

# From the First Inception to the Other

## Metaphysics and the Unity of Being

In the present study, Heidegger's key writings are approached first and foremost in the light of his historical narrative of Western metaphysics. Accordingly, this chapter introduces the basic outline of this narrative, with a focus on the notions of the "first inception" (situated by Heidegger in the thinking of the Presocratics Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus), the "first end of the first inception" and the beginning of metaphysics proper (in Plato and Aristotle), the end of metaphysics (Hegel, Nietzsche), and the ensuing possibility of another, postmetaphysical inception of Western thought. All of these historical key points will be elaborated with an emphasis on the role of the unity of being therein. This chapter should therefore not be read as an independent or systematic study of the respective thinkers, but rather as a general summary of their positions in the Heideggerian narrative. However, it will not introduce Heidegger's numerous and nuanced interpretations in detail but rather seeks to summarize some of the essential claims of Heidegger's scattered and often incomplete readings and remarks in a way that sometimes goes beyond the explicit scope of these readings in order to "flesh out" their most important aspects.

### The First Inception:

#### The Unity of Being in Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus

##### Anaximander

At the outset of his 1934–35 lecture course on Hölderlin's hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine," Heidegger defines the pregnant sense in which

he understands an *inception* (*Anfang*), as opposed to a simple beginning (*Beginn*).

A beginning [*Beginn*] is that with which something starts; an inception [*Anfang*] is that from which something arises. [. . .] The beginning is at once left behind; it disappears in the course of events. As for the inception, the origin, it comes to the fore first and foremost in the course of events and is fully there only at its end. (GA 39, 3)

In the 1942–43 course *Parmenides*, this distinction is applied to early Western philosophy.

With regard to the early thinking in the Occident, among the Greeks, we distinguish between *beginning* [*Beginn*] and *inception* [*Anfang*]. “Beginning” designates the outbreak of this thinking at a determinate “time.” [. . .] The “beginning” refers to the advent and emergence of thinking. By “inception” we mean something else. The “inception” is what, in this early thinking, is to be thought and what is thought. (GA 54, 9–10/P, 7; tr. mod.)

The beginning is an extrinsic determination, the chronological fact of the coming to be of thinking at a certain point of time. The inception, by contrast, refers to the content, topic, or issue that dominates and defines this beginning. *Anfang* is Heidegger’s counterpart for the Aristotelian *archē*, the start that governs what it starts, the origin that provides a guideline for what it originates.<sup>1</sup> It designates an outset or point of departure that is not left behind in the process or development unfolding from it. The inception is what literally “takes up” (*fängt an*, as in the Latin *incipere*, from *capere* “to seize”) and sets out what is to follow. For Heidegger, what properly sets about in the inception of Western philosophy is not the philosophical activity of the early philosophers or their intellectual accomplishments; it is not the inceptual thinkers who simply take up the topics defining the inception. It is rather the thinkers themselves who are “taken up” by the topic with which they are faced and which motivates their work. The inception is the philosophical “mission” or “commission” of the first philosophers, the task assigned to them in the beginning of philosophy.

The inception is not something dependent on the favor of these [inceptual] thinkers, something with which they proceed in such

and such a way, but, rather, the reverse: the inception is that which takes something up [*etwas anfängt*] with these thinkers, occupying them in such a way that an extreme resignation before being is required of them. The thinkers are the *ones taken up* by the *inception* [*die vom An-fang An-gefangenen*], seized by it and gathered upon it. (GA 54, 11/P, 7–8; tr. mod.)

It is noteworthy that Heidegger regards the inception of the philosophical tradition as not only conceptually but also chronologically distinct from its beginning. There are early Western thinkers who are part of the tradition but do not face its inception, its initial experience: “[. . .] [N]ot every thinker at the beginning of Western thinking is, by that very fact, also an inceptual [*anfänglicher*] thinker” (GA 54, 2/P, 2; tr. mod.). A prominent example would be Thales of Miletus, who flourished in the early sixth century BCE and has since Plato and Aristotle been designated as the first philosopher.<sup>2</sup> Thales, to be sure, prefigured the philosophical enterprise by attempting to refer all beings back to a unifying and universal principle (for him, water) that is somehow accessible to a rational study of beings as such. For Heidegger, however, this does not yet qualify Thales as an “inceptual” thinker, as a thinker of the inception in the pregnant sense. For him, the earliest inceptual thinker is Anaximander, a younger contemporary and compatriot and, reportedly, pupil of Thales.<sup>3</sup>

Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus are the only inceptual thinkers. They are this, however, not because they initiate and begin Western thinking. There “are” thinkers already before them. They are inceptual thinkers because they think the inception. (GA 54, 10/P, 7; tr. mod.)

What is it, then, that so decisively distinguishes these two contemporaries and compatriots, Thales and Anaximander?<sup>4</sup> Thales still seeks the principle for all beings *among* beings and points to a *determinate* being, water. According to doxography, Anaximander, on the other hand, considered the principle to be what he referred to as the *indeterminate* or *indefinite* (*to apeiron*)—i.e., precisely that which is *not* a determinate being. Aristotle attributes to Anaximander the view that contraries are differentiated or discriminated from a prior unity in which they are initially contained, implying that this unity itself is indeterminate and above determinate oppositions.<sup>5</sup> Basic elements such as air or water are determined in terms of their mutual oppositions, and if one of them were to be absolute, it would annihilate the

other, contrary elements. In thus refusing to identify the absolute principle with any specific element, Anaximander would have been the first to realize that the principle and ground for *all* determinate beings cannot *itself* be a determinate being.<sup>6</sup>

This is the insight that Heidegger attempts to convey in his readings of the short fragment Anaximander B 1,<sup>7</sup> possibly the earliest surviving philosophical fragment considered to be (to some extent, at least) authentic.

(That from out of which [*ex hōn*] coming-to-be [*genesis*] is granted to beings [*tois ousi*] is also that into which passing-away [*phorān*] takes place,) according to necessity [*kata to chreōn*]: for they reckon with one another [*didonai . . . dikēn*] and give retribution [*tisin*] to one another for their transgression [*adikias*] (in accordance with the order of time).<sup>8</sup>

In this fragment, Anaximander seems—at least from the Heideggerian perspective—to be giving an account of the way in which beings emerge into determinate presence by reciprocally organizing and articulating one another into ordered relationships (“reckoning with one another and giving retribution to one another”), thereby overcoming the fundamental lack of definite proportion (*adikia* “unrighteousness, transgression”) from which they emerge. What ultimately designates the *being* of the beings named in this fragment, Heidegger suggests, is the expression *to chreōn* “necessity,” “requirement,” or (following the basic sense of the medial verb *chraomai* “to need,” “to have use for,” “to use,” “to enjoy”) “enjoyment,” “fruition,” or “usage” (*Brauch*). Heidegger interprets *to chreōn* as the very process of instantiation that determines the emergence and articulation of determinate beings from their indeterminate background and thereby “requires” and “makes use” of beings by “coming to fruition” in them. *To chreōn* is the oldest name for the being of beings, for “the way in which being itself abides [*west*] as the correlation [*Beziehung*] with what is present.” It is that which “de-termines [*be-endet*] what is present” and “hands out limits” to present beings, remaining itself *to apeiron*, that which is without limits (HW, 363, 368/OBT, 274, 277).

According to this account, the inception of Western thinking that distinguishes Anaximander from his predecessors and connects him to Parmenides and Heraclitus is the insight into the being of beings as the *indeterminate and undifferentiated* presence as such that is articulated into the multiplicity of present beings as its determinate, differentiated, and relative instances. In other words, Anaximander would be the first thinker to oper-

ate within the scope of the *ontological difference* between beings and being (GA 35, 31–32; GA 78, 248–72).<sup>9</sup> The first inception of Western thinking in ancient Greece is thus the experience of being as an absolute *unity*, over against the multiplicity of determinate instantiations unified by it. For Heidegger, this basic unifying function is characteristic of all the fundamental names for being as presence in Greek thought.

*Energeia*, which Aristotle thinks as the basic feature of presencing [*Anwesens*], of the *eon*; *idea*, which Plato thinks as the basic feature of presencing; *Logos*, which Heraclitus thinks as the basic feature of presencing; *Moirai*, which Parmenides thinks as the basic feature of presencing; *Chreōn*, which Anaximander thinks as that which abides [*das Wesende*] in presencing; all of these designate the selfsame [*das Selbe*]. In the concealed richness of the selfsame, each thinker thinks, in his own way, the unity of the unifying One, the *Hen*. (HW, 371/OBT, 280; tr. mod.)

In the first inception, being is designated as the indeterminate unity of presence, in contrast to all determinate instances of presence. In this initial contrasting, however, the contrast as such, i.e., the *difference* between indeterminacy and determinacy, between absolute unity and relative multiplicity, remains unarticulated. In contrast to beings, being is understood in negative and privative terms (*a-peiron*, *a-dikia*), but the precise positive character of this negation and privation, Heidegger maintains, remains unthought from the beginning (GA 78, 244–47). Due to this omission, philosophy is led to think being *in terms of* beings, as their being-ness, the *universal* presence, thereness, or is-ness *in* everything that is there as present, and as that which unifies beings as their common element. This is what Heidegger means by the “forgottenness of being”: the oblivion of that which ultimately distinguishes being from beings.

[. . .] [W]hat matters for being is to be the being *of* beings. The linguistic form of this enigmatically ambiguous genitive designates a genesis, a provenance [*Herkunft*] of what is present [*Anwesenden*] from out of presencing [*Anwesen*]. Yet, together with the essence of each of these, the essence of this provenance remains concealed. Not only that, but even the very relation between presencing and what is present remains unthought. From earliest times it appears as though presencing and what is present were both something for themselves. Unawares, presencing itself becomes

something present. When presencing is represented in terms of what is present, it becomes that which is present over and above all present things and, thereby, that which is supremely present. As soon as presencing is named, something present is already represented. Presencing as such is basically not distinguished from what is present. [. . .] The essence of presencing, together with the distinction [*Unterschied*] between presencing and what is present, remains forgotten. *Forgottenness of being* [*Seinsvergessenheit*] is the forgottenness of the distinction between being and beings. [. . .] The forgottenness of the distinction, with which the destiny of being begins, [. . .] is the event [*Ereignis*] of metaphysics. (HW, 364, 365/OBT, 274–75; tr. mod.)<sup>10</sup>

Heidegger's suggestion that the "forgottenness" of the distinction has prevailed in philosophy from the very beginning indicates that his interpretation of the Anaximander fragment is already a *postmetaphysical overinterpretation*. It is a retrieval or retake (*Wiederholung*) of a single term, *to chreōn*, which he treats simply as a "trace" (*Spur*) of the inceptual experience—one that could, in fact, be construed as a positive term for the differentiation of beings from being (HW, 365/OBT, 275). He is not claiming that this is what Anaximander in fact "meant"; in addition to the fact that even if we trust the scanty testimonies of Aristotle and Theophrastus, no satisfactory reconstruction of Anaximander's thinking is possible on the basis of one or two uncertain fragments, hermeneutics and structuralism have long taught us that the "author's intention" is always, as a matter of principle, beyond recovery.<sup>11</sup>

### Parmenides

In order to fully understand Heidegger's notion of the first inception, we must turn to its two other thinkers, Parmenides of Elea and Heraclitus of Ephesus, both of whom were active roughly a century later, around 500 BCE. Ever since Plato and Aristotle, it has become a commonplace to contrast these two thinkers as philosophical opposites: Parmenides is seen as the thinker of unity and immobility, Heraclitus as the thinker of contradiction, constant flux, and becoming.<sup>12</sup> For Heidegger, however, this contrast is superficial: he regards both the Eleatic and the Ephesian as two inceptual thinkers of the unity of being. What Heidegger considers decisive about the first inception—the contrasting of being as the unity of *presence* itself with beings as determinate and relative instantiations of presence—is unfolded by both Parmenides and Heraclitus.

It is said that Parmenides teaches being [*Sein*] over and against becoming [*Werden*]. But he only speaks of beyng [*Seyn*] as the one and the selfsame [*dem Einen und Selbigen*] because he is aware that beyng is constantly menaced by seeming [*Schein*], and that this belongs to beyng as its shadow. It is said that Heraclitus teaches becoming over and against being. But he only speaks of becoming in order to think it back into the oneness [*das Eine*] of beyng [*Seyns*], which is in the essence of *logos*. [. . .] If ever two thinkers taught the same thing, *Parmenides* and *Heraclitus* [. . .] preserved the first inception [*Anfang*] of Western thinking and, what is more, fully unfolded it. (EDP, 36–37/EGP, 336; tr. mod.)

According to the standard view of ancient doxography, the basic framework of Parmenides' doctrine was quite simple: being (*to on/eon*) is one and absolutely devoid of motion. Plato and Aristotle agree that the thesis of unity was Parmenides' main contribution and his challenging legacy to philosophy; Aristotle, moreover, considered it to be derived from another, more fundamental thesis, according to which "being (*to on*) is, nonbeing (*to mē on*) is not."<sup>13</sup> We will see that both theses are explicitly connected to the notion of (meaningful) *presence* to thinking (awareness), i.e., of intelligibility.

We have from Parmenides a number of fragments, all of which apparently stem from a single work, written in hexameter and known at least since the second century CE by the name *Peri physeōs*, "On Nature," even though Aristotle emphasizes that the discourses of Parmenides and the Eleatics are precisely *not* about *physis* in the Aristotelian sense of the realm of materiality and change.<sup>14</sup> In the fragment B 1, considered to be the original opening or Proem of the poem, the narrator-thinker is carried off in a chariot from the abodes of the mortals to a divine domain, situated beyond the gate of the paths of Night and Day, i.e., beyond the most fundamental binary oppositions of the natural realm. This framing clearly indicates the central topic of the entire poem: transcending oppositions and differences toward an absolute unity. The privileged role of the philosopher in this quest for unity is shown by the fact that instead of being angered by this transgression, the anonymous goddess of the Poem gleefully welcomes the thinker and goes on to state his task in the following manner:

It is required that you learn all things:  
 the unwavering heart of well-convincing [*eupeitheos*] evidence  
 [*alētheiēs*]  
 as well as the acceptances [*doxas*] of mortals, devoid of evident  
 conviction [*pistis alēthēs*].

Yet, all the same, you will come to understand how that which is accepted [sc. in the acceptances of mortals; *ta dokounta*] had to be there acceptably [*chrēn dokimōs einai*], throughout and in every respect, precisely as what there is [*panta peronta*].<sup>15</sup>

From the goddess, the thinker must learn two things. First, he is to discover the fundamental level of truth or “evidence” (*alētheia*) in all things, the level that exerts the maximal persuasive or convincing power upon thinking—more specifically, its “unwavering heart,” i.e., its innermost reliability, constancy, and certainty. Second, he is to face the partial views, perspectives, or “acceptances” (*doxai*) of mortals, i.e., the ways in which ordinary human beings in their everyday situations accept what *is there* for them as *being*, however transient, unreliable, and lacking in convincing evidence these acceptances may be. Hence the twofold structure of Parmenides’ Poem, which we know from the ancient commentators to have consisted of two parts, one on Truth, *Alētheia* (fragments B 2–8), and one on Acceptances, *Doxai* (B 9–19).<sup>16</sup> The outcome of this twofold discovery is an insight into the *genesis* of the acceptances, into the way in which they gain their relative acceptability *as* beings.<sup>17</sup> We see that what is at stake in Parmenides’ Poem is precisely a *genealogical* derivation of beings from being or of present things from presence as such, a genealogy resembling the one discovered by Heidegger in the Anaximander fragment.

The “mortal,” ordinary way of thinking and experiencing is particularly characterized by the intertwining of being and nonbeing, in several senses. In everyday situations, certain things are always there—contingently, remaining equally capable of not being there—and others are not. Moreover, present as well as absent things are identical with themselves but different from all other things. Mortal experience is characterized by the “undecided” (*akritos*) attitude of the mortals, by an internal tension between being and nonbeing; in this sense, the mortal path is “backward-turning” (*palintropos*).<sup>18</sup> The crucial step out of this tensional twofold perspective is the insight, articulated in fragment B 4, that while for the embodied awareness of the senses, things can be either present or absent, *thinking* (*noos*), pure intentional awareness of meaningful reality, encounters *only* presence in the sense of *intelligibility*. Whatever is intended in thought, whether spatiotemporally present or absent, is *there* for thinking as intendable and intelligible. While determinate things come to be and cease to be, are there or are not there, *to eon*, being as such—the simple “Is there” in everything that is there<sup>19</sup>—is in each instant present.



Behold, all the same, what is there as absent [*apeonta*] as steadfastly present [*pareonta*] to thinking [*noō*];  
for it [sc. thinking] will not cut off the “Is there” [*to eon*] from holding to the “Is there” [. . .].<sup>20</sup>

This is the most explicit identification of being with presence in Presocratic thought, and an implicit cornerstone of Heidegger’s notion of the first inception. The turn from the “errant” (*plagktos*) thinking<sup>21</sup> of the mortals to the purified, universal thinking of the philosopher results in a radical disjunction between being and nonbeing: when being is equated with intelligible presence, nonbeing is accordingly equated with absolute nonintelligibility and nonpresence and thus banished from any contact with thinking. “[. . .] [F]or you cannot come to know that which, in any case, lacks ‘Is there’ [*to ge mē eon*], for it is not accessible [*ephikton*], // nor can you explicate it.”<sup>22</sup> With this dissolution of the mortal way of “There is and there is not,” the only two options left for thinking are the way of “There is” and the way of “There is not.” While the former is the way of conviction (*Peithō*) and evidence (*Alētheia*) upon which thinking is inevitably persuaded to remain, the latter is entirely devoid of convincing power (*panapeithea*); thinking can never embark upon it.<sup>23</sup> “For at no time will this be forced: that things lacking ‘Is there’ are there [*einai mē eonta*], // nay, do you keep your thought [*noēma*] off this way of inquiry.”<sup>24</sup>

Thinking (*noein*) and being (*einai*) coincide—as the famous one-line fragment B 3 puts it, they are “the same” (*to gar auto*). However, as Heidegger (VA, 226–29/EGT, 82–84) reminds us, this identity should not be understood in the sense of modern idealism, of Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*. Rather than the dependence of being on thinking, it emphasizes quite the opposite, the dependence of thinking on being. Parmenides’ thesis is not: being is nothing but givenness to thinking, but rather: thinking is nothing but receptivity to being and cannot be conceived apart from this relation.

For thinking [*noein*], as well as that in view of which a thought is there [*bouneken esti noēma*], are the same.  
For not apart from the “Is there” [*tou eontos*], in terms of which thinking is there as expressed,  
will you discover thinking.<sup>25</sup>

Briefly put: whereas Berkeley refers being back to the self-identity of thinking, Parmenides refers thinking back to the self-identity of being. As we will see in Chapter 6, Heidegger, in his own productive retake of Parmenides

B 3, refers both awareness and being back to their reciprocal belonging together, which is no longer structurally characterized by self-identity but rather by *difference*.<sup>26</sup>

The fundamental decision (*krisis*) that the philosophical, thinking inquiry is faced with—either *there is* or *there is not*—has thus always already been decided. The way of “There is not” must be left to itself as unthinkable (*anoēton*) and nameless (*anōnymon*), as that of which one cannot speak and of which one should therefore remain silent.<sup>27</sup> This decision that has always already been made is stated by the goddess:

It is necessary to articulate this and to think this [*to legein, to noein t'*]: that the “Is there” is there [*eon emmenai*]—for there is being-there [*esti gar einai*],  
and Nothing [*mēden*] there is not [. . .].<sup>28</sup>

Only one way thus remains: the way of “There is.” The account of this way has apparently been entirely preserved in the extensive fragment B 8, which contains what Parmenides refers to as the “indications” (*sēmata*) of being.<sup>29</sup> In accordance with its basic understanding of being as indeterminate, inarticulate, undifferentiated, and homogeneous intelligibility that precedes all determinate concepts and articulations, as the simple “There is” that precedes the multiplicity of things that are there, the Poem does not give a systematic conceptual *account* of being as such. The indications rather function as “signposts” along the properly philosophical approach to being, signaling, in a primarily negative way, the aspects that distinguish being as such from the differentiated beings encountered in the everyday mortal acceptances. As opposed to specific beings, being-there as such is without coming-to-be (*agenēton*) and without passing-away (*anōlethron*), is entire (*houlon*), unique (*mounogenes*), untrembling (*atremes*), and without end or outcome (*ateleston*).<sup>30</sup> In temporal terms, being as such is pure temporal presence, pure “There is now” (*nyn estin*) without a “There was” or a “There will be”—tenses only refer to the being-there of determinate things. This temporal one-dimensionality is the key to the unity of being as presence: since it is not distributed into a multiplicity of different moments but is the very “there now” of every now, it is all at once (*homou pan*), one (*hen*), and coherent (*syneches*).<sup>31</sup> The unity of being is its *temporal* unity; it is unified by its total temporal *presence*, or even better, *as* this presence.

All of these “indications” of being are then derived from the already established “decision” for “There is” and against “There is not.” Since all relative being-there and not-being-there have been reduced to the funda-

mental “thereness” of intelligible presence and the only alternative to this absolute intelligibility is absolute *unintelligibility*—the absolutely excluded “There is not”—being can only be absolutely identical with itself and different from nothing. Since being has no Other, it is the absolute identity constituted purely on its own terms. Its “immobility” is simply its incapacity to transcend or exceed itself, to differ from itself.<sup>32</sup> This absolute self-identity entails, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the *finitude* of being, in the sense of being *finished*:<sup>33</sup> infinity, in the sense a lack of definite limit and boundary, was understood by the Greeks in a negative sense as *unfinishedness* and as lack of identity. Being is *absolutely finite* in the sense of being finished, “remaining the same and in the same state, resting upon itself.”<sup>34</sup> Another aspect of being is its absolute *homogeneity*: since being-there is always equivalent to itself, it has no internal differences, kinds, or degrees, but is simply “completely full of ‘Is there.’”<sup>35</sup> Like a sphere but unlike a line, a rectangle, or a rectangular solid, the “There is” has *limits* but no *ends* in the sense of particular points that would mark the difference between the figure and its outside. It is at no point cut off from itself or from another. The central facets of the Parmenidean unity of being are thus *self-identity* (perfect self-coincidence), *simplicity* (lack of internal distinctions), *uniqueness* (lack of any conceivable other), and *completeness* (being finished and perfect).

For Parmenides, the *doxai* are constituted by human language and discursivity, by the naming and conceptualizing activity of the mortals, which articulates intelligibility into specific and determinate units that further organize themselves into networks of differential mutual relations, first and foremost into pairs of binary opposites:<sup>36</sup> “light” is determined with regard to “darkness” and vice versa, “warm” with regard to “cold,” “male” with regard to “female,” and so on.

However, since everything is named “light” [*phaos*] and “night” [*nyx*] and these [names], according to their respective potentials [*dynameis*], [are attributed to] these things and to those, everything is at once full of light and invisible night, these being equal to each other, as nothing belongs to neither of the two.<sup>37</sup>

Apparently, the originally quite extensive *Doxai* part of Parmenides’ Poem, of which we possess only a few brief samples, consisted precisely in an account of nature in terms of its fundamental pairs of binary opposites. However, having previously traversed the way of *alētheia* and accomplished

its fundamental “decision,” the thinker is now in a position to see how these differences refer back to the absolute identity of being: “For it [sc. the “Is there”] they all will be names, // the ones the mortals lay down in the conviction that they are evident [ . . .].”<sup>38</sup> This is the true lesson of the goddess: all names of beings are ultimately names for being.

### Heraclitus

Heraclitus’s approach is, in a sense, the opposite. His starting point is precisely *logos*, the discursive articulation of meaningfulness—not merely the human capacity for language and naming, but the *logos* of being itself, of which “human beings remain ever ignorant, both before they hear it and once they have heard it,”<sup>39</sup> even though it is “common to all [*xynos*].”<sup>40</sup> But what this *logos* discloses, when properly heard, is precisely what is disclosed to Parmenides’ thinker by the discourse of the goddess: the fundamental unity of all beings. “When you have heard not me but discursive articulation [*logos*] itself, it is well-advised [*sophon*] to concur with it [*homologeîn*]: all is one [*hen panta einai*].”<sup>41</sup>

Here, too, we are shown the necessity of detaching ourselves from the ordinary and everyday way of looking at things in order to access the fundamental structure that underlies it. *Logos* in the fundamental sense is one—it is what makes reality one and unified and thus common for all. “One must not perform [*poieîn*] or articulate [*legeîn*] like those who are asleep,”<sup>42</sup> since “[f]or those who are awake, there is one common world,” whereas in their sleep everyone turns toward a private (*idion*) world of their own.<sup>43</sup> Wakeful thinking, thinking soundly (*sôphroneîn*), consists in an awareness of a common and shared being, in articulating and bringing forth being as it is discursively disclosed to all through *logos*.<sup>44</sup> *Logos* is the very structure, text, or texture of common reality, the light of day that illuminates reality and distinguishes it from dreams. From this ubiquity of *logos*, however, an immediate awareness of it does not follow. “They part company with that which they most constantly consort with—discursive articulation [*logos*]—and the things they encounter daily appear strange to them.”<sup>45</sup> “Unaware even after having heard, they are as if deaf and dumb; they are described by the saying, ‘Even in their presence, they are absent.’”<sup>46</sup> Though omnipresent, *logos* as the “harmonious” discursive structure of meaningfulness does not directly disclose itself, but remains unapparent: “An unapparent framework [*harmoniê aphanês*] is more powerful than an obvious one.”<sup>47</sup> It is in this sense, perhaps, that we should understand Heraclitus’s famous fragment B 123: “Nature [*physis*, i.e., the basic constitution of reality] favors self-concealment [*kryptesthai*].”<sup>48</sup>

What is evident and easily perceived cannot be separated from what is concealed and hard to grasp, i.e., *logos*, for it is in terms of *logos* that anything can become meaningful and evident. Heraclitus illustrates this essential insight by pointing out the internal contingency and relativity of all specific sensory contents; sense data are inherently meaningless and gain relative meaning only in a discursively articulated system of relations, references, and distinctions. “The eyes and ears of those equipped with barbarous [i.e., inarticulate] souls [*psychas*] are poor witnesses for human beings.”<sup>49</sup> “If all beings were to turn into smoke, noses would be the ones to distinguish [*diagnoien*] them.”<sup>50</sup> Comprehension and understanding, “wisdom” (*to sophon*), therefore requires conceptualization or judgment (*gnōmē*) in which things become discursively connected to one another as well as distinguished from one another. The ultimate wisdom pursued by philosophy is precisely an insight into the essence of judgment, i.e., into the unity and belonging together of everything in the conceptual framework of *logos*. “For wisdom [*to sophon*] is one: to have an understanding of judgment [*gnōmē*], of that which drove everything through everything.”<sup>51</sup>

Hearing *logos* and understanding *gnōmē*, articulating the fundamental structure of all articulation, leads to the insight: All is One, i.e., everything meaningful belongs together in and through the meaning-articulating operation of *logos*. Wisdom is this very insight—and, as Heidegger (GA 55, 346–77; cf. GA 15, 44/HS, 23) points out, also its content, i.e., the unity of *logos* itself. Heraclitus, known for his attacks on Homer and Hesiod, seems to think that this fundamental unity was precisely what the epic poets, the standard teachers of wisdom in his day, had missed. Probably referring to the very same words of Hesiod’s *Theogony* evoked at the beginning of Parmenides’ Poem,

[. . .] where Night and Day, drawing nearer to each other,  
addressed each other as they were crossing the great threshold  
of copper; one steps inside, the other goes outside,  
and at no time does the house enclose both of them within  
itself.<sup>52</sup>

Heraclitus exclaims:

Most people have Hesiod for their teacher. They rest assured that he knows more than anyone, he who did not recognize day and night; after all, they are one!<sup>53</sup>

In a fragment reminiscent of Parmenides, Heraclitus notes that binary oppositions characterize the human, not the divine, perspective on reality:

For the god, all things are beautiful [*kala*] and good [*agatha*] and just [*dikaia*]; human beings, however, have presumed some things to be unjust [*adika*] and some to be just.<sup>54</sup>

However, “If these [unjust? unjust as well as just?] things were not, they would not be aware of the name ‘Justice’ [*Dikē*].”<sup>55</sup> The name or concept “justice” is only meaningful in relation to its opposite, “injustice.” Likewise: “Illness makes health pleasant and good; likewise with hunger and satiety, toil and repose.”<sup>56</sup> *Logos*, the discursive articulation of reality that makes naming and conceptualization possible, is precisely unity-in-difference. Its core, however, the fundamental unity of all things, itself resists articulation and naming; as we saw, it is essential to this harmonious framework to remain in the background, unapparent and concealed. As the ground for all naming, it deserves the highest name—that of Zeus, the father of all gods—yet even this name does not really capture it. “The One, the singular wisdom [*hen to sophon mounon*], does not admit and yet does admit of being articulated with the name ‘Zeus.’”<sup>57</sup>

Thus far, Parmenides and Heraclitus are in perfect agreement: the fundamental unity does not allow of being opposed to anything other to itself and therefore resists naming and articulation. But when we look at Heraclitus’s fragment B 51, the difference in their emphases begins to emerge.

They do not understand in what manner what is differentiated [*diapheromenon*] concurs with itself: a framework [*harmoniē*] consisting in opposing tensions [*palintropos/palintonos*], such as that of a bow or of a lyre.<sup>58</sup>

The internal harmony or concord that makes the bow into a bow and the lyre into a lyre is born out of its internal constitutive tension: the bow and the lyre are turned or bent back upon themselves (probably *palintropos*, the very word used by Parmenides to describe the “path of mortals”). The basic structure of *logos* is not *simply* a harmony of opposites; it is a harmony that *emerges from* tension between opposites and is possible only because of this tension. Unity and concord are in fact *based on* opposition and difference:

What is opposed brings together [*antixoun sympheron*], and the most perfect framework [*harmonian*] emerges from what comes apart [*ek tōn diapherontōn*].<sup>59</sup>

Contacts [*synapsies*]: whole and not-whole, bringing-together [*symppheromenon*]/taking-apart [*diapheromenon*], consonant [*syna-*

*don*]/dissonant [*diadon*], and one-out-of-all [*ek pantōn hen*] and all-out-of-one [*ex henos panta*].<sup>60</sup>

The fundamental principle, for Heraclitus, is the interaction which both opposes and unites: the mutual reference or contact (*synapsis*) between opposites, frequently referred to as “war” (*polemos*) and “strife” (*eris*).

War is the father of all things and king of all things: some it appointed as gods, some as human beings, some it made into slaves and some into free men.<sup>61</sup>

“War” or “strife” is what opposes contraries to each other and binds them together, thus letting them *be* in the first place by relating them to a meaningful network of differences. As war and strife, *logos* is the *xynon*, the commonness and togetherness that unifies all things; the *dikē*, the fundamental balanced order and “justice” of all things; and also the *chreōn*, the necessity according to which all things come to be.

It is necessary [*chrē*] to know [*eidenai*] that war is common for all [*xynon*], that justice is strife, and that all things come to be according to strife and necessity [*chreōn*].<sup>62</sup>

The main concrete image that Heraclitus uses to embody these functions is *fire*. Many ancient authors attest that Heraclitus made fire a principle from and through which everything is constituted and consumed, although they express an uncertainty as to how literally this should be taken.<sup>63</sup> Far from being contrary to ordered structure, the universal world-order, the *kosmos*, is fire, an ever-living fire (*pyr aeizōon*) that precisely lives in accordance with measures and is kindled and extinguished according to them.<sup>64</sup> Fire is the element that distinguishes and takes apart; it can be used to separate and cleanse impurities from metals. But because of its all-consuming nature, fire also encompasses, comprehends, and in this sense *unifies* things; it has the capacity to consume or melt a thing and transform it into something else. “Fire, coming upon things, will distinguish [*krinei*] and comprehend [*katalēpsetai*] all things.”<sup>65</sup> Like money, fire is a universal medium of exchange, a symbol of the interchangeability of all things into other things. “All things are an interchange [*antamoibē*] for fire, and fire is an interchange for all things, just like gold is an interchange for wares and wares an interchange for gold.”<sup>66</sup> We should therefore take Heraclitean fire first and foremost as an image for the system of interrelations and referentiality that relates and refers everything to everything else; it illustrates the

structure of unity in and through difference that constitutes the essence of *logos*. This is the very double function of fire emphasized by Aristotle: fire purifies by combining that which is same in kind and by separating it from what is foreign in kind; it thereby primarily distinguishes unities (*sygkrinein*) and is thus first and foremost a unifying (*henoun*) power.<sup>67</sup> It seems to be this fundamental—although, perhaps, metaphorical—unifying role of fire that Aristotle has in mind in his attempt to articulate Heraclitus’s position regarding change and movement:

Others maintain that all things come to be and fluctuate [*rhein*], and that nothing solidly is; that only some kind of unity remains beneath [*hypomenein*], and that out of this unity all things are constituted [*pephyken*] by assuming different shapes. This is precisely the articulation that Heraclitus of Ephesus seems to be driving at, along with many others.<sup>68</sup>

### The First End of the First Inception: Plato and the One Over Many

We have already looked at Heidegger’s distinction between the chronological beginning (*Beginn*) of Western philosophy and its first inception (*Anfang*) and studied the historical grounds of his understanding of the latter. In *Mindfulness* (*Besinnung*, 1938–39), he makes a further distinction between the first inception and the subsequent beginning of full-fledged metaphysics, which he situates in Socratic-Platonic thought. Metaphysics proper begins with the Platonic distinction between *ontōs on* (that which is in the full sense of “to be”) and *mē on* (nonbeing), i.e., between the Idea as the “one over many,” as the common or general (*koinon*) beingness of beings, and particular (*hekaston*) beings as its instances. This beginning (*Beginn*) of metaphysics, however, is only the “first completion” (*Vollendung*) of the first inception (*Anfang*) of metaphysical thinking. Pre-Platonic philosophy is “pre-metaphysical” in the sense that it already prepares the explication of beingness (*Seiendheit*) in terms of the Platonic Idea; however, it does not yet truly make a distinction between being and beings (GA 66, 383/M, 339).

[. . .] [I]n a certain way, being is here not distinguished (not *yet*) from beings; being as presencing [*Anwesenung*] is the most present (*ontōs*) and thus the most beingful and accordingly being is itself of the kind of beings—or, respectively, beings are of the “kind”



of being. “Kind” means here “genus” [*Geschlecht*], provenance [*Herkunft*], whereby the essence of what beforehand and primarily is present is already implicit in the progeny. The inception and the beginning of metaphysics do not coincide [. . .]. (GA 66, 383/M, 340; tr. mod.)

The first inception of philosophy essentially consists in an experience of being as an indeterminate principle of all determinate beings. The initial inability to address their difference in positive terms already leads the Presocratics to think being in terms of beings. These inceptual thinkers, Heidegger maintains, understand being “genealogically” as the *origin* of beings, as the absolute level that precedes the articulation of determinate and relative beings—as the feature in all beings that, apart from their particular determination, makes them *be*. The decisive step towards full-fledged systematic metaphysics is Plato’s doctrine of Ideas in which, Heidegger maintains, a systematic *hierarchy* of being was properly established for the first time. The supreme or “most being,” that which *is* in the full sense of “to be” (*ontōs on*), was distinguished from that which is in an inferior and derivative sense, from the “unbeing” (*mē on*). Here, universal beingness (*ousia*) is explicitly *set apart* from particular beings as something that itself not only *is*, but is *more* than the particulars.

Aristotle tells us that in his youth, before becoming a follower of Socrates, Plato became acquainted with “Heraclitizing” views—meaning, apparently, a popularized form of the “obscure” teachings of Heraclitus. From the view, shared by the early philosophers of *physis*, that all of nature is in a state of movement and upheaval and no truth admits of being disclosed about what is constantly changing, “Heraclitizers” such as Cratylus (the protagonist of the Platonic dialogue bearing his name) supposedly drew the radical conclusion that a discursive articulation of reality is a hopeless enterprise.<sup>69</sup> Plato, of course, drew the opposite conclusion. Given that there is no true permanence in the realm of materiality and sensibility, we must look for the ideal stability of meaning presupposed by *logos* elsewhere. In order to understand how discursive meaningfulness is possible, we must seek out what is permanent, necessary, and, first and foremost, *unified* in the formation of meaning. Judging from the properly “Socratic” early dialogues and from the testimony of Aristotle, a major element of the historical Socrates’ activity was his search for the determinate and definite meanings (*horoi*) upon which meaningful discourse—especially ethico-practical discourse, around which public life in the Athenian *polis* revolved—is based.<sup>70</sup> It was the adoption of the Socratic *discursive* project that, in Aristotle’s view, distinguished Plato from the earlier tradition.<sup>71</sup>

According to Aristotle, the historical Socrates sought generalizations and general definitions without yet separating the ideal from the real.<sup>72</sup> The introduction of idealities was apparently Plato's original attempt to work out an implicit presupposition of Socrates' method, which essentially involved defining the "things in themselves" apart from their particular instances. In the Platonic view, the criteria that determine the being-character of things in themselves are the criteria of the definitions that apply to these idealities. There are ample characterizations of these criteria in the middle dialogues, the first and foremost among them being *unity* and *self-identity*. In the *Euthyphro*, supposedly one of the earliest "post-Socratic" dialogues, the word *idea* is used in the Platonic sense to designate the "single figure" (*mia idea*) or form (*eidos*), the self-identical piety (*to hosion*) in terms of which the many pious things and acts are pious.<sup>73</sup> In the contemporaneous or slightly later *Meno*, unity in multiplicity or throughout multiplicity is expounded as the hallmark of the ideal *whatness* of a certain kind of thing, of the form through which virtues (*aretai*) are virtues, i.e., of what virtue as such in fact universally is.<sup>74</sup>

Basically, the Idea or form is what unifies the kind of things referred to by one and the same name.<sup>75</sup> From this it follows, according to Platonic reasoning, that the Idea is what is essentially named by a generic name, its true referent and source—it is that *after* which particular things are named.<sup>76</sup> In Book X of the *Republic*, the Ideas are illustrated in terms of artifacts and production. Obviously, artifacts like a couch and a table are defined as such through their function; any kind of fixture that serves the purpose of being reclined upon can be addressed as a "couch." Another common feature of couches is that they are all produced by an artisan whose skill consists in an awareness of a model or pattern (*paradeigma*)—a perfectly functioning couch, or, in the end, pure couch-functionality—and of the means of implementing this functionality in the appropriate material through a process of production (*poiēsis*), taking the model into consideration (*apoblepein*).<sup>77</sup> However, the couchmaker's point of view on a couch is still dependent on another point of view, that of the user, of the one who is in need of a functioning couch—not of any particular couch but of anything fulfilling the criteria of couchness. It is the user who is most fully aware of the whatness, of the purposive functionality of a couch, of the model and standard with respect to which it is possible to judge to what extent a certain fixture is more of a couch than another. The couchmaker's skill is just a material application of information dependent on the fundamental comprehension (*epistēmē*) of *what* a couch is *good for*, possessed by its user (although, in many cases, the craftsman is obviously capable of assuming the user's point of view by herself).<sup>78</sup>

As a pattern or model for the coming to be of beings, the Idea is the cause (*aitia*) that makes a being what it is. It is the functionality of a couch that makes it into a couch. Plato refers to the relationship between instantiation and model, between beings and their ground, as “imitation,” “emulation,” or “reenactment” (*mimēsis*)—or, more consistently, as “participation” or “involvement” (*methexis*), the precise nature of which he openly acknowledged to be elusive.<sup>79</sup> The Idea is thus what *unites* the multitude of couches, making them identical in kind.<sup>80</sup> It *is* the unity of couchness, the most proper identity of each couch, the very beingness (*ousia*) of couches. As the unique generic identity of each kind of being, the Idea is uniform (*monooides*) and cannot be altered in any way—it cannot be anything other than itself.<sup>81</sup> It is immutable and unsituated.<sup>82</sup> The one Idea constitutes the permanent, identical, and universal aspect of the many beings. A couch that is produced by the couchmaker is what it is, a couch, only insofar as the model couch, pure couch-functionality, is realized in it. This adaptation of matter to a function can never be perfect and complete; matter is always also an impediment to pure functioning. Therefore, in the context of couches, what really is, the true is-ness—what *is* in the full sense of what it means to be a couch—is the immaterial model, the paradigm. The model couch is always *more of a couch* than any of its particular implementations. It is the truth about couches, the complete disclosure of what it is to be a couch.<sup>83</sup>

The central questions that usher in the last phase of Plato’s thinking concern the *ultimate* unity of being. They are already touched upon in the middle dialogues. The exact character of the *methexis*, the participation of the many beings in the one Idea or the involvement of the one Idea in the many things, was a question to which, Aristotle maintains, Plato never found a truly satisfactory answer, leaving the term an “empty metaphor.”<sup>84</sup> In what way, precisely, does whatness as beingness *unify* the beings upon which it bestows a specific identity? Another problem is even more profound and more directly Parmenidean: granted that the Idea unifies the many beings that share a common name and species, how are the Ideas related to one another? Is there a fundamental unity of being, a belonging-together of all Ideas?

This latter question is addressed at the end of *Republic* VI. Here, using the analogy of the sun as the source of light and sensible visibility that makes the disclosure of sensible objects possible, Socrates goes on to look for an parallel source of intelligibility in the sphere of pure meanings. That which makes intelligible things intelligible, providing truth/disclosure to what is known and endowing the one who knows with a capacity to know, is designated as the Idea of the Good (*hē tou agathou idea*). The Good is

what grants being (*einai*) and determinate beingness (*ousia*)—articulated and intelligible presence—to beings but is itself “beyond” determinate beingness (*epekeina tēs ousias*).<sup>85</sup> Heidegger argues that the key to understanding this determination of the Good (*to agathon*) as the supreme Idea is to understand “good” in the Greek sense of “excellent,” “advantageous,” or “good-for.” (See, e.g., GA 34, 95–116/ET, 69–84; GA 36/37, 186–215/BTr, 143–64; WM, 226–32/PM, 173–78; N II, 198–205/Ni IV, 165–74.)<sup>86</sup> The Idea of a thing is its ideal purpose or function, i.e., what it is *good for*; thus, being-good-for-something *as such*, purposiveness in general, can be regarded as unifying *all* Ideas as standards of being-good-for-*x*. As Hans-Georg Gadamer and John Sallis note,<sup>87</sup> the Idea of the Good is what lets things show themselves as *one*, in the sense of the unifying functionality that lets the other Ideas grant specific unifying functions to specific kinds of things. In what precise sense the Idea of the Good is itself “beyond beingness” remains, of course, a profound problem. In his early lecture courses, Heidegger suggests an interpretation of the Platonic *epekeina* as an intimation of the radical transcendence of *Dasein*’s understanding of being, of the primacy of a horizon of possibility beyond the actual (WM, 160–61/PM, 124; cf. GA 22, 261/BCAP, 200–01). However, in a later note he explicitly rejects this reading (WM, 160n[a]/PM, 124n[a]; cf. GA 65, 209–11, 216/CPFE, 146–48, 151/CPOE, 164–65, 169), suggesting later that the Platonic Idea of the Good is to be understood as the “transcendent” or “transcendental” ground of beings in the metaphysical sense of a super-being. Despite its supremacy in comparison to all other Ideas, the Idea of the Good is nevertheless still an *Idea*.

The Ideas are the most beingful beings [*Seiendste*] because they make comprehensible *being* “in the light of which” [. . .] a particular being is a *being* in the first place and *the being that* it is. At the same time, the Ideas are the most unconcealed [*Unverborgenste*], i.e., the primordially unconcealed (in which unconcealedness *arises*) insofar as they are what first lets beings *show* themselves (as that which is sighted). Now, if there is a *supreme* Idea that can become visible *over* all Ideas, it must lie *out beyond* being (which already is the most beingful) and primordial unconcealedness (unconcealedness *as such*). Yet the Good, as that which thus lies out beyond the Ideas, is still called an *Idea*. What can this mean? It can mean only that the supreme Idea most primordially and appropriately prevails over that which, in any case, is already the *function* of the Idea: *allowing the unconcealedness* of beings to *spring forth* and *making comprehensible the being*