naming the three-dimensional nature of the transformation at stake in Heidegger's *Sein* we have seen above. Certainly it gives us a way to think the unity of both the consistent subject matter of Heidegger's thought (*Sein/Seyn* in its transformative unity/differentiation of being and beings) and the problem of the difference between Heidegger's thought and *die Sache selbst*, which diverge and converge with the turning of transformative *Ereignis-Denken* along the way of the *Seinsfrage*. Finally, the language of a transformation that, in the heart and soul of its idea, brings thought to a region beyond the schematization of subjectivity-objectivity, can be of aid to a philosophy that struggles to distinguish *being* in the age of *Ge-stell*.

– James Osborn

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