

Continental Philosophy: Towards the Future?¹

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When I returned home after finishing studies in Europe in the early 1960's, I was plunged into the turmoil of the time: the assassinations, the Vietnam War, student protests, conscientious objection, etc. I could talk the talk about the Being question, ontological difference, of appropriation, etc., but to really reach the students, I found it necessary to make clear the relevance of all this to them as embodiments of Dasein. This led to a focus on Dasein as an indispensable component of Heidegger's experience of the reciprocity between human being and Being. I was especially sensitive to Heidegger's insistence at the beginning of *Being and Time*:

The roots of the existential analysis, for their part, are ultimately *existentiell*—they are ontic. Only when philosophical research and inquiry themselves are grasped in an *existentiell* way—as a possibility of each existing *Da-sein*—does it become possible at all to disclose the existentiality of existence and therewith to get hold of a sufficiently grounded set of ontological problems.²

This led to requests to explain the relationship between Heidegger and what was then called “existential psychoanalysis,” and this in turn led to an interest in Freud, then Lacan—not as a turn away from

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² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Stambaugh (Albanay; State University of New York Press, 1996 [1927]), p. 13.

Heidegger's basic insight but as an effort to extend its influence to ontic disciplines badly in need of an ontological base. What interested me most in Lacan was his effort to develop an ethics of psychoanalysis—it correlated nicely with a long-term interest in the ethical dimension of Heidegger's thought. Would it be possible to consider the thought of each as complementary to the other rather than, as seemed to be the case, unalterably opposed?

Lacan had a long-time interest in Heidegger. He personally translated Heidegger's essay on the *Logos* of Heraclitus into French for his students, and during the fifties, they tried to arrange an encounter between the two men. This effort was led by Jean Beaufret, one of Lacan's analysands, who, after having been the occasion for Heidegger's famous "Letter on Humanism," had become a close friend of Heidegger and the most authoritative Heideggerian in France. Surely he saw a value in such an encounter. Eventually Heidegger and Lacan did meet, but there was no real exchange between them. What might have happened if they could have listened to each other and engaged in real dialogue? This is the question that has intrigued me for years.

Each of the men has his bottom line. For Lacan, it is the thesis that Freud's great insight was into the way that language works, hence the "unconscious" that he discovered is "structured like a language." As a result, human being is to be understood as an *être* (being) whose nature it is to speak (*parler*): a *parlêtre*. It is made up of three distinct components: the symbolic (exposure to the entire scope of language and its structure); the imaginary (the dimension of reflecting images, marked by a one-to-one relationship as between a photograph and its object); and the real—not "reality," which is constituted by symbolic and imaginary—but the real as what is precisely impossible to represent by symbolic and imaginary, hence an ineffable darkness, inscrutable and potentially hostile (eventually horrifying and disgusting), that lurks beneath the skin of "reality."

Heidegger's bottom line he articulated when, thirty-three years after the publication of *Being and Time*, he came full circle with his lecture in 1960, "Time and Being." There he asks: "What remains to be said? Only this: [The Event goes on: *das Ereignis ereignet*]). Saying this, we say the Same in terms of the Same about the Same ... [but] this Same is not even anything new but the oldest of the old in Western thought: that ancient something which conceals

itself in *altheia*.”³ *Alétheia* here is the Greek word for truth, of course, which Heidegger translates literally as concealment (*-léthé*) which has been taken away (the *a-*, alpha privative), hence the process of “un-concealment,” “re-velation.”

As a working hypothesis, I propose the following: that we take what Heidegger understands by revelation as the privation of concealment (the *a-* of *alétheia*), i.e. the disclosure of the world, to be the analogue of Lacan’s symbolic and imaginary taken together as constituting “reality”; that we take Heidegger’s understanding of *léthé* (concealment) to be the analogue of what Lacan means by the real. There is no way here to make the argument fully, but let me sketch how it proceeds.

A. Revelation and the World

I base my case on the lecture course Heidegger gave in 1929-30, entitled *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*⁴. There, he returns to the analysis of world that he first examined in *Being and Time*, where he concluded that the most one could say about it phenomenologically was that it is not a thing like other things, a No-thing, *Nichts* (*Nicht Seiendes*). In 1929, his method is not formally phenomenological but rather centered on the analysis of language—language as Aristotle understood it—and the result is much more positive.

I say “an analysis of language”; it would be more precise to say an analysis of Aristotle’s use of *logos* in reference to speech. Heidegger explains:

The Greeks have no word corresponding to our word language. It would be better to translate it as ‘discourse,’ [meaning] what we understand by language but more than our vocabulary taken as a whole. It means the fundamental faculty of being able to talk discursively, and accordingly, to speak. The Greeks thus characterize man as *zoon logon echon*—a living being that essentially possesses the possibility of discourse. (p. 305/442)

—in other words, as Lacan would put it, as *parlêtre*!

³ Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. by J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper Row, 1972 [1962]), p. 24.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. by G.F.R. Polt, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995 [1929-30]).

There are many forms of speech, obviously: speech that questions, beseeches, demands commands, etc., but the most fundamental form is speech that affirms, that simply points out what is the case—*logos apophantikos* (e.g., *a* is *b*). But to affirm what is the case presupposes a prior experience of it *as* being the case. The *as* implies a relationship between the *a* and the *b* according to which *b* adds something to *a*. Aristotle mentions the *as* experience often enough (*on hei on*) but never reflects on it to Heidegger's satisfaction. In any case, the affirmation that *logos* articulates is essentially the transformation of *as* into *is*. This process of transformation takes place for Aristotle through the synthesizing power of *logos* that brings into unity the two terms of the *as* experience while at the same time preserving their difference by keeping them conceptually "apart" (*diairesis*), i.e. distinct. There is nothing especially new in all this, to be sure, but Heidegger insists on the fact that *logos* does not create what it affirms but receives it from the *as* experience and allows itself to be guided by what presents itself as manifest and to be affirmed. The heart of the experience for *logos* is this letting-itself-be-guided-by, a being-free-for what it is given to affirm—the prior manifestness of which makes the whole process possible.

But does this reveal a world? Not quite. Individual affirmations about what is are never singular—there is always the context of other beings to which they are connected. Heidegger gives the example of the lecturer who complains that "the blackboard is poorly placed." One could as well speak of a speaker's microphone that does not function. It connects to a network of relations that make its functioning possible, a network that quickly expands to include the whole multi-functional auditorium and its occupants, included in a larger whole (the building), included in a still larger whole (the university, included in a still larger whole we call the "world." Is this what Heidegger is talking about? Not quite. The world he speaks of is not just the sum total of everything that is—like so many grains of sand in the sandbox. Rather, it is the manifestness of this whole as whole that makes it accessible as such to Dasein—this is what is meant by world. Heidegger's word for "manifestness" is *Offenheit*, openness. This openness, as world, prevails (*Walten*) over human being in its functioning as *logos*. The appropriate response of humans is to "project," i.e., in turn "throw open" (*Entwerfen*) this power, i.e., open itself up to it: "Projection as the primordial structure of this occurrence is the fundamental structure of world-formation...World prevails in

and for a letting prevail that has the character of projecting" (p.362/527).

There is much to be said about all this but I shall restrict my remarks to one. In the text of 1929 just considered, we see an unmistakable anticipation of a much more decisive text that did not appear until 14 years later, the essay "On the Essence of Truth," where the famous "turning" (*Kehre*) in Heidegger's way (a term he chose himself) was fully evident. To get a sense of the coherence of the two documents, consider a key passage from the later essay, where Heidegger is discussing the foundation of truth as concordance between judgment and judging:

What is stated by the presentative statement (i.e., *logos apophantikos*) is said of the presented thing in just such manner as that thing, as presented, is. The "such as" has to do with the presenting and what it presents ... To present here means to let the thing stand opposed as object. As thus placed, what stands opposed must traverse and open field of opposedness and nevertheless maintain its stand as a thing and show itself as something withstanding (*ein Ständiges*). This appearing of the thing in traversing a field of opposedness takes place within an open region (*Offenen*), the openness (*Offenheit*) of which is not first created by the presenting but rather is only entered into and taken over as a domain of relatedness. The relation of the presentative statement to the thing is the accomplishment of that bearing (*Verhältnis*) that originarily and always comes to prevail as comportment. But all comportment is distinguished by the fact that, standing in the open region, it in each case adheres to something opened up *as such*. What is thus opened up, solely in this strict sense, was experienced early in Western thinking as "what is present" and for a long time has been named [a] "being" (*Seiendes*).⁵

A few lines later he adds, "Western thinking in its beginning conceived this open region as *ta aléthea*, the unconcealed. If we translate *alétheia* as 'unconcealment' rather than 'truth,' this translation is not merely 'more literal,' it contains a directive to rethink the ordinary

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *On the Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* (Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers, 1997, [1943]), p.141/79-80.

concept of truth in the sense of correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of beings" (p.144).

To get a sense of what this means concretely, recall how Heidegger describes the Greek temple at Paestum:

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rocky, fissured valley. The building encloses the figure of a god and within this concealment, allows it to stand forth through the columned hall within the holy precinct. Through the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence is, in itself, the extension and delimitation of the precinct as something holy ...

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This arresting of the work draws out of the rock the darkness of its unstructured yet unforced support. Standing there, the building holds its place against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm visible in its violence. The gleam and luster of the stone, though apparently there only by the grace of the sun, in fact first brings forth the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air. The steadfastness of the work stands out against the surge of the tide and, in its own repose, brings out the raging of the surf. Tree, grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter their distinctive shapes and thus come to appearance as what they are. Early on, the Greeks called this coming forth and rising up in itself and in all things *physis*. At the same time, *physis* lights up that on which man bases his dwelling. We call this the earth...

To be a work means: to set up a world ... World is not a mere collection of the things—countable and uncountable, known and unknown—that are present at hand. Neither is world a merely imaginary framework added by our representation to the sum of things that are present. *World worlds*, and is more fully in being that all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we take ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being. Wherever the essential decisions of our history are made,

wherever we take them over or abandon them, wherever they go unrecognized or are brought once more into question, there the world worlds...⁶

Such a disclosure of the world is the function of *alétheia* as revealment. But as a monument, it remains an ontic entity. Physical scientists may examine its material composition; linguists may examine diacritically the written records of its history—or even Heidegger's ontological description of its meaning—but these are all ontic disciplines; none of them touches the world (the Open) that the ruin on-tifies. For Lacan, too, the Other of language, the symbolic order, is also an ontic entity and needs the Open of *alétheia* to let it be manifest as language at all.

B. Concealment and the World

But *alétheia* is the privation of *léthé*. What of the *léthé* (concealment) that remains? It takes two forms: (1) the concealment of concealment that Heidegger calls “mystery” (*Geheimnis*); (2) a compounding of mystery that seduces us into forgetting or ignoring it that he calls “errancy” (*Irre*):

Errancy is the essential counter essence to the originary essence of truth. Errancy opens itself up as the open region for every counter play to essential truth. Errancy is the open site and ground of error...In conformity with its openness and related to beings as a whole. Every mode of comportment has its manner of erring. Error extends from the most ordinary wasting of time, making a mistake and calculation, to going astray and venturing too far in one's essential attitudes and decisions...By leading them astray, errancy dominates human beings thorough and through.⁷

But whence comes the power of concealment to “dominate human beings through and through”? Heidegger reflects on the meaning of *léthé* for the first time in his course on *Parmenides* (1992), when he reflects on the doctrinal *Poem*, dedicated to *Alétheia* conceived as

⁶ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Perennial Classics, 2002), pp.20-23, *passim*.

⁷ On the Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus, pp. 150-51.

a goddess. *Léthe* is the counter-essence of *alétheia* and is translated variously as: forgetting, falsifying, distorting, covering up, veiling, dissembling, hiding, misleading, sheltering, etc. Of these, the most fundamental sense is “forgetting,” in the sense of “oblivion” that, like a cloud, enshrouds everything in “signlessness,” a withdrawal into self-concealing concealment. It is not a subjective phenomenon but does have consequences in the social order of the *polis*, where we find human beings in the multiplicity of their counter-essences, and therein all possible forms of excess. This resulted (as Jacob Burckhardt suggested) in the “frightfulness” (*Furchtbarkeit*), the “horribleness” (*Grauenhafte*), the “atrociousness” (*Unheil*) of the Greek *polis* (p. 90). Think “9/11”!

Whence comes the subversive power of *léthé*? From the force generated by the conflict between unconcealment and concealment in the very nature of *alétheia*. If *léthé*’s thrust toward oblivion were given absolute sway, the result would be a total void. Heidegger grapples with this notion when he meditates on the myth with which Plato closes the *Republic*, the myth of Er (*Republic*, 1961, 614b2-621d3). In Heidegger’s paraphrase of lines 621a2-5, we read:

The warrior narrates that the way to the field of *léthé* leads through a blaze consuming everything and through an air that asphyxiates everything ... This field of concealment is opposed to all *physis*. *Léthé* does not admit any *phyein*, any emerging and coming forth ... The field of *léthé* prevents every disclosure of beings, of the ordinary. In the essential place of *léthé* everything disappears. Yet it is not only the completeness of the withdrawal of the presumed quantity of the concealment that distinguishes this place. The point is rather that the “away” of what is withdrawn and concealed is surely not “nothing,” for the letting disappear that withdraws everything occurs in this place—in this place alone and presents itself there. The place is void—there is nothing at all that is ordinary in it. But the void is precisely what remains and what comes into presence there. The barrenness of the void is the nothing of the withdrawal (pp. 118-19).

Briefly: If the revealment component of *alétheia* as disclosure of the world may be considered the analogue of Lacan’s conception of the world as “reality” through the ensemble of symbolic and imaginary, the concealment component of *léthé* may be seen as analogue of the

Lacanian real. But so what? Does all this offer us any real help beyond the sheer gymnastics of it all? I think it does. For example:

Lacan needs Heidegger's conception of *alétheia*. His early attraction to the notion of language as "speaking" human being (*die Sprache spricht*) is based on the latter's interpretation of *logos* in Heraclitus (that Lacan translated), where *logos*, like *physis*, as is clear in *Introduction to Metaphysics*,⁸ is another modality of *alétheia*. To be sure, Lacan insists that there is "no Other of the Other" but he clarifies this by explaining that he means only that there is "no metalanguage"—something equally ontic as the original Other. But *alétheia* as the Open is in no sense an ontic metalanguage. It opens up language itself in such a way that Lacan (and the rest of mankind) may have access to it. Without *alétheia*, there would be no language at all and—rather more disconcerting—no one to speak it. *Alétheia* also means "truth" and Lacan needs the concept badly to escape an aporia. On the one hand, he insists on the importance of discovering and honoring the "truth" of the subject's desire. On the other hand, he emphasizes the impossibility of truth—"anyone who breaks the bread of truth also shares the lie." Only a conception of truth that includes its own counter-essence, i.e., its own non-truth in the form of errancy, can resolve (it seems to me) this paradox.

Heidegger has need of Lacan's experience of language. An ontic foundation for an "other beginning" of thought is as necessary now as it ever was. Unless "inceptual" thinking can engage coherently with the ontic dimension of language after the "linguistic turn" of the post-modern experience, it will lose its unique opportunity to significantly change the way humans think and live. No one poses this challenge more incisively than Jacques Lacan.

Be all that as it may, the proposed hypothesis, whatever its intrinsic value, testifies, at the very least, to the enduring vitality of continental philosophy. Q.E.D.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by G.F.R. Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).