

CHAPTER 1

Four Meditations on Heidegger's Undergoing of Thought's Finitude

One of the most direct encounters of conceptual thought with its finitude, and perhaps the most violent, occurs in the work of Martin Heidegger. In his early work, *Being and Time*, time appears as the transcendental horizon of all determinations of senses of being, be they conceptual or physical. Indeed, already in this work, Heidegger seeks to think towards temporality in order to think the ground of the ontological difference, between entities and ideas, that serves as the foundation for the history of metaphysics, and Western thought in general. Thus, in *Being and Time* and thereafter, Heidegger seeks a thought that occurs in light of its (thought's) finitude or temporality. In his second major work, *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger's project continues through a shift in the way of his project. This refers to a shift in the very situation of thought in relation to the issue of temporality. In *Contributions*, Heidegger seeks to think in light of the temporality and finitude of thought in its coming to pass, rather than thinking towards time as the horizon of thought. In other words, the task of *Contributions* is to begin to think thought in its finite situatedness, that is, to think in and with the temporality of thought. However, this cannot mean engaging in either a purely conceptual nor in a pragmatic or historiographical explication and analysis of thought; already since *Being and Time* such ontological difference would not serve us to understand Heidegger's work. Thus, in Heidegger's *Contributions* we find an attempt to engage thought's temporality through the specific undergoing of the temporality of thought as such, and to do so in a manner that will not simply re-inscribe the undergoing of philosophical thought within either side of metaphysics. Heidegger calls this thinking beyng-historical thinking (*seynsgeschichtliches Denken*).¹ The abstruse terminology in English requires an immediate clarification: the archaic spelling of being that uses the "y" (*Seyn* rather than *Sein*), indicates a move underneath or back to the undergoing of thought that remains beyond, yet underlying, the history of metaphysics. The term "historical" (*geschichtliches*) points to a specific concern with thinking

as the undergoing of the very dynamic situatedness of thought. As von Herrman puts it, the thought of *Contributions* “is a phenomenological and then a hermeneutical thinking,” that is, its way is found in undergoing the concrete temporality of thought.² As my discussion in the next five chapters, and the book’s orientation as a whole make evident, I take this insight as a point of departure, that is, we will go beyond von Herrman’s formulation, because we will take this phenomenological accent in Heidegger as the opening of a sensibility, or disposition, in which thought goes beyond its delimitation, into an unbounded fecund opening diversifying of the sense of time and being in Heidegger.³ Thus, the next four meditations focus on Heidegger’s attempt in *Contributions* to engage philosophical thought in its temporality or finitude through this beyng-historical-thinking. The discussion delineates Heidegger’s opening of spaces for such undergoing of philosophical thought and marks the limits that also occur in that thinking.

Before moving on to the four meditations, and in order to accentuate the intention and direction of my discussion, I mention some secondary literature crucial to my interpretation of Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*. David Krell’s *Intimations of Mortality*, *Lunar Voices*, and his work have been an inspiration for the development of this book.⁴ The first book directly concerns Heidegger. In it, Krell makes clear that Heidegger’s thought is not a matter of two separate periods of thought divided by a break in his thinking, or the turn (*die Kehre*), a divide often situated within the time frame of the composition of *Contributions to Philosophy* and “The Origin of the Work of Art.”⁵ Instead, Krell argues for a single thought that undergoes a thinking of mortality; “there is something particularly implacable about Heidegger’s thinking of mortality, rooted in the experience he calls *oblivion of Being*.”⁶ Furthermore, this is “a thinking within anxiety . . . a descensional reflection determined to keep its feet on the earth.”⁷ Krell traces this thinking through its various undergoings of mortality, always relating Heidegger’s later thought to *Being and Time*. The path of his discussion leads to Heidegger’s later thought as poetic thought, to his concrete engagement with mortality through his discussions of Georg Trakl, and ultimately back to the thinking within anxiety already figured by Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*.⁸ The following discussion of Heidegger shares Krell’s insight in situating Heidegger’s thought within its mortal and concrete anxiety. Indeed, in the case of the following four meditations the issue is the explicit undergoing of mortality or finitude that occurs in Heidegger’s thought in *Contributions to Philosophy*. The discussion closely follows the movement of Heidegger’s thought with particular attentiveness to its attunement or dis-position (*Stimmung*), or the fundamental modality of the thought. Also, whereas Krell’s reading turns to Heidegger’s poetic thought as a way back to the concrete sense of mortality in the German philosopher,

in my case, the discussion follows Heidegger's anxiety to its extreme. This extreme takes the form of his withdrawal from the thought he opens as he exposes the history of metaphysics to its mortality. This unbearable exposure culminates in his appeal to the destiny of the West, Hölderlin, and the last god as figures in which his thought finds an end or purpose, and hence a harbor, as it comes to be confronted with an unbounded sense of being. This exposure occurs on the one hand in Heidegger's furious engagement of our age of machination and forgetfulness of the forgetting of all senses of being, and on the other, in the unfathomable opening to a concrete diversified and diversifying arising to presence of beings that, in its exposure to concrete temporality, ultimately overwhelms the history of Western metaphysics and opens it to sheer difference. In this sense, I again sympathize with Krell's emphasis on Trakl as the figure of Heidegger's concrete exposure to mortality and difference, and yet, my discussion traces Heidegger's thought through its crisis. This tracing out of Heidegger's thought in attunement or dis-position (*Stimmung*) in *Contributions* does not lead back to *Being and Time*, but it serves as an introduction to the rest of this book's explorations, that is, to the discussion of instances of thought in which we may articulate the sensibility that unfolds through conceptual thought's exposure to its finitude.

Another fundamental moment for my reading is John Sallis's connection between Heidegger's "On the Essence of Truth" and *Contributions to Philosophy*. In this case the crucial point is the way he articulates the movement of Heidegger's thought with relation to the concept of truth. I agree with him that the transformation of the concept of truth in Heidegger's thought opens philosophy to another way of thinking:

In the wake of this strangeness, a wake that has perhaps just begun, a wake in which we are to mourn nothing less than the passing of truth itself what is to become of the essentially other than truth? No longer is it the mere opposite that could be kept securely outside the essence of truth. Nor is it an other that truth could appropriate in such a way that the otherness would be retained within a new unity attesting the priority of truth. . . .⁹

Sallis's words point to the movement and space of thought opened by Heidegger, and in doing so, they also begin to give us a sense of the exposure undergone by Heidegger's thought. As Sallis explains, the essentially other than truth:

It is even—as Heidegger would say in that perhaps most monstrous saying—something within the essence of truth that is older than

truth itself. . . . Thus, what is essentially other than truth belongs to the essence of truth, even though within that essence its otherness is preserved, not just dialectically but as oppositional, even older than truth.¹⁰

Sallis's interpretation opens Heidegger's thought in its unfolding through a movement that does not operate in terms of the metaphysical difference between beings and Being. Furthermore, the monstrosity of the essentially other than truth figures the concrete unfolding of senses of beings in concealment and unconcealment or the movement of truth as *a-letheia*. Thus, as does Krell's, Sallis's work points us to the mortal and concrete, the living sense of Heidegger's thought.¹¹ More specifically, Sallis points us towards the sense of truth in concrete ephemeral difference that arises in the exposure of thought to temporality in Heidegger's work.¹² It is in the wake of this pregnant transformative passage for philosophy that we undergo Heidegger's thought in the next four chapters. At the same time, my discussion goes further as we take this insight as the introduction to the rest of the book. This opening is then explored through the other sections of the book, that is, as the sense of the other in the transformative movement of truth is explored by way of diverse encounters, experiences, and thoughts often singular and at times uncharted and impossible to inscribe under the history of Western philosophy. My reading is always indebted to Daniela Vallega-Neu, from whose reading of *Contributions to Philosophy* I continue to learn.¹³ Finally, I have learned much from the essays collected in the *Companion to Heidegger's 'Contributions to Philosophy'*.¹⁴

First Meditation

Abandonment: A Violent Encounter with Thought's Finitude

The abandonment of being is the first dawning of being as self-sheltering-concealing from out of the night of metaphysics. . . .¹⁵

(*Contributions to Philosophy*)

In *Contributions to Philosophy* thought is engaged in the specific finite situation in which it is undergone. This means for Heidegger that in our epoch the task of thinking in its temporality requires that we think through the highest point of metaphysics: Nihilism in its most extreme form. This is "the abandonment of being" (*die Seinsverlassenheit*) that occurs in our era with the forgetting of any question about the senses of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*). This oblivious existence occurs through the expansion of rationalism into

a calculative technological appropriation of all senses of being. This is not an individual attitude but it refers to an epoch: the epoch of machination (*Machenschaft*). To begin to think in departure from thought's situation will be to think through this specific undergoing of the abandonment of being as *Machenschaft*. As our quote above indicates, the abandonment of being does not call for the abandonment of philosophical thought but, on the contrary, must be thought in order to find a path for thinking, a dim light out of the darkest night of metaphysics' rationalist abstractions and its calculation and production. In other words, we must think through, undergo, and withstand in an articulate manner this epoch by exposing thought to its situation, to that modality of forgetting of the forgetting of all senses of being that rules us and our time.

Forgetting or the Emptiness of Being

Heidegger's observations and warnings about machination are as clear as they are harsh, and it is worthwhile citing one of them. Heidegger writes about this epoch:

One should speak of *the epoch of the total lack of questioning*, which extends its duration within time, beyond the present, far back and far ahead. In this epoch nothing essential—if this determination still has any meaning at all—is any longer impossible or inaccessible. Everything “is made” and “can be made” if one only musters the “will” for it. But that this “will” is precisely what has already placed and in advance reduced what might be possible and above all necessary—this is already mistaken ahead of time and left outside any questioning. For this will, which makes everything, has already subscribed to machination, that interpretation of beings as re-presentable and re-presented. In one respect re-presentable means “accessible to intention and calculation”; in another it means “advanceable through production and execution.” But thought in a fundamental manner, all of this means that beings as such are re-presentable and that only the representable *is*. For machination, what apparently offers resistance and a limit to machination is only the material for further elaboration and the impulse for progress and an occasion for extension and enlargement. Within machination there is nothing question-worthy, nothing that could be esteemed through enactment of questioning as such, simply esteemed. . . .¹⁶

Speaking of the forgetting of being is not an abstract call for some other kind of being or experience beyond our existence. On the contrary, the forgetting

of being is rooted in the fact that we exist in an epoch that concretely, literally in-deed, has abandoned questioning. According to Heidegger we come to the very configuration of our existence and thought out of a lack of questioning. We are without questioning, hence without dignity. But how do we make sense of this claim in a time when science and law seem to have conquered unsuspected frontiers to the point of our speaking of “global order” and “progress”?

The mechanism of forgetting under machination is simple and horrific. All senses of being, even being human, are defined in terms of the measurements and production fitting to rationalist calculative intentionality (*Machenschaft*). This means that not only any form of being can be quantified and manipulated but also determined and produced accordingly to the calculus of rational intentionality. Ultimately all senses of being are products, results, or effects of this powers of production; and, only that which can be quantified, catalogued, manipulated, or reproduced—only that which is made and dominated by reason, can be defined as being in any sense. Furthermore, what remains beyond this productive calculus appears as raw material or marketable natural goods, to be consumed or put to use by machination. Thus, reason is the executed desire that creates all senses of being, and that at the same time controls what has been created. This infinite chain of production and consumption appears as the product and object of all senses of being. This is why Heidegger concludes that in such economy of machination rational intentionality or will ends up being self-sufficient, since they continue to create themselves.¹⁷ We should be clear here that this critique does not entail the rejection or abandonment of reason, logic, or mathematics. These are simply elements put to use by a specific manner of being that encounters all senses of being under a project of production and domination. Under machination rule the presence of entities at hand and the ideas fitting to things and their production through reason.¹⁸ I don't believe a catalogue of contemporary analogies will do here, since such an attempt to give examples would never meet the expanses touched by machination in each reader's situation. However, I do not think it excessive to say that Heidegger's observations in the late nineteen-thirties and thereafter are already fitting introduction to our global economies today, to the conceptual and cultural poverty that accompany our new world “order and progress,” when for example viewed in light of colonialism and Latin America.¹⁹ Obviously, I step beyond Heidegger, and in doing so at least intimate a more radical and transgressive step along with his hope for a rethinking of the thought of the West. This will become explicit when we reach our third meditation.

To return to the analysis of *Machenschaft*, its three principle elements are quantitative calculation (*Berechnung*), velocity (*Schnelligkeit*), and the massive or gigantic (*das Massenhafte, das Riesenhafte*).²⁰ These elements

together configure the horizon of our reality, as they situate us within a limitless projection of progress and expansion.²¹ Today to be part of the project of humanity means for the self-appointed majority to be occupied with the construction of the future through the daily contribution to the development of technology that will shape all the sciences and human knowledge. The future depends on the urgent production of results and technological implements for shaping and making the future safe and secure through the expansion ad infinitum of rational quantitative productions of meanings and goods. Here appears Heidegger's point about the forgetting of the question of being and of questioning in such direction: We are so taken with the urgency for production that we do not have the time for remaining and undergoing the configurations of senses of being.²² When all being is producing and producing is the infinite activity of being, there is not any time for questions, hesitations, doubts, pauses, or silences: what only counts, for now and for the future, if it is to be, is presence and production. In this urgency and fixation with the immediate presence of things and the securing of them in the future, we not only lose and forget being in other registers, but that very forgetting slips into oblivion. Even if one were to encounter questions, silences, and doubt, these are only referred to the need for more quantitative calculation and production, since any lack in the economy of machination can only mean that we must produce more and more effectively. In short, in light of Heidegger's observations, we can see that the quantitative and technological drive of machination and its velocity project us into a massive horizon of infinite progress that we follow with eye, body, heart, and reason; while in that infinite wave we recede towards a limitless emptiness marked only by our ever so close and almost imperceptible forgetting oblivion. To put it in another way, as Giorgio Agamben has indicated in *Homo Sacer* as well as other works, Heidegger already sees at this point the advent of biopolitics and the reduction of life to the material for the sustenance of sovereign systems of production and their blind quantitative expansion.²³

The Impossible Language of Emptiness

I have just said heart and reason because machination's frantic production of being practically occupies every moment of existence. As Heidegger points out, the production of being under machination is accompanied by a certain rush, a certain feeling of adventure (*Erlebnis*) that is thoughtlessly called experience, and even real life experience. Next to quantification and production, and entangled with them, we find as an element of machination reason's fitting other, that most sexy of emotions, "the feeling of being alive."²⁴ We are alive when we produce, when we consume, when we surf along machination's fast wave, when we belong to the massive project actively, when we experience life

as the adventure (*Erlebnis*) of being alive. When not assigned to calculative quantification, all questioning is covered over by the various appeals to life as adventure under words like “emotions,” “feelings,” “belief,” and “power” (the force of the individual will).²⁵ The crucial point here is that reason and emotion correspond to the project of machination, and in their expansive doubling the questioning and pause that have been forgotten are simply closed down. In other words, what cannot be quantified can be lived.

As Heidegger points out in *Contributions* these two elements in their difference are situated by a single product and operational functionary of machination: the rational and emotional subject. As Michel Haar writes, along with calculation and production, machination requires a certain objectivity or pragmatism that may measure and resolve problems.²⁶ The rational subject is that objective point that ultimately performs the role of an impersonal will. We are speaking of a certain rational indifference that takes all undergoings of senses of being as problems that can at least be partially solved if logic and calculative quantification are applied (partially because of reason’s supposed recognition of its own and self-produced limit). One could say that according to this impartial function, for the rational subject any undergoing of a sense of being has its value as a price or measurement. A simple example of this is the type of mechanism that runs most institutions, because their existence is determined by the impersonal application of calculations immediate and projected. I have yet to find an institution in which some one, rather than a functionary, would claim responsibility for what happens to those under its services at any level of decision. This reduction of one’s existence to an impersonal functionary or customer becomes all the more uncomfortable when we consider to what extent institutions make decisions over every aspect of one’s intimate existence; for example, as tools for education, health, and culture. What seals the functionary and the institution, and our being in them, is ultimately their discourse, or what the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar identified as the repetition of the same empty words in order to sustain putrefied ideas. I am speaking of that impersonal and semiformal language that attempts to recognize our use while saying nothing personal, thus securing the functionary’s place, be it as customer or as sales representative, or what ever representing impersonal function the entity serves. Of course, the impersonal character of the institutional model and of each functionary has its limit in the rush of riding the wave of present and future progress and order. Along these lines, if the impartial rational subject deploys a language of indifference over every undergoing of being, it is the same subject that in its living the life of frantic production and projection spreads vacuous emotional discourses that seem to express what subjects feel and want (most of the time difficult to separate), all under the false impression of undergoing changes and of making a difference. How can there be change if the discourse sings that worn-out lullaby of the

strongest form of living as experiencing machination's adventure? Here human experience is caught in a dualistic web: thinking has been reduced to reason and the intimate to a single intense sensation deceptively called adventure. Thus, the horizon of thought seems to entail this twofold possibility, or, the impossibility of a sensibility of thought.

Indeed, it is the danger of such empty double discourse that leads Heidegger to introduce *Contributions to Philosophy* by stating that language as the engagement of the senses of beings has become impossible: "all fundamental words have been used up and the genuine relation to the word has been destroyed."²⁷ One wonders how this situation can be sustained. Heidegger indicates that there is a third element added to reason and emotion, its most spectacular effect perhaps. This is enchantment (*Verzauberung*), that is, the illusion created in the frantic rush of productive consumption and emotion, an illusion that covers over the emptiness of life under machination with the impression of a grand future that is to be produced and, of course, protected.²⁸

Heidegger identifies in machination four rules that secure its functioning and secure the oblivious forgetting of any diverse undergoing of configurations of being.²⁹ The stronger the development of machination the more it becomes hidden behind the enchanting promise of its great project. At the same time, with the strengthening of this economy life becomes more and more the fitting opposite to calculative productive reasoning, that is, it becomes the great indeterminate wave of irrational feeling and sensation opposed to the ordering of reason. As such, it is subsumed under machination as the adventure of life that can only be secured by reason's calculative production of present and future. With these two elements in full play, the possibility of recognizing and engaging machination as such, and therefore otherwise than from within its enchantment, becomes almost impossible. Eventually, without any other horizon than that of machination thought develops a simple indifference or aversion to any questioning beyond its frameworks. This is why Heidegger recognizes in our epoch nothing but the total absence of questioning.³⁰

Conclusion

We have discussed the steps that according to Heidegger lead to the forgetting of being, and we have also developed them in order to engage that situation of thought in its epoch or finite situatedness. We encounter ourselves face to face with our situation of being in abandonment in the epoch of machination, or as Heidegger writes, in the epoch "of the forgetting of being and the decomposition of truth (*Zerfall der Wahrheit*)."³¹ In this violent encounter with the situation of thought in our time we already begin to move towards the dim light Heidegger seeks out of the darkest night of metaphysics. According to Heidegger, this situation we have begun to articulate is what thought

must come to engage if it is to set out in departure from its situation or very finitude. If in what we have said we seem to find naught but despair, hopelessness and emptiness, we should also be able to find a knot in our thoughts, in that situation where words have betrayed us, made us functionaries, or perhaps now, have left us. And in that knot, perhaps we begin to find the anger of being there under machination, the anger that at least insinuates and exposes us to the lack of words and the poverty of what we call reason, feeling, sensation, and experience. But perhaps Heidegger is right in thinking that it is precisely and decidedly in this encounter with our emptiness and aphasia, in light of even this brief look at the spectacle of machination, that we begin to find a path for the articulation of our undergoing of the configurations of being beyond the willful production of the self-fulfilling emptiness of *Machenschaft*. As he writes, “. . . not granting is not nothing but rather an outstanding originary manner of letting be unfulfilled, of letting be empty—thus an outstanding manner of opening.”³² If this is the case, it remains for us to seek the path and the words that will open our thought beyond the accounting of machination. This will be the task of our second and third meditation.