

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## *Introduction*

Heidegger is known for the importance he places on interpretation. In his view we are creatures of interpretation. Every move we make is an interpretation: elaborating, exposing, and shaping our self-understanding and, in the process, our relationships to ourselves, our world, and other things within the world. At the same time, from the moment we find ourselves, as interpreting animals, thrown into this process, we find that our interpretations are not ours alone, but the often mindless yet time-tested iteration of a tradition of interpretations written into our most common practices and beliefs. If we create our lives through our interpretations, it is not without the inertia of traditional interpretations. We are both the parents and the progeny of interpretation and, in both these ways, interpretation constitutes our existence and any sense of being.

This centrality of interpretation is no less true for Heidegger when it comes to what, in his view, most urgently calls for thinking today. We need to think responsibly and creatively about what it means to us for things, including ourselves, to be and what grounds this meaning. The task of thinking is, in other words, thoughtful interpretation of the ground (not merely the cause) of our understanding of what it means to be. At the same time, given the historical character of our thinking, we can only think creatively and responsibly about these matters by considering how the history of such interpretations – philosophical as well as poetic – enables and disables that understanding.

The importance that Heidegger attaches to interpretation in this sense directly affects his interpretations of others' works and helps explain why those interpretations often appear strikingly unconventional if not skewed. For Heidegger, interpretation can never be a matter of simply setting the record straight, of providing the most accurate *ex post facto* reconstruction of the meaning of a thinker or a text. Instead, his interpretive horizon is the process by which beings are meaningful or, alternatively, how the understanding of what it means for them to be takes

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)

hold. When Heidegger turns to poets and other thinkers who allegedly contribute to this process, he presumes that they share this horizon on some level. While this seems at times presumptuous, it is partly offset by Heidegger's humbling cognizance of being caught up in the very process that, like them, he is grappling to express, with a future beyond the reach of any mortal soul. At the same time, while not over, this interpretive process has a beginning and, indeed, a history that we fail to tap at our peril. In Heidegger's view, one of our main tasks is to interpret the history of Western thinking as the beginning of a thinking that remains unfinished and incomplete, even as it shapes us, in need of us (thoughtful interpretations, responsible and creative thinking on our part) just as much as we are in need of it.

For all these reasons, Heidegger by no means dismisses the importance of determining the most coherent reading of a text, on the basis of the meanings of the words in question and/or the intention of the author. In his own interpretations of thinkers from Aristotle to Kant, he is often sensitive to these issues and their deep connection with philosophical interpretation, even where he plainly acknowledges the violence or unorthodoxy of his reading. Indeed, while sharply distinguishing the truth of an interpretation from the correctness of an explanation, he recognizes that correctness – despite or perhaps because of prose's illusory veneer of timelessness – can be a “first indicator of the truth,” provided that it stems from a preview (*Vorblick*) of the truth.<sup>1</sup> There can, of course, be no guarantees of this preview and therein lies the unmistakable risk and pretentiousness but also the promise of venturing interpretations of Heidegger's thinking. In this spirit, the essays in the present volume, ranging over Heidegger's entire corpus, attempt to interpret correctly (Part I) basic themes of his thinking, (Part II) his interpretations of philosophers and poets, and (Part III) some prominent critics' interpretations of his thought. The aim of the following glosses is to introduce readers to these new essays as attempts to interpret responsibly and creatively Heidegger's thinking and critical interpretations of it.

#### INTERPRETING HEIDEGGER'S PHILOSOPHY

Hermeneutics is not, *expressis verbis*, a prominent theme in Heidegger's later thinking and, indeed, this silence has been interpreted as one of many indicators of a major break or discontinuity in his thinking.

<sup>1</sup> GA 70: 147, 153.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

Countering this interpretation is one of the motivations for Holger Zaborowski's "Heidegger's hermeneutics: towards a new practice of understanding." After identifying basic themes and sources that led the young Heidegger to rethink philosophy as a hermeneutics, Zaborowski elaborates the hermeneutics of facticity in his early lectures as well as the hermeneutics of Dasein in *Being and Time*. He shows how Heidegger, rejecting doctrines of hermeneutics as a theory or method of interpretation, is bent on retrieving its significance for philosophy proper as a mode of self-interpretation of factual life. After tracing how this practice of thoughtful self-understanding informs the *Contributions to Philosophy* and the "Letter on Humanism," Zaborowski arrives at the measured conclusion that Heidegger's later thinking is best considered "a transformation, rather than a dismissal, of his early hermeneutics."

In his essay, "Facticity and *Ereignis*," Thomas Sheehan also identifies a basic continuity in Heidegger's thinking, traceable to his early hermeneutics of facticity. One of Sheehan's targets is a widespread tendency to interpret Heidegger as a thinker preoccupied with the question of being. According to Sheehan, this way of interpreting Heidegger obfuscates his basic theme: the necessary correlatedness of Dasein and meaning as such. Arguing that Heidegger embraces the phenomenological reduction of being to meaning, he shows that the overriding concern of *Being and Time* is Dasein's facticity in the form of its ineluctable relation to meaning. Nor does this basic concern attenuate in his more mature thinking as the focus shifts to the theme of *Ereignis*. Far from something outside this relation, "*Ereignis*" signifies its reciprocal character, whereby Dasein submits to being appropriated to the meaning-process, while also actively sustaining it. More simply, the notion of *Ereignis*, like the notion of *facticity*, signals that there is no human being without meaning and no meaning without human beings. In much this way, Sheehan makes a powerful case for reading Heidegger from beginning to end as a hermeneutical phenomenologist. "Both *Ereignis* and *Faktizität*," he concludes, "bespeak the same thing: the 'fate' of human being as necessary for maintaining (projectively holding open) the meaning-giving process."

With its focus on Heidegger's analysis of the call of conscience in *Being and Time*, the next essay in the volume, Simon Critchley's "The null basis-being of a nullity, or between two nothings: Heidegger's uncanniness" bridges Zaborowski's and Sheehan's foregoing treatments of facticity and Guignon's subsequent essay on freedom. In the process Critchley gives a penetrating interpretation of Heidegger's analysis that moves him closer to Beckett than Nietzsche (or, at least, Nietzsche as he is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)

often read). Critchley's point of departure is the paradoxical strangeness of conscience's silent call: it stems from me, yet in a sense against my will, indicating a division at the very heart of myself, my *Dasein*. The self, as evidenced by the call of conscience, is divided between the nothingness of the world into which it is thrown and the nothingness, revealed in its being-towards-death, of what it projects. *Dasein*, as Critchley puts it, is correspondingly constituted by two impotencies, a lack of power over both its thrownness and its projection. Turning to the pre-moral, existential sense of guilt straddling this divide, Critchley argues for understanding the call of conscience as a call, not to heroic self-sufficiency, but to the uncanny potency of this dual impotence that defines our humanity, the freedom of embracing the "unmasterable thrownness, the burden of a facticity that weighs me down without my ever being able fully to pick it up."

In Charles Guignon's essay on "Freedom," he tracks two key meanings of the term in Heidegger's writings during the late 1920s and early 1930s. As a means of introducing the first sense, Guignon shows how Heidegger's distinction between inauthentic and authentic existence neatly maps onto the difference between lives oriented primarily to what Aristotle dubs *poiesis*, the quotidian process of producing something distinct from themselves, and lives oriented to *praxis*, the process of making themselves. But Guignon also helpfully flags how this conception of *praxis* corresponds to the Hegelian notion that an action counts as genuinely free only if one can properly claim it as one's own. Thus, our authentic actions can be characterized as "free" because "in authenticity, we do indeed stand behind our actions: we own them and can own up to them." Not to be confused with individual willfulness, the resoluteness required for standing behind our actions (choosing to choose) is, as Guignon puts it, a means of vigilantly redirecting "our care from everyday dispersal in worldly doings, from *poiesis*, to the role of action in constituting the self, toward *praxis*."

While this robust form of freedom is determined by a "proper" relation to one's own self, the second prominent meaning of freedom for Heidegger at the time consists in "letting be." "Letting entities be" means "freeing up" a space for the truthful encounter with them and, indeed, not as something already finished but with multiple possibilities of their own. This same sense of "freedom" is also operative, Guignon shows, in our authentic relation to ourselves, not least to our finitude. In the conclusion, Guignon turns to *On the Essence of Human Freedom*, where Heidegger criticizes the ontological naivety of Kant's theoretical approach

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

to the notion of freedom while applauding Kant's practical approach. Guignon suggests that, by assuming a derivative conception of being as presence-at-hand (as Heidegger contends), Kant's theoretical analyses of freedom prefigure contemporary debates about compatibilism and libertarianism – and their futility. At the same time, Guignon shows that Heidegger's positive, albeit highly unorthodox, gloss on Kant's practical approach grounds ethicality in decisiveness and authenticity, thereby recapitulating the robust sense of freedom articulated in *Being and Time*.

In the first part of his Habilitation, Heidegger repeatedly cites Scotus' commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The commentary begins with the question "whether the proper subject of metaphysics is being as being (as Avicenna contended) or God and the Intelligences (as the Commentator Averroes contended)." In this way Scotus introduces an old dispute regarding Aristotle's work, namely, whether it is ontology or theology – or somehow both? Heidegger's own notion of "the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics" can be traced to this dispute, at least in the sense that a conception of what it means to be at all and a conception of the primary or pre-eminent being go hand-in-hand in the history of philosophy. In his essay "Ontotheology," Iain Thomson aptly recasts these parallel conceptions as the innermost core and outermost form or expression of an age's sense of reality. Thomson elaborates how, in Heidegger's view, Nietzsche's doctrines of will-to-power and eternal recurrence not only recapitulate ontotheology but, in the process, supply the ontotheological structure for the unremitting reach of technology today. With a deft interpretation of a scenario from *Gulliver's Travels*, Thomson also provides an imposing image of the sense of ontotheology that undergirds our technological age.

## INTERPRETING HEIDEGGER'S INTERPRETATIONS

The thinking that marks the beginning of metaphysics presupposes, Heidegger contends, the Greek experience of being as *phusis*. What he understands by this presupposition can be gathered from his readings of Heraclitus' fragments. Moreover, according to Otto Pöggeler, these readings provide some of the clearest statements of Heidegger's own late thinking. The issue is complicated, however, not only because his views of Heraclitus develop, but also because he explicitly maintains that the earliest Greek thinkers stop short of the central theme of Heidegger's own work, namely, be-ing (*Seyn*) as the grounding appropriation of being and beings to one another. Against this backdrop, I examine Heidegger's

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)

interpretation of Heraclitus' fragments on *phusis* as a key source of the meaning of being at the beginning of Western thinking.

After touting Aristotle's treatment of *pathe* in the *Rhetoric* as "the first systematic treatment of affects," Heidegger makes the oft-cited remark that "since Aristotle the basic ontological interpretation of affective [life] in general has scarcely taken a step worth mentioning" (SZ 138 f.). Yet Aristotle's treatment of *pathos* is by no means confined to his *Rhetoric* and, in fact, during the period leading up to *Being and Time*, Heidegger examines Aristotle's treatment of *pathos* in *De anima* at length, not least in his 1924 lecture, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*. Josh Michael Hayes' illuminating essay "Being-affected: Heidegger, Aristotle, and the pathology of truth," investigates Heidegger's interpretation of *pathos* in these and other lectures during his early Freiburg–Marburg period. Following a review of Heidegger's interpretation of *pathos* generally, Hayes critically discusses Heidegger's reading of Aristotle's accounts of moods of "being composed" (pleasure, tranquility, wonder) as well as "being decomposed" (pain, fear, unrest, anxiety). Hayes shows that Heidegger's reading of these accounts has a direct bearing on the analysis of disposedness and *aletheia* in *Being and Time*, precisely insofar as disposedness is an existential and thus a form of disclosedness. As Hayes puts it, given Heidegger's interpretation of the disclosedness of *pathos*, he is engaging in a pathology of truth, consisting in retrieving the truth disclosed in our moods and the disposedness upon which they rest.

During the period just before and after the publication of *Being and Time*, only one thinker rivals Aristotle in capturing Heidegger's attention. That thinker is Kant and, indeed, as Stephan Käufer puts it in his essay "Heidegger's interpretation of Kant," *Being and Time* is itself "a deeply Kantian work." Käufer points out that Heidegger is engaged with Kant for his entire career, though perhaps never more so than in the period from 1925 to 1936. Heidegger himself characterized his reading of Kant as "violent," but Käufer argues that his reading proposes no more substantial a departure from Kant's text than does the Marburg Neo-Kantian interpretation that Heidegger combats. Indeed, while Heidegger shares with these Neo-Kantians a sense that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* lacks an underlying unity, Heidegger's attempt to find the common ground of its two basic elements is arguably more charitable than eliminating one of them (as the Neo-Kantians propose). Käufer also notes that, far from superimposing a wholly alien framework onto Kant's thought (as Cassirer charged), Heidegger develops his own approach from his reading of Kant and makes no secret of his disagreements with Kant, especially regarding

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

the analysis of the self. Still, despite these disagreements, Heidegger's debt to Kant remains fundamental. For, as Käufer demonstrates in adroit detail, Heidegger merges his phenomenology of existence with a transcendental argument about the temporal conditions of existence and this argument is modeled after Kant's analysis of the threefold synthesis in the transcendental deduction.

"All philosophical thinking," Heidegger writes, "is in itself poetic [*dichterisch*]," adding that "a poet's work – like Hölderlin's Hymns – can be thoughtful [*denkerisch*] in the highest degree."<sup>2</sup> In his essay "Heidegger's poetics of relationality," Andrew J. Mitchell shows just how serious Heidegger is about thinking with the poets. Mitchell demonstrates how Heidegger's mature emphasis on our exposure to the world and the world's exposure to us develop in tandem with his interpretations of Rainer Maria Rilke (1946), Georg Trakl (1950, 1952), and Stefan George (1957–1958). Mitchell shows how Heidegger finds in Rilke someone deeply appreciative of the threat of total objectification, attempting to counter it with poetry that reveals the field of relations that objectification presupposes but cannot touch. But, as Mitchell also shows, while Rilke understands this "relational field" as infinitely open, a place where through poetic speech things can "perfectly belong to the world," Heidegger understands our finitude (including our not belonging perfectly to the world) as the very condition for encountering things in it. In Trakl's figure of the wanderer, Heidegger finds this understanding of human finitude that is missing in Rilke. Mitchell relates how, on Heidegger's reading, the animal that meets the wanderer's gaze in Trakl's *Sommersneige* is able to do so, not because they fit some metaphysical categories of animality and humanity but only because they are in a relation that exposes them to their limits (their not belonging and, ultimately, their mortality) and, in the process, transforms them. In the final segment of this rich essay, Mitchell turns to the humbling power of the poetic words, recounted by Heidegger in his reading of George's poem *Das Wort*. While all three poets have the gift of bringing relationality to words, George makes clear that this is a gift of the words, of language itself, as he writes, in the closing line of the poem, "No thing may be where the word fails." Thinking this gift means thinking of language non-instrumentally and, indeed, as the medium of meaning to which things and humans in their relationality are alike beholden.

<sup>2</sup> N I 329/N2 73. Heidegger makes these comments in the course of criticizing the editors of Nietzsche's works for distinguishing his supposedly "theoretical" presentations of his thought from his "poetic" presentations. The very distinction "theoretical–poetic" in this context is, Heidegger adds, a confusion.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Grappling with Nietzsche's thought, Heidegger submits, is absolutely essential to the task that he sets for his own thinking. In his essay "The death of God and the life of being: Heidegger's confrontation with Nietzsche," Tracy Colony searches for the interpretive horizon against which Heidegger regards Nietzsche as at once so close to this task and yet so far from taking up it. Complicating this investigation is Heidegger's revision of his lectures for the 1961 edition of them. Comparison with the original lecture notes published in 1985–1986 (GA 43–44) reveals that the principal themes of the texts altered or deleted by Heidegger are Nietzsche's understanding of the death of God and the possibility of a recurrence of the divine. Colony argues that the horizon for Heidegger's original interpretation of Nietzsche is to be found precisely in these themes eliminated from the first edition of the lectures. To make this case, Colony first presents a detailed review of Heidegger's discussion of divinity in the 1934–1935 lectures on Hölderlin and in his *Contributions to Philosophy*, written in tandem with Heidegger's first two Nietzsche lectures. This review effectively establishes the proximity of Heidegger's thinking at this time to Nietzsche's thought. But Colony also demonstrates how Nietzsche's conception of being as life represents to Heidegger the culmination of metaphysics and thus is the furthest removed from the sort of thinking that he deems necessary for a re-encounter with the divine.

#### INTERPRETING HEIDEGGER'S CRITICS

For a substantial part of the twentieth century, the most influential Anglo-American philosophers have been more at home with Fregean and Wittgensteinian than with Heideggerian conceptions of the fundamental philosophical issues and ways of addressing them. Nevertheless, there is a history of responses by such "analytically minded" philosophers to Heidegger. In his essay "Analyzing Heidegger: a history of analytic reactions to Heidegger," Lee Braver charts the ups and downs of this history. Braver argues that, while Gilbert Ryle's sincere but limited engagement amounts to a missed opportunity for potentially fruitful dialogue, Rudolf Carnap's charges of linguistic confusion and obscurantism shut the door – for a while – on any rapprochement. Nor, Braver contends, do Richard Rorty's best efforts to rehabilitate Heidegger the historical ironist reopen the door, not least because, on Rorty's reading, Heidegger himself undermines the pragmatic potential of such irony with his deferential reverence for the History of Being. After challenging



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Rorty's reading, Braver concludes with an account of a successful appropriation of Heidegger's thinking to central concerns of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, namely, Hubert Dreyfus' adaptation of Heidegger's conception of being-in-the-world to the basic issues of cognitive science.

As attention rightly turns again to the relation of Heidegger's philosophy to his woeful politics, the position of his former student and later critic Emanuel Lévinas deserves close scrutiny. For Lévinas was himself a victim of National Socialist savagery and a critic, not only of Heidegger's engagement with the Nazi Party, but also of the violent impulses in his thinking. Nonetheless, as Wayne J. Froman points out in his even-handed essay "Lévinas and Heidegger: a strange conversation," these criticisms did not keep Lévinas from appreciating the importance of Heidegger's thinking and the irreducibility of that importance to its political dimensions or Heidegger's own political failings. In an effort to illustrate that importance for Lévinas, particularly in Lévinas' attempt to think what escapes Heidegger, Froman begins with a review of their distinct but complementary criticisms of Western metaphysics – its obliviousness to time, for Heidegger, and its obliviousness to alterity, for Lévinas. *Both* Heidegger's conception of the absence that is constitutive of the meaning of being *and* Lévinas' conception of a relatedness to an other that cannot be assimilated to sameness signal a break with a substantialist metaphysics of presence. As Froman shows, this common ground is also evident in their differences with Sartre's conception of subjectivity. These lines of agreement invite the question of whether Lévinas' ethics can be legitimately interpreted as the implicit ethics of *Being and Time*. Froman shows that the question cannot be answered directly since Lévinas' thinking includes critical assessments of Heidegger's philosophy. Froman carefully sorts through various misunderstandings involved in these assessments and potential responses to them, as he works his way to the sobering conclusion that, while there is basis for agreement in some crucial respects, the basis for equally fundamentally disagreement (on the relative priority of ethics or thinking what it means to be) remains.

In her essay "Derrida's reading of Heidegger," Françoise Dastur points out that Derrida's critical engagement with Heidegger's thought was life-long. As Derrida puts it, Heideggerian questions provided him with the "opening" for his own thinking, even though those questions also contain the most powerful defence of the very thought of presence that he aims to undo. Dastur distinguishes two periods of Derrida's debate with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76494-0 - Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays

Edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Heidegger: the period from 1964 to 1968 (culminating in the lecture “The Différance”) and the second from 1968 to 1997 (extending from the lecture “Les fins de l’homme” to the lecture “L’animal que donc je suis”). Dastur recounts how, in the first period, Derrida takes issue with Lévinas’ criticisms of Heidegger, draws on Heidegger’s notion of *Destruktion*, and credits Heidegger with recognizing how Western metaphysics privileges a particular linguistic form. At the same time, as Dastur also points out, Derridean deconstruction (debunking the alleged difference between sign and signified) is by no means reducible to Heideggerian *Destruktion* (dismantling the content of ancient ontology to retrieve the original experiences that ground the first determinations of being). Yet Dastur also explains how Derrida takes up Lévinas’ notion of trace and Nietzsche’s notion of play in ways that expand – even further than Heidegger does – the project of undermining the dominant Western conception of being as presence. Dastur questions Derrida’s criticism that Heidegger himself remains captive of metaphysics in his differentiation of authenticity and authentic time from inauthenticity and vulgar (linear) time. But she also acknowledges Derrida’s insistence that there are two gestures in Heidegger, one that remains inside metaphysics and another that gestures beyond it.

According to Derrida, this ambiguity in Heidegger’s thinking reveals itself in the ontological difference, since it can be construed as the difference between beings themselves and being as their presence. To counter this understanding, Derrida introduces the notion of “*différance*” as the difference among beings that is older than the ontological difference. But Dastur contends that Derrida misconstrues Heidegger fundamentally in this respect, by failing to acknowledge Heidegger’s conception of “the withdrawal of being, the concealing which occurs *with* the clearing of beings.” Indeed, as Dastur observes, Heidegger anticipates the Derridean *différance* by thinking being as “coming from” the difference and, indeed, a difference that is co-extensive, not with mere process of appropriation, but deappropriation (*Enteignis*).

When Dastur turns to the second period of Derrida’s engagement with Heidegger, she finds Derrida once again taking up a Heideggerian theme and trying to take it beyond the point where Heidegger himself considered it. In the second period the issue is the intimate relation of humanism and metaphysics to one another, discussed by Heidegger in his “Letter on Humanism.” Derrida charges that Heidegger himself fails to evade this very collusion, given his insistence on tying the question of