

**Thinking of Desert Against the Desert:
Or Heidegger's Non-Topical Approach to *Die Sache Selbst***

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“Wir *suchen* überall das Unbedingte, und *finden* immer nur Dinge”.

NOVALIS

Abstract.¹ This paper deals with prolegomenal stances required for a proper understanding of the paradoxical nature of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*. It shall be argued that Heidegger’s *magnum opus* does not inquire into the meaning of being in order to render an answer to the so called *Seinsfrage*. In fact, several answers have already been given traditionally, which are founded on the being/beings indifferentiation (being as God, substance, nature, subject, will and so forth), that is, being has been turned into a topic whilst it is essentially non-topical, for only an entity can be accounted for as topical or thematic. This is the reason why assessing Heidegger as the “thinker of being” can be misleading, if not overtly wrong, when by this is meant that being be conceived of as something that can be thematized.

Key Terms. Heidegger | Being and Time | Ontology | Metaphysics | Phenomenology.

The Task of Reading Nothingness

In §2 of *Sein und Zeit* (SZ henceforth), Heidegger has defined investigation – of course not any investigation, but the one he carries out in his major work and, in general, in the whole course of his thought – through the elucidation of the formal structure of the question of being. The question of the meaning of being, he says, must be raised anew (*gestellt werden*), that is to say, it is always a task of executive nature and whose procedural foundations are not to be left abandoned to the fortuitousness of supposition and first impressions. What does investigating (*untersuchen*) mean? What is worth investigating in philosophy? What must be asked about in philosophy? Perhaps both investigating and asking belong to each other, and any investigation whatsoever entails a search which is implicit or supposed in its way of asking. But SZ, against what could be supposed or contrary to ‘public opinion’, does not intend to raise the question of

¹ A somewhat different version of this paper was first published in Spanish as “Pensar el Desierto contra el Desierto: Estrategias Prolegomenales para Leer *Ser y Tiempo* de Heidegger”. *A Parte Rei* (Spain). No. 65, September 2009, pp. 1-13. URL: <<http://serbal.pntic.mec.es/~cmunoz11/masis65.pdf>>. The earlier draft in English was read and commented by Michael Johnduff (graduate student in English at Princeton University, USA). I deeply appreciate his substantial suggestions of thematic and stylistic nature. I must also thank Marcela Hernández, whose assistance in translation was very helpful.

being. This means that Heidegger is not strictly an ontologist, mostly if by this is meant the philosophical task of definitely elucidating the categorical qualities of beings.

This clearly deserves further explanations, which we begin with a warning: The way in which page one of SZ is understood shall be the basis of all subsequent assessment of the work. SZ opens up, indeed quite dramatically, with a “prologue in heaven” (*pace* H. Mörchen)². Plato’s *Sophistes* is quoted. Let us paraphrase: It is clear that we have always been familiar with the word ‘being’, with the notion of ‘that which is’, and with the meaning of this term. We know, or we think we know, what it means for something to be. But we find ourselves facing an *impasse*, an *aporia*, and an insurmountable difficulty now that the time has come for us to inquire about what it means that something, precisely, *is* (cf. *Soph.* 246a, 4-5). Thereafter Heidegger enacts a move from entity (that which is) to being (the sense according to which something actually is) — which furthermore often tends to go unnoticed — in stating two questions with their corresponding responses:

“Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word ‘being’? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*. But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression ‘Being’? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question” (SZ, Prologue: 1).

From these two questions and their respective answers result some unusual features that tell us about the sort of investigation that Heidegger is deliberately crafting. One simply needs to notice what our thinker states as the purpose of his treatise: *to elaborate* the question of the meaning of being. A purpose which immediately leads one to pose the question: To elaborate a question only, and not to answer it? Isn’t this a rather insignificant aim which, in the end, will leave us utterly empty — just like Jaspers describes the way he felt just after finishing the reading of SZ? We are facing a kind of investigation which shows very special features, for the explicit purpose of elaborating the question seems to suggest that SZ has a rare mission: to teach us how to ask. We must learn to pose the question of philosophy and, in connection to that, we must also learn to investigate it.

² Herman Mörchen recalls the occasion when Heidegger showed his Marburg students a sample of this foreword: “Wordlessly, expectantly, like a child showing off his favorite secret toy, he let us see a galley-proof sheet straight from the printer — a title page: *Being and Time*” (quoted by Safranski, 1997: 174).

Now, provided that there is an immense reception of Heidegger's work — whether or not this reception is supportive of the Heideggerian enterprise does not matter right now — which has not paused enough on this first page (all the interpreters who plainly affirm, as if it were obvious, that Heidegger is an ontologist or that he restored the rights of ontology in contemporary philosophy), it is our duty to analyze, step by step, what is suggested in the opening words of SZ. What does this move mean anyway: The move from beings to being or from entity to being? There is certainly (and this according to Plato's *Sophistes*) an ontological perplexity in living amongst the entitative (of which we are fully aware) and asking about that which is always already understood (and for which we cannot thoroughly account). This would mean that a wider question must be raised: The question of being in general. We shall concede, however, that Heidegger's assertions in SZ's prologue are rather strange. He indeed does not speak about reinstating the rights of ancient ontology, undermined, as it were, by the epistemologically-focused era that we call modern times. Neither does he speak about answering as a final point the question of being. There is an error in that question: We have asked about being, and have responded with beings. With this we have obviously presupposed the lack of difference between being of entities and being itself. Why is the question not answered once and for all? Firstly, because the answers to the question of what it is to be are abundant: *Physis*, the idea, substance, God, the subject, the spirit, will, man, etc. But, above all, because if we properly understand where the text is leading us, we must refuse to answer altogether. One of Heidegger's aims is, indeed, to raise anew a comprehension for the meaning of this question. That is to say, not only do we not know but furthermore we also do not seem to mind. The question itself appears to us as nonsense, and this might partly be due to the answers that have been given to us, which let us spread ourselves out and leave aside the ontological question as untimely, unintelligible or simply lacking any importance whatsoever.

But the problem here is even far more profound. There are of course some very firmly ontological prejudices, rooted in tradition, that serve as an authority (a force that governs with false powers when it comes to thinking) not to ask about supposed nonsense: Being is indefinable, obvious, always understood or assumed, or rather the most universal and empty (cf. SZ §1: 3-4), etc. But it is not solely philosophical prejudices that warn us about a vane endeavor. There is something more to it that places us in front of an *impasse*, and that renders a feeling of not being able to step further into our investigation. We must grant a strange character to the investigation itself, given the fact that all question-oriented search strives for that which is asked about. And what has Heidegger to offer? The elaboration of a question and the provocation of an understanding of its sense. However, we can yet again inquire: Is this not altogether insufficient? Are we not engaging in a blustering matter, an all-too obscure subject that will only lead us to sentimental flare-ups? Although there is a tendency towards impatience

on these regards, a different attitude is herein required: that which Donald Davidson called *the principle of charity*.³ The latter could prevent one from rendering the most important philosophical work of the 20th century (considering solely its vast scope of influence) and its project, as merely futile or entirely dull. This means that we must patiently linger on the first two chapters of SZ, which constitute the introduction to the treatise. And we must do this not only in order to adequately understand what is really going on with the text itself, but also with Heidegger's own pathway of thinking: The so-called Heideggerian *Denkweg*. Furthermore, from the standpoint of the history of thought, this might contribute to a more satisfactory understanding of the development of a radical extreme that arises from Kant and that comes to a peak in Husserl, but prefers to walk the road of modern thinking otherwise.

Our problem cannot be solved through the aid that modern critique would in such case provide. Modern critique, we might say, seeks reflection, and with that, the effort is made to reach a thematic realm of investigation. That way of proceeding nonetheless does not let us overcome the problem of *Seinsvergessenheit*, but rather expands it.

What happens, then, with that which seeks to be investigated in SZ? The investigation has, of course, a peculiar structure, and this is not due to arbitrary reasons, but rather because, strictly speaking, being cannot be *thematized* (this is an error which might be observed in traditional ontology: It makes a theme of something from which there is no possible theme to be made). The structure of the investigation has, as Heidegger says, three parts: (i) *ein Gefragtes* (that which is asked about), (ii) *ein Befragtes* (that which is interrogated), and (iii) *das Erfragte* (that which is to be found out by the asking). We are clear about i and iii. That which is asked about (*ein Gefragtes*) is that in which we have always already been placed: Being, or, in Aristotelian terms, "that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which [*worauflin*] entities are already understood" (SZ, §2: 6). That which is to be found out by the asking (*das Erfragte*) refers to the fact that we must not ask about being plainly (if we do not want to make it an entity), but rather about the *meaning of being*, and so what should worry us is the meaning of such a question and the sense of its ontified answers. Could one proceed however by means of pure ontological analysis? If that were the case, being would be an entity or, in any case, something. If we could purely refer to being, if we could translate it or even just utter *it*, then we would precisely stand in front of a *thing*, whether or not that thing is the most magnanimous of all extant things (say God). We can naturally make a theme of *anything* whatsoever. But we have already been warned in the meantime that "the being of beings 'is' not itself a being" (*idem*). The ontological difference itself implies the middle element of the investigation or ii:

³ See 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', 1974. In: Davidson, 1984.

“Beings themselves turn out to be *what is interrogated*” (idem). This means that in Heidegger’s thought the ontological is not a thematization of being, or of entities, but an explicit account of the being of beings; given the fact that being is not at the same time an entity, what must be surrounded are precisely entities, where being indeed announces itself and its meaning. What must be sought, in surrounding and besieging the beings, is the lighting-up of its being. Envisaging beings with a view to its being means that “interpretation does not consist in seeing another being, but in seeing being otherwise” (Marion, 1998: 63).

Methodologically speaking, we are proceeding in a manner similar to that observed by Ortega y Gasset in *What is Philosophy?* (posthumously published in 1957) which makes a clear reference to the seizure of the city of Jericho by the Hebrews, as told in Joshua 6: 1-27, the so-called ‘method of Jericho’: “Every great philosophical problem requires a tactic similar to the one performed by the Hebrews and their secret roses: No direct attacks, going slowly around in circles, each time in smaller circles, keeping the sound of dramatic trumpets alive in the air. In the ideological siege, the dramatic melody consists in keeping awake the conscience of the problems, which are the ideal drama” (1964: 279). In Heidegger’s account, this is truly what is supposed to be done: Keeping under siege what is problematic and delaying in questionableness.

Ortega y Gasset’s image is in our case fortunate, considering that Heidegger himself has prevented us from getting out of the so-called ‘hermeneutical circle’, whose terminological background binds directly to Schleiermacher’s *Zirkel des Verstehens*. Soon enough, we are aware that SZ does not offer any *theory* of entities,⁴ and this is because, if properly understood, the meaning that is sought is strictly nothing.⁵ What happens in SZ is rather a destruction (*Destruktion*) of traditional ontology, that is, not a smashing of ontology, but rather a repetition (*Wiederholung*) of its themes with the aim of showing that, on the basis, the ontological should have never become any theme at all. The ontological should not have been ontified.

All we have stated above implies the necessity for some serious hermeneutical measures, if we do not wish to fail in our intention to read SZ in a proper manner. The reason for this lies not

⁴ According to this, the assertion that SZ demonstrates that the meaning of being is time is overtly inadequate. SZ does not prove or demonstrate anything. Let us just recall what is said about this in the prologue: “Our provisional aim is the interpretation of *time* as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of being” (SZ Prologue: 1), that is, it is an aim that has to be proven and that here is posed as merely provisional.

⁵ It is *nothing* but not because it is, as it were, nothing out of nothing or nothing at all. It is nothing rather because (as is well suggested in the English term nothing) it is not anything at all: *no-thing*. Properly conceived, the meaning of being is not nothing of nothing but a nothing that belongs to being.

only in the fact that we are dealing with a ‘difficult’ or entangled book, a real headache for translators or the like. These complexities could easily be sorted out with the development of a gradual familiarity with the text, which comes along with the effort of coping with a new philosophical jargon.⁶ We run the risk of fooling ourselves if we believe that by acquiring a handful of philosophical concepts (see, for example, Adorno’s *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*), we would be automatically equipped for coping well with SZ: Precisely the book where there is a certain treatment of language, *a certain use of grammar without believing in it*,⁷ which must be clarified at once. The reasons for this are rather *immanent* to the text which we pose as an ‘object of thematic elucidation’. The latter is in fact quite an inadequate sentence, for it is SZ’s intention to surround the non-thematic itself without, of course, making a theme out of it. But before we go into this, we must bring up the question of what it means ‘to read in philosophy’.⁸

The aforementioned question, that is, the question as to how is one to read in philosophy, is not at all idle. It is capital for philosophy for various reasons. First of all, it situates one in the hermeneutical question and, as we are aware of, Heidegger’s thought is said to have carried out the hermeneutical transformation of phenomenology. Secondly, the question of how to read in philosophy introduces one immediately in the core problem of SZ, where Heidegger has, from the first pages, inquired about how should the meaning of being be read off: “In *which* entities is the meaning of Being to be discerned?” (Am *welchem* Seienden soll den Sinn von Sein abgelesen werden...? SZ, § 2: 7). The problem of SZ is, thus, a hermeneutical problem, and this itself implies the problem of how to read in philosophy.

We are convinced that reading is problematic because, obviously as it is, one can only read that which is positive (what is-there, present for it to be read), that which could be elucidated and discussed. What can be read, then, is the presence of what shows itself. But if the phenomenon ‘shows itself’ as absent in all that has supposedly been seen (theorized) as being present and exposed to sight, that is, presented to contemplation or re-presented, we are stepping on rugged

⁶ Although this ‘Heideggerian jargon’ has aroused both controversy and admiration, one of the original readers of Heidegger’s language, his former student Hans-Georg Gadamer, has even gone so far as to speak of a new experience of the German language: “Sie mag vielleicht der Erfahrung vergleichbar sein, die man seinerzeit an den deutschen Predigten Meister Eckharts machen konnte – und gewiß auch an der Sprache Martin Luthers, dessen Bibelübersetzung dem Deutschen eine neue Unmittelbarkeit verlieh” (GW 10: 14).

⁷ Here we have in mind of course Nietzsche’s famous statement in *Die Götterdämmerung*: “Ich fürchte, wir werden Gott nicht los, weil wir noch an die Grammatik glauben”.

⁸ I owe the conviction that SZ consists in an approach to the non-topical to two remarkable Spanish Heidegger scholars: Arturo Leyte (2005) and Felipe Martínez Marzoa (1999).

ground. This explains why Heidegger's language sometimes turns out to be quite tangled, for what is under siege is not an object, and what we must ask in relation to this is: How is it possible to read something that does not show itself? Which 'thing' can be properly named a 'thing' if it does not appear or show itself? Is this all about something hidden that we somehow could sense esoterically? The abundant accusations against Heidegger's language can now easily be understood. As John Searle has asserted, in the company of the Anglo-Saxon prejudice of the identity of clarity and thought, "*if you don't say it clearly, you don't understand it yourself*" (quoted by Faigenbaum, 2001: 183, emphasis added). If this were the case, we could simply close the book once and for all and accuse Heidegger, like Carnap dared to do in his moment,⁹ of spreading mere nonsense and linguistic unsubstantial confusions disguised in depth.¹⁰

But the heart of the matter here is that clarity is not as clear as the zealous defenders of sight would like to believe, just like *common sense* (*pace* G. E. Moore¹¹) is neither the commonest, let alone a subject without the need of further elucidation, as Wittgenstein demonstrated.¹² Were we contrariwise to make a serious effort to face the enormous attempt at verbalizing what refuses to be thematized, only then will the problematic of SZ begin to acquire more interesting and tantalizing nuances. And a more enlightening shape as well.

⁹ See 'Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache'. *Erkenntnis*. 2 (1), 1931.

¹⁰ The, on its own right, Carnapian caricature of Heidegger's language can reach unsuspected extremes of banalization: "Heidegger stands before hundreds of students in a lecture hall and proclaims 'I'll have the spam, spam, spam, baked beans, sausage, and spam'. To this, the students rise in rapturous applause, as both their existence and their German destiny are revealed to them. Heidegger publishes a book in which he reveals that 'the human brain is like an enormous fish; it is flat and slimy and has gills through which it can see'. This book is greeted as the profoundest statement of the place of humanity in the world" (Richardson, 2006: 219). On this point, Richardson makes recourse to a sketch performed by actor Terry Jones (on the BBC *Flying Circus* show), a member of cult British comedians Monty Python, in order to draw a comparison between Heidegger's language and mere confusing gibberish. According to Richardson, "Heidegger, unwittingly to be sure, expresses a comedic attitude toward life in offering nonsense as his contribution to the world, but he is a terrible comic; his nonsense is not amusing" (2006: 220). And this means: what Heidegger says would be funny and 'comic' were it not stated with the evil intentions of being serious.

¹¹ See 'Proof of an External World'. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939.

¹² See, for example, what he says in *Über Gewissheit*: "Moore *weiß* nicht, was er zu wissen behauptet, aber es steht für ihn fest, so wie auch für mich; es als feststehend zu betrachten, gehört zur *Methode* unseres Zweifelns und Untersuchens" (Wittgenstein, 2000 § 151).

We must, however, be aware of the fact that, when we avow that SZ must be read internally, that is, in its own terms of investigation, we by no means want to fall into a dogmatic *Heideggerianism*, as Pierre Bourdieu believes so when he refers to Heideggerians as “the guardians of forms who consider it heretic or vulgar to read anything outside the work itself” (1991: 17). Bourdieu could be right in stating that, in fact, there are Heideggerians, but this really should not matter to those who are concerned with *die Wahrheit des Seins*, as one could in effect very *heideggerianly* say, or in a more Hegelian and Husserlian manner, with *die Sache selbst*. But the truth is that, rigorously speaking, there should really not be any Heideggerians whatsoever, if we acknowledge SZ’s claim that philosophy should not be doctrinal (disciples need a doctrinal corpus through which knowledge can be transmitted as a handful of tenets). This implies that the sole existence of so-called Heideggerians is in itself an expression of a suspicious reception, to say the least.

The question of reading and doctrine should now be easily connected. Moreover, it shall be granted that doctrine is not a desirable quality in philosophy at all. We should not even have the desire to be Heideggerians¹³ if by this we intend to recite the philosopher’s thesis, slogans and maxims, as if this were a means for solving philosophical problems. Heidegger could well be called a master,¹⁴ but he was a master with no doctrine. He is a master if he provokes, if he opens up new horizons for thought. But it is *our* duty to traverse through them.

Phenomenology itself has warned us from following doctrinal approaches, for it is primarily an ability to *see* that must be developed. This might be what Heidegger signaled when he recalled that Husserl gave him eyes (“...die Augen hat mir *Husserl* eingesetzt”, GA 63: 5). But what is really this ability that ought to be developed? Is it about the talent of a clairvoyant, an esoteric capacity only accessible to the enlightened ones? If we were to trace a historical memoire, Husserl and Heidegger are not the only ones to speak of the development of such an ability. Kant has also dissuaded us from simply learning philosophy, and rather he has encouraged us to actually philosophize. In his lecture *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (a lecture which, by the way, dates back to the same year as his major work), Heidegger states, referring to Neokantians and Neohegelians:

“The basic presupposition for being able to take the past seriously lies in willing not to make one’s own labor easier than did those who are

¹³ This assertion should want to be even more radical than the one once proclaimed by Windelband: “*Wir dürfen nicht Kantianer sein wollen*” (1909: 22). In several occasions, the Neokantian prevents us from wishing to become Kantian in the sense of a mere dogmatic spelling (*Buchstabierung*) of the master’s words.

¹⁴ Safranski indeed subtitles the philosopher’s biography as *Ein Meister aus Deutschland*.

supposed to be revived. This means that we first have to press forward to the real issues of the problems they laid hold of, not in order to stand pat with them and bedeck them with modern ornaments, but in order to make progress on the problems thus grasped. We wish to revive neither Aristotle nor the ontology of the Middle Ages, neither Kant nor Hegel, but only ourselves; that is to say, we wish to emancipate ourselves from the phraseologies and conveniences of the present, which reels from one fickle fashion to the next” (GA 24 § 11: 141-142).

The doctrinal character of philosophy was already condemned when, in *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* (1910-1911), and recalling the medieval exhortation *Res, non verba!*, Husserl discouraged the use of empty scholar philosophical lingo: “Away with empty analysis of mere words [*Weg mit den hohlen Wortanalysen*]. We must interrogate the things themselves” (Husserl, PsW: 305/6). But when it comes to Heidegger’s *magnum opus*, the stimulus raised to develop this ability for asking involves the training of a certain way of seeing, not what is present, but what does not and can never appear, which seems still a bit hazy from the strictly phenomenological point of view. We are talking here about acquiring an ability to develop a sort of sideways gaze. And this gaze, it is clear, should be accounted for from within the things themselves, that is to say, it cannot in any case be a *philosophical invention*. Phenomenology means basically this: *Nothing at all can be made up*.

Husserl demands a *Prinzip aller Prinzipien*, a principle that constitutes the basis upon which our intuition can be considered the source of all rightful knowledge (cf. Hua III: §24: 52/58). But how could showing that we have intuitive knowledge of the unapparent be anything other than an ambiguous enterprise? Heidegger seems to be saying as much, thereby trying to use phenomenology as a stepping stone in order to jump to other unsuspected places. For, what does it mean to exercise a gaze of what has been overlooked? Heidegger seems to be leading us to a phenomenology of the unapparent,¹⁵ a truly paradoxical expression considering that the action of seeing supposes the object to be seen.

If by *aporia* we understand ‘not being able to pass’, the impossibility causes no little astonishment to those who, like ourselves, live in the era of knowledge and techno-science, an era where theory has specialized, spread around, and reached a status of unquestionable validity and of obvious assumption. Heidegger adopts from the beginning a strange stance: He does not

¹⁵ The expression ‘*Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren*’ appears in a letter that Heidegger wrote to R. Munier in 1973. See Marion, 1998: 60.

deliver a *work* for the purposes of the editorial world, but rather offers pathways,¹⁶ voyages through the roads of thinking, of which SZ constitutes but one. If we are to take this formal indication seriously, the notion of philosophy as a practice, as an executive activity, ought to be maintained. Philosophy as philosophizing is, in a way, *peripatetic*: It does not spare the reader from the arduousness of walking the path with his own feet. But the fact that there is a path does not imply that it has been traced beforehand, since, in Machado's¹⁷ words, there really is no path; the path is made by walking.¹⁸

Now, a phenomenology of the unapparent, which could be regarded as mere gibberish if not explored properly, states some demands from which the aforementioned immanent reading must begin. The first one relates to the difficulty of stating a thesis, a positive utterance that is not a crystallized product of some doctrine. The work under this complexity could be conceived of as a late product of the activity that gave birth to it: Philosophizing. This is probably what Heidegger is pointing out when he asserts that we should not make our work easier than that of those who preceded us. Hence, we should not take for granted that there has been actual thinking in the works of philosophical schools or movements. What there is, if much, are these schools and philosophical directions. And this should lead one to meditate on the nature of a treatise like SZ. For if we are not dealing with a work, what do the assertions in the text really mean, if they mean anything? We shall discard the notion that Heidegger's writings are nothing but nonsense, and concede that despite the strange use of the phrases (the repeated use of oxymoronic or impersonal expressions, or the constant verbalization of nouns), these are grammatically well constructed. It would be but an absurdity to break grammatical structures or gratuitously twist the language, just with the purpose of seeming *avant-garde*. Grammar should be used against itself only if we wish to rid it from a metaphysically unquestioned standpoint. Phenomenologically stated, we must rid ourselves from the natural attitude (as accounted, for example, by Husserl).

¹⁶ Heidegger's complete writings display the motive: *Wege, nicht Werke*, pathways, not works.

¹⁷ Here we are alluding to a famous poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1875-1939): "Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is no road -- Only wakes upon the sea".

¹⁸ In Bourdieu's account, on the contrary, Heideggerians are those who follow the instructions of their master. Too bad for them, then!

The Problematic ‘Not’ of Nothingness

The foregoing points would likely be incomprehensible if one did not deal with the problem of that ‘not’ which continues to haunt us in our latter denial of doctrine and the work. Is Heidegger offering us in effect a non-doctrine and a non-work? And if that were true, would it mean that correspondingly Heidegger elaborates a kind of non-philosophy or even worse a doctrine of the end of philosophy?¹⁹ On the ‘not’ of nothingness, Heidegger has uttered the following words in 1949:

“The nothing is the ‘not’ of beings and is thus being experienced from the perspective of beings. The ontological difference is the ‘not’ between beings and being. Yet just as being, as the ‘not’ in relation to beings, is by no means a nothing in the sense of a *nihil negativum*, so too the difference, as the ‘not’ between beings and being, is in no way merely the figment of a distinction made by our understanding – *ens rationis*”. (1998: 97).

The ‘not’ about which we talk is not a *nihil negativum*, that is, is not a simple nothing out of nothingness, but at the same time is not *something*. Because that which is worth thinking is precisely that differential ‘not’, what we are striving after is neither an object nor a non-object. When he talks critically about an internal meditation of the work, Bourdieu – although he does not make it explicit – is perhaps referring to an expression due to Friedrich Wilhelm von Herrmann, who in his commentary on SZ in two volumes (cf. 1987 and 2005) coins the phrase *textimmanente Auslegung*: “[Die textimmanente Auslegung] hält sich auf derselben Erfahrungsebene, auf der SuZ ausgearbeitet ist. Es gehört zu ihrer hermeneutischen Aufgabenstellung, mit dem Text auch die ihm eigene Besinnungsebene auszulegen” (1987: XIV).

But this does not mean, as Bourdieu tends to think (smacking by the way of a very basic understanding of reading and interpreting), that we want to dehistoricize the Heideggerian text so as to dissociate it of its historical context. And maybe because that which is historical, the true historical, cannot be accounted for by means of the methods of historical research, for these *qua* theory imply at the same time an abstract dehistoricization. And this is indeed one of the lessons that one can learn from a *textimmanente Auslegung* of SZ.

SZ’s hermeneutical *Aufgabenstellung* and, in correspondence with it, its *Erfahrungs-* and *Besinnungsebene*, without which every reception is ineffective (and does not do any harm to

¹⁹ This evokes of course Heidegger’s essay ‘Das Ende der Philosophie und die Aufgabe des Denkens’.

that supposedly ‘Heideggerian philosophy’, which there isn’t), is mostly concerned with ontological difference. This is how the argument goes: It is precisely because being has been traditionally confused with beings that SZ does not intent to expound itself upon the superb qualities of an ontified being. Every qualification and characterization can be predicated of something. But if it is being what one is dealing with, not with an entity whatsoever, it is worth thinking what actually can be said of being if we are not to fall in the aforementioned ontification. Depending on what readers conclude, they can choose to view SZ in one of the following ways: Either Heidegger deals with being in the traditional sense of the expression and he therefore is – as an inexact contemporary reception would hold – the thinker who restored the rights of ontology, or, instead, and as we would urge, he simply does not deal with being (as long as the ‘of’ pertaining to ‘thinking of being’ is understood in the objective sense of the genitive, which is how the metaphysical tradition interpreted the task). We have to be clear on this: The *Fragestellung* of SZ is not what being is, for that was the question of metaphysics, which Heidegger radically enough traces from Parmenides to Nietzsche.

But what, then, is the question that SZ puts into question? If one is to start off from that *Besinnungsebene* or from the same meditative level of the text, one would have to grant that this question can be inexact for, properly understood, the question does not question *anything*, it is not a ‘what’ that which appears questioned in the question. And the key to understand this rather paradoxical issue appears in the first page of the Heideggerian most famous treatise, the ‘prologue in heaven’, with which the text opens. It is no doubt a strange proem, but all the strangeness that arouses from what is being dealt with in SZ is due to the simple fact that, in a way, it is not possible to be dealt with, it is, as it were, something *undealtable*: In SZ we are indeed before an introduction to the athenatical. And this non-topical is what rightly deserves the name of the hermeneutical: Not mere being, nor beings or entities, but the being of beings, that is, the sense of being, beings with a view to their being, which cannot appear as something, nor can it become a theme in the strict sense of the word. In some way, and let us make recourse to graphical assistance, Heidegger does not attempt to do philosophy or non-philosophy, but ~~philosophy~~ which does not deal with being, but with *being*.²⁰

SZ, as is wide known, did not exceed the form of a fragment. And on this regard one must agree with Leyte (cf. 2005) that the fact that the treatise’s project (as such announced in § 8) did not accomplish its expectations²¹ is itself a basic lesson that must be understood in advance, in order for a proper reception of the work to take place. SZ has been left behind as a fragment

²⁰ See, on this same regard, Sallis: ‘Nonphilosophy’, in 1990: 15-43.

²¹ The story of how SZ’s project complicated itself is tackled by von Herrmann (cf. 1997).

and its project has not being carried out as it was promised, “but the form of ‘incompleteness’ suggests a ‘defect’ when it turns out to be that perhaps it is an intrinsic quality pertaining to its own question, because ‘incomplete’ can express the proper nature of a philosophical work that cannot appear as doctrine” (Leyte, 2005: 62-63). What one must understand is that SZ, as such the first pathmark of the Heideggerian *Denkweg* (preceded by intense rehearsals to find *die Sache selbst* and the language proper to it in Heidegger’s early lectures in Freiburg 1919-1923 and Marburg 1923-1928²²), stands as a work whose appropriate comprehension is even unavoidable and urgent to adequately tackle the immense philosophical enterprise that was undertaken by our thinker.

Let us just depart from the same purpose that Heidegger adscribes to its treatise: No reply to the question of being, no correction of the mistakes purportedly assumed by the ontological tradition... But only: To elaborate in its concreteness the question of the meaning of being. But what is one to understand by this elaboration? Perhaps a phenomenological description of that meaning which, in the meantime, the ontological tradition has put aside, that is to say, what is needed is a phenomenological description of the already mentioned negativity of the ‘not’ of nothingness. There is no doubt that we stand before an enterprise of negative nature, in the sense that it does not promise any corrections or any kind of salvation. The forgetfulness of being, which is always suggested in the traditional insistence towards the non-differentiation between being and beings, is not a ‘human error’ if by that is meant the lack of force or talent on behalf of the great thinkers of the past.

That which Heidegger has carried out in SZ is nothing less than the attempt to think of desert against the desert (an expression that we take from Leyte, 2005). But it is not about thinking of desert, as it were, ‘outside of it’, reflecting upon it, as if such a thing were possible. We think of desert against the desert from within the desert, and that should mean that we are to think the ‘not’ of nothingness from within the same ontological tradition that engulfs us: Nihilism. And by nihilism we mean the historical metaphysical event which insistently prevents us from thinking when, pretentiously enough, it is suggested that here there is *nothing* to think about.

It is something that we want to know about, that is to say, we do not want to know anything about nothing.

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²² There are seminal works on Heidegger’s early university lectures. See Van Buren 1994, Kisiel & Van Buren 1994, Kisiel 1995 and 2002, and Gander 2006.

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