1. ABANDONMENT OF BEING (SEINSVERLASSENHEIT)

Abandonment of being means at the same time both our abandoning being by covering up being as a condition that lets being be, and (reading the genitive the other way) it also means the abandonment of us by being as being withdraws from us. Since everything we do is really a response to being, these two add up to pretty much the same thing for Heidegger. Being has abandoned us by abandoning entities, a strange idea since we and entities always have to have being as long as we are. The best way to approach this idea is to see it as an adaptation of a central notion in Kant’s and Husserl’s thought. Perhaps the main insight in Kant’s first Critique and Husserl’s work in general is that despite how it appears, we don’t just open our eyes and find reality laid out before us, imposing itself on our consciousness by bumping into us; this kind of empiricist realism amounts to naiveté or dogmatism. Their discovery was that a great deal goes into the having of an experience, much of it on the part of consciousness. For us to perceive an object for Kant, the transcendental faculties must organize sensory data, giving it qualities such as time, space, causality, and objectivity. For Husserl, transcendental subjectivity stitches together an array of adumbrations or sides into a unified entity, thus conferring upon it the status of a single, persistent, independently existing object. We see many-sided objects instead of a series of discrete sides – indeed, we see them as sides at all – because we fuse them together, like squeezing used slivers of soap into a single transcendental bar. Sides are, so to speak, intentional: sides are always sides of something, and it is our transcendental constitution of the object that attaches them to it as sides of it. For both, what seems to lie before us as a gift is largely a product of our own unconscious labor.

Being and Time largely follows this strategy, albeit with important changes. Dasein opens the clearing – the condition for the possibility of experiencing anything – by being-in-a-world; this in turn takes place on the basis of her caring for herself, which is ultimately made possible by her temporality. Although, like Kant’s processing, this largely takes place without our conscious control, rather like our autonomic nervous system or our fabrication of our own dreams, it is still our doing. On the other hand, like Husserl’s active syntheses, we can exert some control over the process: when we still our unthinking use of a tool to stare at it, we change its mode of being from available to occurrent. These modes of being correlate with, and are the result of, our stance toward entities and are ultimately due to features of our nature. (See Blattner 1999 for a detailed presentation of this reading.) This is one reason why the foundation of ontology lies in the existential analytic, i.e., the analysis of Dasein’s way of being.

Although Heidegger’s critiques of his early work are often more exculpatory than critical, a fairly consistent thread objects to how subjectivistic and transcendental they are. He often limits the critique to his choice of terminology for suggesting such an interpretation to careless readers while denying that it is correct, but these excuses generally rely on what strike me as
implausible, “violent” reworkings of what he actually wrote, forcing it into alignment with his contemporary views.

In any case, Heidegger in his later works sees this entire line of thinking – from Descartes through Kant to Nietzsche, with roots reaching back to Plato – as “forgetfulness of being.”

Human beings continually have to do with being, and yet it is alien to them. They have to do with being inasmuch as they constantly relate to entities, but it is alien to them inasmuch as they turn away from being, because they do not grasp it at all; instead, they believe that entities are only entities and nothing further (GA40:139/138).

We cover up being with a realism that ignores the conditions that make awareness possible: “light never first creates the clearing. Rather, light presupposes it” (GA14:81/BW 442). Or, in the modern era, we ourselves take credit for the existence and nature of the entities around us, or at least our awareness of them: “the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct” (GA7:28/BW 332). This idealist/technological stance ignores the fact that we can only become aware of things if being “sends” us a clearing, i.e., gives us this capacity. We do not open up the clearing; we are given or thrown into it. All attempts to explain entities or to discover their beingness (i.e., the universal characteristics that define reality) – that is, metaphysics – abandons being by taking either entities (in realism) or ourselves (in idealism) as the self-sufficient grounds of reality and awareness, ignoring what makes them possible in turn.

However, Heidegger stresses that this erring is not our fault; it is due to being itself. Our abandonment of being is conditioned by its abandoning of us, leading us to the opposed-with-shared-origin errors of thinking that either “entities are only entities and nothing further” or “everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct.”

We find these ideas plausible because being withdraws by its very nature. In un concealing entities, this very event of unconcealment is itself concealed. Being, the event of manifestation, deflects our attention onto the things that are manifest. We don’t think about the fact that a pen is or that we can experience it, for example; we just pick it up and write. “The abandonment of entities by being means that beyng conceals itself in the manifestness of entities. And beying itself is essentially determined as this self-withdrawing concealment” (GA65:111). This is no accident; it is the nature of being to love to hide, as Heraclitus says. Being doesn’t conceal itself behind entities, but in their appearance to us, as this very appearing.

In this way, Heidegger’s later analysis of the abandonment of being can still be seen as combating something like transcendental dogmatism or phenomenological naiveté, but no longer by appealing to consciousness or Dasein. “The abandonment of entities by being gives them the appearance that they themselves, without needing anything else, are now there to be grasped and used. . . . Entities then appear in that way, namely as objects and as things objectively present, as if beying were not occurring essentially” (GA65:115). It is naïve to think that entities are just there and impinge upon our awareness when they knock into us, but it is equally naïve to think that it is we who have prepared the way for them to become manifest to us, the way Kant, Husserl, and, I believe, early Heidegger did. Metaphysics exacerbates abandonment by giving answers to the question of being: “where . . . entities as entities have become obvious (and consequently the
Abandonment of Being (Seinsverlassenheit) / 5

question of being is merely a pursuit of ‘ontology’ as a fixed discipline), then no one thinks to ask how entities as entities come into the open and what this opening might be, and how it takes place… The abandonment by being is consoled by the absence of the question of truth” (GA 45:198/170).

However, as Heidegger likes to quote Hölderlin, the danger also contains the saving power (GA 7:29/BW 333; GA 11:110/QCT 42). In the word “Seinsverlassenheit” we find the word “lassen,” to let. This is a very important word in Heidegger’s later work; he even says that, “the deepest meaning of being is letting. Letting the being be, this is the non-causal meaning of ‘letting’” (GA 15:363/FS 59). Being lets entities be by opening up a clearing that lets entities through to our thinking. This helps us reconceive the nature of thinking as something fundamentally receptive, instead of the transcendental tradition’s emphasis on activity – constituting, organizing, synthesizing, bestowing. “With the relation of letting-presence to alêtheia, the whole question about the being of entities is removed from the Kantian framework of the constitution of objects” (GA 14:56/OTB 46). We receive an understanding that being lets us have, that lets through entities and lets us understand them, one that lets us make sense of and encounter entities. All activity takes place on the basis of this prior receptivity.

The proper attitude for us to take to this fundamental enabling is what he calls in Being and Time (in a different context) a “reciprocative rejoinder” (SZ 386). Whereas being lets entities come to presence, we can let being itself come to presence by thinking about this event, so that “the essence, the coming to presence, of being enters into its own emitting of light” (GA 11:121/QCT 45; see also GA 14:4-5/BW 445). At its best, our thinking reflects, re-enacts being in that we reveal the revelation: “originary thinking is the echo of being’s favor, of a favor in which a singular event is cleared and lets come to pass: that entities are” (GA 9:310/236). That is why our “letting entities be, is the fulfillment and consummation of the essence of truth in the sense of the disclosure of entities” (GA 9:190/BW 127): we disclose the disclosure. Letting be or releasement (Gelassenheit) is the great Aristotelian virtue of Heidegger’s later thought: it is when we are most ourselves and when we are our best selves. Cultivating this attending to and tending of the event which lets being let entities be – what he calls being the shepherd or tender of being – is our proper (“eigentlich”) response and responsibility.

If this turning comes to pass, our contemporary nihilism and “desolation” (another sense of Verlassenheit) may turn away by turning itself inside out, turning abandonment (Verlassenheit) into releasement (Gelassenheit), the danger into the saving power. This is not something we can do on our own, nor is it a simple switch. We cannot solve the problem by just turning our attention to being; it must show itself to us and it always does so in a partially concealing way. Our task in this desolate time is to become aware of and train our attention on the fact that being has withdrawn and abandoned us, which may prepare for its favoring us once more. If we can realize that our present desolation is itself sent by being, this would point us toward being as the giver of all sense, thus curing our transcendental narcissism and resulting cosmic loneliness (another possible translation of Verlassenheit). This changes the early existential thrownness from an abandonment in life to the granting of a clearing. We have been granted this miraculous opportunity to receive the manifestation of reality, and standing within even a desolate clearing should fill us with awe-filled gratitude. We need to stop taking for granted that which has been granted to us. Being grateful for our nihilistic epoch is the beginning of the turning of that
nihilism into a meaning-ful understanding of being, which is what I think Heidegger means by the return of the gods. Although being withdraws, if we embraced its withdrawal, it would no longer be an abandonment.

Lee Braver

REFERENCES IN HEIDEGGER
SZ 2–4; GA8; GA65:10–2; GA40:139/138; GA66:90; GA45:184–90

ABIDE, ABIDING (WEILEN). SEE LINGERING.