



October 2023

Searching for Being

Geran Wales
info@ubiquitypress.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca>

Recommended Citation

Wales, Geran (2023) "Searching for Being," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol3/iss2/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@CWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@CWU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@cwu.edu.

Searching for Being

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to discern the importance of the way in which philosophers read each other to the philosophical enterprise. To do this I compare Socrates' treatment of Parmenides and Heraclitus in the Theaetetus to Heidegger's treatment of Kant in Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics. Using Heidegger's notion of 'unthought thoughts', I attempt to tease out ontological points that contradict the way in which most people think of the philosophers examined in this paper. In this way we see an upset in the traditional understanding of the theory of Forms and the Phenomena/ Noumena distinction.

Searching for Being

Geran Wales
Pacific University

Published online: 30 July 2011
© Geran Wales 2011

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to discern the importance of the way in which philosophers read each other to the philosophical enterprise. To do this I compare Socrates' treatment of Parmenides and Heraclitus in the *Theaetetus* to Heidegger's treatment of Kant in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Using Heidegger's notion of 'unthought thoughts', I attempt to tease out ontological points that contradict the way in which most people think of the philosophers examined in this paper. In this way we see an upset in the traditional understanding of the theory of Forms and the Phenomena/ Noumena distinction.

There are still more confusions to come, including the primary and most fundamental one, which happens to be the source of the whole problem.

-Philosopher from Elea, Plato's Sophist

A common thought concerning the reading of philosophical texts is the importance of preserving the original intention of the philosopher by distancing ourselves and our prejudices from the text in our reading. The only way to understand a text is by apprehending it alone. Furthermore, by clearly apprehending the thought of the thinker, we can build off of their work and in this fashion philosophy builds on itself upwards. This upward trend of thought, furthermore, has an objective goal of clarifying the false suppositions of the past and aiming towards a proper stating of the philosophical objective. Studying the history of philosophy in this way, we can use the tools of past thinkers in our own studies as ways of understanding problems, but our understanding of the current focus of philosophy ought never complicate the way we think of a philosopher of the past. This view of philosophy carries with it its own latent metaphysical assumptions, as do all methods. In nature it is explicitly positivist, in that it takes the act of thinking to consist of a series of assertions to be objectively analyzed and interpreted for validity. If a certain philosophical work is shown to be verified it can then be applied to new problems in the hopes of concisely framing and dealing with all manner of philosophical problems.

Contrary to this, what I would consider popular notion, I assert that philosophy does not build on top of itself but rather digs within. The act of reading a philosophical text is one with a latent two-fold nature. Everyone who has sought insight from a text is “guilty” of existing in a hermeneutic circle whether they recognize it or not. As odd as it seems to say, this act of unconsciously philosophizing alongside the text can be seen as the core of the philosophical enterprise, and needs not degenerate into a critique of the activity of philosophy itself. As a thinker thinking into the thoughts of another we imbue our own thoughts into the thoughts of one who thought before. In that oft-unwilled resulting understanding we are given a text that does not exist autonomously, as something set in stone, but a living, breathing, evolving understanding. Philosophy progresses in this fashion (again understanding that this assertion too is a result of this cycle), in thinking (to quote one of the philosophers to be examined in this paper) “ the unthought thoughts” of those whom we read.

For insight into this phenomenon, it is necessary to look to the history of philosophy and apply this insight where it is explicitly practiced before embarking on our own reading. In this paper I will take two texts by some of the most highly influential Western thinkers who delved into the unthought thoughts of the ones who influenced them the most, providing a link between these readings and the “independent” thought of these philosophers. The two texts examined will be Plato’s *Theatetus* and Heidegger’s *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. In my reading of these texts I hope to follow in the tradition of these philosophers by delving into the thought of the past and seeking the common as an active reader thinking.

The question of being is the central idea in the history of philosophy, latently if not explicitly. Any treatment of an axiological or epistemological problem must deal with the nature of what is being examined in the inquiry. If we are inquiring into what we know, we must have an idea of what it is that we know. If we inquire into the nature of judgments we must have an idea of what we are judging, as well as the necessary conditions for us to be capable of judgment. Rather than turning to Heidegger and Socrates explicit statements of the nature of being I will examine the thinkers who informed their thoughts (for Socrates, Parmenides and Heraclitus. For Heidegger, Immanuel Kant) and, in doing so, hope to illustrate how the question of being can be seen to be a continuous enterprise contained in the history of philosophy. Even more, each of these philosophers takes a problem approached by their predecessors and frames it as “The problem of Metaphysics”. By examining both of these texts it becomes clear that the same sense of Being is being discussed.

Any discussion of the Philosophy of Socrates is innately complicated by the fact that this father of philosophy never wrote anything himself. Rather than simply examining what appears in the dialogue, most readers of the texts paint Socrates as existing philosophically within the realm of the author of the dialogues Platonic philosophy.

While Plato is the author of the texts, it is clear that our thought is to be directed not to what Plato thought, but rather to Socrates. Plato, unique among western philosophers, chose not to speak in his own voice. The philosopher we have access to is Socrates and for this reason it is his thought we are examining. To be sure, Socrates only appears through Plato's writings and the Socrates we hear could very well be filtered or manipulated by the author. But if we wish to talk about Socrates at all we must not discuss Plato or his philosophy and take Socrates as he is disclosed to us within the text as Plato's Socrates.

The problem of metaphysics for Socrates was the *Giganto Machia*, the battle of the pre-Socratic giants with Parmenides on one side and Heraclitus and Protagoras on the other. The battle is over the nature of Being; whether it is all one permanent thing or a articulated, shifting, flux of becoming. In the dialogues *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* the positions of the two thinkers are discussed and analyzed according to the doxa of the time. The issue arises in *Theaetetus* due to the title interlocutor's assertion that all knowledge is based in perception. Commonplace opinions on Platonism and Socrates place this as the view Socrates tried with all his efforts to diffuse, opting for purely intellectual knowledge of the forms. It may seem odd that Socrates treats this assertion in the manner that he does, addressing it and drawing out its implications at exceptional length, and not abandoning it as false when Theaetetus repeatedly reasons that the assertion has failed. The reason for this strange movement on the part of Socrates is to place the discussion between the giants and to take the apparent paradox and let it work on itself. The following two quotes by Socrates establish his understanding of the positions of the two he is working between.

Summarizing his understanding of Heraclitus' position, Socrates says "None is anything itself by itself...but in mutual intercourse all things come into being and come to be of all sorts from their motion, since to think of what's active and what's passive among them as being something particular in any one case is, as they assert, not possible in any fixed way. For there isn't even any active thing until it comes together with what's passive to it"(*Theaetetus* 157A).

This view does not come from one thinker alone, according to Socrates, but rather from a whole host that stand opposite to Parmenides: Protagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Epicarmus and Homer. This is significant because in a sense this was the prevailing sentiment that existed concerning being. Almost all creation myths begin in chaos, a permanent undifferentiated flux out of which nothing can be discerned. This nearly-nothing is what gives rise to things when the flux is ordered into the becoming of the particulars. Being is becoming insofar as beings do not exist in a vacuum. Things only have being in their becoming with regards to the things to which they are related. This is illustrated in a host of examples given by Socrates to Theaetetus concerning the relations of size and number and how comparison alters the being of things in that they

have the qualities we assign them only in relation to what they are differentiated from. Beyond this there lies the sensory element of the claim that stems from the becoming of a thing in the very act of perception. “Would you strongly swear that the way each color appears to you is the way it also appears to a dog or to any other animal?” (*Theaetetus* 154 A)

This recognition of the differentiation of reality in the subjective act of perceiving and apprehending opens the possibility of a world that is composed of the expanding flux of perceiving entities without a verifiable grounding place of a whole being which can be talked of free of the necessary distortions inherent in experience. Indeed, a world of this nature would seem to exist for every man and, with even more complication, for every species. The ontological implications of this system of epistemology are to say the least complicated, but hold in a common theme of Being not as the static state implied by language and our default understanding of things, but of a changing world apprehended by a multitude of changing subjects. This system reminds us that Being is above all a verb, an action which is perpetually unfolding across time. This motion of Being through time makes it unwhole and differentiated and becomes the main point of differentiation from the great Pre-Socratic who opposed this dominant conception of Being.

To contrast this to the thought of Parmenides, Socrates says, “Since it is wholly motionless, being is the name for the all.” (*Theaetetus* 180 E.) The quote is similar to line 38 of fragment VIII from Parmenides (Sachs 76) the original line reads “To be whole and unmoving; with respect to this everything has been named.” The differences between the two allow the understanding that Socrates is working from a particular vision of Parmenides that allows meditation and greater understanding of this question of being. Rather than teasing apart the subtleties of this complicated original fragment we should understand the importance of Socrates characterizing Parmenides’ thought in the way that he does. Characterizing the elder philosopher as “terrifying” and “an object of reverence to me” (*Theaetetus* 184 A), there is no doubt that Socrates would never deliberately simplify and ignore the subtleties of Parmenides’ thought, and we must conclude that he is setting up the radical polarization in order to read his own understanding of being between the opinions of the truths he is dealing with. With Parmenides, being set out as one who believes in the fundamental nature of being as unchanging and unmoving we see into a sort of core of being and beings that allows for them to change in our reality and retain the “what it is to be”. The fact that I live my life in the realm of time hints at this core, evanescent as it may be and this “motionlessness” of reality in spite of the flux points to a core of being that renders all becomings mute and meaningless.

If we now turn to the *Parmenides* for further elucidation of Socrates’ understanding we can find in Parmenides’ approach to the *eidos*: “Given your claim that other things

partake of forms, won't you necessarily think either that each thing is composed of thoughts and all things think, or that, although they are thoughts, they are unthinking?" (*Parmenides* 132 C). The Whole then does not change but is that upon which the gaze is directed and out of which the flux arises from the unthinking thoughts. This is aptly illustrated by turning to the well-known paradoxes of Parmenides' follower, Zeno. When we say that the tortoise will always be ahead of Achilles it is only based upon our dividing thoughts that tease distorting concepts out of the original whole of space, time and ultimately, being.

To move from here it becomes necessary to dwell on the relation of the "much babbled about things" to the positions we have discussed thus far. Standing between the Giants and their arguments we are faced with reality and in facing this we have to strike a path between them. I would argue that the "eidos" are Socrates' reading of Heraclitus and Parmenides, and that to understand them, we have to understand them as Being. While most translators render the Greek word *eidos* as form, there is a far simpler translation that fits into the discussion of the *Theatetus*. This translation is "look", and while the difference between the two wordings may be slight, there is an important difference: the word "form" indicates that the existence of these things exist outside of the context of human thought because the focus is on shape. For the term look on the other hand the focus is centered upon how they appear.

One might object to this by saying that equating appearance with the *eidos* is as far as we can get from Socrates' meaning. But within the intellectual appreciation of the *eidos* there must be some kind of appearance or presentation that leads to the recognition of the *eidos* as such. It is this relationship between appearance as sense data and the appearance of the *eidos* that will become Socrates' and our focus in the search for the being between the giants. "Knowledge is not present in the experiences, but in the gathering together what's involved in them, for in the latter... there is a power to come in touch with being and truth, but in the former there is no power" (*Theatetus* 186 D). Here it seems Socrates has spelled out the relationship between the *logos* and the *eidos*. Gathering together (*logos*) that which is presented in sensation, we come into contact with that which *is*, for us, in our understanding. This is how the understanding of the ontological positions of Parmenides and Heraclitus leads to the *eidos*.

When I see an object through time it goes through the classic changes Heraclitus and those who shared his opinions were keen to point out in their understanding of being as flux. But whether it is a tree, person, or landscape distorted by the alterations of time from how it originally presented itself to me in the original gathering, I come across something that makes me know that it is this rather than that being though it has changed. In this presentation of a multitude of beings I become familiar with certain things in the gatherings. It is in this way that the *eidos* as "looks" come to be the most real of all beings for me. In my gathering of visual data about the object in front of me

there is no lag, no gauging of components and elements to help me understand what it is I am seeing. Rather “chair” is thrust upon me in my presentation as the “look” that this thing has to it. The raw “chairness” of the chair is not present in the light bouncing off the chair alone but in the gathering of the data in an understanding that allows that chair to *be*. To trace this back to the doxa on the eidos, it is essential to see how the view being discussed does not attempt to refute eidos qua forms, but rather provides another level to the understanding of eidos as forms. Tracing the components of the eidos back to their sources it is clear how standing between the giants leads to a comprehensive understanding of being. By nature of there being things to be gathered and brought together we stand with Heraclitus in the ever-changing flux. In the unchanging being of the things gathered as part of a cohesive whole we stand with Parmenides in the motionless whole.

In Socrates’ resolution of the Battle of the Giants being was placed within and without the subject, in which an endless flux simply was, and a motionless whole became other than that which it was. In Heidegger’s approach to the question of metaphysics in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* we can find that not only are the means of Heidegger’s search similar to those of Socrates but that the answer he finds in Kant is analogous to that found in Parmenides and Heraclitus. Martin Heidegger is famous for overturning the traditional structure of Western metaphysics, which he claimed had gone awry since, (ironically), Plato. However the elucidation of Kant’s First *Critique* was essential to the overall project of the search for Being in that the searching took place in finding the ground for Kant’s thoughts, because, in Heidegger’s words the “idea of a philosophy may not be fully expressed, so we should understand a philosopher better than he understood himself.”

The unstated or understated thought in Heidegger’s book is what the problem in the book’s title refers to. There is obviously a universal problem of metaphysics, but for Kant, it is simple and easy to pinpoint. Kant’s Copernican revolution influenced all subsequent philosophers, and, in looking to the goals of those who immediately followed him, we can see the problem presented in Kant’s thought. For Fichte, Schelling and culminating in the early work of Hegel, the obsession of German philosophers following Kant was the absolute that formed the basis of the Idealist existence. This questioning after the unconditioned is based entirely in Kant’s discussion of the noumenal and the phenomenal. By making the human mind the center of the knowable world, Kant was able to lay to rest the arguments of the rationalists and the empiricists but ended up leaving an open question concerning being. Can we, in Kant, draw a line between epistemology and ontology? Kant says emphatically throughout the first critique that to take phenomena as anything other than phenomena is to slip into transcendental illusion.

Be that as it may, Kant cannot have his phenomena without the noumena to undergird them. Because of this, Kant's problem of metaphysics is a problem of where to find being, if pure being can in fact be found. In our experience we run up against the effects of beings molded through the faculties of our mind but because of the very things which make it possible to have experience at all, we find it impossible to encounter the things we are having an experience of. In Kant's understanding of his own thought, we can never approach the being of the chair insofar as by being we mean what the chair truly is in itself. For this reason a generation of philosophers struggled to elucidate the problem and let the all-important problem of metaphysics become the central aim of philosophy.

Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, written two years after the groundbreaking *Being and Time* provides an explicitly phenomenological reading of the first critique, tracing the faculties through the finitude of Dasein in order to find the fundamental groundwork upon which all else is based. In this paper I shall focus explicitly on two of the faculties that Heidegger analyzes and view them in terms of the analysis that come from the beginning and ending commentary by Heidegger.

The first of the essential faculties to explore in the analysis is the transcendental schematism. The schemata have always occupied a difficult position in the layout of the *Critique* as those things revealed as synthetic a priori. In the same way that Kant uses the example of arithmetic to explain how we create understanding of things we have never before experienced and work them into our conceptual framework in a way that changes the way that we experience the world we can see how schema would have to have developed in order for us to interact with the world, in the way that we do.

In the section "Image and Schema," three ways that Kant uses the word image are identified: "the aspect of a definite essent so far as it is manifest as something actually present,...image can also mean an aspect which reproduces something either now or no longer given (and) provides a model for something yet to be produced,...'aspect in general' wherein it is not stated whether something essent or non-essent is thereby made intuitable" (Heidegger 97). If we consolidate these three ways Heidegger finds image in Kant and uses them to explain the concept of schematism, we find an important concept. Heidegger reads the image to be the "how" by which things come into existence, while schema and image are different: "the schema necessarily possess the character of an image... It will be called, therefore, the schema-image" (Heidegger 97). By doing this, Heidegger has made the schema fundamentally phenomenological and presented a latent hypothesis concerning the way we acquire these schema images in our understanding. In our first encounter with something, we have no schema, for we are blind to the thing as it is, because for us it is not a thing insofar as we define what is for us that which has meaning and can be appreciated in the classic sense. Through Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, we encounter a chair as a chair in

accordance with our underlying schema-image of chair. If we had never seen or conceived of a chair, we would be blind to what it is, but upon the construction of the schema, we find that thing, "chair," imposed upon our past and future, giving meaning to those things without being until now through the totality of ek-stasis. Though this can be said of all Kant's faculties, it is worth saying that concerning the appreciation of individual being there is immense stress placed upon the way they reveal themselves as beings-with-meaning, in fact as beings in the way we understand being within the process of schematism. In Heidegger's words "the function of the mode of sensibilization which forms schemata is to procure an image for a given concept." (Heidegger 98)

This entire schematism is based within the pure intuition of time in a more dramatic way than most faculties. Heidegger quotes Kant saying "The image of ... all objects of the senses in general [is] time" (CPR A 142, B 182). For Heidegger, this assertion of the essential nature of time in the meaningful disclosure of beings is all-important in his attempt to read his philosophy out of Kant's. At the beginning of the text he lays out reason for his undertaking in his own philosophical language. "Fundamental ontology is that metaphysics of human *Dasein* necessary if metaphysics in general is to be possible" (Heidegger 4). The concept of time (as is obviously evident from the title of his magnum opus) is the ground upon which *Dasein* is capable of being as *Dasein*: "It is because our *Dasein* is finite- existing in the midst of the essent which already is and to which our *Dasein* is abandoned-that it must of necessity receive the essent, that is, offer it the possibility of giving notice of itself" (Heidegger 31). It is this being-abandoned to the always-already existing world of always-already existing beings that determines Heidegger's understanding of Kant's Transcendental Schematism.

Now that we have started to extrapolate on the role of time in the discussion, we must turn to Heidegger's key point in his reading of the first Critique and discuss the nature and substance of his reading of the transcendental imagination. The entire book, as has been shown above, is a search for the ground of fundamental ontology. In the transcendental imagination, Heidegger finds his phenomenological ground and is able to put Kant's problem of metaphysics to rest in a way that deeply challenges the way we think about the philosopher from Konigsberg. In fact, Heidegger's entire reading of the transcendental imagination is based on a section of the first edition that was completely reworked upon the completion of the second writing of the text. The key idea to understanding Heidegger's analysis is grounding. The element that is contained in the first edition of the *Critique* and excluded in the second is a clear origin point for the basic faculties that the others are built from. Heidegger focuses on Kant's way of naming space and time as original representations. He focuses in on what is meant by the term "original" and concludes that it means, "to let spring forth". Heidegger concludes, "pure intuitions are ... presentations which let the object of intuition spring forth... In this act of presentation lies the essence of pure imagination" (148). The

importance of what Heidegger is accomplishing in this section is vital for understanding his search for being in Kant. Rather than taking Kant as the convoluted epistemologist he is often taken as being, Heidegger is thinking into Kant a phenomenological ontology in which being is in its presentations and nowhere else. By asserting that the pure intuitions discovered by the transcendental aesthetic are to be understood not only as presentations but also as presentations of the imagination Heidegger has reached his ground.

For Heidegger, the influence of the transcendental imagination links back to the schematism and provides the grounding for the presentation of being as being that is accomplished in the disclosure of how a being is what it is. As the schema are within the context of time they create time by allowing the variations on a theme and the concept of change to arise for us, creating the “world within us” that Kant speaks of in the transcendental aesthetic. Quoting Kant, the schemas are a “transcendental product of the imagination” (A 142). The significance of this should become immediately clear when taken in conjunction with the discussion of the schema above and should further display the phenomenological nature of the reading in question.

With this root in place Heidegger places the two main faculties of the mind, sensibility and the understanding in the stance originally given to them in the first critique (Heidegger 135). But, according to Heidegger “Kant did not carry out the primordial interpretation of the transcendental imagination; indeed, he did not even make the attempt, despite the clear indications he gave us concerning such an analytic. Kant recoiled from this unknown root”(Heidegger 167). Heidegger points to the change in the second critique where the imagination is altered from “an indispensable function of the soul” (A 78) to a “function of the understanding” (B 103). In Heidegger’s thought, making the imagination subsidiary to the understanding deprives the fundamental ontology of its ground and disallows Kant from making the kinds of phenomenological leaps he was poised to make after the first *Critique*.

Here we now return to the original question poised, that of Kant’s problem of metaphysics. Following Heidegger’s example and taking the transcendental imagination as described in the first *Critique* as our guide, we can seriously talk about the relationship between the noumenal and the phenomenal in a way we were incapable of before. Kant’s explicit position is clear and unfaltering; it is up to us to think the unthought thoughts that undergird the work as a whole. Turning our attention to an object in our immediacy we should now think of what and how it is that it comes to be for us. This chair to my right is unknown to me outside of the scope of the faculties of my mind but nevertheless it is there. In the transcendental unity of apperception there is no need to look at its qualities, form and usefulness and conclude that it is, in fact a chair. It presents itself to me as through the schema in its temporality as it arises in the sensible manifold and it cannot be other than that which it is. Whence comes this notion

of being? Is it conceivable for phenomena, when juxtaposed with noumena, to have being? But nonetheless, the being is there, it presents itself to me, and nothing can change the meaningful nature it possesses.

Transcendental fallacy proves to be the path for phenomenological inquiry. In going to the thing itself the chair discloses itself not as a shadow of the unattainable real, but as it is in its disclosed being. The imagination, which underlies all our conceptual and sensible understandings, secures this for us as the basis of the world into which we have been thrust.

Looking back over our analysis we ought now ask again the questions raised at the beginning of our discussion. How are the thoughts of philosophers shaped by those they read? Or conversely, how the thoughts of those they read shaped by the philosophers who read them? Within the given context of the readings investigated within this endeavor we have found doxa regarding the most famous of thinkers challenged and often reversed. The *Giganto Machia* is revealed not as a war but a singular dance of understanding Being. The Socratic eidos seem now to be disclosed by sense perception. Kant's phenomenal/ noumenal distinction is dissolved by the root of consciousness itself. And Heidegger, who contended that the search for Being had been forgotten for two thousand years, reveals in his analysis of Kant that the search never ceased, but only misunderstood itself. Only in our situation could this understanding come, and this is how it is revealed, indeed how it has always already been disclosed to those who search for Being.

References

- Heidegger, Martin. *Kant and The Problem of Metaphysics*. Trans. James S. Churchill. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962.
- Plato. *Theaetetus*. Trans. Joe Saches. Newburyport: Focus, 2004.