Heidegger Uncovered

An Encounter with:
Mark A. Wrathall. *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 250 pages.

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Mark A. Wrathall's new book, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History*, focuses on Heidegger's idea of *alêtheia* (*Unverborgenheit*) and its relation to the opening up of the world, the disclosure of beings, and the uncovering of entities in order to challenge multiple debates in contemporary analytic philosophy on the questions of truth, language, and history. However, these ten essays—two previously unpublished, and all of which span the last ten years of Wrathall's engagement with Heidegger—are more than just a handy resource for those analytic philosophers looking to engage with the methodological principle of unconcealment. What is of equal if not greater importance for Wrathall is to show how and why a failure to understand Heidegger's idiosyncratic and ontologically broad use of terms leads to terrible errors—concealing what Heidegger has to say. Wrathall poses some deep criticisms of entrenched mistakes in the literature on Heidegger, especially with regards to his later work. For example, a failure to realize that Heidegger was using the word "truth" in a broad sense has damaged his account of unconcealment and its relationship to truth. To be sure, Heidegger *did* use truth as a name for unconcealment; however, it is wrong to assume that by truth, Heidegger was referring to propositional truth or that propositional truth could be defined as unconcealment. Throughout all the essays, Wrathall hones in on misunderstandings such as these, which he compellingly shows to pervade much of the

secondary literature on Heidegger, in order to uncover what the latter really meant by the terms he used.

As the book's subtitle implies, the work is structured in three parts—"Truth and Disclosure," "Language," and "Historical Worlds." Part One explores Heidegger's account of propositional truth and his claim that propositional truth is grounded in unconcealment. In Part Two, Wrathall shows how, for Heidegger, the whole of language necessarily depends on unconcealment. The final section looks at the question of historical worlds—that is, worlds that split history into a series of contrasting ages of unconcealment. In each section, Wrathall traces out the pattern that the logic of unconcealment makes in Heidegger's thought. In doing so, he is able to provide a much-needed set of guidelines for those difficult later essays, seminars, and lectures that follow *Being and Time*. Wrathall deals with the problems of Heidegger's so-called "turn"—thought by some scholars to mark a fundamental break in the 1930s from a more existential phenomenology to a history of being—by constantly following the golden thread of *alêtheia* through the later works. He is thus able to make the case that, despite scholarly claims to the contrary, "Heidegger's thought develops less in starts and stops and dramatic turnings, and more as a gradual recognition of the implications of pursuing an ontology of unconcealment" (Wrathall 4). Unconcealment provides the proper perspective for attempts to understand Heidegger's mature work and is to be recognized as a serious and convincing idea connecting the Heidegger of *Being and Time* to the later Heidegger.

From this brief synopsis we can see that Wrathall's work has the potential to impact a diverse philosophical audience and is well-positioned to pique the curiosities of enlightened analytic philosophers. His refined insights into Heidegger's thought add to current discourse on Heidegger and contribute to debates on the purpose and method of contemporary philosophy in general. This collection of essays is, therefore, an invaluable resource for

Heidegger scholars, researchers on both sides of the analytic-continental divide, and philosophy students in general.

The first chapter, simply titled "Unconcealment," is by itself almost worth the entire price of the admission. It is by far the best chapter on Heidegger's account of unconcealment I have ever come across: not only does it provide an accessible introduction to Heidegger's thought in general, but it also seeks to correct some long-standing myths surrounding the notion of unconcealment and its relationship to truth. Wrathall observes that such a relationship is complex, partly because Heidegger used the terms of unconcealment and truth (*Warheit*) interchangeably throughout his career (15). However, while truth in the usual sense (*im gewöhnlichen Sinne; im üblichen Sinne*) or in the contemporary sense (*im heutigen Sinne*) has been understood by philosophers to be propositional truth as correspondence (*Übereinstimmung*) or correctness (*Richtigkeit*), as when a proposition is true when it corresponds with a state of affairs, it is a mistake to define propositional truth as unconcealment or to transfer features of propositional truth to the notion of unconcealment (15). Instead, the three platforms for building up to Heidegger's account of propositional truth as a sort of correspondence—the truth of entities, the truth of being, and truth as the clearing (*Lichtung*)—are different modes or ways of unconcealment (11-15). Ultimately, as Wrathall explains, "all truths—propositional, the truth of being, the truth of entities—preserve and shelter a particular existential relationship between things in the world" (39). This relationship is one of unconcealment whereby we encounter entities as being what they are only through their prior disclosure in a particular world. Thus, as Wrathall explains, "being itself must be understood not as something determinate and stable, but in terms of conditions for the emergence of entities and worlds out of concealment into unconcealment" (1). It follows that propositional truth, which, as Wrathall observes, "stabilizes and secures particular ways of encountering entities" (39), is presupposed by unconcealment from the

very beginning, "that unconcealment was an essential condition of there being truth," in this narrower, philosophical sense (6). Wrathall adds weight to these claims in the fourth chapter through an historical analysis of how unconcealment became overshadowed by truth as correctness including the consequences this has for our thinking, as well as an investigation into the later Heidegger's embryonic fascination with the history of being.

The motivation for Wrathall's defence of Heidegger's account of unconcealment as the essence of truth seems to be Ernst Tugendhat's 1967 book, *The Concept of Truth in Husserl and Heidegger* (*Der Warheitsbegriff bei Husserl und Heidegger*). Tugendhat, a Jewish exile who returned to Germany after the war in order to study with Heidegger, unlike the majority of his colleagues, severely criticized his master's conception of truth. Indeed, Tugendhat's book is one of earliest examples of a work that, according to Wrathall, misconstrues Heidegger's understanding of truth. Often acknowledged as having introduced analytic philosophy to Germany by those who have read his works, Tugendhat responded to the ontological questions that Heidegger had rehabilitated; however, his criticisms of the latter's conception of truth moved him toward contemporary philosophy of language. Tugendhat's argument consisted of the following three claims: 1) Heidegger had redefined propositional truth; 2) Heidegger had extended the revised concept of propositional truth to uncovering entities and the disclosure of being; 3) the uncovering of entities and the disclosure of being lack the right to be called truth. As Wrathall demonstrates, Heidegger did not believe that only propositional truth has an inherent right to be called truth. Indeed, accounts that equate propositional truth with truth and leave no room for anything else fly in the face of ordinary linguistic practices. Wrathall argues that we can think of the "natural" conception of truth in terms of unconcealment, without losing its specificity, by treating propositional truth as an example of unconcealment. In doing so, he seeks to defend Heidegger from all three of Tugenhadt's charges.

Throughout this first chapter, Wrathall does a superb job in providing a defence of Heidegger and of unconcealment in general. However, his argument for the concept of unconcealment as the ground of truth could, I claim, be taken a step further by drawing upon the ideas of Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer. For Heidegger, the disclosure of being relies on entities having an essence. He became fascinated by the idea of an authentic, *historical* essence (an essence that is temporally and contextually contingent), in contrast to *des unwesentliche Wesen* (a fixed and necessary property that all entities of a certain kind must have or, indeed, a universal property which a particular thing shares with other things of the same kind). What it means for something to be—or, put in more elaborate Heideggerian terms, that in the light of which something shows up to be what it is—changes with history. This being the case, Heidegger was determined to figure out why a single understanding of essence could prevail over any other. As Wrathall illustrates, Heidegger argued for the existence of a clearing that allows particular ways of being disposed to the world by concealing others: "The clearing maintains a world by keeping back (concealing) possibilities that are incompatible with the essence that is currently operative" (Wrathall 34). Gadamer, who was heavily indebted to Heidegger for having brought the clearing out into the open, went some way to disclosing its structure through his ideas of "historically effected consciousness" (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) and "horizon" (*Horizont*). Here, understanding and interpretation are established by our historically determined situatedness, providing us with "the right horizon of inquiry" so that we are effected "in *finding the right questions to ask*" of a text when we are caught up in the event (*Ereignis*) (Gadamer 301). Although there is certainly not enough space in Wrathall's essay to explore Gadamer's disclosure of the clearing, such an exploration would be worthwhile for its ability to lend further support to the idea of unconcealment as the ground of truth.

The second chapter is entitled "The Conditions of Truth in Heidegger and Davidson." Here, Wrathall aims to show how both sides of the philosophical divide can be brought into successful dialogue with each other on topics central to the agendas of both traditions. He does this by illuminating Heidegger's account of truth and unconcealment through a comparison with Davidson's accounts of the conditions of truth. Different as they are, both come to focus on the conditions of truth as the means to dissolving philosophical problems. As Wrathall shows, this is where Heidegger and Davidson disagree.

With analytic traditions of philosophy, the general point of departure for a discussion of truth is to analyse the truth predicate, to understand the formal features of our use of "is true." Arguably, the best-known example of a definition of the truth predicate is Alfred Tarski's semantic theory of truth. For Tarski, an adequate analysis of the predicate should verify what he called "Convention T." According to Convention T, a satisfactory definition of truth must entail for every sentence of the object language a T-sentence of the form "s is true if and only if p," whereby "s" is a structural-descriptive name of the sentence of the language in question, and "p" is the translation of the sentence into the metalanguage. However, in order that we might understand why it is that a sentence of the form (T) is true, we require a pre-theoretical understanding of truth, an account of truth above and beyond a definition of the truth predicate of the kind that makes up Tarski's formal theory of truth. That is, what we require is not a definition of truth as such, but a clarification of the conditions of how we come to have the concept of truth. The content of truth was a central concern for Heidegger, who, as we have seen, claimed that truth presupposes unconcealment. His is a hermeneutic, pre-linguistic account of what makes us comport ourselves in particular ways in the world so that propositions conform or correspond to the way the world is. As Wrathall illustrates, Heidegger's prepropositional account of truth is required by Davidson in order to fill the gap between a primitive, causal account of human behaviour in the world and an intentional

account of propositional states that leaves out the stage where intentional content—that which is intended in an assertion—becomes fixed (49-52).

What makes truth possible for Heidegger is unconcealment, understood in two ways. The first is the manifestation of entities and the second is the disclosure of the structural features of human existence, which is the condition of possibility of the first. For Heidegger, the unconcealment involved in the uncoveredness of entities requires a prior disclosure of being: "The unconcealment of beings is what lets us encounter entities toward which we can be directed in our thought and talk—entities about which we can successfully get it right or fail to do so" (26). Wrathall argues that it is Heidegger's account of discovery within a practical—not linguistic—context that explains the fixing of intentional content in propositional states. Unless entities are discovered in prepropositional, practical but nevertheless intentional contexts, then they can at best appear as privative insofar as they resist our world and can only be understood and specified in relation to what they are not. It follows that, for Heidegger, the practical totality of involvement brings with it the possibility of normativity, of rightness and wrongness in our way of relating to things—such as when we realise that a hammer is for driving nails as opposed to chopping wood. As Wrathall observes, "Practical expertise thus bestows a normativity on things, a normativity similar to (and Heidegger would say precursor to) the normative structure discernable in our understanding of truth" (55). Such expertise is a form of intentionality—the ground for the conditions of truth that make linguistic interaction possible (52-56).

Wrathall backs up his argument for prepropositional, intentional engagement with the world as the basis for meaning in the third chapter, "On the Existential Positivity of Our Ability to be Deceived," and also in chapter four, "Heidegger on Plato, Truth, and Unconcealment: The 1931-1932 Lecture on *The Essence of Truth*." In the first of these two superbly written and captivating essays, Wrathall suggests that it is wrong to think of

perception in terms of propositional contents. Yet, just because perception is not propositionally determinate, this does not mean we cannot operate in the world in a meaningful way. Further, if we see perception in terms of action, of practical engagement with the world, rather than in terms of propositional contents, then we will no longer be urged to think of our perceptions as true or false, a problem Heidegger sees as commencing with Plato's thought (chapter four), but of succeeding to greater or lesser degrees based on an interplay of revealing and concealing. In order to theoretically bolster Heidegger's analyses of perception, which are few and far between, Wrathall draws extensively on the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* was greatly influenced by Heidegger. Subsequently, in chapter four, Wrathall takes these analyses on perception and deception and brings them and their consequences under Heidegger's broader discussions of unconcealment, truth, and the history of being within the context of Plato's allegory of the cave and the *Theaetetus*.

The second of the three sections subdividing Wrathall's text deals with Heidegger's discussions on language, specifically the idea that our linguistic practices are grounded in unconcealment. Wrathall hones in on the fact that what we say is determined or constrained by social factors. However, in contrast to the likes of Hubert L. Dreyfus and Taylor Carman, Wrathall enters with an original and provocative interpretation by demonstrating that language is not responsible for the "banalising and levelling of everyday human modes of existence" (96). When there is a move from a non-superficial, authentic discourse or conversation (*Rede*) to a banalised, idle conversation (*Gerede*), Wrathall argues that this is because "all our practices are implicated in a network of social activities and concerns" (96). He takes this reading of Heidegger in order to critique social externalist accounts of language, such as those proposed by Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge, by stressing that it is not the speaker's inability to determine the extension of their terms that leads to idle conversation,

but that such inabilities are derived from a speaker's lack of experience with particular objects and the contexts in which those objects are located. This lack of experience is the source of *Gerede*, and how we experience things and people in the world is determined by disclosure, what Wrathall calls a "background readiness" (106). Language, then, is the articulation of this readiness: "So conversation is communication—or, perhaps more accurately communicative—in that it articulates meanings which open up a way of acting in the world" (110). Idle conversation is, therefore, a mode of engagement with the world in which a genuine readiness or disclosure is not available or, indeed, is closed off.

It is this reading of disclosure as the basis for language that allows Wrathall, in the subsequent chapter on "Discourse Language, Saying, Showing," to stress the continuity in Heidegger's later thought after *Being and Time*. Based on a virtuosic reading of the immortal *leitmotif* "language is the house of being," Wrathall provides a wide-ranging and meticulously detailed critique of the notion that the later Heidegger, like John McDowell in *Mind and World*, was a linguistic constitutionalist—the view that our experiences of the world have their content fixed by the concepts we use to describe or think about them. To understand why Heidegger was not a linguistic constitutionalist, Wrathall argues that language cannot be understood in the usual sense of the word as a "stock of individual terms [*einen Bestand von Wörtern*] and rules for linguistic construction" (122). "In its most fundamental form, language for Heidegger was not a conceptual articulation of experience, nor was it something that we can say in our ordinary language" (124). Instead, Heidegger construed the word "language" in an ontologically broad sense as a derivative, world-disclosive phenomenon that "gathers," "joins" and "makes known" prelinguistic meanings—prepropositional, practical engagements with the world. It is because language is a phenomenon that gathers and collects in order to show and, thus, let things appear that we understand it as the house of being. By drawing upon both Heidegger and Pascal, Wrathall

uses chapter seven to demonstrate the practical potential of this ontologically broad conception of the word "language" through an exploration of the relation between scripture and the disclosure of the Christian world, an exploration that will give much pause for thought for those currently engaged in the debates surrounding faith and the so-called New Atheism.

The final section of the book deals with Heidegger's understanding of the history of being as a series of different ages of unconcealment. In the essay "Philosophers, Thinkers, and Heidegger's Place in the History of Being," Wrathall discusses Heidegger's idea that, in order to overcome both the metaphysical tradition and contemporary analytic philosophy, we must think through the history of metaphysics in order to understand how beingness manifests itself in the works of different metaphysical thinkers—despite their obliviousness to the fact that their understanding of the world is based on a background understanding of being. In this sense, the job of philosophy is to be responsible to the background understanding of being that determines cultural changes and crises, including changes in how we do philosophy in the first place. As with the other two sections, Wrathall's compelling and penetrating reading of Heidegger's idea of the history of being hinges on understanding history in an ontologically broad sense—not as a concern for foreground thoughts, words, experiences, deeds, and rules, but as a series of different background understandings. The history of being is, therefore, a series of different background understandings of being, and is traceable in the works of metaphysicians because they articulate the understanding of being that characterises the age and determines cultural practices. Heidegger, then, was a preparatory thinker in the sense that he made us aware of the background understanding of being that governs our modern technological practices with the hope of preparing us for a transformation of this current age of being.

This leads nicely to chapter nine, entitled "Between the Earth and the Sky: Heidegger on Life After the Death of God," where Wrathall focuses on Heidegger's preoccupation with the dangers of technology. Heidegger used Nietzsche's maxim, "God is dead," as the means to understand the technologisation of everyday life by which everything is turned into resource—things that do not really matter, according to Heidegger, because their worth does not exceed their instrumental value. As Wrathall explains using Heidegger's own ideas, "The search for a new source of divinity, then, becomes a question of finding a mood, a mode of attunement, which will allow things once more to show up as having weight or importance" (199).

One of the very few criticisms I have of Wrathall's book lies with this chapter, specifically, with totalising claims such as "everything presents itself as mere resource … nothing is capable of existential importance" (201). To be sure the problem lies with Heidegger, but Wrathall is only too happy to accept such claims. After all, despite the scientific-technological understanding of being that governs our modern ways of doing and thinking, we still cultivate existentially important relationships with, for example, loved ones, friends, art and nature. I do not think my criticism undermines Heidegger's regard for God as the stimulus for a world that really matters, but it does raise the question of whether Wrathall believes that divine leftovers are responsible for those things in the world which, despite the utilitarian and instrumental pressures of the technological age, still show up as existentially important for us. If he does believe this, then it seems to me that we need to address the larger problem of our fallenness—our sinful nature—as it is discussed in the context of past religious practices, a nature that cannot be corrected even if we were attuned to the divinities. If we are to be attuned by God, then we must acknowledge the fact that our sinful nature will constantly look to destroy the world's existential importance. In a religious context where sin

is not just a phenomenon but part of the essence of human beings, would the world actually hold more existential importance for us than if God were dead?

Wrathall's final essay, "Nietzsche and the Metaphysics of Truth," looks at Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche in the light of metaphysical accounts of truth. Through discussions of the material and attitudinal dimensions of truth, by which the physical truth of entities is not determined independently of our ways of engaging with them, and together with his synopsis of the four metaphysical ages—Greek, Christian, Modern, and technological—Wrathall observes how Heidegger identified a network of common background assumptions that shaped the approach to truth from the Greek age to the Modern. It follows that with the transition from the Modern age to the technological age, the background assumptions for truth became cast in a decidedly different form, the form of "chaos" and the "real," yet the original assumptions still remain in force to some extent, as Heidegger insisted. By pulling apart the true (that which is stable) from the real (that which is chaos), Nietzsche was able to deny many of the metaphysical theses with regards to truth. And yet, as Heidegger argued, by simply shifting the locus of his metaphysical commitments from truth to reality, Nietzsche still remained embroiled with metaphysics.

I cannot recommend this book enough: not only does it advance the current scholarship on the later Heidegger, but it also provides a thorough, yet jargon-free introduction to some of the most important aspects of Heidegger's thought, an introduction that will prove useful for both analytic philosophers and philosophy students in general. Wrathall's analyses are original, provocative, and attuned to the subtleties in Heidegger's writings. He draws upon a vast array of Heidegger's works, many of which are yet to be published in English, making this book even more valuable to the English-speaking scholar. Furthermore, the examples employed are rich enough to ensure that there is something for anyone looking to apply Heidegger's ideas to the study of texts, whether those of philosophy,

history, literature, or art. If the "Heideggerian turn" in contemporary philosophy has yet to take place, Wrathall definitely points us in the right direction.

Works Cited

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