

## The Post-Modern Attack On Plato

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*Plato's true speculative greatness, that in virtue of which he constitutes an epoch in the history of philosophy and hence in world history generally, lies in the more precise identification of the idea, a recognition which, a few centuries later, was in general to form the basic element in the ferment of world history and a new configuration of the human spirit.*

Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Beyond Plato And Hegel

For Hegel, the 'idea' is far more than a mere Platonic invention, one among many technical terms to gain currency in philosophy. On the contrary, it is the proper and essential object of thought, and as such its development forms the principal theme of philosophical history. The initial identification of the idea thus coincides with the advent of a thinking which for the first time knows what its true content is, which in the idea has the unity of thinking and being clearly before it, and Plato is rightly seen as the founder of this knowledge of the idea to which he gave the name 'philosophy'. The subsequent career of this science Hegel represents as the "labour of the concept" whereby, over two millennia and more, this ideal knowledge is further deepened and widened. Over centuries of Christian culture the speculative spirit initiated among the Greeks was to become a matter of inward and outward habit, and, as the spirit of modernity, is born again in the self-consciousness of freedom. Modern philosophy proceeds from the principle of freedom as an intellectual and moral certainty toward the systematic comprehension of it as the basis of all scientific and ethical truth; a labour consummated in the Hegelian science in which the enterprise Plato inaugurated finds a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Die wahrhaft spekulative Grösse Platons, das, wodurch er Epoche macht in der Geschichte der Philosophy und damit in der Weltgeschichte überhaupt, ist die nähere Bestimmung der Idee, eine Erkenntnis, welche denn einige Jahrhunderte später überhaupt das Grundelement in der Gärung der Weltgeschichte und der neuen Gestaltung des menschlichen Geistes ausmacht. (Werke, Moldenhauer/Michel, Frankfurt am Main, 1971, v19, p.66)

completion.<sup>2</sup> "The goal that I set myself" declares Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "is that Philosophy more closely approach the form of science -- that it reach the point where it can set aside its title as the love of knowing [*Liebe zum Wissen*, philo-sophia] and become an *actual* knowing [*wirkliches Wissen*]." <sup>3</sup>

It is this view of philosophical history as having in some sense reached its term that the ultra-modernist critics of Hegel immediately take up, though their understanding of that consummation and his do not simply differ: rather, they are notoriously at odds.<sup>4</sup> Notorious also is the fact that it is not Hegel's view of philosophical history, the appreciation of which is rare enough, that has profoundly shaped how the matter is seen today, but rather the views of these his 19th-20th century critics. In Feuerbach or Nietzsche, in Russell or Heidegger, in Rorty or Derrida we not only find Western philosophy represented as a completed history but also this completion set forth as the negative major premise of their own peculiar account of the bankruptcy of that tradition, whether seen as springing from intellectual fallacies at long last exposed and refuted, or as the long-standing corruption of an original human wisdom now standing in need of radical reconstitution. The critique of a putative 'Hegelian' account of the upshot of philosophical history becomes the springboard for an attack on the tradition as a whole and an attempt to delineate an entirely post-philosophical way of thinking.

The meaning of this post-modern rebellion against philosophy is not easily assessed. Where Hegel saw in the modern affirmation of freedom the triumph of the philosophical idea, his successors, standing already in and beyond that event, take their freedom as given and seek only to resolve it to some more immediate, political or existential, form. In relation to such resolution a philosophically comprehended freedom appears as a limiting obstacle: freedom as idea becomes the enemy of freedom as actual life. Hegel's successors could not (and still cannot) imagine how a freedom brought to consciousness through the exercise of reason and mediated by some definite ethical and historical culture could ever be an absolute freedom, in the (questionable) sense of a this-worldly, here-and-now freedom a *human* freedom. From this perspective, accordingly, the philosophical tradition appears as having achieved no more than to have nurtured and brought to completeness an *ideal* freedom only, the mere ought-to-be of moral conscience. It thus appears to the heirs of this legacy above all necessary to be liberated decisively from that tradition, precisely and paradoxically in order that the all-important principle which it had engendered and brought to light might be transformed into actuality.

It is in accordance with some such extreme hostility toward philosophy and its history that the counter-Hegelian revolution began and is still pursued. For the generation for whom a strictly *human* freedom became an absolute premise and fact it seemed

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<sup>2</sup> "This movement, which is philosophy, finds itself already completed when in the end it grasps its own concept, i.e., simply looks back on its knowledge." (Hegel, *Encyclopedia*; *Werke* 10. s.573) See also the conclusion to his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (*Werke*, 20, p.460).

<sup>3</sup> *Werke*, 3, p.14.

<sup>4</sup> See Jackson, F.L. "Post-Modernism and the Recovery of the Philosophical Tradition", in *Animus*, vol.1 (1996).

imperative that the commitment to ideas, 'idealism', upon which Western culture as a whole is founded, be finally identified, exposed and abandoned. For the history of philosophy is seen as the history of the *abstraction* of freedom only, of its merely 'spiritual', i.e., moral-intellectual expression. It will be argued that actual freedom, freedom as a palpable human self-experience and a principle of concrete political and material relations, had been wrenched from the context of real life and installed somewhere in the sky, there afforded a holy-ghostly existence accessible only in the otherworldly intuitions of art, religion and philosophy. Various hypotheses are advanced to account for this fatal turn to idealism. Typical (the version with which we will here primarily be concerned) is the hypothesis of a cultural catastrophe in which an original harmony between Nature and Spirit is somehow broken and the original priority of the former over the latter is reversed. The real is then made subordinate to Thought, the truth of Being is obscured or forgotten, State and Technology become master over Individuality and Life. So deprived of his natural freedom man is dehumanized; Theology, Metaphysics and Morality become the universal opiates through which this alienated condition is sustained. Though the various forms of this 19th-20th century metaphor are in content often contradictory (Marx is no Kierkegaard) they all have the same objective: to liberate life from the domination of reason, to affirm freedom as preeminent human nature, to declare the world-for-thought as utterly incompatible with a human world of freedom. To this end it becomes especially necessary above all to undermine the whole cult and culture of the idea; to repudiate 'philosophy' as Plato initiated it and Hegel completed it.

The task to which post-Hegelian thinking thus enthusiastically applied itself was the discovery of the adequate critique of the Western spiritual and intellectual tradition, such as could lay the basis for a new ultra-spiritual standpoint both comprehensive of it and liberated from it. The common metaphor is a 'return to nature' in some fashion, whether through the romanticist invocation of an ante-historical spirit the preeminence of culture or the substitution of natural science for metaphysics as absolute knowledge. The former seeks to disclose and rehabilitate a pristine life and wisdom alleged to have been suppressed and corrupted by a domineering modern intellect which "murders to dissect". The latter opposes any such great leap backward and proposes a revolutionary emancipation from everything past, appealing to a new theology and psychology of the natural, Darwinian man. But the wish common to both is altogether to have done with the reason-ridden, idea-world of philosophy and to rediscover (or open up) entirely aboriginal (or entirely new) territories beyond the realm of the rational and a merely moral good and evil.

This ultra-modernist program is of course ambiguous at its core. It is one thing simply to abandon thought as empty and useless activity. But how could it ever be possible to *demonstrate* the invalidity of philosophical reason; by what new standard and in what *other* form of discourse could the case be made against it? It is our limited purpose here to survey how Nietzsche and Heidegger generally answered this question; how they reconstructed, indeed inverted, the spiritual history of the West to tell of a virginal Greek wisdom become sullied and perverted through the encroachments of a life-denying, otherworldly mentality; how Plato formalized this Socratic falsification in his theory of

ideas; how he founded thereby a regimen of self-deception called 'philosophy' which provided the seedbed for a vast cultural growth devoted to the sustaining of this life-repressive mentality; how this spiritual cancer spread and grew, reaching its deadly finale in and as Modernity.

In spite of its *prima facie* implausibility, this tragic, high-operatic account of the intellectual history of the West still exercises enormous influence upon contemporary thinking; the more recent heroes of continental philosophy still perpetuate it.<sup>5</sup> With both Nietzsche and Heidegger the beginning is typically made with a claim to an epoch-making insight into the essential 'nihilism' of modernity as the final embodiment of a legacy of spiritual degeneration going back in time.<sup>6</sup> The root cause of this cultural decay, or at least its crucial symptomatic expression, is declared to be epitomized in the historical cult of philosophy which as a matter of course elevates thought above life, plays down the sensible world as 'mere appearance', and seeks to comprehend and subordinate living reality under intellectual principles, the so-called ideas. The history of philosophy is thus, as Nietzsche puts it, the history of a lie whose consequence is just nihilism, the culture-negative culture of modernity.

The radical deconstruction and reconstruction of the history of philosophy thus becomes a chief means of defending 'philosophically' a romanticist insight into the decadence of modernity that would otherwise remain aesthetic or dogmatic only. For since the very nature of the thesis in hand the 'lie' underlying philosophy precludes any directly *philosophical* explication or defence, it can appear possible to justify it only through a radical reinterpretation of the history of that discipline itself with a view to exposing its real burden and intent as quite the opposite of what had ever been supposed. There will be required a radical rereading of original texts in order to ferret out and define the alleged fundamental misapprehension upon which Plato founded his ideal world, this then to form the basis of a complete retelling of the tale of European cultural history recast as the progressive compounding of this misapprehension until it reaches its apotheosis in modern humanism. The traditional-Hegelian spiritual history of the West is utterly and deliberately turned on its head.

So established and refined has this post-philosophical narrative become since Nietzsche's time that appreciation for the original sense of traditional philosophical texts is now rare enough, an indifference reinforced by a new conviction that respect for manifest argument is in any case no longer obligatory; one must rather look for (or invent?) a surreptitious, unconscious, and usually contradictory meaning lurking behind

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<sup>5</sup> See postscript on Derrida in section 5, this essay.

<sup>6</sup> Ambivalence with respect to terms like 'spirit' or 'spiritual' pervades the whole tradition represented by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Like most post-Hegelians they were generally loathe to use the word except disparagingly; yet they were equally clear the crisis they would describe and address was a 'spiritual' one, in the sense it was at once intellectual, moral, political, aesthetic, religious i.e., 'cultural'. The new worldliness to which they would lead the return is not a materialism but wholly presupposes a concrete freedom: 'spirit' in the distinctively Hegelian sense. Heidegger himself will declare "World is always the world of spirit", but see Derrida's revealing account as to how he continually vacillated over whether or how to use the term: whether negatively, positively, figuratively etc.: *Of Spirit, Heidegger and the Question*, tr. Bennington/Bowlby (Chicago, 1989).

what is obviously and overtly reasoned. Counter-textual hypotheses of this kind have accordingly come to be taken as gospel: with respect to Plato and Parmenides on the relation of being and thought, for example, Heidegger is taken much at his word, as is Nietzsche on the perversity of morality or Derrida on identity. Yet even the most superficial inspection will show that the interpretations of classical texts upon which such claims are based are often conspicuously cavalier, clearly bent and amended to serve a distinctly post-modern outlook.

Much has been written as to whether Nietzsche's or Heidegger's specific accounts of the classical legacy are valid in literary or scholarly terms; however, more thought needs to be directed to the question of the *philosophical* motives which inspired these. The interpretative liberties taken were certainly extreme and cannot be attributed to wrongheadedness or an invidious will to distort and deceive we are dealing, after all, with the best minds of recent centuries. But there is need to examine the limits of the very task they set themselves, namely to formulate a deliberately '*post-philosophical*' standpoint, one which could claim at once to have liberated itself from all the historical mediations of philosophy while justifying and sustaining this independence precisely by appeal to that same history. Such a thinking is radically divided in itself; exempting itself in principle from any appeal to a legacy of rational argument, it would sustain itself nonetheless through endlessly worrying that same legacy, exploiting by means of extreme and oblique interpretations the very literature from whose substance and upshot it declares itself already free. In so assuming what it negates in order to negate what it assumes, it will inevitably taint everything it finds with its own ambiguity in that literature.

## 2. Nietzsche's Plato.

The iconoclastic rhetoric of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ultra-modernists was driven by the extremity of what they attempted. Schopenhauer and Comte, Kierkegaard and Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche took similar recourse to violent polarizations and epochistic history, the positions articulated not meant to be understood merely as discontinuous with the Western moral and intellectual tradition but as consciously subversive of it. Their radical counter-histories were not constructed on behalf of some new philosophical standpoint; on the contrary, they were meant to undermine and deconstruct the philosophical tradition as a whole, a step they saw to be prerequisite to the maintenance of positions that could not otherwise even be rendered intelligible. Accordingly we find the history of Western philosophy represented, not simply as riddled with misapprehensions regarding logical or living truths, but as a dark legacy of deliberate falsification and corruption of the very truth itself. Metaphysics, morality and theology are singled out as prime villains in a fallacy-driven melodrama of cultural descent into moral and intellectual decadence. The need to expose their nihilistic essence and to loosen their grip on the human spirit poses the principal challenge. An entirely new kind of thinking is proposed such as will presuppose, as its own essential premise, the very speculative legacy it seeks at the same time to undermine.

As Western philosophy traces its own roots to the Greeks, it is with the Greeks that the deconstruction of the tradition must also begin. It will seek to show how and where, long ago, a wrong turning was made, initiating developments whose final issue is nihilistic modernity. This whole undertaking entails, of course, a key presumption: that there actually *was* an ancient wisdom from which the advent of philosophy represented a turning-away and to which return must now somehow be made. It is required of the romanticist argument, not only that it declare what the great evil of modernity is, but also that it identify the pristine cultural outlook it is alleged to have corrupted: the two factors are entirely reciprocal. Kierkegaard found an instance of a pre-Socratic wisdom in the faith of Abraham; Schopenhauer praised Vedantic pessimism as more 'honest' than Greek philosophy; Heidegger proclaimed Parmenides the real unsung hero of Greek thought; and Nietzsche offers Zarathustra, the first divinity to overvalue the otherworldly, the poetic opportunity to correct his error.

In all cases it is with Socrates and Plato that the rot sets in and a vision of truth opposed to being and life firmly established. Nietzsche is everywhere blunt about this: they are co-authors of a world- and life-denying moralism which was to become constitutive of European culture; consolidated over two Christian millennia (and Christianity is but "Plato for the people") and attaining world-domination in modern enlightened humanism. The first articulation of this sinister outlook with Socrates coincides, Nietzsche claims, with the collapse of authentic Greek virtue, a heroic condition he describes as rooted in a profound sense of the priority of Life over Thought the former as ungrounded, self-expressive, spontaneous existence and the corresponding priority of the natural over the moral will. "Will-to-power" is Nietzsche's shorthand for this remarkable fusion of freedom with instinct, a view that has since become common enough in the general culture.<sup>7</sup> Socrates is depicted as harbinger of a perverse will-to-power, a will turned destructively against itself and against instinctual life, a 'spiritual' or moral will hostile in principle to everything natural and spontaneous; thus unfree in Nietzsche's sense. The philosopher is the supreme epitome of this 'new' human type:

The appearance of the Greek philosophers from Socrates onwards is a symptom of decadence... (*WP* 427). Socrates represents a moment of the profoundest perversity in the history of values (*WP* 430). [Plato] severed the instincts from the *polis*, from contest, from military efficiency, from art and beauty, from the mysteries, from belief in tradition and ancestors. He was the seducer of the nobility... He negated all the presuppositions of the 'noble Greek' of the old stamp, made dialectic an everyday practice, conspired with tyrants, pursued politics of the future and provided the example of the most complete severance of the instincts from the past. He is profound, passionate in everything *anti-Hellenic* (*WP* 35).

So Socrates really was the corrupter of Greek youth and Plato the despoiler of Greek ethical life rather than the first to discern its principle. Plato's appeal to a universal good

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Tr. Kaufmann/Hollingsdale (NY, 1968), [Hereafter 'WP']. "... freedom understood, that is, as positive power, as will to power ...(*WP* 770)" "The most fearful and fundamental desire in man, his drive for power this drive is called 'freedom'" (*WP* 720).

delivers the kiss of death to a uniquely Greek ethos still alive in Milesian and Ionian speculation and preserved, though already in decline, even among the Sophists whom Plato so persistently maligns.

The real philosophers of Greece are those before Socrates with Socrates something changes. They are all noble persons, setting themselves apart from people and state... They anticipate all the great conceptions of things: they themselves represent these conceptions, they bring themselves into a system (*WP 437*). The 'Sophist' including Anaxagoras, Democritus, the great Ionians is still completely Hellenic, though as a transitional form.... The 'philosopher', on the other hand is the *reaction* (*WP 427*). The Greek culture of the Sophists had developed out of all the Greek instincts; it belongs to the culture of the Periclean age as necessarily as Plato does *not* (*WP 428*).

And what is it that uniquely belongs to the noble Greek outlook which Plato debased?

In the Greek philosophers I see a decline of the instincts: otherwise they could not have blundered so far as to posit the conscious state as more valuable. We must in fact seek life where it has become *least* conscious, i.e., least aware of its logic, its reasons, its means and intentions, its utility (*WP 480*).

[For] there exists neither 'spirit', nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions that are of no use.... Belief in the body is always a stronger belief than belief in the spirit; and whoever desires to undermine it, also undermines at the same time most thoroughly belief in the authority of the spirit! (*WP 659*)

Plato [is] the great viaduct of corruption, who first refused to see nature in morality, who had already debased the Greek gods with his concept 'good', who was already marked by Jewish bigotry (*WP 202*).

Startling and dramatic though this relentlessly anti-spiritual tirade may be, is there much that is really plausible in it? Where in the ancient chronicle or literature does one find anything resembling Nietzsche's descriptions of an original Greek 'virtue' expressing itself as an unqualified affirmation of the priority of nature over spirit, instinct over morality, body over mind, the unconscious over consciousness, individuality against "people and state". Almost everything we know of ancient peoples suggests rather the contrary: that far from having brought such distinctions body/soul for example to such clarity of dichotomy as would allow of choosing to 'value' one over the other, we typically find the converse: a marked *in*-distinctness of divisions between human and divine, aesthetic and intellectual, or spiritual and natural. Indeed, the bringing to light of just such categories and the working out of both their distinctness and their unity was precisely the work Plato began; an historic work whose result Nietzsche entirely presupposes.

Indeed, it is only against the background of the whole Western-Platonic development that such ultra-modernist conjurings of a pre-rational consciousness, a morality based on instinct and other such romanticist notions can even be meaningful. Nietzsche's account of pre-Platonic Greek culture and its putative Socratic subversion does not, in short, derive from any first order survey of that culture itself but is the product of quite contemporary notions and conflicts foisted in. Appeals to para-historical narrative were common enough in the great age of the opera and the novel; but romanticism's interest was never in history itself so much as in dramatising certain of its more exotic episodes in order to make its own reactionary case against that particular form of modernity which saw in history only the endless improvement of social and material conditions. To Nietzsche's generation this newly dominant scientific, technocratic and political idealism threatened to subordinate to its vision of progress the actual freedom of living individuals, a freedom immediately possessed and borne witness to 'existentially', i.e., psychologically and aesthetically.

It is this post-Hegelian controversy over the meaning and consequences of modern freedom which Nietzsche would read back into the Greek context, there to create a point of departure for a critical 'genealogy' of the whole of Western culture. But a genealogy of moral types in epochal confrontation is not really 'history' at all but a kind of psycho-cultural absolutism crudely grafted upon the actual record.<sup>8</sup> Like Wagner, Nietzsche would recoil from the humanistic optimism of post-Hegelian times into a reconstructed Teutonic paganism<sup>9</sup> where freedom becomes a primitive affect and the natural individual, so empowered, the archetype of the 'noble races', prior to the encroachment of the so-called moral type in whom the instinct to freedom is corrupted, i.e., become unnatural, ascetic, set against itself and against life. In short, Nietzsche's heroic narrative of a Greek age of virtue falling into decay and supplanted by a vulgar emphasis on a universal good is nothing more than a metaphor for a conflict actually raging in his own time: the war between freedom as existential individualism and freedom as socio-technological humanism.

When it comes to specifics there are many conspicuous incongruities in Nietzsche's account of the Platonic argument itself. Apart from "meddling in reasons" and displacing the gods with the "vulgarity" of an ideal good, Plato is accused of promoting certain metaphysical fallacies which demonstrate his fundamental "anti-Greek prejudice". One example:

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to emphasize that for Nietzsche, as for Schopenhauer, 'Will' is a decidedly not a practical category ('volition') but a psychological one. Freedom is "above all an affect" (Beyond Good and Evil [BGE] 19). In expressionist metaphysics generally, affect acquires the value of existence feeling is being on which view psychology, not philosophy, becomes queen of the sciences (BGE 20). Existential philosophy may be styled 'absolute psychology', i.e., psychology no longer concerned with a separated mind or soul, but which makes the identity of being and self-consciousness its principle. This identity comes to be variously characterized as *Wille*, will-to-power, the unconscious, the unknowable, Life, *Existenz*, *Dasein* and so forth..

<sup>9</sup> James Doull, "Natural Individualism", in E. Combs (ed.), *Modernity and Responsibility* (Toronto: U. of T. Press, 1983) p.40.



[Plato] reversed the concept "reality" and said: "What you take for the real is an error, and the nearer we approach the 'Idea', the nearer we approach 'truth'." ... It was the greatest of rebaptisms; and because it has been adopted by Christianity we do not recognize how astonishing it is. Fundamentally, Plato, as the artist he was, preferred appearance to being! Lie and invention to truth! The unreal to the actual! He was so convinced of the value of appearance that he gave it the attributes 'being', 'causality', 'goodness' and 'truth', in short everything ['moral'] men value <sup>10</sup>

Even the most unsympathetic reader of Plato might well be "astonished" though hardly as Nietzsche would intend at how utterly unrecognizable is any such account of what Plato actually wrote, said or preferred. How ever is it possible to understand Plato's intent as that of conferring upon the appearance the rank of absolute being, and how is the *idea*, of all things, possibly to be construed as the crucial metaphor for such a preferential valuation of the apparent over the real? How can such a view of the Platonic philosophy be other than gratuitously contentious, given that it is precisely the very opposite case that is pressed on every page of the dialogues? Are we to understand that Plato lied to us or to himself; that he meant or believed the opposite of what his arguments overtly contend? Does Nietzsche believe he has 'exposed' a Plato hidden not only from us but also from himself: an unconscious perversity concealed in his thinking of which even the philosopher was unaware?

Or is the "reversal" which Nietzsche would force upon an unwilling text simply his own?. Clearly the Nietzschean individual (*cum* 'noble Greek') will have only contempt for the universals of Plato; after all, 'reality' is what *he* wills, 'good' what *he* values, 'truth' a function of *his* perspective etc. From the standpoint of the absolute subject, any appeal to a universal must appear as the very converse of 'reality' or 'truth' in the special sense implied by Nietzsche's telling quotation marks.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the opposition and inversion to which Nietzsche alludes are conceivable only in terms of a much later, modern conception of the relation of thinking to being, clearly instanced in the Kantian scheme wherein everything falls within a relation between the being-in-and-for-consciousness of the world and its being-in-self between 'representation' (*Vorstellung*) and 'thing-itself' a relation which, *since comprehended entirely within the sphere of subjectivity*, is decidedly un-Platonic and even un-Greek.

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche's teacher, takes his cue entirely from this debate, proposing in opposition to the equation of the real with the phenomenal, represented world a position precisely articulated in Comtean positivism, for example a radical realism of the in-itself, wherein the world-for-consciousness is reduced to but a moment of a self-expressive, preconscious and pre-representational life, *Wille*, a reality that cannot in principle be represented in intellectual or moral consciousness but is encountered only aesthetically, in the immediacy of self-feeling. This Schopenhauerian absolute is the birth-parent of the Nietzschean will-to-power and grandparent to what Heidegger will

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<sup>10</sup>. WP 572

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche's opens *Beyond Good and Evil* with this challenge to philosophy: "Suppose we want truth: why not rather untruth?" (BGE 1)

more abstractly call 'being'. From the standpoint of a radical subjective realism, 'reason', 'thought', 'idea' and such terms acquire a specifically altered meaning; their universal logical and ontological sense is abandoned and their meaning restricted to mere forms and contents of consciousness. To advocate the rule of reason is thus to identify consciousness with being; to appeal to the truth of ideas is to declare the measure of the reality of things to lie in their representation, how they are given in consciousness.

It is on the basis of this thoroughly modern polarization between consciousness and the in-itself that Nietzsche (following Schopenhauer and prefiguring Heidegger) takes the extreme liberty of equating 'idea' with 'representation', then to levelling against Plato the charge, astonishing in its turn, that in identifying truth with the idea he betrayed a preference for the appearances over the real, the polar opposite of what Plato everywhere and persistently argues: that what the idea precisely is *not*, is a representation. Notwithstanding, Nietzsche construes the subsequent preoccupation of Western philosophy with the ideas as the culturally extended elaboration of the 'prejudice' of Plato's.<sup>12</sup> On this account, philosophy is in principle a *nihilism*, a specifically world-negative spirit contemptuous of living reality from which it withdraws into a netherworld of pure thinking, there to generate non-entities of its own, the representations or 'ideas', which then are constituted as another world transcendent to this one which is demoted to the status of an illusion. It is this momentous 'inversion', springing out of the corruption and suppression of an instinctive will-to-life by a contrary will-to-think that Nietzsche presents, even as early as his *Birth of Tragedy*, as the essential leitmotif of Western moral and cultural history.

It is in terms of this extreme and deliberately anti-rationalist account of Western culture that Nietzsche mounts his attack on philosophy's founding father, Plato, the first logocentrist: the first to 'forget' being, to detach it from its appearances and to hold fast to the latter by seeking to ground them in thought-constructed, logical essences. The terms of a 19<sup>th</sup> century debate are in this manner read back *verbatim* into the classical record; the resulting 'fit' is not only awkward or implausible, however, but does clear and vivid violence to both Plato's text and time. To speak of his reference to ideas as a flight from reality to the appearances, the latter understood as only the subjective representations of the former, is to speak from within a phenomenological and a distinctively post-Greek schema wherein 'appearance' has come to denote mere being-*for-a-subject* as opposed to subjectivity itself as the truth of being. To the extent Plato might be said to treat of an analogous position, it is with regard to the Sophist argument from subjective relativity which he challenges with relentless thoroughness on every page. But even this analogy is only partly apt; it is only within the context of a romanticist identification of being and subjectivity that it can make any sense to speak of the appearances as *subjective* representations only and of the ideas as mere fabrications designed to sustain these in

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<sup>12</sup> This confusion of 'idea' with 'representation' has long been a fixation in English-speaking philosophy. For many years the best-known translation of Schopenhauer's main work (Haldane and Kemp, London, 1883) had its title as "World as Will and as Idea", though the German has *Vorstellung*, representation, not *Idee*. A newer version by E.F.J. Payne (New York, 1966) has corrected this, yet the bias persists: Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton 1979) argues that Western philosophy, in its traditional appeal to ideas, is rooted in a prejudicial grounding of reality in representation, i.e., a 'reflection' of nature in mind..

dissociation from their true being. Such an account seems wilfully to controvert both the spirit and the letter of the actual Platonic writings.

For if Plato can be said to make a case in favour of the appearances, it is certainly not to afford them a being of their own; such an identification of the apparent as the real is, if anything, the view Nietzsche himself will ultimately espouse (as, in another way, do the Sophists).<sup>13</sup> With Plato the issue of the appearances was much more straightforward. The question had been passed down to him whether, with Parmenides, we must distinguish the being of things from their non-being absolutely, on the principle that things cannot both be and not be, or whether, with Heraclitus, we must afford due recognition to a world of becoming in which things both are and are not and in which being and non-being are in some sense the same. Plato's whole interest was to bring these thoughts together: to discover in the instability and changeability of things a stable principle of their actuality and correspondingly to recognize, *contra* Parmenides, that there can be an understanding of the changeable which is more than mere ignorance. It is within this context that the relation between the appearances, *phainomena*, and a principle of actuality, *idea*, became important for him.

There is no withdrawal here into a netherworld of pure thought. Plato was no platonist. The interest is to show how the truth of the actual world might be brought to light and the abstractions of the earlier logicians and metaphysicians resolved into a more concrete wisdom. Nor has Plato's idea to do with representations in subjective consciousness for the simple reason 'the subject' had yet to be invented. Nor can it make sense to say that he prejudices thought against being. The idea *is* nothing other than the unity of thinking and being, concept and thing: no less the principle of the latter's animation the very being-dog of the dog, the being-just of just actions as of its comprehension. We find the most unambiguous summary of all this in the well-known figure of *Republic* (509d),<sup>14</sup> where differing classes of reality are correlated with types of knowledge appropriate to them. There is here no notion whatever of appearances as the representations of things in thought; the term is applied strictly 'ontically' to things so far as they are mutable existences, both are and are not, are beings in time. Nor are ideas spoken of as mere thought-forms a view explicitly denied in the *Parmenides* dialogue (132b-d) as elsewhere. Rather, as principles of the actuality of things, the ideas are known on the analogy of the way ordinary visible things are seen.<sup>15</sup> There is no notion in Plato, in short, of any radical dissociation of apparent and real or of thought and being in the sense such distinctions acquire in modern philosophy. Plato everywhere is concerned

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<sup>13</sup> The absence of any difference between being and appearance or being and becoming is a theme pursued throughout Nietzsche's philosophy. The "supreme will to power" is described as imposing the stamp of being upon becoming. "The closest approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being" is the metaphor of eternal recurrence (WP 617). Put pre-socratically: "The world exists; it is not something that becomes .. or passes away. Or rather, it passes away, but it has never begun to become and never ceased from passing away ... It lives on itself: its excrements are its food" (WP 1066). This thought is discussed approvingly by Heidegger in Nietzsche, (San Francisco, 1987, ed. D. Krell) v.III, Pt.3, ss.4.

<sup>14</sup> Source: Collected Dialogues of Plato, ed Hamilton/Cairns, Princeton, 1961.

<sup>15</sup> Republic 507d-509b: the idea is neither a thing, nor is it the mere thought; it is the principle through which these are related in knowledge. Plato's figure cannot be squared with any such sharp division between thinking and being as Nietzsche would impute to him.

with showing, not how thinking and being are opposed, but how they might be reconciled in an actual and true knowledge. Whether it can be said he achieved this aim in his theory of 'participation' remains of course open to question, but Nietzsche's account of stark oppositions of Life to Reason and an outright intent of subverting the former through a retreat into an intellectual and moral vacuum is simply glaringly inappropriate to the Platonic context. Only from a 19<sup>th</sup> century standpoint could anything of the kind be even imagined.

### 3. Heidegger's Development Of The Nietzschean Theme

#### (a) Heidegger's 'History' of Being.

Heidegger's ontology belongs to the same romanticist quest for a counter-intellectual absolutism that preoccupied Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, though he brings the argument to a higher plane of refinement. Their common presumption is the modern axiom of self-conscious freedom, the identity of existence and thought, a principle implicit from the outset of philosophy but which reaches its fullest, most definitive articulation in Hegelian philosophy.<sup>16</sup> This unity Heidegger and others wholly assume, but would seek to resolve to immediacy, thus to the primacy of its existential moment. This one-sided resolution sustains itself through the renunciation of the opposite notion, namely that the unity is generated from the side of thinking, a unity only in idea. As it is a question of the unity of being and thinking, however, the latter cannot simply be downplayed in favour of some dumb ontic absolute. The moment of self-conscious freedom must thus somehow be shown to 'belong to being', as Heidegger obscurely puts it; being will have to be newly defined as the absolute ground *both* of the existent *and* of the reflexive apprehension thereof.<sup>17</sup>

The key problematic then becomes: how is one to think that which in principle is *before* thinking; how rationally to demonstrate the grounding of the rational itself in the pre-rational, or consciousness in the unconscious? More generally, how is it possible to defend philosophically a standpoint that is on its own account *pre*-philosophical or (which is really the same) *post*-philosophical. Heidegger conceives this task as one of showing how all that appertains to thinking to consciousness, representation, idea, reason, indeed thought itself can be reconstituted as modes and distinctions within being as more radically understood.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, he would show how any alternative understanding inevitably leads to the converse corruption of the unity of being and

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<sup>16</sup> Heidegger recognizes this in his Introduction to Metaphysics (NY 1961, tr. Manheim, [hereinafter IM], p.158): "The philosophy of the Greeks conquered the Western world not in its original beginning but in the incipient end, which in Hegel assumed great and definitive form."

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger's ontology supersedes and assimilated Husserl's phenomenological standpoint just in this sense that consciousness, pivotal for the latter, is recast as an ontic category, turning up as Dasein, the "being for whom being is a question".

<sup>18</sup> "The differentiation springs from an initial inner union between thinking and being itself. The formula 'being and thinking' designates a differentiation that is demanded as it were by being itself" (IM 101).

thought, reducing it to a mere relation within thinking: the essence, for Heidegger, of historical rationalism.<sup>19</sup>

Following Nietzsche, Heidegger will extend this otherwise wholly contemporary conflict to make it the theme of a vast historico-philosophical drama. An ancient Greek sense of the virginal harmony of thinking with being is adulterated, the victim of a tyrannical misapprehension which divides reason from being, divinizing the former to establish it as the successor to being. This then becomes the essential gospel of Western theology and metaphysics under whose influence over two millennia the original truth of being has been suppressed and all but forgotten. Plato is the first of the 'metaphysicians' to promote the ascendancy of *logos* over *ousia*;<sup>20</sup> the last is Hegel whose system completes the Platonic assimilation of being to the idea. Heidegger is quite literal in his commitment to this curiously melodramatic account:

This differentiation [between 'being and thinking'] is a name for the fundamental attitude of the Western spirit. In accordance with this attitude, being is defined from the standpoint of thinking and reason... The maxim [that thinking and being are the same] became the guiding principle of Western philosophy only when it ceased to be understood because its original truth could not be held fast. The falling away from the truth of this maxim began with the Greeks themselves, immediately after Parmenides (*IM 122*).

In the seemingly unimportant distinction between being and thinking we must discern the fundamental position of the Western spirit against which our central attack is directed. It can be overcome only by a return to its origins, i.e., we must place its initial truth within its own limits and so put it on a new foundation (*IM 99*).

Heidegger thus relies directly upon a para-historical narrative of the origins of Western philosophy, serving as premise and prelude to his own 20<sup>th</sup> century ontology. It might appear, ironically, that in this a certain Hegelian reason-in-history is assumed: an incipient principle becomes a realized end. But Heidegger's interest was clearly never in the history of philosophy as such, in the treatment of which he is notoriously selective

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<sup>19</sup> This existential interpretation of the modern principle Heidegger opposes to modern revolutionary humanism which, appealing to the same unity, presents it from the other side in terms of a radical freedom which subdues existence, thus conforming it to itself. For Engels, the cherry tree in the garden 'exists' only relative to human practical interests; indeed Nature itself is but a 'resource', i.e., a disappearing moment in technical self-activity. For Heidegger, it is rather being, not freedom which is primary, with individuality itself an inexorable 'being-there'. That this human being-there be reducible to a mere being-for technocratic freedom Heidegger considered a perverse and destructive fiction grounded in a gross misapprehension of the "truth of being" and wholly inimical to a real, existential freedom.

<sup>20</sup> There are a number of Heidegger's writings dealing directly or indirectly with Plato's "doctrine of truth", including the essay so named. But though nuance and focus change, his thesis remains virtually unchanged from what is argued in *An Introduction to Metaphysics (IM)* to which, for convenience's sake, all further references will apply. For a closer account of the consistency of Heidegger's view of Plato see R.J. Dostal, "Beyond Being: Heidegger's Plato", in C. Macann, ed., *Martin Heidegger: Critical Assessments*, (London, 1992).

and even cavalier.<sup>21</sup> His principal interest was only in showing that, and how, Christian-European modernity should be seen to rest on, thus originate in, an 'historical' fallacy.

Heidegger's call for a "deconstruction" of the Western metaphysical tradition as prerequisite to a 20<sup>th</sup> century reawakening to the truth of being is thus, in reality, an a-historical, or better, an ultra-historical exercise. Nietzsche similarly offers, not a history, but a 'genealogy' of nihilism, that is, a purported ancestry of modern decadence. Their aim in common is not to review the history of philosophy as such, but to expose the philosophical spirit itself as symptomatic of cultural degeneracy. Nietzsche calls it a sickness to which they claim to bear witness in their own time. The appeal to reconstructed history only serves to reinforce the main thesis, which springs from a wholly *contemporary* perception of modern culture as corrupted by a predominating rational-spiritual outlook, intrinsically repressive of what is presumed as the original, natural freedom of the existing individual. What passes as history is a romanticist fable of the fall from this 'authentic' freedom, the subsequent centuries of wandering in the desert, and the possibility of recovering it anew in an ultra-modern return to nature which would reunite post-history with pre-history.

The relation of such a standpoint to the *actual* history of thought is highly ambiguous. It addresses that tradition with the explicit intent of undermining it, since it is chiefly in contraposing itself with it that it defines itself. In this manner, however, it remains dependent on the very tradition it would undermine, assumes and negatively conserves it, even remains obsessively tied to it. Appeal is made to an elemental natural freedom spoken of as at once originary and radically new; an ancient freedom that comes once again to light with the flight of Minerva's owl as a philosophy-dominated European history draws to a close. It would transcend that history through a return to what are perceived as primordial, pre-European insights.<sup>22</sup> This is the general procedure respecting the treatment of the history of philosophy followed by all the continental critics from Nietzsche to Derrida, issuing themselves thereby a powerful license to rewrite that presupposed history as a means of affecting a liberation from it. All have recourse to the Greeks, for where Philosophy begins there also must its insipient limit be found. Thus Heidegger:

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<sup>21</sup> See IM 130 for Heidegger's remarkable view that history is always and essentially decline rather than progress. This flows necessarily from an existential standpoint for which there neither is nor can be an objective, historical world. If he can say "world is always the world of Spirit" (IM 37), 'world' is here meant in an entirely onto-psychological, i.e., existential sense. History likewise becomes for Heidegger an existential moment in Dasein, 'historicity', rendered in accordance with a curiously para-Hegelian view of temporality: "History is not synonymous with the past; for the past is precisely what is no longer happening ... [nor with] the merely contemporary, which never happens but merely 'passes'... It is precisely the present that vanishes in happening" (IM 38). Hegel observed that in this ever-vanishing present, time also vanishes, but Heidegger will hold the line at this point.

<sup>22</sup> Heidegger and Nietzsche are certainly not alone in the celebration of everything primitive, primordial, original, natural-cultural as against what is developed, constituted, mediated and historical. The same remains one of the most powerful themes in contemporary culture, but it was they who had a great deal to do with garnering philosophical respectability for this extreme polarization in which, in Nietzsche's formula, spirit again becomes nature and freedom instinct.

We shall only master Greek philosophy as the beginning of Western philosophy if we also understand this beginning in the beginning of its end. For the ensuing period it was only this end that became the 'beginning'. So much so that it concealed the original beginning. But this beginning of the end of the great beginning, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, remains great even if we totally discount the greatness of its Western consequences (*HM 150*)

In Heidegger's account, Plato's introduction of 'philosophy' marks the turning point when a profound insight into the meaning of being to which the early Greeks had uninhibited access is displaced by another, contrary apprehension. A rupture occurs; dynamics intrinsic to a 'natural' consciousness which knows itself as 'belonging to being', are separated from their source and given a life of their own. There is generated a spurious order of emasculated categories, presided over by a similarly denatured reason which only calculates the meaning and value of appearances in accordance with these intellectual categories. The provision of a discourse appropriate to the pursuit and defence of this spurious 'ideal' world is the import of Plato's teaching, and upon it the whole of European intellectual and moral culture was founded.

Latent in this unusual narrative, however, is a much more contemporary interest: to confute the reigning Kantian *cum*-phenomenological view, the legacy of German idealism, in which everything whatever, in its most extreme statement even the so-called thing-itself, stands in relation to consciousness. Heidegger's ontological absolutism seeks to be more than another critique of this idealism carried out on its terms, that is, in terms of relations and oppositions of consciousness. He would seek to transcend this whole context through a meta-ontology of existence so described as already comprehensive of the phenomenological relation, an ontology thus radically preemptive of the standpoint of subjective consciousness which forms the very basis of idealism in both its theoretical and practical forms.<sup>23</sup> It is with this in mind that Heidegger attempts to rewrite the history of philosophy as a history of idealism so defined, tracing its flaw to an alleged fatal severing of the bond between existence and appearance, leading to a pseudo-ontology of the representations of consciousness 'appearances' in the Kantian sense which Plato, apparently a Kantian before his time, was the first to articulate.

It was in the Sophists and in Plato that appearance was declared to be mere appearance and thus degraded. At the same time being, as *idea*, was exalted to a suprasensory realm. A chasm ... was created between the merely apparent existent here below and real being somewhere on high. In that chasm Christianity settled down ... [turned] these refashioned weapons against antiquity (as paganism) and so disfigured it. Nietzsche was right in saying that Christianity is Platonism for the people.. Distinct from all this, the great age of Greece was a single creative self-assertion amid the confused, intricate struggle between the powers of being and appearance... For the thinking of the early Greek thinkers the

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<sup>23</sup> Heidegger's critique of practical reason likewise traces the roots of modern morality and technocracy to an alleged Platonic confusion of doing with making.

unity and conflict of being and appearances preserved their original power  
(*IM 89-90*).

Heidegger here echoes, virtually word for word, Nietzsche's apocalyptic narrative of a present European crisis retraceable to a cultural catastrophe occurring at the end of the "great age of Greece", a rupture epitomized in Plato's philosophical world-view and sowing the poisoned seed of modern humanism. This 'exalting' of ideas and 'degrading' of appearances springs from a misapprehension of a unity of *physis* and *logos* which, according to Heidegger, Plato's predecessors already well knew, a unity wherein nature comprehends reason as a difference grounded wholly in itself. This relation Plato turns quite on its head, inaugurating thereby a legacy of 'logo-centrism' which reaches its apex in the system of Hegel where ideas in thought are explicitly equated, on Heidegger's account, with "the reality of the real".<sup>24</sup>

In defending these astonishing assertions Heidegger does not, since he cannot, make appeal to reasoned argument, such appeal being precisely the essence of the Socratic-Platonic vice he wishes to call into question. This presents him with a unique dilemma, typical of all post-philosophical critique: if the authority of speculative thought is to be in principle denied, then no *reason* can be given why 'Being' should have been sundered, revealing itself to later Greeks in such a paradoxically self-negative way. (Nietzsche's earlier formulation of this dilemma: "How is the will-not-to-will even possible?") Nor can there be any rational accounting for why 'Being' then withdrew behind a curtain of forgetfulness, waiting for two thousand years for modern Germany and Heidegger. Absent reasoned historico-philosophical argument, then, to what *other* evidence or authority can Heidegger appeal to authenticate this strange narrative, to define its terms, and convincingly describe for us the before-and-after of the crucial Platonic turn supposed to have given birth to Europe?

(b) Philosophy as Etymology.

Heidegger's well-known recourse is to language, based on the presumption that reality as it is for particular times and peoples has its primary expression in linguistic culture, the way words are generated and commonly understood. If it is in language that the spirit foundational of a given people finds its first embodiment, then to discover the original sense of their language is to rediscover their original and defining spirit. Not thought, not philosophy, but the disclosure of the primitive roots of key speculative terms thus becomes the chief access to the way "being" appears to a particular age and culture;<sup>25</sup> moreover, the degree to which a culture conserves or corrupts its original language is the measure of its 'greatness' or 'decadence'. With Heidegger, words replace concepts as the official lingua franca of philosophy, semiotics becomes the pilgrim's path back to a forgotten wisdom, and metaphysics is pursued anew under cover of etymology.

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<sup>24</sup> This view of the Hegelian idea as the reduction of reality to its mental representation has become a commonplace, even though nothing could be more alien to either the language or the logic of Hegel's philosophy.

<sup>25</sup> "Language is the primordial poetry in which a people speaks being." (*IM 144*)



The notion of 'original meaning' is, of course, fraught with ambiguity. Clearly related to other romantic notions of return to a pristine, pre-intellectual and instinctive life and wisdom, it prizes the aboriginal over the civilized, feeling over thought, myth over history and an aesthetical view of nature as opposed to science's meddling intellect.<sup>26</sup> It is no startling revelation of contemporary hermeneutics to observe, however, that a fatal circularity plagues any attempt to identify such a thing as an 'original' meaning; the search for a linguistic source of the Nile is bound to degenerate, as the romanticist mentality itself, into a sort of unrequited longing. For one thing, only a divine etymologist could avoid introducing into any such research much that belongs to her own derivative linguistic context. More important for philosophy, when substituted for reasoned argument the etymological method provides its practitioners with unlimited license, a license bound to be abused, to introduce and promote all manner of assumptions and convictions by the linguistic back door. Plato himself deals specifically with these issues in the *Cratylus*;

This is certainly the case with Heidegger who sets many such traps for his readers. In accepting his version of the sense of certain Greek terms, one unwittingly commits to an ultra-modernist account of the world put into the mouths of ancient thinker-heroes who are assigned various roles, as in a Verdi opera, in a contrived metaphysical melodrama. How plausible, really, are Heidegger's etymological exercises? How much is Greek original insight and how much late German ontology? It is not easy to know, and it is a question whether all the classical scholarship in the world could ever tell us, for reasons which Plato, again, spells out clearly in *Cratylus*. But aside from all learned appeals to philology, it is instructive simply to compare Heidegger's overt account of the meaning of certain key Greek terms with the account Plato himself gives of the same, sticking strictly to the *philosophical* import of any difference.

Heidegger's typical tactic is to inform us, without much ado, as to how the Greeks of the golden age purportedly understood certain words. This he contrasts with later, post-Socratic uses, reading into any divergence, not just the common variability witnessed in all growing languages, but the weightiest metaphysical implications such as tax the most generous credulity. His basic thesis is familiar: the ordinary Greek view of being, he says, is expressed in the word *physis* ('nature'), whose meaning he variously gives as the appearing, manifest presence or standing-forth of the existent as such and on the whole. Moreover, he says, the Greeks "called the appearance of a thing *eidōs* or *idea*", a term which, since it suggests a visual context, implies the "coming to light of the existent."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See IM 84. Romanticism has its philosophical form in 19th century metaphysical expressionism for which all that occurs in nature, history or experience is construed as utterly 'phenomenal' in the distinct sense of being but the outward self-manifestation of an Absolute that remains in itself hidden; whose 'reasons' are therefore entirely inscrutable or encountered only aesthetically, mystically or in feeling. Heidegger is fully in this tradition. See my "The Beginning of the End of Metaphysics", *Dionysius* v.15, pp.113-123.

<sup>27</sup> Here again Heidegger assumes an equivalence of idea and representation with Plato, discordant with Plato's own view which always equates the idea with the principle of a thing, never its 'representation', which latter term in any case belongs to another era. The alleged degenerate meaning of idea attributed to Plato is a fiction of Heidegger's construction, as is the whole idea of an original identification of logos with physis among the ancients.

Here Heidegger has already afforded being precedence over thought: the existent is first, and the significance of *eidōs* shifted bodily, and un-Platonically, to suggest the being-seen of the existent rather than what belongs to the act of seeing. Furthermore, granting a certain ambiguity inheres in the concept of appearance which allows distinction to be made between the appearing of being ("unconcealment") of what appears and that appearance as such (as what has "come on the scene"), Heidegger will insist the difference is no difference, that appearance "belongs" wholly to being, that being is the "essence" of the appearance, that being and appearing are thus the same, and that this indeed is how pre-Socratic Greeks understood the term *idea*: as the apprehension of the apparent as grounded in *physis* and one with it.

It amounts to the same to say that 'being' really *is* nothing else but what appears; that what appears *is* the thing itself, that the distinction between reality and appearance is no distinction. Nietzsche everywhere makes this point and it has Heidegger's express approval. "Appearing is not something subsequent that sometimes happens to being," he writes, "appearing is the very essence of being" (*IM 83ff*; also 92,93). He grants one may differentiate between the appearing of being as such and appearances existing things and events as such. But he insists that the existent entails nothing else beyond being itself; that it is being's very own unconcealment, its "coming upon the scene". Thus the distinction 'being-appearance' itself belongs entirely to being.

It is striking how exactly this very stressed view of the matter accords with the general tenets of modern romanticist ontology. In Heidegger's narrative, Plato really *meant* to use the *idea*-word as any Greek would to refer to the way being appears, but he fell into the error of viewing the matter from his own human standpoint which had the effect of driving a wedge between things and appearances, between *physis* and *eidōs*, whereby the former becomes "degraded" and the latter "exalted". So detached from what it is that appears, the appearances achieve a seeming reality of their own; by falsely construing *eidōs* as the "essence of the existent" the latter is afforded a prominence sustained only by abstract thought. In such a scheme even 'being' becomes a mere universal, an empty word, and nature or *physis* a problematical reality subordinated to the new 'ideal world' of ideas.

What does it mean that *physis* should have been interpreted as *idea* in Plato?... The word *idea* means that which is seen in the visible, the aspect it offers. What is offered is the appearance, *eidōs*, of what confronts us. The appearance of a thing is that wherein, as we say, it presents, introduces itself to us, places itself before us ... i.e., in the Greek sense *is*. A *consequence* is exalted to the level of the essence itself and takes the place of the essence... We then have a falling-off, which must in turn produced strange consequences. The crux of the matter is not that *physis* should have been characterized as *idea* but that the *idea* should have become the sole and decisive interpretation of being (*IM 151-2*).

With Plato nature is no longer the ground of appearance, rather the appearance (for Heidegger = the *idea*) has become the basis for the interpretation of nature. But all this

has an extreme and quite unfamiliar ring. How can Plato be thought to have had any such inversion of things in mind? How far does the significance Heidegger assigns to Platonic terminology actually accord with what is expressly to be found in Plato's own writings? Could Heidegger be guilty of thrusting 20<sup>th</sup> century paradigms inappropriately upon an ancient text and context? The everyday reader of the dialogues will certainly be astonished to learn that Plato was not at all interested in the truth of being but only in the appearances; that he introduced the idea only as a device for rendering the latter absolute, referring them, not to their proper ground, but to their own abstract nature. No such account of things can be found in Plato's own express arguments, nor could it explain his tireless war against the Sophists whose arguments he saw as predicated precisely on some such Parmenidean dissociation of real and apparent, reconciled only by a Protagorean reduction of being to its mere apprehension. On Heidegger's account it turns out that Plato is supreme among Sophists, carrying their argument to its extreme by extending the relativism of Gorgias, for whom being can neither be known nor said, into a more radical idealism where being is expressly identified with its representation. Heidegger would appear to have turned Plato's thought into a parody on German idealism, a caricature of a caricature.

Heidegger performs the same etymological rearguard action with respect to two related issues where Plato is again implicated as the perverter of an original Greek understanding. First Heidegger charges Plato and Aristotle with corrupting the original Heraclitean sense of *logos*, whereby it becomes the foundation of 'logic', a purely epistemic technique addressed to the calculation of relations among representations.<sup>28</sup> Second, he accuses Plato of perpetrating a fatal misunderstanding of the famous Parmenidean aphorism on the sameness of thinking and being, an original Greek insight, in Heidegger's view, which now at last needs to be rescued from the Platonic distortion.

We go back to the two decisive thinkers, Parmenides and Heraclitus, and attempt once more to gain admittance into the Greek world, whose foundations, even though distorted and transposed, covered and concealed, still sustain our world. *Precisely because we have embarked on the great venture of demolishing a world that has grown old and of rebuilding it authentically anew ... we must know the tradition.*<sup>29</sup>

Of all the early Greek thinkers it is Heraclitus who, in the course of Western philosophy, has suffered the most transformation along un-Greek lines... Christianity was responsible for the misinterpretation of Heraclitus. It was begun by the Old Church Fathers. Hegel was still in this tradition...(IM 106-7)

According to Heidegger's reconstruction, the original sense of *logos* is 'to gather together, to collect'. Such a use can certainly be verified by reference to any college

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<sup>28</sup> "[Logic] began when Greek philosophy was drawing to an end and becoming an affair of schools, organization, and technique. It began when eon, the being of the essent, was represented as idea and as such became the 'object' of episteme." (IM 102)

<sup>29</sup> Italics added. The statement epitomizes the romanticist project. Derrida has given a similarly negative rationale for continuing the study of the tradition to become free of it.

lexicon, but Heidegger according to his typical regressive method deliberately downplays more developed meanings such as 'reasoned account' meanings which in fact fit far more readily into the flow of the Heraclitean argument to look for more 'original' senses which better accord with his own intent. The alternative 'gathering'<sup>30</sup> better suits Heidegger's purpose since it allows him to cite the 'original' sense of *logos* as the "the intrinsic togetherness of the existing thing", even though no lexicon could possibly support any such complex extension. But Heidegger is driven by the wish to maintain that *logos* and *physis* are the same; that *logos* is just being itself in its aspect of an all-pervasive power binding together a multifarious phenomenality. (*IM 109-110*) But to conscript Heraclitus in defence of such an improbable rendering is overtly to ignore what he himself actually says, which is not that everyday things and events are "disparate and antagonistic" yet unified through their "intrinsic togetherness" in being, as Heidegger puts it, but that they are utterly and intrinsically unstable, self-divided, their being just as much a non-being and *vice versa*. What alone remains stable is the *logos* itself, specifically defined as the immanent identity of opposites, most tellingly the opposition of being and non-being which everywhere rules in the finite world.

This hardly accords with Heidegger's account; nonetheless it is Plato once more who is accused of misunderstanding Heraclitus, of distorting his alleged pristine encounter with *logos* as the togetherness that belongs to *physis*, setting it over against being as something independent. Yet in any discussion one might care to mention, Plato never (mis)represents Heraclitus in any such way; on the contrary, he shares with his contemporaries the plainer understanding of the *logos* as a stable principle of the unity-of-opposites immanent in an otherwise meaningless welter of the changeable. The *logos* is never represented as something apart from or beyond the way things appear, but as their own inward and animating principle.

To describe the *logos* merely as the "togetherness" of beings in being is to say something far more banal than Heraclitus, by his own account, clearly intended. Does this dilution of his powerful principle represent Heidegger's best effort to enlist him in support of his own radically onto-centric interpretation of pre-Platonic Greek thought? Is it not rather Heidegger who corrupts the Heraclitean argument in support of his own expressionist view of the immediate relation of the absolute to the finite with the *logos* signifying nothing more nothing higher or deeper than the mere togetherness of one in the other? So to place the *logos* at the level of appearances as expressing (all too vaguely) a certain togetherness implied by a common groundedness in what it is that appears; then to present this account as an 'original' Greek understanding in relation to which all other interpretations, including Plato's, are to be rejected as un-Greek; such an account, if plausible at all, is at least nowhere to be verified in anything Heraclitus is known to have said.

Heidegger pursues a similar stratagem with regard to the famous "word" of Parmenides which he claims has been subject to "a misinterpretation no less un-Greek than the falsification of the Heraclitean doctrine of the *logos*." (*HM 115*) The relevant

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<sup>30</sup> He also avoids the obvious implication that 'to grasp or gather together' might equally be well rendered by the all-too-logical term 'con-cept'.

fragments seem straightforward enough: *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai* (frag. 5) and *tauton d'esti noein te kai houneken esti noema* (frag. 8). The first is typically rendered by something like 'thinking and being are the same', the second as 'thinking and what is for thought are the same', both broadly suggesting the principle that 'thinking is always and only of what is', or negatively, 'what is not is unthinkable'. This is consistent with what Parmenides and his disciples such as Zeno directly argue. The reading Heidegger comes up with, however, is mediated by a host of strained and elaborate etymological interpretations. For example, regarding *noein*, a word routinely translated in most languages as 'thinking' or some variant, Heidegger chooses to translate it as 'apprehension' (*Vernehmen*). If 'thinking' has a distinctly active connotation, 'apprehension' suggests passive awareness, as of something already given and merely borne witness to. Here again, by an exercise in etymological legerdemain, the matter has already been biased in favour of a view of thinking as a moment in being, as 'belonging to' it. Heidegger further explains in the following neologistic definition: "Apprehension (*noien*) is the receptive bringing-to-stand of the intrinsically permanent that manifests itself." (*IM 117*)

Regarding *einai*, Heidegger is again concerned that we first understand 'being' in his way, which he has decided is also the way the Greeks of the great age understood it: namely as *unconcealment*, the manifesting of the unmanifest. Finally the phrase *to auto ... te kai*, is not to be understood in the conventional sense of 'the same as', but as 'belonging to', this more oblique translation allowing Heidegger to avoid any suggestion of identity of thinking and being and to say no more than that they somehow 'belong together'. The end result of all these labourious lexical machinations is that it can now be declared on behalf of Parmenides that *noein*, while distinguishable within *physis*, is not different than it; that thinking is in no way autonomous but belongs to being; it is being itself that calls apprehension into play.<sup>31</sup> Given these etymological premises, Heidegger can provide his own final, if staggeringly convoluted, translation of Frag. 5: "Where being prevails, apprehension prevails and happens with it; the two belong together" or again, more abstrusely, "Being dominates, but because and insofar as it dominates and appears, appearing and *with* it apprehension must *also* occur." Frag. 8 gets similar treatment: "The same is apprehension and that for the sake of which apprehension occurs" or "There is an inherent bond between apprehension and that for the sake of which apprehension occurs." (*IM 117*)

Such cumbersome transpositions of simple Greek statements into 20<sup>th</sup> century expressionist jargon do great violence to the simple wisdom of the Parmenidean principle. Could Parmenides ever have thought any such thing? It is clear that Plato, at least, understood this principle in its literal, unadulterated sense: being alone is conceivable; of what is not, of non-being there can only be ignorance. But his was nonetheless far from an unqualified acceptance of Parmenides' proviso: there is another, ambiguous world of things that both are and are not, a knowledge of which the abstract Parmenidean identity of being and thinking will not allow. Contrary to his traditional

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<sup>31</sup> Heidegger's well-known essay *Was heisst Denken?* tortures the ordinary German way of asking the a question like "What is 'x'?" (or, What do we mean by 'x?'), until he finally forces the expression to read: "what is it that calls forth thinking?".

caricature, which Heidegger further reinforces, Plato was always and ever concerned with how there could be a concrete knowledge of the finite and changeable world, the world of 'appearances'; with how the One might be known in the Many and the Many as participating the One.<sup>32</sup> In this he parts company with *both* Heraclitus and Parmenides; in the *Parmenides* dialogue, Zeno's celebrated deconstruction of any knowledge deriving from the finite, showing it to fall inevitably into contradictions, is matched by an equally cogent demonstration by Socrates showing how a knowledge commencing from the strict standpoint of the Parmenidean disjunction leads also to many absurdities. At no point does Plato suggest a solution to lie in any dissociation of thinking from being, the source of unity to lie subjectively in the knower's representations. In *Parmenides* that solution is clearly and explicitly repudiated. (*Parmenides* 132b)

The *idea* is Plato's deeper rendering of the unity of thinking and being. It is uniformly spoken of as the objective principle of beings the comprehension of which constitutes a true knowledge of them. The idea is neither thing nor thought but being and essence at once; though itself neither plant nor eye, the sun is both the source of the living thing and the light that makes the sight of it possible (*Repub.* 580). There is never any suggestion in Plato that ideas belong to the realm of appearances, as no more than the latter's abstract representation, as Heidegger and Nietzsche perversely construe his position. Nothing, indeed, could be more at odds with what Plato consistently maintains; the idea is never associated with how things appear to us that he clearly defines as a Sophist position. Nor does he locate them in a sort of Pythagorean thought-world away and beyond what is immediately evident. Even if Aristotle thought he never adequately answered it, for Plato the question of the ideas had nothing to do with how a changeful world might be bypassed en route to some metaphysical heaven, nor with rendering the appearances as such absolute, as on Heidegger's account, by fixing them in their abstract essences. It had to do with whether and how the actual, mutable world might be somewhat comprehended if only its own immanent intelligible principles could be discerned.

In his criticism of Plato, Heidegger places an inordinate burden on the interpretation of ancient Greek terms and texts. There is already an extensive scholarly literature dealing with the legitimacy or otherwise of his strained transliterations which characteristically tend to revert to peripheral or pre-philosophical usages with which to confront their later philosophical sense. Applied generally, such a method would reduce most developed terms to perplexing banality: a cause would be a confession of guilt, to make lace to fashion a noose, a lady is a bread-maker and so on. Not only that, but where only the 'original' sense of words is considered meaningful, effective translation from one tongue to another tongue would be rendered virtually impossible, which Heidegger and his followers are often tempted to argue anyway.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See James Doull on these matters, to appear in this number of *Animus*.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger makes much of the superiority of Greek and German languages as alone capable of expressing spiritual truth. (IM 47) Where there is no appeal beyond language to thought the result is linguistic fascism, instantiated in the Heideggerean argument that, while German-speakers intuitively can appreciate the Greek sense of *ousia*, English-speakers cannot, hearing only *techne*.

Plato presses many ordinary words into service as philosophical concepts which acquire thereby another and distinctive sense that may or may not accord with simpler or more common usages. The same is true of most words one can think of: is a soul (*pneuma*), for example, really no more than a breath? The prima facie instance is Heidegger's treatment of *eidos* and *idea* which in common ancient usage did indeed connote the way something is seen, how it looks. It is clear on every page of his writings, however, that Plato did *not* intend *eidos* or *idea* to be understood in any such commonplace way but that he had deliberately altered and upgraded the term for an original and sophisticated philosophical use. Yet Heidegger, on the basis of nothing more than an appeal to a literal, everyday use of these words, accuses him of dire metaphysical mischief, specifically of confusing the being of things with their mere representation in thought, even though there is hardly a page where Plato does not argue exactly the converse. Heidegger turns language into a prison-house; he denies to Plato a freedom expressively to mould language which he himself profusely indulges. When we, on the other hand, read that language is the "house of being" in which "man dwells" we do not ask Heidegger if reference is being made to some inn in the Schwarzwald into which one might move bag and baggage.

#### **4. Plato's Response: Language As Prison-House**

Without joining these etymological wars, it is instructive to ask what Plato himself would think of Heidegger's method. Something of a fair answer is available in the *Cratylus*, a dialogue which specifically addresses the limits of etymology as a means of deciding philosophical matters. There Plato considers the two principal alternatives regarding the origin of linguistic meaning which still confound semiotic theory today: is the attachment of particular meanings to particular words purely arbitrary, conventional in the radical sense of a pure matter of chance? Or must we suppose that linguistic conventions are for the most part derivative and their meaning disclosed only by referring back to original meaning the faith of the etymologist? In the dialogue the contradiction stemming immediately from the first option is quickly recognized and agreed upon: strict conventionalism would mean anything anyone says will be 'true'; it would be impossible to judge of a right or a wrong use of words. The remainder of the argument then focuses on the second hypothesis, the possibility that linguistic conventions can be traced back to some original source of meaning, that is, to some sort of authentic bond between language and reality, word and thing.

How is such an original bond between language and being to be imagined? One typical image is that of a primeval people gifted with immediate and immaculate insight into their own reality and condition, a reality directly embodied and expressed in their language and culture. In such an 'original' condition, merely to speak at all is to speak the truth, and this provides a standard against which the sense of derivative languages can be measured. To such an image Heidegger appeals when he looks to the linguistic usages of the "Greeks of the great age" as the prime standard of metaphysical meaning.

In the *Cratylus* Socrates and his interlocutors make use of a similar metaphor by imagining an ancient "legislator" or "giver of names" whose business was appropriately to discover and assign words to things. This figure is no less legitimate than Heidegger's fiction of a pristine linguistic culture whose authority he demands we simply accept. But it does more obviously beg the question as to what reasons a name-giver might adduce to justify his choosing just this sound or squiggle over some other as most appropriate to naming a particular entity or event. The search for linguistic originality is in this way driven back to the vain attempt to find a direct link between verbal structures and the natural events and sensations they are employed to signify.

Plato points to a number of glaring pitfalls to which the etymological search for an original, unadulterated vocabulary is in principle prone. Can it literally expect to arrive at its goal, or is the search by nature an endless one? If the former, then it is a matter of some amazement why this original language was ever given up, why so hopelessly masked by derivatives as to be rendered virtually indiscernible, or why indeed there could have ever been any other language but this original one. But if the latter is true and the etymological road is open-ended, then how, without the standard of the original sense being known, can that of *any* derivative term be determined? As Plato puts it:

... any sort of ignorance of first or primitive names involves an ignorance of secondary words, for they can only be explained by the primary. Clearly then the professor of languages should be able to give a very lucid explanation of first names or let him be assured he will only talk nonsense about the rest.<sup>34</sup>

A further problem: if meaning is inevitably imprisoned in language and as etymologists we are working from within our own derivative culture and language, how could we hope to recognize an underived meaning even if we encountered one? Unless we could leap out of our own cultural-linguistic skins, any such determination will be bound to be prejudiced, colored by the linguistic perspective from which it is carried out. For instance, how could a 20<sup>th</sup> century German academic, however well educated in the classics, mediaeval philosophy and Schopenhauer, be so confident of his reading of certain ancient Greek terms as to declare they give evidence of an aboriginal and authentic encounter with the very truth of being?

Even if one assumes the legitimacy of etymological inquiry in general, there is still a host of practical obstacles to frustrate the search for the original sources of particular words. Plato provides some examples:

... the original forms of words may have been lost in the lapse of ages [and] names so twisted in all manner of ways that I should not be surprised if the older language when compared with that now in use would appear to us to be a barbarous tongue (*CR 421d*).

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<sup>34</sup> *Cratylus* 426a,ff. (hereafter CR)



Moreover, there is no way we can know whether, how, why or by whom particular words may have been significantly altered along the way, and for reasons extraneous to what they are meant to signify:

... you know that the original names have been long ago buried and disguised by people sticking on and stripping off letters for the sake of euphony, and twisting and bedizening them in all sorts of ways; and time too may have had a share in the change (*CR 414c*).

Much of the *Cratylus* is devoted to exhibiting the utter arbitrariness with which the words and their meanings change and develop.<sup>35</sup> Socrates and his friends nonetheless try their hand at a few etymological conjectures, for example, as to why the ancients named their gods and virtues as they did. The tone is throughout tongue-in-cheek for Plato is all too aware of the limits of such inquiry. He does acknowledge that some terms do have a 'natural' origin in the limited sense that words originally designating natural phenomena are often borrowed and modified to express more sophisticated notions. That the word for 'runners', *theous*, came into use as a general name for the gods, for example, may derive from the fact that the earliest divinities were associated with the celestial bodies, ever on the move (*CR 397d*). Similarly, it is noted *anthropos* actually suggests an animal, though one who looks up and reflects on what he sees; and *psyche* borrows on the breath that sustains the body to suggest the power which sustains nature itself (*CR399c-e*). This familiar feature of the ordinary development of language, which Plato accepts, where natural images and analogies are exploited to generate terms with a more complex and abstract meaning, stands in contrast with Heidegger's deconstructive use of etymology, employed to force the reverse assimilation of a developed meaning to an undeveloped one, as a means of getting at the former's 'real truth'. Such is his claim that because *psyche* has etymological roots in *physis* a claim Plato explicitly rejects we are to conclude that spirit belongs to nature, which of course is to destroy the whole sense of the term; or because *eidōs* has the common meaning in Greek of something seen that Plato is to be denied the luxury of adopting the term to express a purely intellectual intuition.

In the *Cratylus* Plato includes in his ironic survey some of the philosophical terms that are the subject of Heidegger's earnest pronouncements. This is interesting since it is fair to assume that Plato, uncluttered by two millennia of speculative metaphysics and actually living and breathing the linguistic tradition in question, might certainly be as reliable an etymological witness as Heidegger. A key example: Heidegger's ontological absolutism requires the conversion of all cognitive relations into modalities of being. It is thus especially important for him to claim that even the word 'truth' initially had an ontic sense. To this end he gives the original meaning of the ordinary Greek term for truth, *aletheia*, as 'unconcealedness', based on an analysis of this word into the elements *a-* (not) and *lethe* (forgetfulness, oblivion). Truth is thus being as a "standing out from oblivion". Plato has an entirely different take on the word, however; his analysis yields

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<sup>35</sup> The *Cratylus* is often described as indulging overmuch in aimless, even frivolous conjecturing about the origins of words. But it is surely Plato's point to demonstrate the indeterminability that is bound to attach to any attempt to 'explain' language in terms of itself, as Derrida, which is to say un-philosophically, without reference to thought.

instead *ale* and *theia*, thus something like "the divine movement of existence" (*CR 421b*). On this account the truth of being lies in the divine element latent in it, its intelligible moment, its 'idea'.

Some further contrasts: Plato tells us that *legein* originally suggests questioning; possibly also the art of speechifying and dissembling. The term *logos* accordingly comes later to mean making a case, giving reasons or grounds, and with Heraclitus is used still more specifically to signify a universal principle of a unity-in-opposition underlying the manifest impermanence of the finite. Heidegger however, as earlier noted, insists on reverting to a more prosaic form of the same stem, 'gather together'. By so restricting its meaning he is enabled to insist that in its 'original' sense *logos* refers to an aspect of being. Being as the 'togetherness' of beings a suggestion nowhere to be found in Heraclitus and which indeed contradicts how he does actually speak of the matter. By completely ignoring the overt argument of the fragments and their explicit reference to the term *logos* to suggest an immanent reason or cause, Heidegger would seek to enlist Heraclitus on behalf of his own attack on the Platonic philosophy.

One last contrast: as also noted earlier, Heidegger insists on translating *noein* as *Vernehmen*, 'apprehension' or 'bearing witness', his interest again being to make thought over into a modality of being. So to limit thinking to passive apprehension preempts any notion of thought as spontaneous or constitutive; just as describing being as 'self-presenting' precludes any notion of thinking as an active 'representation', which Heidegger regards as a corruption. Yet Plato's analysis of the same word yields an entirely different thought. *Noein* is broken down into *neou* and *esis*: 'desire of the new', implying a "world always in process of creation" toward which "the giver of the name wanted to express his longing of the soul...", an analysis far more consistent with other typical constructions.<sup>36</sup>

Apart from the striking differences with respect to the roots of specific terms it is clear Plato had far less faith than did Heidegger in the fruitfulness of etymological method, on which point he makes a number of telling comments. For one thing, as with analysis generally, there is the difficulty of ever bringing the process to completion:

... if a person goes on analyzing names into words, and inquiring also into the elements out of which the words are formed, and keeps on always repeating this process, he who has to answer him must at last give up the inquiry in despair (*CR 421e*).

Further, there is a danger in supposing any so-called root meaning to be any more authentic or enlightened than its derivative:

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<sup>36</sup> For instance Socrates speculates that the name 'Athena' might stem from a combination of *theou* and *noesis*, thus 'divine mind', or from *ethei* and *noesin*, thus 'moral intelligence'. (407b) It would be impossible to make sense of this or many other constructions from *noein* (the closing words of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, for example) using Heidegger's 'apprehension'..

He who follows names in the search after things, and analyzes their meaning, is in great danger of being deceived ... [for] clearly he who first gave names gave them according to his own conception of things ... and if his conception was erroneous .. in what position shall we who are his followers find ourselves? (436a-b).

There is thus a dogmatic quality to any claim that a word as used in an earlier time, among the Greeks of the great age for example, expressed the truth of things more authentically than does our use of it. We have reason to be wary of those who speak of 'original meanings', especially of philosophical terms.

Finally, the search for a primitive bond between language and reality inevitably tends to some version of psycho-semiotics (in our time, 'analytic philosophy') based on the doctrine that language imitates nature, that words denote facts and ultimately that letters, syllables and words mirror sensory phenomena.<sup>37</sup>

That objects should be imitated in letters and syllables, and so find expression, may appear ridiculous, Hermogenes, but it cannot be avoided (CR 425d).

To follow this path is to become inevitably entangled in onomatopoeic speculations as to how various things and occurrences are appropriately expressed in verbal clicks, grunts, swooshes, whines and glottal stops, a procedure Plato mercilessly lampoons. But the very idea of a direct, causal relation between words and sensory experience begs a great number of questions, among them: why, if literally rooted in a universal experience of nature, would not all languages be the same? Why would such a first-order form be abandoned and languages become so various and complex? Could what derives from a strict imitation of the sensory provide a linguistic resource sufficient to cover the whole breadth and depth of human experience? (CR 434.ff) Clearly, attempts to disclose any such direct and literal causal relation between words and world go nowhere; they must be motivated by something more than themselves.

What could it be, Plato finally asks, that makes the idea of archetypical meaning, a direct relation of language to reality, so powerful and attractive? He offers an answer: we are rightly convinced that when we know the word we somehow also know the thing. But it is illegitimate to conclude that words literally imitate reality, express it bodily, or "house" it. For inevitably, when we attempt to find our way back to some such original bond between word and thing we are led down one garden path after another:

[in this] battle of names, some asserting that they are like the truth, others contending that *they* are, how or by what criterion are we to decide between them? ... Obviously recourse must be had to another standard

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<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein's proposal that words are "pictures" of facts now seems astonishing in its sheer literalism, but it electrified a whole generation which produced mountains of now largely useless research dedicated to discovering what "is" or "of" are pictures of, or how Russell's "cat on the mat" exactly corresponds with an actual cat actually on an actual mat.

which, without employing names, will make clear which of the two is right, and this must be standard which shows the truth of things (*CR 438d*).

The real question then is what this "other standard" might be: what *is* it that names name; to what do words, however arbitrary or conventional their composition and origin, actually refer? The answer for Plato cannot be found by looking for their 'ontic' meanings, i.e., how being is domiciled in them. What words capture and express is not the being of the existent in its immediacy, but rather the *principle* of the existent, the *logos*, and it is with this in view that the representative imagination fashions words, creatively borrowing for the purpose whatever images and suggestions experience and imagination might offer. The "nobler and clearer" approach, Plato says, is that we learn the truth of things from themselves, irrespective of the contingency and relativity of linguistic figures, and this means nothing else but getting hold of their concept, their idea:

Let us suppose that to any extent you please you can learn things through the medium of names, and suppose also that you can learn them from the things themselves. Which is likely to be the nobler and clearer way to learn of the image, whether the image and the truth of which the image is the expression have been rightly conceived, or to learn of the truth whether the truth and the image of it have been duly executed? ... How real existence is to be studied or discovered is, I suspect, beyond you and me. But we may admit so much, that the knowledge of things is not to be derived from names. No, they must be studied and investigated in themselves (*CR 439a*).

Here Plato directly confutes Heidegger's charge that his 'doctrine of truth' has only to do with the ordering of representations or the correctness of their correspondence with things. He directly declares the measure of truth to be, not whether the relation of image to truth is "rightly conceived", but the truth of the thing itself, the idea, which goes beyond the mere 'fit' of language to being.

Indeed, it is evident, at times embarrassingly so, that it is Heidegger who indulges in much linguistic gerrymandering in defence of positions that are very much his own and very questionably 'Greek'. That 'world' is 'unconcealment', the revelation of being otherwise concealed; that being is at once absolute and yet radically temporal, that *logos* 'belongs to' *physis*, that in this sense spirit reverts to nature, thinking to being and so on: these are not Greek propositions but those of a modern romanticist ontology of which Parmenides or Plato could have made little sense. They belong to a post-modern reaction to the Hegelian doctrine of spirit, of self-conscious freedom, which they both presume and yet seek to restate in more earthy, existential terms. This Heidegger thinks to achieve by constructing an inverted history of the Western philosophical tradition, construed (and certainly misconstrued) as promoting an otherworldly freedom radically inimical to the concept of freedom as concrete, aboriginal and prehistorical, the pristine paradigm of which he imagines he has unearthed in his philosophical archaeology of early Greek fragments. It is for *Dasein*, the being for whom being itself is a question, he declares, to

recover the ancient encounter with being the pre-Platonic Greeks enjoyed, so that Western thinking, which is only a thinking of thinking, can become again a thinking beginning and ending with being itself in its manifest temporality as "that for the sake of which thinking occurs."

To say Plato in the *Cratylus* counters this Heideggerean vision point for point would of course go too far. Trans-historical arguments generally tend to distort things, and the more ambitious post-modern attempt to rewrite the whole history of philosophy from a standpoint purporting to be liberated from it is even more disfiguring. But at least two points are clear: first, there is no evidence in Plato's own writings that he committed the crimes of which he stands accused, of deliberately mistaking and corrupting ancient Greek doctrines, of sundering thinking from being and of confusing the apparent with the real. On their own face, his actual arguments lead to quite other conclusions. Second, there is overwhelming evidence that Plato was anything but naive concerning the relation between language, truth and being; his dialogues extensively address this very issue. But he is far less optimistic than Heidegger as to the virtue of hermeneutics as a means to philosophical insight, and he is inclined to view language as as much a prison-house as a dwelling house of the truth of being. His arguments in this connection are far too clear, too open and plain to support the belief he only advanced them to promote some impossible retreat from reality or to advance some unimaginable desire to corrupt an extant intuition into the very truth of things on the part of his predecessors.

### 5. Conclusion - A Postscript On Derrida

The post-philosophical attack on Plato's legacy relies principally on the doctrine, now virtually a universal belief, that thought is really no more than language and philosophical discourse no more than a certain type of language-use. Heidegger's generation would insist philosophy turn to semiotics as a means of resolving ontological and other issues. Derrida would go even further toward a strict identification of philosophy with language. "Philosophy is first and foremost writing", he declares, though a peculiar kind of writing whose effect is to isolate the signified from its sensory verbal signifier, thereby to generate an illusory realm of meaning independent of language, the so-called world of spirit, thought and ideas. On this hyper-linguistic account, thought does not create and enlighten language; it is language that incorporates and generates thought.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, words have their meaning only within the endlessly inter-referential context of some linguistic system or text, referring to nothing whatever beyond that even the house of Heidegger is a hall of mirrors. As thus never transcending writing, meaning is always, as such and intrinsically "undecidable".

According to Derrida, philosophy is a kind of writing that seeks to arrest this absolute ambiguity of meanings by sorting them artificially into oppositions (spirit-nature, intelligible-sensible, concept-intuition and so on), then affirming one to the exclusion of the other (surely itself a banal and artificial account of what philosophy has been about).

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<sup>38</sup> See his essay on "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy* (tr. Bass, Chicago, 1982), p. 6ff.

As it is in the present tense of speech that it seems somewhat possible to fix meanings in the sheer verbal affirmation of them, philosophy, according to Derrida's odd thesis, favours speech and is intrinsically hostile to writing. Again it is Plato who is credited with embarking (in *Phaedrus*)<sup>39</sup> upon a diatribe against writing, of initiating the practice of deliberately transgressing the limits of written language, of extracting meanings from words and setting them up on their own as a separate realm of ideas; in short, Plato invented 'thought'. Through a deconstruction of traditional texts, showing how in every case and in spite of themselves they inevitably run afoul of some ambiguity in their own linguistic constructions, we can at last hope to liberate ourselves from the lure of philosophical writing.

Certainly, literally to restrict meaning to language is to render the latter soulless; nothing is left but words themselves in their thought-less indeterminacy, dead lexical husks ruled only by "différence" and incapable of supporting any stable apprehension. Derrida's method relies chiefly on the endless opportunities for deconstructive plays on words which such a literal identification of meaning with linguistic entities allows. Plato, however, had a familiar name for it Sophism and his dialogues are indeed largely devoted to its critique. It is a piece of supreme irony that the super-sophistry of 20<sup>th</sup> century hermeneutics should now pretend dismissively to interpret these famous writings as subject to the very limits they were meant to break through. For the great aim of the Platonic philosophy was surely nothing else but the subduing of this linguistic Medusa, the breaking free from the despotism of words and their endless Protean mutations: from "différence". The advent of Philosophy was coincident with the triumph of *nous* over language wherein the latter is rendered thoroughly fluid and ideational, 'ideal' in Hegel's sense that it no longer poses an obstacle to thinking but becomes its own expressive and willing agent.

Plato's art distilled the proper object of thinking, the concept, out of the rhetorical-mythopoeic primal soup of the Greek linguistic tradition. It is to this latter, *pre-platonic* standpoint that philosophy, now in its post-philosophical dotage, would have us revert: back beyond Protagoras and Thrasymachus, beyond even Parmenides and Heraclitus, into some ancient semiotic chaos of pre-rational utterance. The Platonic dialogues also make much ado about language, though not as mere hermeneutic exercises themselves, as some have averred, but because Plato well knew that language is as much the enemy as the friend of thought, just as the body is as much the prison-house as the instrument of the

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<sup>39</sup> In "Plato's Pharmacy" (Dissemination (tr. B. Johnson, Chicago, 1981) Derrida interprets the *Phaedrus* as an attack upon writing. This he bases chiefly on a mythical tale late in the dialogue wherein the inventor of writing offers the art to the king describing it as a "remedy" for the enhancement of wisdom; only to be reminded by the king that the inscription of intelligence in writing can also have a fossilizing effect that can actually serve and further ignorance. Through multiple plays on words (pharmakon can mean a drug or poison as well as a remedy), references to the hiding of books under cloaks, the alleged 'repressive' significance of the king's fatherly negation of writing and so on, Derrida manages completely to corrupt the plain sense of the *Phaedrus* into a diatribe against writing, when on a plainer reading it is clearly not so much about any conflict between speaking and writing as about the proper and improper (i.e., sophistic) uses of both spoken and written language.

soul. Philosophy, the discipline of the idea, was conceived and explicitly described by him as devoted to the overcoming of this bondage, to the liberation of thought from the tyranny of words. Thus the Socratic daemon refused to allow the soul's insight into its higher life its essential freedom to become entangled in nets of metaphor and sophistry, of customary meaning and mere asseveration. Plato likewise called every linguistic appearance into account, subjecting it to the standard of a dynamic *logos* present in but not captive to language, knowing language itself as nothing else but the soul's own free creation.