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THE QUESTION OF BEING TODAY

There is no doubt that the rearrangement of philosophy according to the question of Being is due to Martin Heidegger. We owe Heidegger credit for having named the era in which this question has been forgotten. The history of this forgetting, begun as early as Plato, *is* the history of philosophy itself.

What for Heidegger is the distinctive feature of metaphysics, that is, metaphysics conceived as the history of Being in its withdrawal? We know that the Platonic gesture placed *aletheia* under the yoke of *idea*: the cross section of the Idea or Form as a singular presence of the thinkable ascertains that beings predominate over the initial or inaugural movement of Being's unconcealedness. The upshot is that non-veiling or disclosure is assigned to securing presence. Most important is that this securing exposes the Being of beings to the resources of counting and of "counting-as-one." That by which 'what-is is what is' *is* also that according to which it is *one*. The norm of the thinkable is the unification of a singular being under the power of the One. This norm, this normative power of the One, is what crosses out the "coming-to-itself" or the "re-entry within itself" of Being as *physis*. The theme of *quidditas*, whatness, as a determination of the Being of beings according to the unity of its *quid*, is what seals Being's entry into a normative power that is strictly metaphysical.¹ It destines Being to the preeminence of beings.

Heidegger summarized this movement in the notes included at the end of volume II of his *Nietzsche*, which he titled "Projects for the History of Being as Metaphysics":

The preeminence of *quidditas* continually brings about the preeminence of beings themselves in what they are. The preeminence of beings secures Being as *koinon* (common)

from the perspective of the *en* (One). The distinctive character of metaphysics has been decided. The One as unifying unity becomes normative for the subsequent determination of Being.²

Therefore, it is because the One normatively decides on Being that the latter is reduced to what is common, reduced to empty generality. This is why it must also endure the metaphysical preeminence of beings.

Metaphysics can be defined as follows: the *enframing* of Being by the One. Its most appropriate synthetic maxim comes from Leibniz. The maxim ascertained the reciprocity of Being and the One as a norm: "What is not truly *one* being is not truly a *being* either."³

The question from which I began speculating can now be formulated as follows: Can the One be unsealed from Being? Can the metaphysical enframing of Being by the One be severed without in turn becoming involved in the Heideggerian idea of destiny, or without entrusting thought to the unfounded promise of a redemptory returning? For, with Heidegger himself, the thinking of metaphysics as a history of Being is bound to an announcement whose ultimate expression is that "only a god can save us."

Can thought be saved without having to appeal to the prophecy of a return of the gods? For that matter, has thought not always saved itself, by which I mean: saved itself from the normative power of the One?

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger declares that "on Earth an obscuring of the world comes forth."⁴ He draws up a list of the essential events of this obscuring: the flight of the gods, destruction of the Earth, gregarization of Man, and preponderance of the mediocre. All of these themes are coherent with determining metaphysics as the exasperated normative power of the One.

If, through an original scission in its disposition, thought as philosophy has forever marshaled the normative power of the One simultaneously to seeking recourse against this power, that is, a subtraction from this power, then the following ought to be said. Just as an obscuring of the world forever comes forth, so also at the same time does its enlightening. As such, the flight of the gods is also the beneficial leave given to them by humankind; the destruc-

tion of the Earth is also its adjustment so as to be appropriate to active thought; gregarization is also the egalitarian irruption of the masses onto history's stage; and preponderance of the mediocre is also the radiance and density of what Mallarmé used to call *action restreinte*, "special action."⁵

Our problem then becomes figuring out how thought can designate from within itself the perennial effort to subtract Being from the influence of the One? How can we come to terms with the fact that, along with Parmenides, Democritus also existed and that with him the dismissal of the One occurs through a dissemination and an appeal to the void? How is the Heideggerian idea of destiny played off against what are evidently exceptions to it? An example of such an exception would be the magnificent figure of Lucretius. With him, far from maintaining the appeal to the Open in distress, the power of the poem attempts instead to subtract thought from any returning of the gods and ascertain it in the steadfastness of the multiple. Lucretius is the one who directly confronts thought to subtraction from the One, which is none other than inconsistent infinity, that is, what nothing can collect:

Such is the nature of the place, of the gigantic space:
Were it to slide, forever drawn away by time,
Lightning would never see distance reduced
The whole enormous reservoir of things is open
In all directions⁶

What has motivated me is to invent a contemporary version of fidelity to what has never surrendered to the historical constraint of onto-theology or to the enframing power of the One.

My initial decision was to contend that what can be thought of Being per se is found in the radical manifold or a multiple that is not under the power of the One. In *L'Être et l'événement* I called the latter a "multiple without-One."⁷

Yet maintaining this principle involves highly complex requirements.

First and foremost, pure multiplicity or the manifold unfolding the unlimited reserve of Being as a subtraction from the power of the One, cannot be consistent on its own. In fact, we have to assume, as did Lucretius, that manifold-unfolding is not constrained

by the immanence of a limit. For it is only too obvious that such a constraint proves the power of the One as grounding the multiple itself.

The manifold as the exposure of Being to thought has to be posited then as not lying within the figure of consistent delimitation. Or rather ontology, if it exists, has to be the theory of inconsistent multiplicities as such. This means that what lends itself to the thought of ontology is a manifold without a predicate other than its own multiplicity. It has no concept other than itself, and nothing ensures its consistency.

More radically, a science of Being as really subtractive Being must prove from within itself the One's powerlessness. The without-One of the manifold cannot make do with a simple external refutation. Release from the One's grip is accomplished in the inconsistent composition of the manifold itself.

This point was grasped in its subsisting difficulty by Plato in the *Parmenides* when examining the consequences of the hypothesis that "One is not." This hypothesis is especially interesting when juxtaposed to Heidegger's determination of the distinctive character of metaphysics. What did Plato say? First of all, that if One is not, it follows that the immanent otherness of the multiple becomes an unending self-to-self differentiation. It is the astonishing formula: *ta alla etera estin*, which may be translated as: "the others are Others." The first other, marked by a lower case "o," contrasts with the Lacanian capital "O" distinguishing the second. The outcome of "the One is not" is "the other is Other" in terms of an absolutely pure manifold, a complete dissemination of itself. The motif of inconsistent multiplicity is found here.

Plato then goes on to show how this inconsistency dissolves the One down to the root of all of its supposed power—be it even the power to withdraw or inexist. All apparent exposure of the One immediately resolves it into an infinite manifold. Quoting from Plato: "To whoever thinks closely and sharply, every One appears as a limitless multiplicity, as soon as the One—since it *is* not—ends up lacking from it."⁸

What does Plato mean here if not that when subtracted from the metaphysical influence of the One, the multiple cannot be exposed to the thinkable as a multiple consisting of ones? It must be agreed that the multiple always and only consists of multiples. Every multiple is a manifold of multiples.

So long as a multiple (a being) *is not* a manifold of multiples, subtraction has to be maintained until the very end. One should not have to concede that such a multiple is the One, nor even that it consists of ones. That is the point at which it will inevitably be a multiple of nothing.

The subtractive also amounts to the following: instead of conceding that for want of the multiple there is the One, assert that for lack of the multiple there is nothing. This is how we end up running into Lucretius again. Lucretius did exclude the case of some such third property being ascribed to the One, somewhere between multiple compositions of atoms and the void:

In addition to the void and bodies, there remains
Among things no other nature
That falls forever under our senses or that a mind
Ends up discovering through reason.⁹

Moreover, this exclusion is what organizes Lucretius' critique of various unitary principled cosmologies, like that of Heraclites' Fire. Lucretius clearly sees that subtraction from the fear of the gods requires that, short of the multiple, there be nothing. Beyond the multiple there is still only the multiple.

Finally, a third consequence of a subtractive commitment is to exclude the following: that there could be a *definition* of the multiple. On this matter, Heideggerian discipline can help us: the strictly Socratic mode of carving out the Idea is performed by grasping a definition. The avenue of definition is opposed to the imperative of the poem precisely in that it lays out within language itself the normative power of the One. The Idea is to be thought in its being insofar as it is carved out, or frozen, by the dialectical resource of definition. Definition is the linguistic mode of ascertaining the pre-eminence of beings.

Were we to claim access to the multiple-exposure of Being by means of a definition, or by the dialectical route of successive delimitations, we would then be placed originally under the metaphysical power of the One.

Therefore, the definitional path is blocked for the thought of the multiple-without-One or the inconsistent manifold.

Ontology lies in the difficult passage whereby it has to expose the thinkable dimension of the pure multiple without ever being

able to state the specific conditions a multiple affords. It is not even possible to make this negative duty explicit. For example, it simply cannot be said that thought is devoted to the multiple and to nothing but the intrinsic multiplicity of the multiple. Otherwise this thought would then already enter into what Heidegger calls the “process of limiting Being” by appealing to a delimiting norm. And the One would return.

It is not possible to define the multiple, or to make this absence of definition explicit. Actually, the thought of the pure multiple must be determined in such a way as to avoid mentioning the name “multiplicity” (or “manifold”). The name “multiplicity” should be used neither to say what it designates according to the One, nor to say, still according to the One, what it is powerless to designate.

Yet what is a thought that never defines what it thinks? That never exposes it as an object? A thought prohibiting itself from resorting to any name whatsoever of that thinkable, and in the very writing by which it is linked to the latter? Clearly, it is an *axiomatic* thought. An axiomatic thought seizes upon the disposition of undefined terms. It never encounters a definition of these terms or a practicable explication of what is not them. The primordial statements of such a thought expose the thinkable without making them thematic. Doubtless, the primitive term or terms are themselves inscribed, but they are not inscribed as a kind of naming in which a referent would have to be represented. Rather, this inscription points to the sense of a series of dispositions wherein the term lies only in the regulated game of its founding connections.

The most intimate requirement of a subtractive ontology is that its explicit presentation be in the form of an axiom, which prescribes without naming—but not as a dialectical definition.

It is from the standpoint of this requirement that the famous passage from the *Republic*, in which Plato opposes dialectics to mathematics, ought to be reinterpreted.

Let us read the summary Glaucon, one of Socrates’ interlocutors, gives of his master’s thought on this topic:

Regarding being and the intelligible, the act of theorizing such as it is based on the science (*episteme*) of dialectics is clearer than the act based on what are called the sciences (*techne*). To be sure, those who theorize according to these

sciences, the first principles of which are hypotheses, are compelled to proceed discursively and not empirically. But as their intuiting rests upon hypotheses and fails to open access to first principles, they do not appear to you to possess the intellection of what they theorize. However, in light of first principles, this intellection stems from the intelligibility of beings. It seems to me that you call discursive (*dianoia*) procedures those used by geometers and their ilk; but not intellection in terms of the discursivity ascertained between (*metaxu*) opinion (*doxa*) and intellect (*nous*).¹⁰

It is perfectly clear that, for Plato, the trouble with mathematics is precisely the axiom. Why? Because the axiom remains outside of the thinkable. Geometers are compelled to proceed discursively because they do not enter into the normative power of the One, whose name is *first principle*. And this constraint is testimony to their exteriority in relation to the principle-based norm of the thinkable. In Plato's view, the axiom is laden with an obscure type of violence, owing to the fact that it does not appropriate the dialectical and definitional norm of the One. In the axiom and mathematics there is certainly thought, but not yet free thought. It is marshaled by the paradigm, the norm and the One.

On this issue, my conclusion is opposed to Plato's. What determines the axiom's value—the axiomatic disposition—is precisely its subtraction from the normative power of the One. Unlike Plato, I do not see the constraint it includes as being the sign of anything lacking in the unifying and grounding clarification he seeks. In it I see the necessity of the subtractive gesture itself. It is the movement by which thought is torn from everything that still keeps it connected to the common or to the general. Thought's own metaphysical temptation rests upon the latter at the cost of the inexplicit or of the impotency of naming. It is in this tearing away that I read the freedom of thought with respect to that to which it is destined to be constrained. It is something we could easily call its "metaphysical penchant."

Let us say that, in its dedication to the axiomatic disposition, ontology, or the thinking of the inconsistent pure multiple, cannot be guaranteed by any principle. Conversely, when treading back to the first principle, the multiple ceases to be exposed according to the immanence of its multiplicity alone.

There are five conditions for any ontology of the multiple to be conceived in its defection from the One's power. These conditions also stand for any ontology that is faithful to the struggle philosophy has waged against its own metaphysical tendency.

1. Ontology is the thought of the inconsistent manifold, that is, of what is reduced without an immanent unification to the sole predicate of its multiplicity.
2. The multiple is radically without-One in that it itself consists only of multiples. What there is, or the exposure to the thinkable of what there is under the sole requirement of the 'there is,' are multiples of multiples.
3. Granted that no immanent limit related to the One determines multiplicity as such, there is no first principle of finitude. The multiple can thus be considered infinite. Or even, infinity is another name of multiplicity as such. As no first principle binds infinity to the One, it ought to be tenable for there to be an infinite amount of infinites, an infinite dissemination of infinite multiplicities.
4. Given that a multiple can be considered as *not* being a multiple of multiples, we should withhold on reintroducing the One here. Instead, let us consider a multiple to be a multiple of nothing. And 'nothing' will be endowed with a consistency principle, though not anymore than multiples themselves will.
5. Actual ontological presentation is necessarily axiomatic.

At this point, enlightened by the Cantorian grounding of mathematics, we can assert ontology to be nothing other than mathematics itself. This has been the case ever since its Greek origin. However, mathematics has managed only with considerable difficulty and at the cost of toil and tiresome recasting to ensure the free play of its own conditions. Ever since its Greek inception, ontology has struggled within itself against the metaphysical temptation.

It can be said that with Cantor we move from "special ontology," which still links the multiple to the metaphysical theme of representing objects, numbers and figures, to "general ontology,"

which sets the free, thoughtful apprehending of multiplicity as such as the basis and destination of mathematics. It forever ceases to constrain the thinkable to the special dimension of “object.”

Notice how post-Cantorian mathematics becomes somewhat equal to its conditions.

1. In Cantor’s sense, the *set* has no other essence than to be a manifold. It has no external determination since nothing limits the way it seizes another thing. Nor does it have an internal determination, for that of which it is the multiple recollection is itself irrelevant.
2. In Zermelo and Fraenkel’s stabilized elaboration, there is no other nondefined primitive term or value possible for the variables apart from sets. Hence, every element of a set is itself a set. This accomplishes the idea that every multiple is a multiple of multiples, with no reference to units of any kind.
3. Georg Cantor fully recognized not only the existence of infinite sets, but also the existence of infinitely many such sets. This infinity is itself absolutely open-ended. It is sealed only by the impossible and therefore real point that makes it inconsistent, namely, knowing the set of all sets cannot exist. In fact, this accomplishes Lucretius’ a-cosmic philosophy.
4. There does exist a set of nothing, or a set that has no multiple as an element. This is the empty set. It is a pure mark from which all multiples of multiples are woven. The equivalence of Being and the Letter is thus achieved so long as there is subtraction from the normative power of the One. Let us muse over Lucretius’ other powerful anticipation in the First Canto, verse 910ff:

A slight transposition suffices for atoms to create
Bodies both igneous and ligneous. It is like with words
When separating the letters somewhat,
We expressly distinguish igneous from ligneous.¹¹

Were we now to refer to Lacan, it would be in this instance of the letter—an instance borne out by the mark of the void—that the thought unfolds, that is, the thought ‘without-One,’

or without metaphysics, of what lends itself to mathematical exposure as an immemorial figure of Being.

5. As the core of its presentation, Set Theory is nothing else than the theory's body of axioms. The 'set' is not a part of it, let alone is the definition of that word. The upshot of this is that the essence of the thought of the pure multiple does not require a dialectical principle. Furthermore, the freedom of thinking in harmony with Being is in the axiomatic decision—and *not* in the intuition of a norm.

The Cantorian presentation of sets was subsequently shown to be not so much a particular theory, than the very space of the mathematically thinkable. It is the famous "paradise" about which David Hilbert once spoke. Accordingly, a general retroactive move authorizes us to state the following. Ever since its Greek origin, Being per se has been insistently inscribed in the dispositions of pure mathematics. So it is from the very outset of philosophy that thought is subtracted from the normative power of the One. The striking incision of mathematics into philosophy from Plato to Husserl and Wittgenstein must be deciphered as a singular condition, that is, the condition exposing philosophy to the test of a way other than that of the subjugation of Being by the power of the One. From the outset and under its mathematical condition, philosophy is thus the scene of a disparate or split endeavor. It is true that philosophy exposes the category of truth to the unifying and metaphysical power of the One. And it is no less true that philosophy exposes this power to the subtractive defection of mathematics. This is why every singular philosophy is less of an actualization of its metaphysical destiny than it is an endeavor, under the mathematical condition, to be subtracted from it. The philosophical category of truth simultaneously results from a kind of normativity inherited from the Platonic gesture and from grasping the mathematical condition that ends up unraveling this norm. Besides, this is true with Plato himself. The progressive pluralization or blending of the supreme Forms in the *Sophist* or *Philebus*, as much as the act of bringing the theme of the One to an impasse in the *Parmenides*, both bear out the option between definition and axiom, principle and decision, and unification and dissemination as undecided and mobile.

In more general terms, if ontology, that is, what can be said of Being *qua* Being, is coextensive to mathematics, what then are philosophy's tasks?

Undoubtedly, the first task runs counter to its own latent vow, which is to humble itself before mathematics by acknowledging the latter as the thought of pure Being, of Being *qua* Being in its very act.

I stress that this is its *latent* vow because in its real becoming, philosophy has only had too great a tendency to claim mathematics does not accede to the status of genuine thought despite having had to examine it as admittedly necessary for its own existence. On this matter philosophy yielded to the sophistic injunction. This is partly responsible for the reduction of mathematics to the simple rank of computation or technology. It is a ruinous image for mathematics—one to which current opinion readily reduces it with the aristocratic complicity of mathematicians themselves. Mathematicians have willingly settled on believing that common folk understand nothing of their science.

It is philosophy's task to argue that mathematics *is a thought*. This is something philosophy has often tried to do, only to cancel out its task in the very same stroke.