

DISCUSSION MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

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In the vast literature on Heidegger this book must count as unique.¹ Philipse has written critical essays on Heidegger before, but here he develops a full-blown critical ‘onslaught’ (p. 385) on the *entirety* of Heidegger’s philosophy. Through a ‘hypothetico-deductive’ method of interpretation, explicitly conceived as a ‘scientific’ approach, he doesn’t just attempt to read Heidegger, but to master him – and dethrone him. The interpretation is organized around a ‘pentafold’ (p. 212) of ‘hypotheses’ which aim to explain the articulation and development of the ‘fundamental structures of Heidegger’s thought’ (p. 75). In this way ‘problems’ arising in the interpretation of Heidegger’s various texts can be ‘solved’, and the corpus as a whole can be ‘explained’ in the sense that the five hypotheses should explain why every textual appearance appears as it does.

As Philipse knows, the scientism that pervades this approach is fundamentally at odds with Heidegger’s own point of view. Nevertheless, an utter lack of sympathy for an author’s outlook does not preclude the development of an interesting interpretation of his or her work, and there are a number of insightful aspects to Philipse’s treatment, particularly in his reading of the latent tensions between Heidegger’s historicism and essentialism in *Being and Time*.

However, in my view, for all its scholarly apparatus and desire for analytical rigour, the objectivity that Philipse seeks from his interpretation is not realized. Philipse wants there to be a text which would enable ‘one’ to make a final decision regarding Heidegger’s philosophy of being; a text which could lead ‘one’ either to ‘the decision Heidegger wants us to make’ or ‘the opposite’ (xvi). Yet one does not have to read far to see that in Philipse’s case the decision has, in fact, already been made, and made against Heidegger.

¹ Herman Philipse, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. xviii + 555, £17.99.

In order to bring this into clearer focus, I want to look at one of the two 'fundamental difficulties' that Philipse identifies as standing in the way of 'any attempt' to interpret Heidegger's question of being, namely, Heidegger's 'pronouncements on logic in *Was ist Metaphysik?* and elsewhere' (p. 9). Since *Was ist Metaphysik?* is a relatively short text, and Philipse's treatment of it is relatively brief and self-contained, an examination of this perceived 'difficulty' can serve as a kind of micro-model of Philipse's interpretation of Heidegger as a whole. It is the beginning of the book, but it might as well be its heart. As Philipse says, it concerns 'a partial analysis' of Heidegger's text.

Phlipse's concern is with the threat that Heidegger's lecture seems to pose to the authority of the intellect and logic *in general*. He reconstructs the main 'argument' of the first part of the lecture as follows:

Heidegger says in 1929 that science is characterized by a specific relation (*Bezug*) to the world, by an attitude (*Haltung*) in which we freely choose to let things speak for themselves, and by the fact that in science one being, namely, man, 'breaks into the totality of beings' (*Einbruch*) in such a manner that being 'breaks open' and 'is restored to what and how it is'. [Phlipse's translation is wrong here. It is not being but 'beings' (*Seienden*) which 'break open and show what they are and how they are'. This is important given that the next sentence runs:] In all three respects, *Bezug*, *Haltung*, and *Einbruch*, the scientist is concerned with beings and with nothing else. Heidegger repeats the phrase 'and with nothing else' six times in different variations in order to prepare his conclusion: that when the scientist tries to say what he is up to, he inevitably speaks of something else, namely, the Nothing, or nothingness (*das Nichts*). It follows that in reflecting on science we cannot avoid the metaphysical question: What about the Nothing? (p. 9–10)

As we shall see, it is a mistake to think that the first part of the lecture aims to show that 'we cannot avoid' a certain question. What is 'unfolded' there is simply a suggestion that there *may* be a legitimate 'matter for thinking' which, strictly speaking, *could* not be a concern for science: a question that science can hear, if at all, in only the most backhanded kind of way, through a 'concession' that *that with which science does not deal* is – 'nothing' ('What is Metaphysics?' [WiM] in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. Farrell Krell, London: Routledge, p. 96).

Philipse does not attend to the crucial notion of ‘concession’ which organizes Heidegger’s discussion. The structure that Heidegger is appealing to can be illustrated by imagining a botanist saying ‘what he is up to’, and someone else (a proto-geologist, say) replying in the following way:

A: We are interested in plants and animals – and not rocks and stones.

B: So what about this other kind of thing, what about this ‘rocks and stones’ topic? How is it with the rocks and stones?

We might now (try to) apply this schema to the more general case of a scientist (in the broad sense of science as *Wissenschaft*) saying ‘what he is up to’ and a syntactically parallel reply from this scientist’s inquisitive ‘other’:

A*: We are interested in beings, in what is – and nothing else.

B*: So what about this pure ‘Other’ to beings, what about this ‘nothing’ topic? ‘How is it with the nothing?’ (WiM, p. 96)

Of course, as Heidegger acknowledges, in A* (unlike A) ‘what we are interested in’ is meant to be *everything that is*. So, it seems, there is and can be no further inquiry which one *might* go in for. But Heidegger’s aim in the lecture as a whole is to show that there is. He thinks one can inquire into beings (science) and one can at least come to the point where one sees that one can legitimately ask a question concerning that with which science *quite properly* does not deal – what is designated here by the ‘conceded’ ‘nothing’.

Thus, although Heidegger does not in the least think it ‘follows’ that ‘in reflecting on science we cannot avoid the metaphysical question’ (in fact avoiding it is what he thinks we do best ‘today’), he resists avoiding it by attempting to form an *essentially* non-scientific question. Of course, whether Heidegger has raised a *legitimate* question in doing so has not, at this point in the lecture, been settled at all.

Following his summary Philipse continues: ‘Is this argument sound? Rudolf Carnap criticized Heidegger’s *Was ist Metaphysik?* in his 1931 essay on ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’ (p. 10). Philipse then recalls that Carnap’s account of ‘metaphysics’ conceives it as consisting of meaningless pseudosentences of two sorts: sentences with no empirical significance or meaning and sentences that violate logical syntax. As far as Heidegger’s text is concerned, Philipse’s

subsequent concession to opponents of verificationism concedes nothing at all: 'It is important to distinguish these two sources of meaninglessness, for even if one rejects the verification principle, one still has to admit that violations of logical grammar may generate meaningless pseudosentences' (ibid.).

'One still has to admit that . . .' Does one? Philipse here declares without declaring it a profound dependence or debt in his entire analysis and its code on a 'metaphysical' orientation which claims to be able to identify, independently of every context, cases where sentences which are, as he puts it, 'correct according to the rules of ordinary grammar' are nevertheless 'violations of logical grammar' (ibid.) However, if (as James Conant has put it) one takes the Fregean-Wittgensteinian context principle *very* seriously, then one will 'have to admit' that *no* words or chains of words are *in themselves* meaningless and must be so *whatever* the context, and that consequently it is only within a quite specific theoretico-metaphysical horizon that such decisions concerning what, according to Philipse, 'one still has to admit' have the force of necessity. Nevertheless, for Philipse Heidegger may have to be condemned. 'Clearly, then, Heidegger's conclusion does not follow from his premise, and it is meaningless because it violates the rules of logical syntax' (p. 10).

However, Philipse is also aware that Heidegger does not take the mere formulation of the question as resolving or deciding *anything* in his favour. He continues: 'Does this settle the matter of Heidegger's question of being and nothingness? Should we conclude that it is a pseudoquestion? We are tempted to do so. Yet this would be rash, for Heidegger seems to have anticipated Carnap's critique, albeit in an informal way' (p. 11). We now turn to the second part of the lecture in which, in my view, Heidegger attempts to show that what *may* be a legitimate question *is* one. Summarizing the start of the second part, Philipse acknowledges Heidegger's explicit recognition that any attempt to formulate the question concerning the nothing would seem to be thwarted by the fact that we can only succeed in actually thinking (at all) by failing to think at all about the nothing *as* nothing. The very form of thought itself 'turns what is interrogated into its opposite' (WiM, p. 96) – into something.

Heidegger's conclusion seems unexceptional: 'Assuming that in this question 'logic' is of supreme importance, that the intellect is the means, and thought the way, . . . have we not already come to the end of our inquiry into the nothing' (ibid., p. 97).

These assumptions are then, the crucial presupposition of rejecting the legitimacy of the question. The new problem then, indeed 'the basic demand for the possible advancing of every question' (ibid., p. 98), is: is there any other kind of access, any other means than the intellect, for establishing the legitimacy of the question? At this point Heidegger introduces the idea, familiar from *Being and Time*, that the intellect is not the only form of *discursive receptivity* that belongs to the entity that we are. Specifically, what Heidegger calls '*Befindlichkeit*' designates modes of 'attunement', instantiated by moods, in which Dasein is disclosed to itself 'prior to all cognition and volition, and *beyond* their range of disclosure'. We can now ask whether there is a mode of attunement which 'in the most proper sense of unveiling reveals the nothing', and Heidegger claims that there is: it is revealed in 'the fundamental mood of anxiety' (WiM, p. 100).

Passing over the crucial distinction Heidegger draws *within* the sphere of discursive receptivity between intellect and attunement, and within each between fundamental and founded modes of disclosure, Philipse tries to acknowledge the role played by the appeal to anxiety, and is still willing to offer some kind charitable support to Heidegger's claims:

But, one might ask, does Heidegger not ostensibly define the word *Nichts* (nothingness) in the second part? Should we not apply the principle of charity and assume that Heidegger meant *Nichts* from the outset in the sense given by this ostensive definition, so that his introduction of the question of nothingness is needlessly misleading? (p. 14)

I do not find this suggestion helpful. As we have seen, Heidegger takes the 'conceded' word 'nothing' from the scientist in order to attempt to formulate a question concerning 'that with which science does not deal'. The problem then is whether we have any way of 'encountering' such a non-entity *as such* given that the question cannot be coherently framed by reference to the intellect and *its* conceptual logic. In the second part of the lecture anxiety is identified as the 'fundamental mood' that might allow the inquiry to continue nonetheless. Indeed, Heidegger finds a certain attestation of the pertinence of anxiety in the words of everyday life: 'In the lucid vision sustained by fresh remembrance we must say that that in the face of which and for which we were anxious was 'properly' nothing' (WiM, p. 101). Heidegger's recourse to everyday ways of speaking about

anxiety borrows from a similar and revealing passage in *Being and Time*:

When anxiety has subsided, then in our everyday way of talking we are accustomed to say that ‘it was really nothing’... But this ‘nothing-ready-to-hand’ is not totally nothing. The ‘nothing’ of readiness-to-hand is grounded in the most primordial ‘something’ – in the *world*. Ontologically, however, the world belongs essentially to Dasein’s Being as Being-in-the-world. So if the ‘nothing’ – that is, the world as such – exhibits itself as that in the face of which one has anxiety, this means that *Being-in-the-world itself is that in the face of which anxiety is anxious*. (*Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 231–2)

The ordinary notion of ‘ostensive definition’ is clearly ruled out in this case. What we are ‘brought before’ in anxiety is *ourselves*, and ourselves not as an ostensible entity within the world, but as that entity which ‘is’ only in so far as ‘the world’ is disclosed to it as the ‘wherein’ of its ‘understanding of itself’, an understanding Heidegger calls ‘familiarity’: ‘and this familiarity, in turn, is constitutive for Dasein, and goes to make up Dasein’s understanding of Being’ (ibid., p. 119).

It should now be clearer why Heidegger’s strategy in the lecture is to take the Nothing as his ‘matter for thinking’. For it designates, precisely, (i) that with which science does not deal, and (ii) that which is not an ostensible something. In short, it functions as Being. Philipse does recognize that the question of the Nothing is ‘essentially equivalent to the question of Being’ (p. 9). But he does not explain why and makes very little of it. However, if we are to read this lecture with any analytical rigour whatsoever, the point needs to be emphasized that the Nothing that we are (supposedly) exposed to in anxiety is, as Heidegger put it in his postscript from 1943, ‘the purely ‘Other’ than everything that ‘is’’. When this is acknowledged it also becomes clear that there is something fundamentally appropriate about the choice of word that Heidegger takes from the scientist’s ‘concession’ and our everyday ways of talking about anxiety for his own wholly ‘other’ inquiry. For the Being of beings ‘is’ not itself a being: it is, one might say, *the* no(t-a-)thing, or the Nothing.

Phlipse, however, having attempted ‘charitably’ to introduce something like ‘empirical meaning’ to Heidegger’s *Nichts*, now finds it difficult to understand ‘why Heidegger thought that raising

the question of being and nothingness is incompatible with logic' since he does not define it as the logician does (p. 14). Philipse's worry here is worryingly confused. The 'incompatibility' with 'logic' that *Heidegger* wishes his inquiry to develop is not the incompatibility of his use of nothing with that prescribed by 'logical grammar'. What occurs within Heidegger's lecture is an attempt to show that 'the power of the intellect' cannot take the leading role in the field of inquiry into Being. This attempt does not seek to 'liquidate logic' (or, in general, discursive intelligibility) as such, as Philipse supposes, but only, as one might put it, a certain vision of philosophy, namely, one which assumes that the intellect *is* the sole and leading 'taskmaster' for every legitimate inquiry. We could call this vision of philosophy 'scientific naturalism'.

As Philipse is aware (p. 196) scientific naturalism is Heidegger's more or less constant target of criticism. For Philipse, on the other hand, scientific naturalism is the effective milieu, the code and heritage, of his 'serious' philosophical thinking, a thinking which he conceives as truly embodying 'the sincere longing for understanding the world, life and humanity' (p. 197). As a result he cannot but read Heidegger's analysis of the Nothing other than as an (incoherent) attempt to 'liquidate' or 'repudiate' 'logic' *tout court*.

In the final moments of the partial analysis, Philipse does make a stab at offering a somewhat more sympathetic reading of *Was ist Metaphysik?*, by comparing 'Heidegger's calumnies against logic' with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (p. 15). The comparison is, I think, an interesting one. But it does not really interest Philipse. In fact the comparison is very brief and returns only once, and again very briefly, later in the book, when Philipse claims that 'Heidegger's views on logic' can be 'explained' *only* according to an interpretation which locates them within an 'attempt to replace the Christian religion by a different variety of religious discourse' (p. 187). I do not think this is the best and certainly not the only way of understanding Heidegger's attempt to challenge the dominance of scientific naturalism. Against this tendency of 'today', Heidegger articulates a view in which language is seen as *the* medium in which historical Dasein expresses itself, where our mode of 'inhabitation' in language manifests the determinate 'understanding of Being' that, in any epoch, is 'ours today'. And, as Philipse notes elsewhere, the essential contrast here is between Heidegger, who wants 'to restore language to its greatest expressive power' and the scientific naturalist who wants (*in extremis*) to

'make language. . . as unambiguous, clear and 'scientific' as possible' (p. 230).

The motivation behind Philipse's 'postmonotheist explanation' is as familiar as it is dubious: Philipse wants to discredit Heidegger's critique of scientific naturalism by placing *all* the emphasis in 'explaining' it on quasi-religious, and thus potentially illogical and *supernaturalistic*, grounds. Indeed, the 'atmosphere' of *Was ist Metaphysik?*, Philipse will urge, 'is markedly religious' (p. 229).

Phlipse's basic claim here is that the strategy of Heidegger's lecture is to 'first destroy the dominance of reason and logic' in order to make way, in the closing paragraph, for a 'leap of faith' (p. 485 fn. 65) or 'leap to religion' (p. 384). But this reading of the lecture is far from obvious or obviously sound. What is clear is that the closing paragraph of *Was ist Metaphysik?* incites us to 'liberate ourselves from those idols (*Gotzen*) everyone has and to which they are wont to go cringing' (WiM, p. 110). I think the idols Heidegger has in mind are what Sartre calls 'the great explanatory idols of our epoch': 'heredity, education, environment, physiological constitution' – ways of giving naturalistic 'explanations' of *every* aspect of human existence. No doubt Heidegger's idol-hammering suggestion aims to open a 'spiritual' path for philosophy quite distinct from the one envisaged in the affirmation of 'linguistics' and 'linguistic analysis' that marks Philipse's closing paragraph (p. 386), but it is distorting to claim that Heidegger's has a 'clearly religious meaning' (p. 267) or aims to prepare us for a 'religious conversion' (p. 268) as Philipse would have us have it. It is a fallacy to suppose that the only alternative to scientific naturalism must be, in some way, a form of religious supernaturalism.

In his 'evaluation' of Heidegger's work Philipse says he is looking for 'what is interesting, fruitful and true in Heidegger's question of being' (p. 291–2) and his official criteria for judgement are 'consistency, clarity and general academic method' (*ibid.*). It is not surprising that he concludes 'that Heidegger's question of being should be rejected completely as it stands' (p. 386). But 'not surprising' because what Philipse's 'interpretation' has given us is, already and from the start, only 'a partial analysis'.

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