**THE TAO OF HEIDEGGER**

***Being and Time* and Beyond**

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Martin Heidegger, 1889-1976

***The Question and the Quest***

Heidegger was a German philosopher whose life spanned the first three quarters of the twentieth century. He was one of the twentieth century’s most important and influential philosophers. His quest for Being progressed from phenomenology through existentialism to Zen. Heidegger helped launch postmodernism: the twentieth century revolt against certainty, closure, “foundations.”

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger uncovers Kantian “conditions for the possibility” of Dasein. Dasein is Heidegger’s term for human reality. It means being-there. Dasein is being-in-the-world.

The worldview of *Being and Time* sees Western culture as fallen from Being. The second half of *Being and Time* calls us to be resolute. Being-toward-death opens the way to resoluteness, which is another term for authenticity.

***Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*), 1927**

Martin Heidegger’s 1927 *Being and Time* was a landmark in the history of Western philosophy. It achieved a fallibilistic, holistic overcoming of “foundationalism.” It shows how to “overcome” the Cartesian mind-matter, subject-object, dualistic, “representational” tradition, which Heidegger largely blames on Plato.

*Being and Time* achieved a paradigm shift. It offered philosophy a new worldview. It was daringly post-metaphysical and linguistically fresh. It was the launching pad for Heidegger’s further adventures in Ways: from “fundamental ontology” through “forest paths” of “meditative thinking” to the poetic silence of Zen.

Heidegger’s journey begins and ends with the question of Being. His philosophy is a prolonged inquiry into the *meaning* of Being. Heidegger describes his philosophy as always “being on the way.” He is always “on the way” to Being.

He begins by showing that time is the “horizon” of Being, hence the horizon for our understanding of Being. Thus the title of his *magnum opus, Being and Time.* For Heidegger, temporality is the key to Being. Temporality is also the key to human becoming.

Human existence is *ecstasis*: the temporal standing-out in the clearing of the experience of beings. *Ecstasis* – inner distance – is woven into the dialectic of human there-being. Dasein is always behind itself and ahead of itself. The no-longer and the not-yet are present as absence, informing the ever fluid durational now.

This existential distance finds echo in Heidegger’s later notion of the “rift,” or “rift design,” which he locates, not in Dasein, but in Being’s own event, the *Ereignis.* The rift (*Riss*) is the tension between revealing and concealing. All revealing is also concealing. Shifting from the language of Dasein to Being’s own event is the hallmark of Heidegger’s “turn” – the *Kehre*.

Heidegger never abandons *ecstasis –* “nihilating” self-distancing, which Sartre calls “self-transcendence” – as an existential category. Indeed, *ecstasis* is Dasein’s core feature: the condition for the possibility of being-in-the-world as “caring,” linguistic, and temporal.

The *later* Heidegger emphasizes the *ecstatic* nature of *Ereignis*:the happening of *Being’s* rift-event. The rift-event constitutes the possibility of possibility. The essential distance, earlier called *ecstasis*, is now found in Being, and given a new name: *the rift design.* The rift design is first articulated in Heidegger’s essay on *art’s working* to exhibit the strife which joins earth and world. The “strife which joins” is the dance of mystery and meaning, concealing and revealing.

Heidegger feels the question of Being has been covered up – concealed, obliviated – in the metaphysical tradition from Plato to Nietzsche.

Heidegger returns to the Presocratics, especially Heraclitus and Parmenides, to track the *aletheia*, the un-concealing *truth* of Being, which also conceals. Heidegger moves from

1) the existential, human-centered anthropology of *Being and Time,* to

2) the earth-world rift of art’s origin and work, through

3) the fourfold of earth, sky, gods and mortals, to

4) poetic dwelling in the discourse of silence: thinking and thanking in post-

philosophic Zen.

*Being and Time* begins with the questions of Being and time. Heidegger pursues these questions by looking at the questioner. He sees the question of Being is best approached through – opened up by – the being for whom its own being is in question. Heidegger reaches back through Kierkegaard and Augustine all the way to Socrates. Human being is a question to itself.

Dasein is a there-being; thrown into a facticity from which it also projects toward death. Dasein is a time-horizoning thrown-projection. Dasein’s being trembles with anxiety because its being is in question to itself.

It is because Dasein is *ecstatic*, self-distancing, that its being is in question; and therefore anxious. Because we are temporal, and because temporality is *ecstatic* distancing, we can never, as Sartre would later say, fully coincide with ourselves

This ontological “nihilation” at the heart of Dasein is reflected in Heidegger’s “ontological difference,” the distance between beings and Being. The pulse of Dasein’s own inner distance is reflected in “the ontological difference.”

Heidegger spends time with Heraclitus, Parmenides and Hegel pondering the differences built into the notion of identity. We cannot speak being without the nothing, and we cannot speak presence without absence. This insight is manifest in four key notions: 1) the Nothing, which “nihilates,” 2) “*ecstasis*,” or nihilating self-distancing, 3) “ontological difference,” between beings and Being, and 4) *aletheia*: the event of truth as concealing revealing.

In sum: Presence is also absence. It is above all an event; not a timeless, unchanging Platonic Form. Nor is it an Aristotelian ontological substance, epistemically in need of “representing.”

***The Lamp and the Light***

Dasein is a *lichtung*: a lighting clearing. Heidegger will later – after the *Kehre*, the “turn” – say Being itself is the *lichtung*; and that Dasein’s disclosing is enabled by, hence a gift from, Being itself. This gift calls us to be “shepherds of Being.”

Globally, Heidegger brings a necessary Zen emphasis on *Yin* – serenity, quietude, humility, frugality, thanksgiving – to counter-balance, indeed, lend sanity to, the Western, increasingly planetary *Yang* of militarizing, self-consuming, techno-klepto-capitalism and bio-despoliation.

Heidegger’s diagnosis of our “late modern” historical epoch – fallen, calculating, nihilistic – shows that we are “too late for gods and too early for Being.” The foundations tremble; storm clouds gather; the center cannot hold. The transition is fraught with danger and promise.

Arriving at the end of Heidegger’s Way, we have inadvertently followed Heidegger back to the second of half of *Being and Time*. Amidst the absurd, we are *called* to be *authentic*.

**On *Being and Time* and Beyond**

*Hermeneutic* is a fancy word for “interpret” or “interpretation.” Dasein is hermeneutic: a being whose being *is* interpreting.

The *Hermeneutic Circle* is Heidegger’s name for the curious fact that to ask a question is already to have some sense of an answer. Questions frame, and thus partly anticipate, their answers. Understanding is self-reinforcing. Questions, of course, can also jolt the understanding into boundary-crossing epiphany. For authentic understanding, the hermeneutic circle is never closed.

Dasein is always *projecting* a *horizon of interpretation* – hence meaning – upon the world, in virtue of which the world is disclosed. Dasein’s worldhood is disclosed in the *understanding* and in *moods*; most primordially, in *angst*: the anxiety that brings to the surface the anguish of being thrown into the world, doomed to death.

The hermeneutic circle reflects the assumptions and values of the historical epoch in which Dasein finds itself. We find ourselves situated in fact, immersed in contingent circumstance, thrown into a particular historical fate. We are free to respond.

Authentic response involves conscientious *being-toward-death*; in Castaneda’s Toltec vocabulary: “Death as wisest advisor.” Death cuts through all the bullshit. It allows you to Be Here Now. Heidegger’s *Sein-zum-Tode* – *being-toward-death* – is like a seed in *Being and Time* which fertilizes over the decades, then blossoms into Zen.

*Das Man* – most people, the “they-self,” animated versions of prisoners in Plato’s cave, socialized into ignorance and dysfunction – “*flee*” their *angst*, “*fall*” into *chatter* and distraction, are inauthentic and *alienated,* and unaware of their condition. Sartre says they are in *mauvaise foi*, “self-deception.” Sartre also says it is as hard to break the chains of self-deception as it is “to wake from sleep.”

Heidegger completes Part One showing that *Das Man* is fallen, inauthentic, alienated. The they-self is a crowd of Nietzschean camels, huddled close for comfort. They are fleeing – and led – into forgetfulness, chatter and distraction.

Part Two shows authenticity as becoming Promethean. In short: unshackling from the heard; becoming a constant and creative self-overcoming; following a path with heart out of Plato’s cave.

Dasein is in-the-world *as* “equipmental.” Dasein equipmentally, or equiprimordially, *works* the world as it works on him. Said Nietzsche: “Humans are clever animals.”

Facticity and mood situate Dasein in the past. Understanding projects Dasein into the future. Discourse erupts in the present as the intersection of past and future, facticity and freedom, history and possibility, moods and projects.

Heidegger’s transition from Dasein to Being passes through Nietzsche and the poet Holderlin. Heidegger interprets Nietzsche as the last Western metaphysician; Nietzsche’s ontology – “will to power” – combined with his secular theology – “eternal recurrence” – exhibits the ontotheological obsession with sheer presence begun with Plato.

Heidegger’s middle and later essays elaborate this theme, saying Nietzsche’s ontotheology is the metaphysical backdrop for late-modern, all-pervasive, hyper-calculating, techno-nihilistic subjectivism. The subject dominates a world of objects stripped of meaning except as resources for endless power games. Humans too are thus *enframed*.

Heidegger uses new language to repeat his earlier suspicion: Western culture, as Nietzsche said, is sick. It takes an *Ubermenschean* effort to remain sane amidst so much absurdity.

To heal the Wasteland, Heidegger turns to art, and with great affection to the poetry of Holderlin. Beauty, says Heidegger, is art’s truth, working to draw us into the mystery of the self-concealing revealing; urging us to listen, while calling us to eff the ineffable.

***Excursus on Hegel and Heidegger***

Philosophy is the journey from the love of wisdom to the wisdom of love. The turning about of the “of” in the love of wisdom, in order to *become* the wisdom of love, is reflected in the title of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. What starts out as an inquiry *into* Geist *becomes* the revelation of Geist *in* the spirit of inquiry. Is there not a Socratic irony at work here?

There are three turns in the philosophic, therapeutic, epiphantic adventure. The first is a meditative turning away from the everyday. This ignites a second, inner turning. The “eye of the soul” revolves to explore the Heraclitean depths of the never-ending psyche. Then, thirdly: climaxing Diotema’s “stairway to heaven” is a *turning about in Beauty* which throws the aspirant back into the world, pregnant with creativity.

The double function of the “of” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – its bivalent eventfulness, pointing in both directions at once – mirrors the *turning about in Beauty* which climaxes Diotema’s speech to Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*. It recalls the “turning about” of the “eye of the soul” in Book Seven of *The Republic*, which parallels the “turning about” in the “deepest seat of consciousness” in Buddha’s *Lankavatara Sutra*.

Heidegger – in, for example, *Identity and Difference*, *Hegel’s Concept of Experience*, and *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* – engages in a phenomenology of the *Phenomenology*, disclosing the bivalent force of the “of” in Hegel’s title. The movement of that bivalence – its turning about – is a cipher for Heidegger’s own turn.

The turn in Heidegger’s philosophy, the *Kehre*, is prefigured in the 1929 exploration of “the nothing” in “What is Metaphysics?”

It is illumined in the 1935 tension between “earth” and “world” in “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

It is clarified in the 1946 contra-Sartre, meta-existential “Letter on Humanism.”

It is elaborated in the portrait of the Fourfold – earth, sky, gods, mortals – in the 1951 “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.”

It is poetized in the 1953 “Discourse on Thinking”, which urges a meditative allowing of the mystery of Being to show itself and be heard. Heidegger’s later philosophy is a long journey into Zen.

Heidegger sees the Plato-to-Nietzsche canon as a will to power, and he sees the earlier version of himself as part of that madness and strife, which the Greeks personified as the goddess Eris, soul-sister of Ares, god of war.

Recoiling from the horrors of the twentieth century and his own anthropomorphic willfulness, Heidegger’s later philosophy returns to Meister Eckhart’s *Gelassenheit*: a letting-go and letting-be that may be our best hope for redeeming the Faustian bargain by which the West, and now the world, lost its soul. A walk in the forest helps recapture the sanity we were born with.

***Contingent Metaphysics***

Process and Presence

Heidegger’s critique of the Western philosophic tradition is a critique of what he calls “the metaphysics of presence.” Heidegger lays the groundwork for the *overcoming* of the “metaphysics of presence” in his 1927 *Being and Time*. Heidegger’s critique of Western philosophy – of “onto-theology” – asserts that we have mistaken the map for the territory.

Although apparently unfamiliar with Heidegger’s work, Alfred North Whitehead would have been tremendously sympathetic to Heidegger’s critique of the “category mistake” which is the fatal flaw of the West. Indeed, Whitehead’s process philosophy is precisely such a critique, though, of course, couched in a metaphysical language Heidegger would find too alien to appreciate. Whitehead calls the category mistake “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

Heidegger is a process philosopher. Heidegger and Whitehead share a deep suspicion of the notion of “substance,” in regard to which Whitehead develops Hume’s Buddhist critique while Heidegger develops Nietzsche’s.

Heidegger and Whitehead help overcome the substance-philosophy – the “metaphysics of presence” – enshrined in the Western canon from Aristotle to Kant. Heidegger and Whitehead – like James, Freud and the later Wittgenstein – help launch the de-centering of self and soul.

Heidegger’s critique of presence argues against Descartes’ notion of perception. Descartes’ mistake – Locke’s too – is to think that sensory data somehow become transformed into ideas in a theater called mind, and that truth can thus be defined as the correspondence of these ideas to the objects and events they re-present.

In this scheme, objects and events are shrunk to the present moment, isolated from each other and from the experiencing subject. Objects and events are now *present* *as* ideas in a Cartesian “theater of consciousness,” mirroring – often through a glass darkly – the truth of the world and of ourselves.

Descartes’ dualism lies at the schizoid heart of representational thinking and the correspondence theory of truth. It is insufficiently wary of, and too seduced by, the subject-predicate logic of language. Nietzsche helped Heidegger see this.

Heidegger argues that Descartes’ onto-epistemology is absurd, because it violates our primordial experience of being-in-the-world, which is *horizoning* and thoroughly temporal.

*Dasein*, “there-being,” is “thrown” *from* the past *into* the future. Humans are historically impacted *and* teleological. We project forward *into* a horizon of expectations and projects, *from* a fluctuating foundation of historical facticity.

The category mistake of representational thinking and the correspondence theory of truth – a legacy, Heidegger argues, from Plato’s theory of Forms – is that it presupposes stasis. It divides subject and object in such a way as to miss the unitive primordiality of Dasein’s “equipmental,” functional, being-*with*-the-world.

Objects in the world are not simply “at hand” (*Vorhanden*); they are, most fundamentally, “ready-to-hand” (*Zuhanden*). We are symbiotically *with* the environment, and this symbiosis is more primordial than Cartesian mind/natter, subject-object, substance-attribute dualism.

Shortly after the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger asserts that his own *magnum opus* was still too anthropocentric. It was, he says, the post-Nietzschean culmination of Western “metaphysics” and its “humanistic” bias. Having turned Nietzsche into a metaphysician, and having sought to overcome Nietzsche, Heidegger now sees his own *Being and Time* as the last gasp of Western metaphysics. He also says it was useful as a way, like a forest path, to the clearing which he now speaks of as Being’s event, the *Ereignis* in which we live and move and have our lives, mostly unknowingly.

Heidegger’s middle and later philosophizing – which he prefers to call “thinking” – abandons the language of traditional philosophy and becomes increasingly poetic.

This move toward poetizing thinking renews Heidegger’s “openness” to Being’s truth; the pulse of its *aletheia*; disclosure and withdrawal, revealing and concealing.

Heidegger concludes that humans are, or ought to be, not the lord of Being, but its “shepherd.”

To release ourselves into shepherding, we must clear the clutter and learn to “dwell” again. Heidegger’s implicit environmentalism destabilizes the institutional inertia that now prevents sustainability and peace.

To paraphrase Michael Parenti: It is better to swim against the current than to be swept over the cliff.

Process and Absence

We now arrive at the irony of the evolution of presence in Heidegger’s thought. He begins with a critique of presence, yet ends with Zen’s “Be here now.” He banishes presence, then circles back to it.

This is not a contradiction. Heidegger’s encircling movement is a phenomenological spiral. Imploding the “metaphysical” notion of presence, Heidegger peers into its absence, the nothing, the black hole. He discovers Being’s emerging and withdrawing, disclosing and concealing. A *mysterium tremendum*, where epiphany and humility are entangled.

Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit* is Eckhart’s “releasement” into the Zen of “Be here now.” *This* “now” is something new. Heidegger’s “turn” after *Being and Time* is a return to presence from a radically new point of view. The negation of metaphysical presence opens into Zen presence.

Japanese Zen Master D. T. Suzuki said to Thomas Merton: “Thomas, you’ll never understand Zen unless you read Meister Eckhart.”

Eckhart said: “If I spend enough time with this caterpillar, I’ll never have to write another sermon.”

Chuang Tzu said: “Am I a butterfly dreaming I’m a man?”

***Platonic Afterthought***

Dualism is the fatal flaw of Western culture. It leads to excessively separative thinking, in which everything is reduced to calculation, including humans.

One can argue, as many have and Heidegger does, that Plato inaugurates dualistic thinking in the West with his distinction between reality and appearance, truth and image, universal and particular, being and becoming. “Platonism” is the term for this bifurcated vision. Platonism is dualistic, idealistic, and other-worldly. Plato is the father of Western metaphysics. Accordingly, “Platonism” is a useful term. It is also dangerous.

It is useful primarily in systematizing a “Platonic” worldview which runs like a river through the subsequent history of Western thought. Aristotle’s philosophy is a transformative refinement of Platonic ideas. One can usefully refer to the Platonism in Plotinus, Augustine, even Aquinas.

Yet “Platonism” is a dangerous term, because it extracts a rigidified matrix, a frozen Logos, from a polymorphously perverse, ironic, fluid and paradoxical set of suggestions. Note that Plato almost never appears in his dialogues, and, apart from the *Letters* and *Laws*, he never speaks in his own name.

“Platonism” signifies one strand in Plato’s thought. To appreciate the whole Gestalt, we must respect Plato’s irony. His Socratic hero in *The Phaedo* says the body is the tomb of the soul, then says in *The Symposium* the body is the temple of the soul.

Plato is a *maestro* of indirect communication, encircling what he finally says cannot be said. If Plato is other-worldly – truth is, and is a function of, timeless Forms – he is also profoundly this-worldly. If Plato in *The Republic* has Socrates build a philosophic ladder to the stars, it is only in order to return to earth to create justice in the *polis*. If Socrates’ muse in *The Symposium* shows him the stairway to heaven that culminates in Beauty, it is only in order to cast the pilgrim back into the world to give birth to virtue. The life of the creative artist is most like the divine. By exhibiting the infinite in the finite, beauty reminds us to be virtuous.

Plato thunders against mythology; even banishes the poets. Yet he is himself a mythologizing philosopher. The Cave parable uses images to turn the eye away from images. Plato’s philosophy is perpetually in tension with itself. One needs to be careful not to confuse Plato with Platonism.

If Plato is the father of Western metaphysics, it is – given the strife with which Plato’s texts are fraught – perhaps best to approach his philosophy as a form of *contingent metaphysics*. This approach honors Plato’s use of myth, his dialogical personae, his Socratic suspicion of claims to certainty, and his story within a story within a story narrative style.

Pragmatism could benefit from seeing contingent metaphysics as a viable form of philosophizing. Richard Rorty captures the spirit of contingent metaphysics with a term he borrows from Kierkegaard: “edifying discourse.” One can do metaphysics in a suggestive, literary, contingent, ironic, edifying way, without claims to certainty and closure.

Rorty’s early and most famous book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, builds on the Nietzschean and Heideggerian overcoming of Western metaphysics. It undermines the foundationalist program – the search for certainty – in Husserl’s attempt at a scientific phenomenology and the early Wittgenstein’s attempt at a totalizing logic of language.

Rorty’s later work draws the pragmatic conclusions implicit in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. His 1989 *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* launches this pragmatist project, more or less fulfilled in *Philosophy and Social Hope* and *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*.

Pragmatic metaphysics is quantum philosophy: thinking the tension between flux and the patterns in the flux. We live in that tension, that between. It is no more contradictory than Rorty’s “A World without Substances” or “Ethics without Principles.” Rorty never saw this; and when it comes to Plato, neither did Heidegger.

In his book *Plato and Heidegger: A Question of Dialogue*, Francisco Gonzalez argues that Heidegger opposes Platonism more than Plato’s own philosophy. Heidegger’s myopic and simplistic version of Plato is a figure he can then forcefully oppose.

Heidegger admits that he engages in “original interpretations” of original thinkers, excavating the primordial and “unsaid.”

Gonzalez respects Heidegger’s originality *and* his philosophic right to what Whitehead calls “the *adventure* of ideas.”

Gonzales argues, however, that Heidegger’s turning Plato into such an *oppositional* discursive partner hinders – indeed, prevents – what could have been a more enlightening and fruitful conversation between Platonic and Heideggerian philosophy. Hence the subtitle: “A Question of Dialogue.” Gonzales questions Heidegger’s dialogue with Plato.

Gonzalez appreciates the path Heidegger took. He critiques that path to illumine the road not taken. If Heidegger had walked with Plato down a different path, they might have had a more fruitful and congenial debate. Gonzalez writes:

… Plato is Heidegger’s “other,” though not the “other” Heidegger

made him into. By identifying Plato with Platonism and the metaphysics of presence, Heidegger was able to make Plato a chapter in his history of being and transform Plato into his mere opposite, against which he could define himself. Only when we can see that Plato is not the mere opposite of Heidegger and that there is instead a very close affinity between the two can we see just how radically “other” Plato is, that is, the extent to which he represents a genuine alternative to Heidegger’s way of thinking.

(Penn State University Press; University Park, PA; 2009; p. 2)

***The Work of The Work of Art***

The title of Heidegger’s 1935 essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” calls attention to the vibrant ambiguity of the word “work.” Work is noun and verb. Like Hegel’s “of,” it is bipolar. We need to hear it both ways.

“The Origin of the Work of Art” is best read as a question. Heidegger seeks the origin of the creative impulse, whereby the artist works the art, the art works the artist, and both work the culture which works the artistic event.

The originary upsurge of the work of art is a working dialectic. This event occurs in the tension between earth and world. World is the unconcealing – the lighting, clearing, disclosing of truth, *aletheia* – amidst the perpetual self-concealment of earth.

Every unconcealing is also a concealing. Earth is the infinite mystery. World is the perpetual attempt to unveil that mystery. Unlike the metaphysics of presence – the history of Western philosophy – the art-work preserves the mystery and invites us to appreciate it. If successful, the art-work works on us. Yet we ourselves have to do the work of being open to its influence.

Heidegger uses Plato as a foil. Ironically and inadvertently, Heidegger edges toward a Platonic epiphany: Beauty is a guide to justice.

In the Apollonian peace of a sustainable and civil civilization, there is abundant Dionysian dance. Perhaps all we need is to give peace a chance.

***The Rift***

In “The Origin of the Work of Art” and similar essays, Heidegger employs “the rift” – also called “the rift design,” “the rift structure,” and “the fissure” – to describe the *agon* between earth and world. Humans live in the tension of this between.

Plato’s word for “between” is *metaxia*. It is Plato’s name for “ontological difference.” It signifies the distance between timeless Forms and manifest particulars. The god *Eros* lives in the metaxic energy field, mediating Beauty and the flutters of the human heart. Plato’s metaxic space between earth and heaven is his most numinous and elusive notion; it is also, perforce, the domain of the soul after death.

Is Heidegger’s “rift” unwittingly a version of Plato’s energetic, numinous, metaxic dialectic? Both are fraught with paradox, unifying tension, identity in difference.

In Heidegger’s later essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” the agon of earth and world – the rift between which we are beings-in-the-world – is encompassed by sky and gods, completing the Fourfold.

The Presocratic philosopher Empedocles is the unsung hero of Heidegger’s post-metaphysical poetizing. Heidegger’s rift between earth and world is Empedocles’ Taoistic *agon* of Love and Strife. Tension and release is the key to art. Beauty is *exquisite* disequilibrium.

Heidegger portrays humans as worlding events in the clearing of earth’s disclosure and concealment. Earth’s revealing makes the worlding of intelligibility possible; but there is no revealing without concealing. This is the first principle of phenomenology. The emergence of any aspect coincides with the submergence of other aspects.

Intelligibility overflows out of and into the unthought. Understanding is horizoned by the not-yet: the half-hidden promise veiled by the very act of revealing. This was, after all, the point of the bivalent “of” in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason.* The critique of reason is reason’s critique of itself. Done with care, it generates respect for limits, and reverence for the unlimit; humility before the mystery of the overflow itself.

Through Nietzsche, Heidegger returns to Eckhart’s conundrum. *Gelassenheit* means “less is more.”

In *The Republic*, Plato defines dialectic as the ability to make connections. Dialectical thinking is wary of either/or, respecting the concealed in the unconcealed. Plato says we live in the *metaxic, agonistic* flux of known and unknown. Buddhism and Taoism say essentially the same.

Heidegger, then, is in good company. He fondly greets his fellow gardeners from the East. Meanwhile, Plato is an unwanted ghost locked in a hut that Heidegger built, right over there, almost hidden by the fir trees. But a ghost cannot be confined by a hut, and Plato’s living presence in Heidegger’s thought is clear. Heidegger’s rift is Plato’s metaxic pulse. The Tao of the self-concealing emerging.

The rift between Heidegger and Plato is a bridge. Beneath that bridge flows the river of Western discourse. The river speaks. It says the present moment is perilous, and in the danger lies the promise.

***Toward a Theory of Exquisite Disequilibrium***

Heidegger articulates five essential Western “epochs”: Presocratic, Platonic, Medieval, Modern, Late Modern. Each epoch has a distinctive way of interpreting beings, but thereby *unknowingly* puts the question of Being itself in oblivion, i.e., in brackets, as per Husserl’s notion of *epoche*, which is why Heidegger uses the term “epoch”. *Epoche* is the Greek word for “holding back”, which Derrida calls “putting in parentheses”. Playing on Husserl’s notion, Heidegger uses the term “epoch” with this double reference: a distinct time-frame, *and that which it conceals*, brackets, hides, obliviates. Hence the need for an “overcoming” or “destruction” of the history of Western metaphysics, which Derrida translates as “deconstruction.

Bringing the forgotten or suppressed question of Being itself to light is what Heidegger means by “fundamental ontology” in *Being and Time*.

Iain Thomson observes,

“In the metaphysical tradition, Heidegger maintains, the question of the being *of entities* stands in for (and so eclipses) the deeper question of ‘being as such.’ Being as such [Heidegger says] ‘conceals itself in any given phase of metaphysics, [and] such keeping to itself determines each epoch of the history of being as the *epoche* of being itself.’”

(*Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*; Cambridge University Press; 2011; footnote, p. 9; the Heidegger quote is from his Nietzsche lectures.)

Nietzsche and Heidegger interpret Plato as a nihilist, because Plato devalues beings in time. Hence Nietzsche’s famous dictum: “Christianity is Platonism for the masses.” Heidegger, daringly, sees Nietzsche as the culmination of Platonic nihilism. For Heidegger, Nietzsche’s will-to-power is his ontology; eternal return is his secular theology: the metaphysical text or context.

Heidegger sees technological “enframing” (*Gestell*) as the outcome of Nietzsche’s ontotheology, whereby beings, as will-to-power, are reduced to mere “resource” or inventory (standing-by, *Bestand*) for human use. Humans too are thus reduced: mere inventory for use.

It is of course absurd for Heidegger to claim, insofar as he does, that Nietzsche is the *cause* of (late-modern, nihilistic) enframing. Nietzsche had no such influence; not even amongst philosophers. However, Heidegger’s utilization of will-to-power as the nihilistic currency of the late-modern Western worldview is astute. For Nietzsche, reality is a meaningless play of forces eternally recurring. For Heidegger, Nietzsche’s ontotheology frames the late-modern vortex of self-consumption.

In *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity,* Iain Thomson notes: “Heidegger suggests in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ that intelligibility contains a complex texture of edges, lines, and breaks, and that this ‘rift-structure’ forms an open-ended ‘basic design’ or ‘outline sketch’ … to which we need to learn to be creatively receptive in order to bring at least one of the potentially inexhaustible forms slumbering in the earth into the light of the world.” (p. 24, footnote #27)

The word “aesthetics” comes from the Greek *aesthesis*, meaning “sensation” or “feeling.” Heidegger’s critique of aesthetics centers on its being one more example of the core assumption of the modern worldview: the subject-object dichotomy. Heidegger’s term for this dichotomy is “subjectivism,” which (a la Descartes, Nietzsche and Freud) implies will-to-power, which translates as will-to-control. Three aspects of subjectivism are especially relevant: 1) It isolates and divides the subject from others and nature. 2) It locates truth in representational thinking. 3) It perpetuates objectifying, calculating, will to control.

Heidegger traces the subjectivist impulse back to Plato, who places truth in the subject’s relation to Forms. As a theory of Platonic “truth,” this is, of course, questionable, given Heidegger’s antagonistic approach to Plato.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger shows that we are pragmatically *with* the world in a way ontologically and epistemically prior to the subject-object dichotomy. Importantly, Heidegger does not deny the value, and even the correctness, of subject-object thinking, even in aesthetics. For example, an art work stands over against me – outside of and apart from me – and I can usefully reflect on how it affects me. But Heidegger’s philosophy – early, middle and late – shares a commitment to seeing subjectivism as a second-order phenomenon: a misunderstanding of our primordial being-with-the-world.

Love can be seen as Heidegger’s paradigm case for *Gelassenheit*. To love another person (or a mountain, a forest, a river, a lake, an animal, a flock) is to have respect for their independence. Love means not trying to control. Love recognizes that the other makes demands on me; demands which are as sacred as my own demands. Love is negotiation, not control. Negotiation takes place in the meeting-place, the between, the *metaxia*.

Heidegger claims that his Art-work essay is designed to overcome aesthetics, where aesthetics is understood as reinforcing subjectivism: the subject’s objectifying attempt to control beings. Modern subjectivism leads to late-modern enframing, wherein even the subject is objectified and reduced to mere resource for optimization.

Heidegger’s Art-work essay looks at three art-works in particular: a Greek temple, a Roman-fountain poem, and a Van Gogh painting of peasant shoes. The temple, poem and painting exemplify the three essential epochs of Western metaphysics: ancient, medieval, modern.

For Heidegger, a great work of art exhibits the *aletheiac* tension between unconcealing and concealing, revealing and veiling, emerging and withdrawal. This *aletheiac* tension in great art exhibits the archetypal pulse of all art: tension and release. In great art, the yin/yang fusion of tension and release is, for Heidegger, a kind of motion-in-repose. I call it *exquisite disequilibrium*.

Heidegger says great art is manifestly polysemic: its meaning always exceeds and overflows conceptual articulation. There is no concept-closure which adequately exhausts the meaning of great artwork. Such artwork is great precisely because it reminds us that all being is polysemic, all revealing a concealing, the light of conceptual clarity always surrounded by a penumbra of mystery, a dark and uncanny excess.

Heidegger’s healing solution for the self-devouring, dehumanizing, techno-enframing nihilism that permeates our late-modern epoch is dwelling in thankful thinking, with respect for Being’s mystery.

To dwell thankfully is also to be creative. The mystic heart of Heidegger’s thinking – the Yin and Yang of Heidegger’s Tao – is openness and upsurge. This dialectical tension, or movement in repose, calls for caring. Care – *Sorge* – is a defining feature of Dasein in *Being and Time*. In his later work, Heidegger abandons the term; but the idea is implicitly present throughout. We must care for the earth and for each other, and be careful in our use of technology, if we are to survive in any meaningful way.

Caring authentically means slowing down; a Zen reorientation of our temporality. Gilles Deleuze makes this Heideggerian point when he notes that Van Gogh took a long time to start experimenting with color. Van Gogh approached color carefully, with hesitation and trepidation, knowing that he was entering into and opening up a new world. Michelangelo spent weeks meditating with the marble from which his David would emerge. For Heidegger, all great art – poetry, painting and music most especially – is a cipher of the holy, showing that what we are is but a bridge to what we could be.

***Caring for the World***

Creative dwelling in thankful thinking signifies *Gelassenheit*. *Gelassenheit* – Meister Eckhart’s “letting go,” “letting be,” “releasement” – is the term Heidegger appropriates to indicate the human comportment which opens to the event he calls *Ereignis*. The underlying theme is authentic being-in-the-world. Authenticity is currently overwhelmed by what Heidegger calls “enframing,” *Gestell*. *Gestell* reduces entities and humans to mere inventory “standing by” – *Bestand* – for optimal use in techno-corporate profiteering.

Advertising is the curse of modern culture. It is intrusive and pervasive. It prostitutes language and imagery. It sustains enframing, and reduces humans to homeless strangers in a blizzard of information overload. It distorts what is and what matters. It creates fear and dissatisfaction, promotes desire, superficializes human relations, and undermines educational and political integrity. Its consequences massively contribute to the despoliation of the biosphere: the destruction of our one and only spaceship. It is perhaps the most insidious presence of enframing in our lives.

Plato and Heidegger share the conviction that *abuse of language* is a kind of existential disease: the sign and herald of social collapse. The abuse of language engenders forgetfulness. Iain Thomson observes:

Enframing could effect and enforce a *double forgetting* in which we humans beings lose sight of our distinctive capacity for world-disclosure *and* forget that anything has been forgotten. [Enframing leads to] what Baudrillard calls “the triumph of the simulacra” … in which dystopia masquerades as utopia …. [Thus Heidegger warns, in *Contributions to Philosophy*], “Humanity with its machinations might for centuries yet pillage and lay waste to the planet, [resulting in] … the endless etcetera of what is most desolately transitory.” … [In *What is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger concludes:] “the wasteland grows.”

(*Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, p. 200-201.)

Heidegger doesn’t just thunder against the danger. He struggles to provide a philosophic and linguistic bridge to a new, authentic mode of being-in-the-world. As the danger increases, so does the possibility that we might awaken. Instead of sleepwalking through history, we might instead learn from history, and prepare a path to beauty. How we respond to this challenge determines the destiny of our children. Thusfar and collectively, we are not responding well. Heidegger’s assertion that, now, “only a god can save us,” indicates his hope that whatever is holy in Being as such might provide us with an undeserved experience of grace, opening a Way to the Way. As and when that happens, we shall learn to care for the world, and thus give our children the beauty they deserve.