



## Heidegger's phenomenology of the invisible

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### ABSTRACT

Martin Heidegger has retrospectively characterized his philosophy as “phenomenology of the invisible”. This paradoxical formula suggests that the aim of his thinking was to examine the origin of the phenomena. Furthermore, Heidegger has also stated that his philosophy is ultimately motivated by a theological interest, namely the question of God's absence. Following the guiding thread of those remarks, this essay analyzes the essential traits of Heidegger's thought by interpreting them as an attempt to develop a phenomenology of the invisible. Heidegger's attitude towards physics and metaphysics, his theory of truth, his reading of Aristotle, his concept of *Dasein*, his understanding of nothingness are all situated within the problematic context of the relation between the invisible and the revealed. Heidegger's thought is thereby posited at the point of intersection of phenomenology, ontology, and theology.

### KEYWORDS

Martin Heidegger; phenomenology; ontology; theology; physics; metaphysics; truth; nihilism

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Heidegger paradoxically characterizes his own entire philosophy as “phenomenology of the invisible” (Heidegger, 1986: 399). He only gives a brief explanation of this statement. He claims that every original phenomenology, *i.e.* any attempt to phenomenologically describe the origin, is by necessity a tautology. It is so because what it endeavors to express is not something that can be conceptually captured. Henceforth a different, metaphoric mode of speaking must be developed in order to express that which is tautological in its essence. Heidegger’s remarks conclude his interpretation of *aletheia* in Parmenides where he observes that the “immutable heart of truth” is characterized by Parmenides as tautological par excellence: *tauton t'en tautoi te menon kath' beauto te keitai*, or *Selbes im Selben wohnend liegt in ihm selbst* (Heidegger, 1986: 398). In other words, it refers to that which Plato calls *auto t'auto* (*e.g.* in *Alc.* 129b). In order to understand those statements, I’d like to show how the question of the relation between the hidden and the revealed permeates Heidegger’s entire thinking.

First of all, it is the essence of Heidegger’s concept of *aletheia* which he explains as the disclosure of that which is hidden, or the negation of *lethe*, thereby claiming that the primordial meaning of truth is both ontological and phenomenological, denoting the movement of *phanein* of all *phainomena* out of that which by itself remains hidden. This understanding of *aletheia* can be traced to his initial interpretation of Aristotle in the early nineteen twenties. This interpretation was preceded by Heidegger’s early interest in Luther, especially the *Heidelberg Theses*, where interpreting Romans 1:20 (a classical passage on the relation between the hidden and the revealed) Luther claims that the theology should concentrate on the manifest aspect of God, *i.e.* manifested in the phenomena of the world, or *id quod est* (Heidegger, 1995b: 282). Furthermore, Heidegger’s often repeated interpretative credo is to reveal “that which is unsaid in that what has been said”<sup>1</sup> (Heidegger, 1976b: 203; cf. Heidegger, 1991: 201). Finally, in one of his rare statements on God, he claims that “God is present only through his absence” (Heidegger, 1981: 170–171), or by the “absence of the hidden fullness” (Heidegger, 2000: 185). From this perspective I’d like to interpret Heidegger’s phenomenology of the invisible.

Heidegger’s question — as he has often stated — was the question of being. But it was also the question of truth. Whoever tries to understand Heidegger, should pose the question of the relation of truth to being, the question of *on hos alethes*, which was indeed the question he himself tried to answer in his interpretation of Aristotle. But what one should ask first is: why was Heidegger at all interested in the question of being and the question of truth? There are several hints given by Heidegger himself that allow us to answer this question. He confessed several times that the only question he has ever tried to answer was the question of God’s absence, *e.g.* in his 1937/1938 *Retrospective*

<sup>1</sup> All translations from German are mine — A.S.

*glance on the way*: “the single question, whether God is fleeing from us or not” (Heidegger, 1997: 415). When we take into account Heidegger’s introductory remarks to the Rainer Maria Rilke memorial lecture *Where are poets for?* which formulate a diagnosis that we are living in the “night of the world” because we have lost our relation with the divine and therefore our task is now to restore it (Heidegger, 1977a: 269–270), then Heidegger’s theological stance becomes evident. It does not mean however that Heidegger wants to become a prophet, although in his voice one can sometimes sense prophetic and apocalyptic undertones, but rather that his philosophical project is constantly motivated by this ultimately theological interest.

Heidegger speaks about God only in apophatic terms: as that which is present only through its absence. God as such is unattainable for us and remains hidden. Only beings (phenomena) are given in our worldly, finite experience. Any positive statement about God would be reductive since it would reduce God to something particular, one among many. It would reduce the origin of all phenomena to a particular phenomenon. This observation, combining the apophatic idea of *Deus absconditus* with the phenomenological attitude towards the world, is the point of departure of Heidegger’s thinking. We can try to reformulate Heidegger’s question about God’s absence (or hiddenness) in a different language. If all that is given are phenomena (beings) in their *phanein* (being), and the domain of beings is the world (*physis*), then Heidegger’s single question becomes the question of the possibility of metaphysics. In other words, Heidegger does not accept metaphysics as given. Heidegger’s question would therefore be: is it at all possible to move beyond the domain of *physis*, from beings to their origin, to their *arche*? Or, to restate it once more: is it at all possible to conceive a phenomenological analysis of the invisible?

In order to answer this question Heidegger performs what he calls a detour (*Umweg*), or a shift in thinking. If the only thing given is phenomena (appearances, beings) and their origin is hidden due to the mere nature of phenomenality (every phenomenon covers its source), then we cannot perceive or express the origin as such. But phenomena are not given statically. They are given in their *phanein* (appearing, being). The shift that Heidegger undertakes — a sort of ontological *epoche* — is the shift of attention from beings (phenomena) to their being (*phanein*). To summarize: what is given (revealed) are phenomena. What is hidden (invisible) is their origin, or that which gives. What Heidegger attempts to do is the shift of attention not to that which gives, and not to that which is given, but to the mere act of giving, to givenness. This dynamic relation is the focus of Heidegger’s thinking. Furthermore, if we accept Heidegger’s understanding of *aletheuein* as *phanein* (i.e. appearing of phenomena), only then can we understand why *aletheia* played such an important role in his thinking as the intermediary between that which is closed (*lethe*) and that which is disclosed (beings): the opening, or the disclosure.

I'd like to concentrate now on the initial interpretation of *aletheia* as something decisive for the development of Heidegger's thought. Not only did he remain a thinker of *aletheia* throughout his entire life but he also pointed himself to this initial interpretation as the key to his thinking (Heidegger, 2006b: 145–152; Heidegger, 2007: 93–101). He also pointed to the epigraph of Brentano's study of Aristotle — *to on legetai pollachos* (*Met.* 1003a33) — as crucial (Heidegger, 1985: 88). This quotation from *Metaphysics* can indeed serve as a guiding thread since it shows the relation of *logos* (*legein*) to being, one of the core features of Heidegger's phenomenological interpretation of *aletheia*. I will try to show how this interpretation is Heidegger's first attempt to develop a phenomenology of the invisible in which *Dasein* (*psyche*) reveals (*aletheuei*) that which is hidden (*lethe*), which in itself is nothing, revealing it as something (*kata tinos*). A brief sketch of this interpretation is presented in two chapters of *Being and time*, the chapters on phenomenology and on truth (Heidegger, 1977b: 36–52, 282–305).

First Heidegger enquires about truth in the conventional meaning, *i.e.* he tries to examine the roots of the correspondence theory of truth. Tradition has always referred to Aristotle's *De interpretatione* to justify this understanding. Therefore Heidegger undertakes an interpretation of this treatise in order to examine the original Aristotelian understanding of *logos* and its relation to *aletheia* (Heidegger, 1976a; Heidegger, 1982; Heidegger, 2006a). It turns out that the classical theory of truth is absent in Aristotle. Moreover, as Heidegger points out, the ontological concept of truth is an essential part of *Metaphysics* (the final chapter of the book Theta). But the crucial Aristotelian treatise in Heidegger's interpretation of *aletheia* is the *Nicomachean ethics*. *Dasein* is the term that he uses to translate *psyche*. Heidegger translates the Aristotelian statement *aletheuei he psyche* (*Eth. Nic.* 1139 b 15) as "*Dasein* reveals beings".

Why *Dasein* instead of *Seele*? According to Heidegger, soul is a metaphysical concept overburdened with traditional understanding that obfuscates the phenomenon of *psyche* instead of clarifying it. The introduction of a nontraditional term (*Dasein*) is an attempt to phenomenologically describe the phenomenon of *psyche* anew. Its understanding is developed on the basis of interpreting Aristotle's *De anima* and *Nicomachean ethics*. In the etymological underpinning of the native German *Dasein* Heidegger was able to discover a meaning that he could only reveal by applying this term to translate the Greek *psyche*. Henceforth Heidegger's statements from *Being and time* that *Sein* manifests itself through *Dasein*, or that *Sein* is always *Da*, stem from this interpretation. If *Dasein* (or *psyche*) is the place of the manifestation of phenomena, and being (*sein*) is *aletheuein*, or the manifestation itself, then *Da* is the particularity of each manifestation in its particular thisness (*kath hekaston*).

This is related to the fundamental feature of manifestation: it is always a manifestation as-something (*kata tinos*). Pure self-manifestation would be

equivalent to manifestation as nothing, or to annihilation. Therefore presence is always a presentation as something. Heidegger performs an analysis of this aspect of manifestation (*aletheuein*) in his analysis of the as-structure of *logos apophantikos*, i.e. *legein* as *apophanein* (manifesting). This is the subject of his interpretation of *Metaphysics* Theta 10 (he repeats it twice in: Heidegger, 1976a: 170–182; Heidegger, 1982: 73–109). It concerns the relation of *aletheia* to *logos* and constitutes the cornerstone not only of Heidegger's entire interpretation of Aristotle but also — as he claims — of the entire *Metaphysics*. It is not only a phenomenological analysis of the as-structure of *logos* (manifestation as something) but also a proof of the ontological and phenomenological understanding of *aletheia* by Aristotle. In other words, it confirms the Heideggerian claim of the cooriginality of being and truth, or, to state it differently, it shows that *aletheuein* as a manifestation of being takes place not only in language as speech but also on the ontological level (*logos* is ontologized here).

To summarize, Heidegger's interpretation of *aletheia* in Aristotle starts with *Dasein* (*psyche*) and its relation to the world in its manifestedness (in its beingness). Various forms of this manifestation (*aletheuein*) are analyzed in *Nicomachean ethics* VI (Heidegger, 1992: 21–188). This is a step beyond a merely linguistic understanding of truth towards *aletheia praktike*, i.e. any form of embodied world experience (e.g. *techne*, *phronesis*). From this analysis of various modes of *Dasein*'s being (which is always *Da*) Heidegger moves to the analysis of manifestedness as such, or to the condition of possibility of *Dasein*'s being in the world. According to Heidegger's analysis of the as-structure of manifestation, the fundamental condition for any manifestation is the possibility of synthesis of something separate. From this Heidegger goes on to the analysis of the unity of a manifestation. If something manifests itself as something, then it is equivalent to it. But at the same time that which it manifests itself as must be separate in order for the relation to take place. Therefore this unity is from the outset divided within. This conclusion leads to an ontological claim that the condition of possibility of any manifestation is the division of unity, or ontological negation (*stereis*). The self-negation of that which is nothing in itself is necessary for its manifestation as something. Hence Heidegger's analysis of *aletheia* leads him to what he later called *lethe*, or that which is hidden as such, which reveals itself as something in any manifestation, but manifests itself always as something and never as itself, since in itself it is nothing.

*Lethe*, the hidden fullness, is the “immutable heart” of *aletheia*, of any manifestation, as Heidegger has stated in his late remark. He had this intuition early on in his thinking and his reading of Aristotle only helped him to develop a language to formulate this thought. He stated it for example in the motto to the final remarks of his 1915 dissertation on Duns Scotus: *Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte und finden immer nur Dinge* (Heidegger, 1978: 399). The *Unbedingte* that we are trying to find everywhere is the unconditioned, the “un-thinged”,

the non-thing, or even the no-thing. Now we can clearly see how Heidegger follows the apophatic tradition of identifying God with nothingness (cf. Eckhart's gesture of identifying *nihil* of the Pauline *apertisque oculis nihil videbat* in Acts 9:8 with *Deus* in *Sermo 71*). This nothingness is the blinding divine light appearing to the soul as nothingness, as Bonaventura has noticed in the motto to Braig's *Vom Sein*, one of Heidegger's formative readings in his early years (cf. Plato's figure of such light in *Phaedo* 99d ; *Republica* 515d–e). In other words, from the worldly perspective, or, in Heideggerian terms, from the perspective of thrownness and facticity, behind everything there's only nothing. The path towards this forgotten hidden fullness, towards *lethe*, is the path through which goddess *Aletheia* leads in the Parmenidean poem *On nature*. This is the path that Heidegger follows in his entire thinking.

One of Heidegger's most important discoveries was the demonstration of the primordial unity of *logos*, *aletheia* and *physis* (Heidegger, 1979: 359, 371–374). The essence of *aletheia* as manifesting, as being, is movement, *i.e.* ceaseless differentiation, unfolding, unconcealing (*aletheuein*) of the hidden unity (*lethe*). Therefore Heidegger can claim that Aristotle's analysis of *aletheia* is to be found not in *De interpretatione* (that would be a superficial, non-originary understanding of truth), not in *De anima*, not even in *Metaphysics* Theta 10, but in *Physics*, which is the essential metaphysical treatise of Aristotle. Heidegger states this in several places, including his most important essay on Aristotle, *On the essence and concept of physis* (Heidegger, 1976b: 239–301). Hence in the early 1922 draft of his Aristotle interpretation Heidegger can say that “in *Physics* the primordial meaning of *aletheia* is revealed” (Heidegger, 2005: 391). This primordial meaning is movedness as manifestedness. *Physis* is the domain of movement and change understood both ontologically and phenomenologically. *Phyein* denotes the essential trait of *physis*, *i.e.* being-moved, or, in phenomenological terms, being-revealed. *Phyein* is cooriginal with *aletheuein*, as *physis* is with *aletheia*. This is why Aristotle describes the early physicists as *filosofesantes peri tes aletheias* (*De cael.* 298 b 12–14; cf. *Met.* 993 a–b). Therefore Heidegger ends his 1922 lecture course on Aristotle with a detailed analysis of *Physics* A 1–4. During a lecture given in this course on June 2nd, 1922 he translated *aletheia* for the first time as *das, was nicht mehr verborgen ist*, or *Nicht-mehr-in-Verborgenheit-Sein* (Heidegger, 2005: 112).

Only from this perspective can one try to answer Heidegger's single question: whether God is fleeing from us or not, and what are the causes of his hiddenness. Heidegger's answer is related to the way we as humans are relating to *physis* (*i.e.* the world as such). His criticism of technology can only be understood from the perspective of his fundamental theological question. The attitude towards *physis* is not of accidental interest to Heidegger but it stems from his aim to reconstitute the divine (as expressed *e.g.* in the Rilke lecture). To state it briefly, objectification of *physis* and the development of the subject-object

paradigm was a possible road humanity, or rather: the West could take. We have witnessed its advantages and disadvantages (scientific and technological progress), but the fundamental consequence of this approach is that *physis* became objectified, petrified, depersonalized and detheologized. Heidegger's proposal of another beginning is a proposal of retheologizing or reanimating *physis*, *i.e.* assuming a primordial relation towards it, treating it as an animate, living organism that responds to us, that we are a part of, that we interact with, without distancing ourselves to it with gestures of objectification (Heidegger, 1981: 49–77; Heidegger, 1983: 87–90; Heidegger, 1995a: 3–159; Heidegger, 2000: 5–36). *Physis* becomes thereby a medium between the invisible and the revealed (manifested through *phanein*, *aletheuein*). In other words, *physis* is functionally equivalent (or cooriginal, in Heideggerian terms) to *aletheia*, serving as a go-between, an intermediary between nothing and something, as that which originates the phenomena.

Furthermore, one shall emphasize that Heidegger never identifies *aletheia* or *physis* with God. God is something beyond, hidden, absent, but paradoxically present through this absence. What's more, the absence of the absolute is the condition of possibility of any particularity. What is God, then? *Unbekannt*, answers Hölderlin in one of Heidegger's favorite poems, *dennoch voll eigenschaften*. Everything, every phenomenon is a property, a modus, an aspect of the divine nothingness, of the hidden fullness, as Heidegger describes it. Or, as Angelus Silesius pointedly formulated it (Scheffler, 1862: 7, 14):

Die zarte Gottheit ist ein Nichts und Übernichts:  
 Wer nichts in allem sieht, Mensch, glaube, dieser sieht's.  
 Gott ist ein lauter Nichts, ihn rührt kein Nun noch Hier:  
 Je mehr du nach ihm greifst, je mehr entwird er dir.

Heidegger's nihilism is therefore not atheism. Just the opposite. It is an attempt of relating to that which is hidden — to the hidden fullness — from the perspective of that which is revealed. *Aletheia*, the central figure of Heidegger's philosophy, is not only a reformulation of the concept of truth. It is an attempt to phenomenologically describe the hidden, or the invisible, in its movement of disclosure, *i.e.* in the manifestation of phenomena. But even if we treat each manifestation as a revelation, then we are still left only with a multitude of phenomena. Their origin remains hidden. Heidegger was painfully aware of this: "Alles Seiende mögt ihr durchstreifen, nirgends zeigt sich die Spur des Gottes. Frage das Seyn! Und in dessen Stille, als dem Anfang des Wortes, antwortet der Gott" (Heidegger, 1997: 353).

Having sketched the fundamental tenets of Heidegger's ontological position, we can now briefly describe his attitude towards the tradition which is a direct consequence of his ontology. The notorious "destruction of metaphysics" has

a reconstructive undertone, clear for everyone who realizes the scope of Heidegger's project. A restatement of his goals may be necessary, though, in order to clarify this sufficiently. For this purpose the Platonic figure of the cave — which Heidegger has often commented upon (Heidegger, 1976b: 203f.; Heidegger, 1988; Heidegger, 2016: 327f., 457f.) — will prove useful as a guiding thread. Heidegger uses two intertwined terms to diagnose the crisis of metaphysics: *chorismos* and *zygon*. *Chorismos*, or separation, denotes the yawning gap between the physical and the metaphysical (in theological terms: the absence of the Divine); *zygon*, a term taken from Plato's description of the cave allegory, denotes a yoke, a junction, or, in Heidegger's analysis, a constant gaze fixed upon the sun. To state is allegorically, philosophers (metaphysicians) may have adapted their eyes to this unworldly light, but lost the ability to perceive the cave (*i.e.* the world), and henceforth detached themselves from life, from mere human existence, which should be the point of departure and constant reference for any metaphysics (a possibility, of course, anticipated by Plato). In other words, they have never returned to the cave. Heidegger's project can be clearly understood from this perspective. The aim of his metaphysical *epoche*, or the "destruction of metaphysics", is a part of the strategy whose ultimate goal is to reestablish the lost connection. For this purpose the Heideggerian philosopher has to start the ascent anew, thereby joining *physis* (the cave) with that which can only reveal itself, but is never readily given. Another feature of Heidegger's stance is the vindication of the cave, of *doxa*, of *error*, and the demonstration of its essential relationship to truth. The ultimate question that Heidegger was constantly asking is: Why is there a cave (*i.e.* something), and not only the sun (seen from the cave as nothing)?

This restatement allows us to understand Heidegger's fundamental standpoint. *Dasein* is not only *psyche*; *Dasein* is not only being-here; *Dasein* is — first and foremost — being-here-in-the-cave. This explains Heidegger's strategy of interpretation, his retrieval of the tradition. This also explains why he never comments *e.g.* on *Timaeus* or *Metaphysics* XII, which constitute a discourse unacceptable by the cave. One must first be led out of the cave, out of the domain of *doxa*. The purpose of all Heideggerian *Einführungen* is leading from *physis* into *ta meta ta physika*. The possibility of such a transition is Heidegger's fundamental problem. This perspective allows us to clarify Heidegger's relation to Husserl (why he favored the early *Logical investigations*), to phenomenology (the domain of *phainomena* as the domain of *doxa*), and to existentialism (the concentration on finite being-in-the-world). Heidegger's *epoche* is therefore different than Husserl's, because instead of bracketing the "natural attitude", Heidegger wants to revindicate it. This is why he can counter Husserl's "return to the things" by saying "how can we return where we already are". In other words, *Dasein* as being-in-the-cave is being-with-the-things, being-with-others, being-embodied, being-affected. The entire existential analysis of *Being*



*and time* is a polemic with the detachment of traditional metaphysics. At stake is nothing less than the meaning of worldly human existence which Heidegger aims to reconstitute. Simultaneously, he attempts to reroot (radicalize) metaphysics in existence, which is best seen in his existential interpretation of Aristotle (Heidegger, 2002). All this leads us to the ultimate theological stake of Heidegger's thinking, the question of God's relationship to man: whether God is some abstract, detached entity, away, beyond, or just the opposite, present here, for man, in man, as man. Heidegger clearly claims that *Dasein*, the domain of the cave, is the scene of presentation, the scene of *Sein*.

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