

A Non-Entitative Understanding of Be-ing and Unity: Heidegger and Neoplatonism

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Metaphysics, traditionally conceived, seeks to articulate the ultimate principles and causes of beings by grounding beings in be-ing and unity. Further, be-ing and unity, when acknowledged as principles, are themselves understood as beings and are most frequently "coalesced" into the supremely simple being called God. This entitative understanding of be-ing and unity arises out of two presuppositions fundamental to traditional metaphysics: first, that the question "what is it?" is the primary question for metaphysical investigation and, second, that propositional discourse is the solely legitimate mode for expressing metaphysical thought. In light of these presuppositions, traditional metaphysics seeks to articulate the essential natures of be-ing and unity within the ambit of propositional discourse.

However, in the writings of Heidegger and the Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, we find a non-entitative understanding of be-ing and unity (*ereignis* for Heidegger), an understanding which denies that be-ing and unity are beings or anything that is. Such an understanding requires a denial of the above-mentioned presuppositions. Indeed, such a denial is made in various ways in the writings of these authors.

In this paper I wish to examine the inadequacy of the "what-question" and propositional discourse for a non-entitative understanding of be-ing and unity as well as discuss certain similarities and differences in the teachings of Heidegger and our Neoplatonists that bear on these matters. The paper will be divided into two parts. First, I will discuss the role of the "what-question" in traditional metaphysics as well as the Heideggerian and Neoplatonic criticism of this question. This discussion will provide the basis for considering the extent to which these thinkers engage in metaphysics as well as the manner in which they seek to overcome it. In the second part I will consider the inadequacy of propositional discourse for a non-entitative understanding of be-ing and unity. In light of this I will consider certain differences between Heidegger and the Neoplatonists which illustrate the quite different frameworks out of which they criticize propositional discourse.

I

Near the beginning of *Being and Time* Heidegger denies the
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adequacy of traditional metaphysics for a non-entitative understanding of be-ing. He asserts that “the be-ing of beings ‘is’ not itself a being” and immediately goes on to add:

If we are to understand the problem of be-ing, our first philosophical step consists in not (μυθόν τινα διηγείσθαι), in not ‘telling a story’ — that is to say, in not defining beings as beings by tracing them back in their origin to some other beings as if be-ing had the character of some possible being. Hence be-ing . . . must be exhibited in a way of its own, essentially different from the ways in which beings are discovered . . . the meaning of be-ing also demands that it be conceived in a way of its own essentially contrasting with the concepts in which beings acquire their determinate signification.¹

The story telling to which Heidegger refers is, of course, the metaphysical attempt to ground beings in entitative causes and principles.

Heidegger’s call for a non-entitative understanding of be-ing is tied to his insistence that we “raise anew the question of be-ing.” We must do this because of a forgetfulness of be-ing. This forgetfulness constitutes traditional metaphysics and lies in the fact that metaphysics forgets to think be-ing as be-ing while persistently misunderstanding it as a being. This misunderstanding penetrates down to the manner in which be-ing is questioned within traditional metaphysics. Thus Heidegger’s insistence that we “raise anew the question of the meaning of be-ing” is fundamentally a challenge to traditional metaphysical questioning of be-ing.

This challenge is the occasion for great perplexity regarding the meaning of be-ing. Heidegger begins *Being and Time* with the passage from Plato’s *Sophist* in which the Stranger admits his perplexity about be-ing in the face of his previous belief to have understood it.² Heidegger is also clearly perplexed about be-ing. But his radical perplexity does not lie in his inability to formulate an answer to the question of be-ing. Rather, it lies in a thoroughgoing difficulty with even formulating the question about be-ing in an adequate way.³

1. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 1. Page reference to Heidegger’s works are to the standard English editions. Also I translate “*das Sein*” and “*on*” as “be-ing” to stress the dynamic and transitive character of that to which these words refer.

2. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 1; Plato, *Sophist* 244A.

3. A corollary to this is that we cannot approach Heidegger’s thought as if he is giving answers to traditional metaphysical questions, as this presupposes that he thinks within the framework of such questions.

Metaphysics investigates beings as beings through determining their ultimate principles and causes. For Socrates/Plato and Aristotle, the fundamental question in this inquiry is "what is it?" which I shall call the "what-question." For these thinkers, and for most others following them, knowledge is fundamentally a knowledge of what things are; we most of all know things when we know what they are.⁴ In contrast to the modern tendency to separate questions of definition from questions of causality, these Greeks regard the what-question as the fundamental causal question. For Aristotle in particular, all causal questions are eventually reduced to the what-question.⁵

Socrates/Plato responds to this question by positing the *eidei* which determine beings to be what they are. Aristotle responds by elucidating the essences (the various *to ti en einai*) with respect to which everything else is and is said to be. But the *eidei* and essences are themselves beings; indeed, as Plato says, they are "the really real." For, those beings which cause determinateness in other beings are themselves preeminently real as preeminently determinate, as permanently and unchangingly self-gathered.

The primacy of the what-question for classical Greek philosophy lies in the insistence of the finitude and determinateness of what is. Aristotle is especially concerned to deny any efficacy or actuality to the infinite. Of course, subsequent Western thought, especially under the influence of Christianity, reverses this view and comes to regard be-ing as fundamentally and preeminently infinite: being itself is the most real being or God.

Yet such thought still remains thoroughly bound to entitative thought and the preeminence of the what-question. That is, infinite be-ing is understood as the infinite and first being (*infinitum* and *primum ens*). This being is a substance: supersubstantial and infinite, to be sure, but nevertheless a substance. It is also its own essence — superessential and infinite, to be sure but nevertheless, at bottom, an essence. Moreover, the unique and, from our point of view, inaccessible and incomprehensible character of this being is indicated most precisely by saying that we do not know what it is, only that it is. The what-question as much applies to be-ing (God) as to beings since be-ing, after all, is understood to be a being. However, we are simply unable to answer the question when asked of be-ing.

4. Plato, *Phaedo*, 99D-102A on forms as causes; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z.2.996a.15-18.

5. Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1963), pp. 375-6.

Heidegger's criticism of this metaphysics and its framework of questions is most explicit and well-known.⁶ Yet such criticism does not begin with Heidegger but has earlier roots in Neoplatonism. Indeed, these roots go back to Plato himself, for the 'logic' of the non-entitative thinking which is developed in Neoplatonism is worked out in Plato's *Parmenides*, especially the first hypothesis. The one of that hypothesis: a one-in-no-way-many — not a being, not thinkable or expressible in logos. Plato characterizes it as "being in no manner whatsoever" (*to oudamos on*).⁷ This characterization, however, does not entail that the one is a mere *flautus vocis*, babble of words or, certainly, a non-existent being; rather, it suggests that we must abandon entitative or, more properly for Plato, eidetic thought to contend with the one.

This suggestion is reinforced in the *Sophist*. Thus at 244Dff the Stranger broaches the problem of unity itself in discussing whether or not *ta onta* are a whole of parts. He defines unity itself as what is without parts. That is, he characterizes unity itself as the one-in-no-way-many of the *Parmenides*, (Hyp I). Decisively the problem of unity itself is soon dropped in the dialogue and does not reappear, especially in the discussion concerning the interweaving of the forms. If one keeps the *Parmenides* in mind this is not surprising, for absolute one can hardly be or not be connected with anything else. But this implies, I believe, that the unity and diversity of the forms which arises through participation in unity is ultimately inaccessible to dialectical thought — eidetic analysis expressed in propositions.

This 'logic' is taken over by Plotinus in his teaching about the one and by Pseudo-Dionysius in his teaching about unity and be-ing. They are clear that unity or be-ing 'are' beyond thought and being, and 'are' not beings — not even an infinite being.⁸ To be sure this does not always emerge explicitly in their texts. Unlike Heidegger they do not always understand be-ing or unity "in a way of its own essentially contrasting with the concepts in which beings acquire their determinate signification." Unlike Heidegger, these Neoplatonists do not seem to develop elaborate and systematic methodological considerations to distinguish thought about unity or be-ing from thought about beings. Unlike Heidegger, they do not forge a vocabulary which uniquely expresses be-ing or unity, although this applies more to Plotinus

6. See, for example, Heidegger's essay *The Way Back to the Ground of Metaphysics*.

7. Plato, *Parmenides* 141D.

8. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, I.6.593D, 13.3.981A; Plotinus, *Enn.* III.8.10, VI.9.3.

than it does Pseudo-Dionysius.⁹ Because of this, the Neoplatonists can be and are read as remaining within an entitative framework in which the one or be-ing is understood as the summit of an analogical hierarchy of beings, as first hypostasis, first being and, as it were, first link in "the great chain of being."¹⁰

However, it seems to me that the radical thrust of their thought repudiates such entitative, analogical thinking and its framework of questions. As Plotinus writes:

But this non-subsisting, what is it. We can but withdraw, silent, hopeless and search no further. What can we look for when we have reached the furthest. Every inquiry aims at a first and, that attained, rests. Besides we must remember that all questioning deals with the nature, [what it is] of a thing, its quality, its cause, or its essential being. In this case the being — insofar as we can use the word — is knowable only by its effects; the question as to cause asks for a principle beyond, but the principle of all has no principle; the question as to quality would be looking for an attribute in what has none; the question as to what it is shows only that we must ask nothing about it but merely take it into the mind if we may, with the knowledge gained that nothing can be permissibly connected with it.¹¹

9. We might add that Plotinus' and Pseudo-Dionysius' stance towards their tradition seems to mark a greater acceptance of that tradition than one finds in Heidegger's stance towards the tradition. Thus Plotinus, as is well known, views himself as the faithful interpreter of Plato. Pseudo-Dionysius presents himself as both faithful to the teachings of the sacred writings and as the expositor of his mentor Hierotheus (cf. *D.N.* III.2). Heidegger, however, engages in a conversation with the tradition which takes the form of a destructive retrieve of the tradition: metaphysics itself is made questionable to disclose a heretofore forgotten and concealed meaning of be-ing. To be sure, all great philosophers create a distance between themselves and their tradition but few have done this in the explicit and radical fashion of Heidegger. However, unlike the positivists who hold out the possibility of completely liberating philosophy from its historical tradition, Heidegger is quite clear that possibilities for thought always emerge from the tradition and that he himself is fundamentally bound to it. The following text from *Time and Being* is excellent justification for this. "But what gives us the right to characterize be-ing as presencing? This question comes too late. For this character of be-ing has long since been determined without our contribution, let alone our merit. Thus we are bound to the characterization of be-ing as presencing." (p. 6)

10. Compare, Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 1.1558B and Plotinus, *Enn.*, I.7.1, II.9.1. Also, the title to *Ennead*, V.1, "The Three Primal Hypostases," designates the one, nous, and soul. The title, however, is by Porphyry.

11. Plotinus, *Enn.*, VI.8.11.

Four observations can be made about this text. First, the characterization of the one as non-subsisting (*me huposten*) clearly jeopardizes any attempt to understand it as the first hypostasis. Second, it is we who attribute being to the one. Properly we ought not do so, for the most wondrous apprehension of it is without being.¹² Third, we profane the one by attributing anything to it, even essence. Thus we must give up asking the question “what is it?” of the one as this question presupposes that essence pertains to the one. Fourth, while in this text Plotinus allows the one to be called ‘cause,’ he elsewhere suggests that this term more properly describes our relation to it rather than simply designating the one!

Even when we call the one cause we are not predicating any attribute of it but of ourselves, because we receive something from it which it is “in” itself (*en auto*). Strictly speaking we should call it neither this nor that; but we should, so to speak, run around outside of it trying to interpret our own feelings about it, sometimes drawing near and sometimes falling away in our perplexities about it.¹³

For Plotinus as well as Pseudo-Dionysius, entitative thinking — and this includes analogical thought — is ultimately paradoxical in character. Indeed all discourse and, implicitly, the inquiry which gives rise to it is paradoxical and self-canceling. These thinkers offer such discourse about the one to get us to ‘see’ its radical inappropriateness and, thus, the necessity of silencing ourselves. Again, Plotinus:

Plato says of the one “it can neither be spoken of nor written about.” If nevertheless we speak of it and write about it we do so only to give direction, to urge towards that vision beyond discourse, to point out the road to one desirous of seeing. Instruction goes only so far as showing the road and the direction.¹⁴

Pseudo-Dionysius also questions entitative metaphysical discourse and questioning. While he differs essentially from Plotinus in allowing the one to be called “infinitely be-ing,” he is, nevertheless, clear that be-ing is not a being. This is evident in his characterization of be-ing as *huperousios* and *huperenomenos*. Such terms deny being (*ousia*) and unity to be-ing; that is, be-ing ‘is’ as it were beyond being (or essence) and unity. However, the non-entitative meaning of these terms is totally obscured when

12. Plotinus, *Enn.*, III.8.15.

13. Plotinus, *Enn.*, VI.9.4.

14. Plotinus, *Enn.*, VI.9.5.

Dionysius is read within the framework of an entitative metaphysics. In such a metaphysics, which prevails in traditional interpretations of Pseudo-Dionysius, one wants to know "what is be-ing according to Pseudo-Dionysius?" But this question presupposes that be-ing is a being which exists in itself apart from other beings. On such an interpretation, a term like "huper" cannot completely deny being and unity to be-ing, it must only deny finite being and unity of an infinite being and unity.¹⁵

Heidegger, Plotinus, and Pseudo-Dionysius each in their own way undermine the priority of what-questioning as well as the entitative metaphysics which arises from such questioning. However one might contend that any similarity between these thinkers is overshadowed by the fact that the latter give us a metaphysics while Heidegger seeks to overcome metaphysics. To be sure, Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius give us a metaphysics; the one or infinitely be-ing is first cause of all beings, as the origin (*arche*) and end (*telos*) of all beings. But their metaphysics as I have suggested is fundamentally non-entitative; they offer us a non-entitative understanding of causality. In this way Pseudo-Dionysius and Plotinus avoid at least one aspect of Heidegger's criticism of Western metaphysics, namely: that all metaphysics is fundamentally ontical in character since it understands be-ing in terms of beings and, hence, as a being.

Further, not all of Heidegger's thought is non-metaphysical; there is a sense in which aspects of Heidegger's thought in *Being and Time* and some of the other earlier works give us a non-entitative metaphysics and, thus, a non-entitative understanding of causality. *Being and Time* is the first step in constructing a fundamental ontology. There is, of course, a decided similarity between Aristotle's understanding of the priority of first philosophy over the other 'sciences' and Heidegger's description of the priority of fundamental ontology over the various regional ontologies and positive sciences associated with those ontologies.

Thus Aristotle:

There is a science which takes up the theory of being as being and of what "to be" means by itself. It is identical with none of the sciences whose subjects are defined as special aspects of being. For none of these looks upon the whole or generally; but each isolating some part, gets a view of the whole only incidentally, as do the mathematical sciences.¹⁶

15. See my *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 29-32 for a more complete discussion.

16. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1003a.21-26.

Thus Heidegger:

Ontological inquiry is indeed more primordial, as over against the ontical inquiry of the positive sciences. But it remains itself naive and opaque if in its researches into the be-ing of beings it fails to discuss the meaning of be-ing in general. And the ontological task of a genealogy of the different possible ways of be-ing . . . is precisely of such a sort as to require that we first come to an understanding of what we really mean by the expression be-ing The question of be-ing aims therefore at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine beings as beings of such and such a type . . . but also for the possibilities of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundation.¹⁷

Aristotle understands the question of first philosophy — “what is being as being?” — to be equivalent to the search for first principles and causes. The outcome of this search for Aristotle is to ground all things in formal causes or essential natures. Heidegger clearly does not understand the be-ing question as a search for the nature of beings nor does he understand be-ing as a nature or essence of beings. Further his attempt to disclose the meaning of be-ing in general (*Sein überhaupt*) is to be essentially contrasted with Aristotle’s search for the causes of beings in totality as Heidegger would regard Aristotle as only concerned directly with beings.

If one insists that only beings are causes, or that any understanding of be-ing as cause reifies be-ing, or that causes must ultimately be grounded in essential natures then Heidegger is certainly not doing metaphysics. But I see no reason why these claims ought be accepted as I do not find any *a priori* justification for rejecting non-entitative causes.¹⁸ For, “cause” in the broadest sense means “that in virtue of which” or “the reason why,” (*to dioti*). The causes of a being are what account for that being,

17. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 31.

18. Something like these claims is found in John Macquarrie’s *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1976), p. 106 where he seems to distinguish his own understanding of be-ing as letting-be from metaphysical understanding. He seems, however, to restrict metaphysics to the study of objective or entitative causes, which is certainly true of traditional metaphysics. But, clearly, Macquarrie is doing a kind of metaphysics: be-ing (letting-be) is the beginning and end of beings as well as their condition of possibility (pp. 110. 211); moreover, be-ing is identified with the Judaeo/Christian Creator God. In other words, Macquarrie understands be-ing to be a non-entitative cause.

explain it and which we must elucidate in order to understand it. A cause in this broad sense might be viewed as an explanatory factor.¹⁹

To be sure, Heidegger does not consider the be-ing of beings to be any entitative factor of beings. However as Heidegger insists that be-ing determines beings as beings and is presupposed in any understanding we have of them, an elucidation of the meaning of be-ing is crucial to any understanding we have of beings. This is reflected in the conception of fundamental ontology as the articulation of the *a priori* conditions for the possibility for our understanding of beings which emerges in the various regional ontologies and the positive sciences associated with them. But then be-ing, as an *a priori* condition for the possibility of understanding beings and as what determines beings as beings, is an explanatory factor of beings and a cause of beings, in the broad sense that we have characterized "cause." While it is not a *telos* of beings it is a kind of *arche* for beings.²⁰ With its conception of fundamental ontology, *Being and Time* offers or, better, remains within the grips of a metaphysics which is fundamentally non-entitative in character.²¹

Heidegger's radical attempt to overcome metaphysics does not, of course, lie in *Being and Time* where thought about be-ing is understood as fundamental ontology. Rather it is found in his later writings where thinking is understood as releasement. Released thinking is non-metaphysical. It is thinking freed from questioning and is a thinking without a why and for that matter, a what. Reiner Schürmann has shown the connection between releasement for Heidegger and Meister Eckhart, where Eckhart understands releasement as a kind of mystical union with God. As Schürmann rightly insists releasement is fundamentally an-archic in character,

19. "Explanatory factor" is Richard Hope's translation of *aitia*. See his *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), V.2 and p. 355.

20. The *telos* of beings, so to say, is inauthentic Dasein; for it is the "ultimate for the sake of which" of all instrumental involvements. (*Being and Time*, pp. 116-7).

21. In his Prefatory letter to William Richardson's *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), Heidegger notes that "thought" is ambiguous naming "on the one hand, metaphysical thought (the thinking of the Being (Sein) of beings) and on the other, the Being question, sc. the thinking of Being as such (the revealedness of Being)" (p. 11). Fundamental ontology, it seems to me, remains very much within the grip of metaphysical thought. Also, Richardson characterizes Heidegger's early thought as tending toward the development of a metaphysics of metaphysics. (p. 202).

for in thinking without a why, one must, abandon the attempt to experience be-ing as the beginning (*arche*) or end (*telos*) of beings. In releasement one abandons reference to causality and metaphysics.²²

A version of this radical overcoming of metaphysics, which is indeed a primary source of Eckhart's understanding of release-ment, is also found in Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius. This overcoming of metaphysics takes place in *henosis*. The negative 'theology' which leads to such union is not, as is frequently misunderstood, an aspect of metaphysics which expresses the radical difference between the one (or be-ing or God) and beings.²³ Rather the practice of-such negative mystical theology leads to an abandonment of the difference and, thus, identity between oneself and the nameless. Such abandonment requires releasement from metaphysics, for in metaphysical experience a cause is always experienced as other than its effects.²⁴

II

We have thus far explored the unsuitability of the what-question in a non-entitative understanding of be-ing. In this section I will explore an even more far-reaching consequence of such an understanding: namely, the necessity to relinquish propositional discourse.

The limiting character and, indeed, fundamental inappropriateness of propositional discourse is seen clearly in Heidegger's later thought. In the essay *Time and Being*, propositional discourse serves as a primary impediment in Heidegger's attempt to elucidate his understanding of time, be-ing, and appropriation.

If overcoming (metaphysics) remains necessary, it concerns that thinking that explicitly enters appropriation in order to say it in terms of it about it. Our task is unceasingly to overcome the obstacles that tend to render such saying inadequate. The saying of appropriation in the form of a lecture remains itself an obstacle of this kind. The lecture has spoken merely in propositional statements.²⁵

22. Reiner Schurmann, "Heidegger and Meister Eckhart on Release-ment," *Research in Phenomenology*, 3(1973), pp. 95-119.

23. See St. Thomas, *Expositio de divinis nominibus, Proemium*, I.d for a typical interpretation of negative theology.

24. See Jones, *ibid.*, pp. 97-102 for a more complete discussion.

25. Heidegger, *Time and Being*, p. 24.

Moreover, the attempt to abandon propositional discourse is found in a number of enigmatic phrases, scattered throughout Heidegger's writings, such as "nothing nothings (nihilates),"²⁶ "appropriation appropriates,"²⁷ and "temporality temporalizes."²⁸ Such phrases are an embarrassment and nonsense to a positivist like Carnap.²⁹ Indeed they probably are nonsense so long as one remains within the ambit of propositional discourse.

However, Heidegger offers such phrases, I believe, to free himself from the tyranny of propositional discourse by exploding, as it were, the fundamental unit of such discourse: the subject-verb.³⁰ Now a proposition such as "the runner runs" refers to a being — a runner — and one of his entitative activities — running. Clearly both the runner and the running are beings or something which is. However, appropriation, temporality, and nothing are not beings; "appropriates," "temporalizes," and "nothings" do not refer to entitative activities. Rather, the enigmatic phrases cited above express a non-entitative appropriating, temporalizing and nothinging (or, nihilating.) For Heidegger these phrases are all ways of thinking be-ing (*das Sein*). But, of course, Heidegger does not understand the infinitive "*das Sein*" as a substantive. Rather, as he makes clear at the beginning of *Being and Time*, "*das Sein*" names "*seiend*," which we translate as "be-ing."³¹ This participle expresses the concealing/-non-concealing process in which beings come to presence as beings.

This process is properly inaccessible to propositional discourse and the conceptual thought which is associated with it. For such discourse and thought is always directed towards beings as what is present and never the process as such and as itself. Thus a proper

26. Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics in Basic Writings* (New York: Harper, 1976) p. 163.

27. Heidegger, *Time and Being*, p. 24.

28. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 376-7.

29. Rudolph Carnap, "The Overcoming of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language." Text in Michael Murray, *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 23. "The error of using the word "nothing" as a noun . . . [is that] it involves a contradiction. For even if it were admissible to introduce "nothing" as a name or description of an entity, still the existence of this entity would be denied in its very definition, whereas sentence (3) ["The Nothing exists only because . . ."] goes on to affirm its existence. This sentence, therefore, would be contradictory, hence absurd, even if it were not already meaningless."

30. See Heidegger, *Time and Being*, p. 17ff for a discussion of the inadequacy of a propositional analysis of "it gives" ("*es gibt*").

31. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 1.

apprehension of be-ing requires a comprehension which is non-propositional in character. Indeed, and more precisely, since it is in the process which is be-ing that beings comes to presence, and since it is with beings that the distinction between beings and their activities emerges, and since it is this distinction that the linguistic distinction between subject and verb expresses, then a proper apprehension of be-ing must be *pre-propositional* in character.

As I remarked earlier, the logic for the non-entitative metaphysics which the Neoplatonists develop is found in Plato's *Parmenides*. A cursory reading of the hypothesis in that dialogue shows the collapse of all discourse with respect to the one-in-no-way-many, or "absolute one." Now, Plotinus, accepts Parmenides devastating final conclusion about absolute one!

You cannot say that it 'has' anything or that there is anything 'of' it. Consequently it cannot have a name or be spoken of, nor can there be any knowledge or perception of it. It is not named or spoken of, not an object of opinion or knowledge, nor perceived by anything.³²

For Plotinus all thought is properly directed towards beings, unified multiplicities which have be-ing. All thought, as expressed in judgement, presupposes what we would call the simple existential judgement 'it is.' But this judgement always apprehends an 'it,' a unity, which is, has be-ing, and which is, thus, a plurality. Thought expressed in judgement always apprehends identity in difference. But as Plotinus insists that it is by unity that beings are beings so that identity in difference can never fully account for itself, Plotinus does not take Parmenides' conclusion about the one as the basis for dismissing the one.³³ Rather this conclusion entails that we get beyond eidetic thought and propositional judgement to experience the one. To be sure: Plotinus utters much propositional discourse about the one, but this is done in an ultimately paradoxical manner, namely to comprehend the inappropriateness of such discourse.

Pseudo-Dionysius is lead to fundamentally the same teaching about "unlimitedly be-ing." Within the context of his categories I wish to explore the character of non-propositional apprehension of be-ing. For Pseudo-Dionysius beyond-beingly be-ing is the cause of beings. However, beyond-beingly be-ing is not a being; consequently we cannot understand the emergence of beings as

32. Plato, *Parmenides*, 142A.

33. Plotinus, *Enn.* VI. 9.1-4.

be-ing itself letting be beings. We cannot properly express this emergence as "be-ing itself lets-be beings," since this inevitably suggests that be-ing is a being. Rather, to express the emergence of beings we must say: be-ing beings. Yet here thought balks at what is manifestly a sentence fragment and incomplete thought. Taken from the standpoint of ordinary grammar this is quite true, but such grammar is patterned for thinking beings and we are not here thinking beings alone but be-ing beings. Traditional grammar, as the grammar of propositional discourse, cannot regulate the thinking and saying of be-ing and beings.

Our situation here is, it seems to me, somewhat analogous to the analysis of Schönberg's twelve tone music by means of conventional diatonic harmony. Thus, while a given 'chord' in twelve tone music can generally be analyzed in terms of conventional harmonics, the transition between chords always remains unanalyzable, incomplete, and lacking in resolution. This is because there is no tonic-note around which these "chords" are arranged. Similarly, in the utterance "be-ing beings," we have first a gerund "be-ing". This gerund is not properly a verbal noun as if one begins with verb and noun and combines them in some strange way to form the gerund. Rather, this gerund expresses infinitely and transitively what is prior to the distinction between verb and noun. We also have a collective noun "beings." Yet the connection between these is unanalyzable for traditional grammar since a phrase of the type "be-ing beings", e.g. picking apples or being a mechanic, requires and has reference to something which engages in a given 'activity'. Thus we expect a person who is a mechanic or someone who picks apples. In this phrase be-ing beings, traditional grammar and thought demand a being which lets be beings. But for a non-entitative understanding of be-ing, there is no being letting be beings in be-ing beings.

The expression be-ing lacks completeness and resolution for traditional grammar. It lacks a tonic note as it were. The tonic note for propositional discourse, that on which such discourse is based and to which it eventually resolves, is the existential judgement "it is." But this judgement is expressive only of beings, unified multiplicities which have be-ing. That is, while such a judgement presupposes a comprehension of be-ing and the belonging together of be-ing and beings, the judgement can never give direct expression to a comprehension of be-ing as be-ing. Such discourse is thoroughly ontical or entitative. It is expressive always and only of beings in terms of beings: It expresses beings as beings. A comprehension of be-ing as be-ing, which must be non-entitative in character, cannot be grounded in the existential judgement. To

do so is implicitly to reify be-ing. Hence, an adequate comprehension of be-ing must be pre-propositional in character. We have given expression to such comprehension by saying: be-ing beings.

However, this pre-propositional 'judgement' does not completely express the meaning of "be-ing of beings" as this meaning is fundamentally ambiguous. Let me digress for a moment to develop this ambiguity and seek to explicate the relation of the two meanings within the categories of Pseudo-Dionysius. I will also be able to again indicate the quite different understandings of be-ing that occur in a pre-propositional and propositional expression of be-ing. So far as we ask about the emergence of beings we are to think: be-ing beings. Yet in asking about the be-ing of beings, we also ask about the be-ing of each particular being as the 'activity of be-ing' in which each being engages. My be-ing (activity of "existing") is not my letting be; for neither I nor any other being am fully self-emergent. Rather in be-ing beings, beings are let be to be. In be-ing me, I am let be and thus engage in be-ing. Let us call the activity of be-ing in which beings engage: "beings be-ing," which corresponds to the existential judgement (in plural form) "beings are."

The phrase "be-ing of beings" is therefore fundamentally ambiguous: it names both be-ing beings and beings be-ing. Since to think about the be-ing of beings is to think about the emergence of beings and the 'activity' of beings in which beings engage, then the task of ontology is to think "be-ing beings be-ing."

For Pseudo-Dionysius, the 'existential' expression of beings is 'having be-ing' (*habens esse* or *metechon tou ontos*). Thus beings be-ing is to be understood as having be-ing. Further insofar as *ousia* can signify manners of be-ing in the broadest sense, we may understand having be-ing as *ousios on* or be-ingly being. But then what is the 'relation' between be-ing beings and beings be-ing? What be-ing do beings have? What is the difference between beyond beingly be-ing and beingly be-ing?

One might say that each being has its be-ing, which be-ing is a participation in be-ing itself or beyond-beingly be-ing. In this fashion one could distinguish between the be-ing of beings and the Be-ing of beings, between "little b" be-ing and "big B" Be-ing. Yet such a move, especially in English, inevitably splits be-ing (as Be-ing) off from beings and reifies it as a being subsisting independently of beings. Rather I would say, the be-ing of each being: its having be-ing; the be-ing which is has: be-ing (itself.) The difference between be-ing beings and beings be-ing is that between be-ing and having. Put another way, beings are beingly be-ing; be-ing itself: beyond-beingly.

Be-ing itself 'is' beyond beingly. The Greek word here is "huperousios." When traditionally understood as 'superessentially;' then be-ing itself comes to be understood as the *primum ens* which essentially exists beyond all finite beings. When properly understood as 'beyond-beingly' so that it offers a non-entitative expression of be-ing, this term does not, as it were, add anything to be-ing or express a way of be-ing other than beingly be-ing. Indeed it does not express a be-ing other than the be-ing of beings. Rather, "beyond-beingly" expresses be-ing in its difference from beings.

I have suggested that the difference between be-ing and beings is that between be-ing and having, where having signifies the activity of be-ing in which beings engage. Hence the difference between be-ing and having is not that between active and passive modes of be-ing. Rather the difference reflects be-ing thought transitively and infinitively as letting be and be-ing thought as the activity of be-ing in which beings engage. Our pre-propositional 'judgement', "be-ing beings" expresses be-ing as infinite (not a being) and transitive or creative. The existential judgement "beings be-ing" focuses on beings and their activity of be-ing. However, it inevitably reifies this activity of be-ing as something which is, i.e. as self-subsistent be-ing (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*.)

Both our Neoplatonists and Heidegger criticize propositional discourse and suggest a pre-propositional comprehension of be-ing and unity. Yet their critiques arise out of quite different frameworks and lead to fundamentally different experiences of man's relation to be-ing and unity. I will conclude this paper by briefly examining two differences between our authors which bear this out.

For the Neoplatonists, propositional discourse fails in the attempt to think a one-in-no-way-many. Tradition would say that the Neoplatonists abandon such discourse in their attempt to think an undifferentiated identity. Heidegger, however, makes clear in the essay *Identity and Difference* that his attempt to think *ereignis* is not the attempt to think an undifferentiated identity. Indeed, he chastises the pre-idealistic tradition for trying to think identity without difference, as when it understands be-ing as an absolutely simple being.

Since the era of speculative Idealism it is no longer possible for thinking to represent the unity of identity as mere sameness, and to disregard the mediation that prevails in unity. Wherever this is done, identity is represented only in an abstract manner.³⁴

34. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, p. 25.

Heidegger wants a non-metaphysical and non-propositional thinking and saying of identity and difference, of the belonging together of being and thinking to the same (*ereignis*) as the difference which holds them together. To be sure Plotinus' one and Pseudo-Dionysius' infinitely be-ing are not to be simply identified with Heidegger's *ereignis*. But as Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius do not regard the one or be-ing as some kind of substantial unity, it is not at all clear to me that they understand the one or be-ing as an undifferentiated identity or, hence, that they try to think identity without difference. To see this however we must constantly bear in mind that the one is neither the same as or different from itself or any other.³⁵ That is, neither sameness nor difference pertain to the one. Rather the one: non-same and non-other.

Identity and difference, and this is especially true for Plotinus, emerges with beings, with the production and consequent correlation of being and thinking. These Neoplatonists would agree with Heidegger that identity cannot be thought without difference. Rather identity and difference are to be comprehended in their mutuality in the bringing forth of being and thinking "from" the one or be-ing. This is not always clear in Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, in part because they refer to 'it' as the one. Such a name suggests an undifferentiated unity. However, both Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius deny the ultimate appropriateness of the name 'one.' They would both deny that the one is or has unity.³⁶

This denial is central to *henosis* which overcomes metaphysical discourse through the silencing of all discourse in "the darkness of unknowing." Language and thought for these Neoplatonists are fundamentally metaphysical in nature; they apprehend unity or be-ing in causal differentiation from beings. The paradoxical nature of metaphysical discourse does not lead to a non-metaphysical thinking but to the radical silencing of all thinking. We have here, I believe, a fundamental difference between Heidegger and the Neoplatonists. In contrast to the Neoplatonists, Heidegger wants to develop a non-metaphysical thinking and

35. Plato, *Parmenides*, 139A. Of special interest is why the one cannot be the same as itself. Thus: "the nature of the one is not such as to be the nature of the same. Because it is not the case that when something becomes the same as anything it becomes one. For becoming the same as a multiplicity is necessarily to become many, not one. But if the one and the same differed in no manner, whenever something was becoming the same it would always be becoming one, and whenever one, the same. Therefore if the one is to be the same as itself it will not be one with itself."

36. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 13.3.981A; Plotinus, VI.9.5.

saying of be-ing and *ereignis*. The following text from *Identity and Difference* bears witness to this. After insisting that our experience of the belonging together of be-ing and man entails a spring away from the conception of man as rational animal and be-ing as ground, Heidegger writes:

Where does the spring go that springs away from the ground? Into an abyss? Yes, as long as we only represent the spring in the horizon of metaphysical thinking. No, insofar as we spring and let go. Where to? To where we already have access: the belonging to be-ing.³⁷

That is, for Plotinus and, especially, for Pseudo-Dionysius, *henosis* involves a spring away from the one as ground and cause into an abyss (nothing: *ouden*) undergone in radical silence and cessation of thought (*noesis*.) This is evident in Pseudo-Dionysius' description of Moses' mystical union with God:

And then Moses abandons those who see and what is seen and enters into the really mystical darkness of unknowing; in this he shuts out every knowing apprehension and comes to be in the wholly imperceptible and invisible, be-ing entirely of that beyond all — of nothing, neither himself nor another, united most excellently by the completely unknowing inactivity of every knowledge, and knowing beyond intellect by knowing nothing.³⁸

For Heidegger, on the other hand, we spring away from the ground into a released non-metaphysical thinking and saying of the belonging together of be-ing and man. While *henosis* abolishes the difference and identity between the one and man; released thinking enters the domain of the belonging together of be-ing and man to the same as the difference which holds them apart.

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37. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, p. 32.

38. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, I.3.1000D.