

Rorty's Critique of Heidegger as a Metaphysician

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Richard Rorty aptly credits Martin Heidegger as being a decisive thinker in twentieth century philosophy and praises his critique of metaphysics as instrumental in overcoming the "other-worldliness" of philosophy. However, while Rorty's praise for Heidegger has made Heidegger's name more respectable among analytic philosophers, Rorty also criticizes Heidegger's talk of the "Thought of Being" or the "openness of Being" as an unnecessary vestige of Platonism, a residue of the very metaphysical language that Heidegger is trying to overcome. Rorty writes, "Heidegger's attachment to the notion of 'philosophy'—the pathetic notion that even after metaphysics goes, something called "Thought" might remain—is simply the sign of Heidegger's own fatal attachment to the tradition: the last infirmity of the greatest of the German professors" (1982, 52). On Rorty's interpretation, this attachment to the tradition is Heidegger's desire to get in touch with something in another realm called Being, a desire similar to Plato's search for the Forms, to Augustine's desire for God, and to Hegel's quest for Absolute Knowledge.

I will show that Rorty interprets Heidegger as another metaphysician through what I think is a misguided reading of Heidegger's "Thought of Being." Rorty criticizes Heidegger for attempting to correctly apprehend Being—an other-worldly project unconcerned with the problems of his fellow human beings. However, in thinking the openness of Being, Heidegger was not concerned with apprehending Being correctly and although he was not engaged in finding cures for the ills of society, he was interested in how such cures might come about. I will then discuss Heidegger's interest in the openness of Being as an explanation of how Rorty's project of finding better vocabularies — ones that will improve the lot of human beings by redescribing the world in new ways—might be possible.

FROM *ALETHEIA* TO *ORTHOTES*

To understand what Heidegger means by the "openness of Being," it is helpful to understand its opposite: the "closure" or "hiddenness" of Being. Heidegger points to the origin of this closure in his essay "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," and describes the origin of truth as *orthotes*, i.e., as the correctness of representation: a correspondence theory of truth. In an analysis of Plato's allegory of the cave, Heidegger notices a shift of the notion of truth from *aletheia* or "unhiddenness," to *orthotes* or "the correctness of the glance" (1962, 265). "Unhiddenness in Greek," explains Heidegger, "is *aletheia*, which word is translated as 'truth.' And for a long time 'truth' has meant, for the Western mind, the agreement of the mental concept (or representation) with the thing: *adaequatio intellectus et rei*" (257). Instead of thinking of truth as correctness of representation, Heidegger takes the alpha prefix of *aletheia* as a negating prefix and thereby interprets the work of *aletheia* as a struggle between *aletheia* and *lethei*, unhiddenness/hiddenness, revealing/concealing.

The revealing/concealing work of truth as *aletheia* is an openness that allows beings to come to presence, to be shown in their outward appearance. The Greek for "outward appearance" is *eidōs* or *idea*. In Plato's allegory, Heidegger says,

The *idea* is the apparent. The essence of the idea lies in the qualities of being apparent and visible. The idea achieves presence, namely the presence of ever being as what it is. Each being is continuously present in the What of beings. Presence however is really the essence of Being. Being, then, for Plato, has its real essence in its What. (262)

When Plato considered Being a What, a thing, he began a long tradition of objectifying the essence of beings. Humans perceive the *idea* of beings, their outward appearance, and take this *idea* as what the thing is. The *idea* is apprehended as a thing. But the presencing of the *idea* and "what" allows the *idea* to shine forth as something present goes unthought in the apprehension of the truth of beings as *idea*. What allows the presencing of the present?

Heidegger thinks the answer to this question is found in the essence of *aletheia* as the ground for truth as correspondence. Since Plato defines unhiddenness as a thing, the truth is the conformity of our representations with *something* out there. Heidegger rethinks unhiddenness as the possibility of representation and, therefore, as the possibility of this conformity.

Plato's attempt to explain what grants presence cannot be successful because what makes presence possible cannot be adequately described as an "it," but rather as "is." Heidegger goes on to explain that

when Plato says that the *idea* is the master permitting unhiddenness, he banished to something left unsaid the fact that henceforth the essence of truth does not unfold out of its own essential fullness as the essence of unhiddenness, but shifts its abode to the essence of the *idea*. The essence of truth relinquishes the basic feature of unhiddenness. (265)

By taking truth as a "correctness of representation," the great metaphysicians since Plato have simply replaced what language represents with different ultimate realities. God replaced the Ideas, which gave way to Reason and Truth, which were inverted by Nietzsche in the Will to Power. Nietzsche described atemporal realities like God and Truth as the creations of weak individuals who, in their hatred for strong individuals, projected these ideals and values into an empty beyond. "The slave revolt in morality begins," explains Nietzsche, "when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge" (1989, 36). Hans-Georg Gadamer explains that Nietzsche's Will "is in Heidegger's eyes still understandable in terms of metaphysics—as its demonic counterpart. The will which wills itself emerges as the final extreme of the subjectivism of the modern period" (1981, 443). What began as the quest for objective certainty culminates in subjective creativity. I will show later that Rorty's account of language exemplifies this subjectivity.

Heidegger, observing the rise and fall of these different metaphysics, does not replace the last one with a new one. Instead, he focuses on what happens in the transition between two metaphysical epochs. This transition is a crisis for the out-going metaphysic because it no longer does the work that its adherents want it to, and here the struggle between revealing/concealing comes to the fore, allowing the openness of Being to be present. He writes, "We must think *aletheia*, unconcealment, as the opening which first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other" (1977, 387). This simple explanation of a metaphysical crisis points out that Heidegger is not attempting to get something right. To get something right, at least in the traditional sense, means to

describe an event or a thing in terms of what is ultimately real, i.e., in terms of what the current metaphysical outlook is. Heidegger wants to think through the crisis of "rightness," the rupture in the way things are, the scission in Being.

HEIDEGGER AS AN ORACLE OF REALITY

I can now take up Rorty's first criticism: Heidegger wants to get in touch with an ultimate reality called Being. Rorty suspects Heidegger's talk of Being because it sounds like Heidegger wants to have a tyrannical hold on ultimate reality: only Heidegger's story counts and the community must learn it to get things "right." Rorty insists on reading Heidegger this way because Rorty wants "to suggest that we see the democracy-versus-totalitarianism issue as as basic as an intellectual issue can get" (1991, 19). Anything that sounds remotely like a tyrannical hold on Truth is therefore suspect. Gerald Bruns, in his book *Heidegger's Estrangements*, explains that for those like Rorty with suspicions of Heidegger's work, an idea like

Gelassenheit or letting-go is a mask of narcissism, a return to a primitive freedom from suspicion that will allow every manner of secret fascism or theology to reimpose itself. Whatever its meaning within the superficial framework of Heidegger's later texts, the practical—that is, the social and political—meaning of *Gelassenheit* is that it is a counsel of submission that puts at the disposal of the state, the nation, or the dominant culture. Who is being asked to let go? The meaning of 'Being' is power. (1989, 5)

Rorty accuses Heidegger of wanting to avoid the problems of metaphysics by temporalizing metaphysics, making Being something that moves along with history instead of something atemporal like the Forms. He says, "Heidegger thought that he could escape from metaphysics, from the idea of a Single Truth, by historicizing Being and Truth" (1991, 2:77). "Whereas Plato looks down," explains Rorty, "Heidegger looks back. But both are hoping to distance themselves from, cleanse themselves of, what they are looking at" (70).

I think Rorty misinterprets Heidegger in the same way that Plato overlooks the meaning of truth as *aletheia*. Rorty persistently talks of Being as if it were a thing. Although Heidegger says "Being," using the word grammatically as a noun, he is not referring to a thing. But Rorty

does repeatedly. For example, in his essay "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," Rorty begins by describing Platonism "as the claim that the point of inquiry is to get in touch with something like Being, or the Good, or Truth, or Reality—something large and powerful which we have a duty to apprehend correctly" (27). Later in the same essay, Rorty asks, "But if Being is not a hidden choreographer, not a source of empowerment, what is it?" (36). Again, as if Being were a kind of subject matter, Rorty postulates, "*Being is what vocabularies are about*" (37).

To continue talking as if Being were a thing ignores the reminders Heidegger gives us throughout his works that he wants us to see beyond his use of Being as a noun. For example, Heidegger's use of phrases like the "truth of Being," the "openness of Being," and the "meaning of Being" draws our attention away from the word "Being" and toward the workings of Being. These phrases offer no consolation to Rorty who characterizes them as extensions of Platonism. In "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey," Rorty concludes, "By offering us 'openness to Being' to replace 'philosophical argument,' Heidegger helps preserve all that was worst in the tradition which he hoped to overcome" (1982, 54). In a more recent essay Rorty implies that "impregnation by the Form of the Good" is no different from "Openness to Being" (1991, 2:71).

Later in his writings, Heidegger moved away from using the word "Being" and alternated between other words which served the same purpose of describing the clearing in which beings can come to presence. John Caputo, in a defense against Rorty's reading of Heidegger, concedes that "the word 'Being' has always had a mystifying effect upon Heidegger's readers, particularly his Anglo-American readers, and I rather think he did better when he avoided using this word and spoke instead of *physis*, *aletheia*, event (*Ereignis*), or world" (1983, 683). Even if Rorty missed Heidegger's shift away from the word "Being," he could not have missed the outright statements by Heidegger both in his early writings, e.g., in the Introduction to *Being and Time*, "We can conclude only that 'Being' is not something like a being" (1977, 44), and in his later writings, e.g., in *On Time and Being*, "Being is not a thing" (1972, 3).

Rorty's interpretation of Being as a "hidden choreographer" seems to be a deliberate attempt to avoid Heidegger's own description in his work. At one point, Rorty confesses that he reads Heidegger by his own

“Deweyan lights” (1991, 2:49). However, reading Heidegger this way puts off Heidegger’s own statement of purpose to think the most universal, indefinable, and self-evident concept: the common use of the verb “to be” (1977, 41-44).

Another aspect of Rorty’s first criticism also stems from his Deweyan reading of Heidegger. For Rorty, no voice in the community has more claim on Reality than any other voice. This includes philosophers. Rorty writes, “To drop the notion of the philosopher as knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well would be to drop the notion that his voice always has an overriding claim on the attention of the other participants in the conversation” (1979, 392). This criticism of philosophers in general can be applied to Heidegger in particular since Rorty sees Heidegger’s work as a variation on the theme of the metaphysicians since Plato.

If Heidegger were trying to access something in a realm more real than our own and trying to accurately represent that thing in language, i.e., if Heidegger were doing metaphysics, then Rorty’s criticism would hold. But Heidegger neither tries to represent any thing nor does he claim exclusivity to the openness of Being. Furthermore, Heidegger’s thinking rebels against anyone who claims to have gotten Being “right.” To be touched or to touch this openness is not to know things as they really are, as Rorty suspects. Heidegger has various words for this openness: homeland, clearing, scission, neighborhood, lighting. The work of the thinker and the poet is to *wander* in this openness, to *err* in the realm devoid of metaphysically correct paths. In the “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger addresses the question of whether to wander in the truth (unhiddenness) of Being allows one exclusive access to the way things really are. He says, “Whether the realm of the truth of Being is a blind alley or whether it is the free space in which freedom conserves its essence is something each one may judge after he himself has tried to go the designated way, or even better, after he has gone a better way, that is a way befitting the question” (1977, 223). It is not for another person to dictate what one experiences in the realm of the truth of Being. Heidegger allays Rortean fears of a monopoly on reality by opening up the field of inquiry for each to inquire for herself.

HEIDEGGER AS AN ASCETIC PRIEST

I will now take up Rorty’s second criticism: Heidegger is uncon-

cerned with the problems of his fellow human beings. To Rorty, the talk of *aletheia*, the openness of Being, and the struggle between revealing and concealing is just as sublime and detached from what really concerns the human race—the alleviation of cruelty and suffering—as the most atemporal and all-powerful metaphysic one can imagine. To Rorty, Heidegger is a good example of a Nietzschean ascetic priest, one who opts out “of the struggles of his fellow humans by making his mind its own place, his own story the only story that counts, making himself the redeemer of his time precisely by the abstention from action” (1991, 2:70). For Rorty, an ascetic priest sets himself apart from the rest by claiming to make contact with his “real self” or “God” or “Being” or “Brahma” or “Nothingness.” What bothers Rorty about the ascetic priest is as much his uselessness to his fellow human beings as it is his claim that he is in touch with a higher reality. Rorty sees these two facets of the ascetic priest as interconnected: by claiming to have communion with a transcendental reality, the priest says, “What matters to me takes precedence over what matters to you, entitles me to ignore what matters to you, because I am in touch with something—reality—with which you are not” (74).

Rorty is a pragmatist who “thinks of the thinker as serving the community, and of his thinking as futile unless it is followed up by a reweaving of the community’s web of belief” (17). Following Dewey’s dictum, the pragmatism of the philosopher “is an attempt to help achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number by facilitating the replacement of language, customs, and institutions which impede that happiness” (20). For Rorty, the overcoming of metaphysics means that humans can stop worrying about Being, Truth, and God, and start worrying about other beings. Rorty thinks that Heidegger’s hope in the Thought of Being as the path which offers new possibilities for language “is just what was worst in the tradition—the quest for the holy which turns us away from the relations between beings and beings (the relations, for example, between the ghastly apparatus of modern technology and the people whose children will die of hunger unless that apparatus spreads over the rest of the planet)” (1982, 52).

This statement of Rorty’s is in response to Heidegger’s critique of modern technology, such as found in this passage from *On Time and Being*:

Now that modern technology has arranged its expansion and rule over the whole earth, it is not just the sputniks and their by-products that are

circling around our planet; it is rather Being as presencing in the sense of calculable material that claims all the inhabitants of the earth in a uniform manner without the inhabitants of the non-European continents explicitly knowing this or even being able or wanting to know of the origin of this determination of Being. (1972, 7)

According to Heidegger, revealing the world as "calculable material" is the result of the final epoch of metaphysics, the Will to Power. David Krell explains that Heidegger may indeed feel that introducing the question of Being into a discussion on the strip mines of Montana and the Red Guards of Shanghai may sound clownish and professorial, "but the thought of Being as refusal, withdrawal, closure, and oblivion, insofar as it evokes a critique of unbridled manipulation and exploitation of beings by an insatiable will-for-more—does that thought leave Anaconda and General Motors altogether untouched?" (1981, 469). I think not, and I think Heidegger's lack of faith in technology as an extension of the will-for-more is well taken. Krell continues, saying Rorty "wants results. For the children's sake. I too want these results, and so does Heidegger. But Heidegger is not convinced that the spread of the ghastly apparatus will save the children" nor does he promise that the thought of Being will relieve us from the effects of technology (470). So Heidegger's concern for thought does not leave him unconcerned for the plight of the human race, but he is not hopeful, as Rorty is, making technology more accessible will solve our problems (Rorty 1982, 52).

Rorty is particularly perturbed by Heidegger's need for detachment and stillness in order to think the openness of Being.¹ Attending to the holy is a waste of effort while others suffer. But for Heidegger, keeping busy and continuing to use language as it is only perpetuates revealing the world as calculable material. Rorty agrees that there need to be new possibilities for language in order to improve the lot of society, but his account of how such languages come about is lacking. It is here that Heidegger's interest in the openness of Being and the need for silence—which Rorty detests—offers an explanation of Rorty's project of finding better vocabularies.

HEIDEGGER AND RORTY ON NEW LANGUAGE

After they both reject truth as correspondence, Heidegger and Rorty move in different directions. Rorty opts for a coherence theory of truth where individuals are trapped in what he calls a "final vocabulary" (1989, 73). This vocabulary "is 'final' in the sense that if doubt is cast

on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse," i.e., the truth of a statement made can only be determined by that statements coherence with other propositions in the user's vocabulary (73). The person who faces up to the contingency and finality of her vocabulary is an "ironist." An ironist searches for, creates, and acquires new vocabularies for herself. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty says that the ironist

spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. (1989, 75)

The ironist's need for new language is the need for poetry. Poets break down the dead metaphors of their everyday language and create new metaphors. "Old metaphors," Rorty explains, "are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors" (16). The new metaphors give life to the community's language as it tries to accommodate the new vocabularies that poets have coined. If we view history as largely an evolution of language, Rorty claims that this "sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species" (20). We should even view the role of philosophers such as Rorty himself as subsidiary to that of the poets.

As for his account of how new metaphors are coined, Rorty simply says that they are created by the poet. Those which are more interesting or promising are incorporated into the language of a community and soon become old metaphors, dying off into literalness. The problem with this explanation, according to Charles Guignon, is that

there are no criteria that can constrain our interpretations and invention of vocabularies other than the question of whether they are 'interesting' or enable us to 'cope.' Yet ... there is no way to reflect on whether these vocabularies are interesting or enable us to cope outside of those currently accepted vocabularies themselves. (1986, 413-414)

Heidegger also knows the need for new language and poets, but he offers an account of how new language is possible. He moves away from the correspondence theory of truth, not to accept a coherence theory, but to leave off propositions altogether. By refusing to determine the Being of beings in propositional discourse, Heidegger lets the openness of Being come to the fore. Instead of saying "The sky is blue," then altering the proposition to say "The sky is azure," or "The sky is wide," Heidegger thinks the work of the "is" in the sentence and leaves off the urge to determine the sky as such and such. The "is" doesn't refer to any "thing" or attribute. It establishes and sustains the relation between the sky and the color blue. The "is" allows the sky and the color blue to be present and come into relation with one another.

In much of the history of philosophy, the subject-object relationship has been studied without much attention given to what makes the relation between the two possible. Rorty, like Nietzsche, emphasizes the role of the creating subject, but Heidegger asks,

Why is it that we stubbornly resist considering even once whether the belonging-together of subject and object does not arise from something that first imparts their nature to both the object and its objectivity, and the subject and its subjectivity, and hence is prior to the realm of their reciprocity? (1975, 103)

This granting/imparting space between the two is the openness of Being. We exist as humans surrounded by this openness. Heidegger calls this existence "ek-sistence" or standing out. "Man in his essence is ek-sistent into the openness of Being, into the open region that lights the 'between' within which a 'relation' of subject and object can 'be'" (1977, 229).

By standing out in the open region, humans come into relation with other beings and dwell together in the neighborhood of Being. In his essay "The Nature of Language," Heidegger says,

Neighborhood, then, is a relation resulting from the fact that the one settles face to face with the other. Accordingly, the phrase of the neighborhood of poetry and thinking means that the two dwell face to face with each other, that the one has settled facing the other, has drawn into the other's nearness. (1971, 82)

Dasein is ek-sisting insofar as it stands in relation to the other, a relation

made possible by standing out in the lighting of Being. "So far as it exists," explains Heidegger, "the Dasein is always already dwelling with some being or other, which is uncovered in some way or other and in some degree or other" (1982, 208). It is this encounter with the other which enables discourse, which in turn enables language.

Rorty's account differs. As Caputo explains, "Language originates not in the inventiveness of subjectivity but in the openness of Dasein, not in the subject's ingenuity but in letting-be" (1983, 674). Bruns also says,

For the later Heidegger, it is no longer enough to characterize poetic speech ... simply in terms of the poet's originary power of disclosure, of maintaining things in being, or the grounding, lighting, or opening up of a world; *Dichten* has now to be understood as the way of entering into the mode of being of *Gelassenheit*, the letting-go of things. (1989, xx)

Rorty's talk of the language-creating subject does not overcome metaphysics, but rather consolidates the subjectivity born of Western metaphysics. Caputo turns the tables on Rorty in this way, saying that "if Rorty would take Heidegger's notion of the language of Being as a vestigial nostalgia for metaphysics, Heidegger would locate Rorty's language games squarely within metaphysics" (1983, 673). Mark Okrent buttresses this claim by pointing out that Heidegger's openness of Being provides the ground for the "showing" of the object in either a correspondence or a coherence theory of truth. Okrent says, "In order for there to be truth in either of the traditional senses, as correspondence or coherence, there must be evidence. That is, the object referred to in the true statement must be manifest, must show itself, it must be uncovered" (1981, 503). Rorty's move to a coherence theory does not allow him to overcome metaphysics in the way he imagines. "Even the young Heidegger knows," says Krell, "as Richard Rorty and John Dewey do not seem to know (perhaps it would be Un-American to know it), that all courageous and forthright decisions to abandon metaphysics result in naive reduplications of its patterns of thought" (1981, 471). A Rortean "change of subject" away from metaphysics does not abandon metaphysics, but reinforces the subjectivity born of the tradition.

One defender of Rorty's position claims that "to say that language is 'entirely a human doing' is not to deny that 'language speaks'" (Asher 1988, 123). This defense has a problem: it insists, as does Rorty, that

“vocabularies are made by human beings” (Rorty 1989, 21) and thereby makes language something generated by the subject instead of originating in the encounter between being and being. Although not denying that language speaks, the creative subject makes the language. However, for Heidegger, allowing language to speak does not place language-creation squarely on the being doing the talking; language is granted in the face to face encounter with another being. In overcoming metaphysics, Heidegger does not abandon metaphysics, leaving it unthought. Rather he thinks through the subject-object relation and what allows the two to come into relation with one another.

In conclusion, I sympathize with Rorty’s hope of finding better ways to describe the world, more promising vocabularies that will improve the human condition. I have not argued against Rorty’s hope, but against his imposition of how to achieve this hope upon Heidegger. Both figures are interested in new language. Heidegger thinks about how new metaphors come about; Rorty hopes to “rapidly reduce [new metaphors] to the status of tools of social progress” (1991, 17). Rorty compliments poets like Hegel and Wittgenstein saying, “They are the people ... whose metaphors come out of nowhere, lightning bolts which blaze new trails” (17). Heidegger, on the other hand, thinks about this “nowhere,” this indeterminate space, this no-thing, which allows for the possibility of new metaphors. I think Rorty is mistaken in painting Heidegger as a metaphysician for doing something other than making edifying conversation. Instead, Rorty might do better to pursue Heidegger’s description of *Gelassenheit* and *aletheia* in his own quest for redemptive vocabularies.²

ENDNOTES

1. Jean-François Lyotard in *Heidegger and “the jews”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) also makes this criticism of Heidegger pertaining to Heidegger’s silence on the Holocaust and on his involvement with the Nazi party. Lyotard denies that this silence leaves open any possibilities, but is rather “a mute silence that lets nothing be heard. A leaden silence” (52).

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