
Preface

It is doubtful that philosophy has ever had such a unity that would justify talk about “the tradition” or “metaphysics” as if it were a whole cut of the same seamless cloth. Far too much chopping and cutting is required to seriously entertain the possibility that even a list of such interrelated thinkers as for instance Plato, Ockham, Aquinas, Ficino, Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel should be easily recognized as representing a unified “tradition.” Drawing more lines to include Kierkegaard, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Vico stretches the credibility and even thinkability of the idea of a “tradition.” The more names we add to the list fleshing out the constituents of this tradition, the more the very notion withers. “Der Teufel versteckt sich im Detail.” Contention,—multiple and deep—not consensus, is the general tenor of the history of thought. Even if a retrospective look finds unified movements in which individual thinkers stand as representatives, it is unlikely that any individual thinker of any originality ever faced the future in terms of an effort to identify himself with a movement rather than the other way around. The philosophical imaginations that are at work in the twists and turns in the history of thought confront the details of issues in all of their particularity. Enduring contributions always get worked out, and must be reenacted, with a degree of specificity that resists easy schematization into a unified “tradition.” It is precisely this resistance, standing in an uneasy relation with the effective history of such contributions, that keeps history alive and makes the notion of “tradition” problematic.

Nevertheless, one trademark of continental thought after Hegel is the tendency to speak of “metaphysics” as if it stood for a unity and

the “tradition” as if it were singular. This does not signal a collective amnesia on the part of those working out of the continental tradition. Talk of the “tradition” does not mean that the long history of efforts to wrestle with phenomena, and to reflect upon the capacity and powers of reflection, has been reduced to a unified effort. Nor should the construction of such a tradition be the means whereby displaced and marginal texts and unclaimed heritages and ideas are once and for all excluded from an “essential” history. One of the other trademarks of recent continental thought, especially as it has been developed by feminist theorists, is the effort to enlarge our sense of philosophy’s past and the tasks of its present. Speaking about the “tradition of metaphysics” is not the last gasp of historicism but one of the ways in which contemporary thinkers have sought to simultaneously establish and loosen the history of the discourse that is called philosophy. To speak of “metaphysics” and “the philosophic tradition,” as this book will do, is not to suppose that the past history of thought has been sedimented and so presents a unified front but to ask whether the present of thought can identify itself in a unified way. The point is this: despite its richness and depths, despite its honesty and efforts, and despite its complexity and conflicts, it has become increasingly difficult for contemporary thinkers to hold onto what can be found in the history of thought as vital, tenable, and answering needs of today. We find ourselves in a moment in history in which we no longer seem to be able to find our own place: that which we want to value often seems to have no place, while many of the challenges of today come from quarters and raise questions that are unanticipated by the topics of the past. It would be foolish to attempt to pinpoint a single cause for contemporary upheavals or even to locate contemporary challenges in one region of life. Yet it does seem reasonable to say that technology has spawned many of the questions that dissolve more “traditional” frameworks for arriving at answers. It is not insignificant that the rapid developments in “medical ethics” take place at the same moment that we find the notion of “postmodernity” making deep inroads into several fields of questioning. Developments in medical technology are forcing ethical theorists to look for answers and solutions where, until recently, there were no questions. But there are other domains in which technology is providing a heat that melts long-standing assumptions—Walter Benjamin signaled this in his 1936 essay on “Art in the Age of its

Technological Reproducibility.” So did Hannah Arendt when she began *The Human Condition* by pointing out that the first launch of an earth-born object in 1957 was an event “second in importance to no other.” More recently, Lyotard is compelled to begin *The Postmodern Condition* by saying that “the nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged” in light of recent technological transformations.

But the point is not simply a matter of technology. It is not the only domain of inventions and discoveries that seems to be outstripping inherited frames of thought. It is not alone in altering, or at least challenging, our perceptions of what is right, real, and meaningful—it is simply frequently more public in its effects. More important is to recognize that technology is the expression and product of a way of thinking and a set of values and that modern technology, which is a modification of the possibilities of human *techne*, is best understood in light of its values, imperatives, and conceptual underpinnings. To do this, to understand such distinctive and dominant features of modern life and culture, requires that the unsettled place of the present historical juncture be settled—if only for the present.

This is one of the points from which contemporary efforts to speak of the past as a unity can be understood. In confronting the past as a “tradition,” and specifically as a tradition of “metaphysics,” we are equally confronting ourselves. When a philosopher like Heidegger writes of the “history of Being as Metaphysics,” or of “metaphysics as the forgetfulness of Being,” and then calls for the “overcoming of philosophy as metaphysics,” his primary purpose is not to homogenize or domesticate the past, or to demolish a presumed and already received pantheon, but to ask and challenge the present to find its own integrity against, or simply out of, the diversity of the past. That is why the project of overcoming metaphysics is part of the recovery of the task of thinking today.

This book is an attempt to confront the details of Heidegger’s career-long efforts to think the tradition as a unity and so overcome it. My purpose is to take Heidegger seriously and to ask how far he has succeeded in this effort, and to ask how far he has succeeded thereby in contributing to our present understanding of the present and what is at stake in it. To what extent do his achievements toward this end of thinking “the tradition” match his claims? What, if any, hidden intentions and motivations are concretized in the issues over which Heidegger must confront the representatives of metaphysics?

Part of Heidegger's purpose in bringing philosophy to an end is to release thinking into the region of that which calls thought, a region that he contends has been suppressed and muted by the presumptions of metaphysics. But how far has this intention of emancipating thought had the unintended effect of refusing to release the full potential of the past? Does regarding the past as something from which we must be emancipated do justice to the radical senses of time and history that Heidegger himself articulates? Is Heidegger's attempt to overcome metaphysics radical enough to recover the topic of thought, the ontological difference, from its supposed abandon or suppression? Does a vision of the metaphysics of modernity, and of what lies before and after it, emerge from this project of destruction and release?

Such questions can only be worked out in the details of Heidegger's confrontation with metaphysics. Heidegger was well aware that the demonstrations and decisions called for by his project would have to be exhibited in the confrontation with individual "representatives" of metaphysics. To that end, at crucial stages in his critique of metaphysics Heidegger generally singles out a predecessor who he considers typifies that element of the tradition at issue, and frequently it is Hegel who is singled out as the representative of metaphysics par excellence. Whether or not this decision is the most interesting one, that is, the decision that discloses most both about Hegel and the problems that metaphysics poses, is one of the questions addressed throughout this book. Certainly it is not surprising that a contemporary German philosopher, especially one dedicated to establishing the lines of a "tradition," would pay special attention to reflecting upon and criticizing the reappropriation of history in Hegelian thought. It would be far more surprising if there was the lack of such reflections from a philosopher from Heidegger's generation and with his intentions. But what is surprising, and thus revealing about Heidegger, is the extent to which he resists Hegelian thought, preferring to separate himself from the rhetorical excesses of Hegel's description of the dialectic rather than drawing out the richness and complexity of that which the "Absolute" was an attempt to describe. The frequency with which Heidegger turns to Hegel as a representative of "the" tradition of "metaphysics" is striking, but equally striking is the detail of Heidegger's analyses of Hegelian texts and topics. These detailed and extended remarks on Hegel clearly reveal Heidegger's

own prejudice that Hegelian thought embodies and gathers into a unity the characteristic prejudices of metaphysics and its tradition. Nevertheless, the confrontation between Hegel and Heidegger is a complicated matter—more complicated and more a matter of nuances than Heidegger generally concedes—and it is a dialogue that reveals much about both, as well as about the topics over which they confront one another.

It is important to bear in mind that confronting Hegel and Heidegger is not a matter of adjudicating a debate between competing or incompatible “positions.” The idea of a “position” is always inappropriate in the dialogue between thinkers. In the case of Hegel and Heidegger it is better to characterize that which emerges as at stake: speaking and thinking the meaning of the finite. Both make sustained attempts to capture—without holding captive—the finite as that which both agree has eluded their respective predecessors. Both claim to be at the “end” of a “tradition” and to have ushered in that end by virtue of the rediscovery of the meaning of the first and ubiquitous topic of philosophy: the finite. Herein lies the hidden persistence—the appeal and the threat—of Hegelian thought for Heidegger’s own concern: motivated by a sensitivity to the finite, yet governed by the prejudices that are destined to conceal the finite, Hegelian thought harbors both the threats and promises of metaphysics for the project aimed at getting over metaphysics and back to the task of thinking.