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Recommended Citation

Brook, A. (2005). *Martin Heidegger's Path to an Aesthetic ετηος*. **Paper presented at the Heidegger and the Aesthetics of Living Conference. Sydney Society for Literature and Aesthetics. University of Sydney, NSW, 12-14 December, 2005.**

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'Martin Heidegger's Path to an Aesthetic Ετηος'

Angus Brook

1. Introduction

Martin Heidegger is infamous for his rejection of the validity of Ethics as a philosophical endeavour and moreover, for his aesthetic formulation of ετηος. In this paper I will attempt to trace the path of Heidegger's thought from his early engagement with Aristotle and Religion, through pre-Socratic thinking, to the formulation of ετηος as an authentic dwelling in the truth of being revealed by the poet.

There are, at the outset, two introductory themes to discuss. First, there is the issue of Heidegger's rejection of ethics, and second; the formulation of an aesthetic ετηος.

In the 'Letter on Humanism', Heidegger provides an argument for the rejection of ethics as a valid philosophical endeavour. The context, then, for the rejection of ethics is grounded on a discussion of humanism and further, an argument which determines humanism and ethics as intrinsically linked.

Heidegger determines the essence of humanism to be no more or less than a kind of metaphysical thinking: for humanism is either grounded on metaphysics or is the ground of metaphysics[1]. The question of ethics, as such, arises in this text as a kind of thinking intrinsically linked to both humanism and metaphysics. The question of ethics is provoked by humanism and is also linked to metaphysics as a product of the development of metaphysics in a historical sense[2]. So, the rejection of the validity of ethics is posited by Heidegger, in the first instance, insofar as he rejects metaphysics. Thus, the destruction of metaphysics as onto-theology is crucial to appreciating why Heidegger rejects ethics.

In this 'letter on humanism' Heidegger also provides a second, positive, form of the rejection of ethics. Here, Heidegger reflects on the question: "when are you going to write an ethics?"[3] to which he replies: "If ethics signifies a thinking about the ετηος of the human being, then that thinking which thinks the truth of being as the

primordial ground of being-human (as Dasein) is in itself originary ethics. However, this thinking is not ethics… because it is ontology”[4].

Heidegger then poses his formulated question of ετηος: If this thinking that ponders the truth of being determines the essence of being-Dasein… as belonging to being… then, what can this thinking disclose in relation to directives for actual living?[5]

The answer Heidegger gives is this: thinking builds upon the house of being, or language[6], in such a way that the destined (historical) unfolding of being enjoins being-Dasein in each case to dwell in the truth of being.[7] In other words, a Heideggerian ethics (if you will) is the argument we ought to become truly human. This ‘ought’ of being operates within the three primary dimensions of the truth of being: language, thinking and history.

This formulation of ετηος is further developed in Heidegger’s work, ***Holderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”***. Here, Heidegger provides both a determination of authentic ετηος and an argument of just how this authentic ετηος becomes possible for humans. In the first instance, an authentic ετηος is determined as: that potentiality for being in which the being of humans is fulfilled: being homely in becoming unhomely[8]. An authentic ετηος, as such, is no more or less than a becoming homely (a becoming truly human) wherein being-human is determined as the unhomely – the uncanny, the ***unheimlich***, the δαιμονες. This authentic ετηος is both grounded upon and revealed by the poet as demigod, for being can be said only as the poetic μυτηος or as λογος[9].

Two questions remain to be asked:

- Why does Heidegger reject ethics?
- How does Heidegger reach this aesthetic formulation of ετηος in which it is poetry as μυτηος and λογος that grounds an authentic life?

I will attempt to address both questions through the following overview of Heidegger’s path to an Aesthetic ετηος

2. The Question of Grounding phenomenology in Heidegger's early thinking:

Martin Heidegger's early attempts to ground phenomenology were marked by two pivotal themes; the interpretation of Aristotle and Religion. Heidegger sought through Aristotle to ground phenomenology as ontology – attempting a recovery of an authentic way into the question of being. This quest for ground forms the basis for the deconstruction of metaphysics and the resultant rejection of religion. Moreover, this quest reveals the way in which Heidegger will constitute ethos as a problem for philosophy.

One of Heidegger's earliest texts, 'Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle', highlights the problem of grounding phenomenology as ontology. Here, Heidegger posits three intertwined characteristics of ground: historical ground, proper ground and authenticity as ground.

In the first case, the problem of grounding lies within the horizon of philosophy as a historical phenomenon. The ground of philosophy, as such, belongs to the historical origin of philosophy of which – Heidegger argues – Aristotle represents the fulfilment and endpoint.[10] The first character of grounding, then, is marked by a return or retrieval of the historical origin.

The second characteristic of ground operates as the problem of determining the proper matter of thought of philosophy. For Heidegger, the ground of philosophy in this sense is being-human as Dasein – the way of being-human that is philosophical. As such, the problem of grounding philosophy is that of disclosing and characterising the way of being-human that constitutes being-understanding or thinking-being.[11]

The third characteristic of ground, then, revolves around what Heidegger calls the tendency of Dasein to fall away from oneself, or, the intrinsic inauthenticity of everyday human concern.[12] The problem of grounding philosophy in this sense is that of disclosing the authenticity of Dasein – of what or how it is to be truly human – that founds philosophy as an authentic way of existence.[13]

The way of grounding philosophy is thus threefold. The ground is first and foremost historical and etymological – the ground is Greek as the primordial origin of philosophy as a way of being. Moreover, the ground of philosophy is the being of Dasein insofar as philosophy expresses and is motivated by what it is to exist as Dasein. Further, if philosophy is to attain validity – if philosophy is to reveal the truth of being – then, philosophy must be grounded on authenticity – the truth of being Dasein.

This problem of grounding then forms the basic problems of phenomenology – for phenomenology as ontology must address the problem of being and ground – of uncovering the truth of being and of disclosing the being of Dasein as the ground of philosophy.[14] Further, phenomenology must find its way into this problem of ground through the history of philosophy and in opposition to the way in which philosophy has fallen away from its own authentic ground. As such, phenomenology becomes a way of de-construction – a way of seeking being-the-ground in various senses that inherently involves a destruction of inauthentic or improper grounding and the construction or disclosure of the authenticity that makes philosophy possible.[15]

3. With Respect to Aristotle: The De-Construction of Metaphysics as onto-theology

For Heidegger, Aristotle represents both the culmination of Greek philosophy and the origin of the 'Greek-Christian' tradition of metaphysics. As such, Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle is de-constructive – an interpretation that destroys the inauthenticity of the tradition of metaphysics and thus also allows the possibility of recovering the authentic ground of Greek thinking. This deconstructive relation with Aristotle is then, the point of origin for Heidegger's attempts to ground phenomenology, and moreover, the point of origin for the question of being. The primary task of Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle is thus the destruction of improper ways of grounding philosophy – a clearing the way towards the truth of being as ground.

At the same time, this deconstructive process with respect to Aristotle forms the basis for Heidegger's rejection of Ethics. Herein, there are three primary themes that I would like to draw out as illustrations of the interrelatedness of this deconstructive grounding and the rejection of ethics.

A. The Primacy of Ontology

The first theme of Heidegger's relation to Aristotle is that of ontology. Here, ontology is determined as the ground of philosophy as proper. In other words, ontology is the only proper matter of thought and the only proper way of being-philosophical. Thus, in the 1921 to 1922 lectures on Aristotle, Heidegger poses the proper of philosophy as ontology: the question of the ground of beings, the sense of being, and as an authentic way of being Dasein.[16] The essence of philosophy proper is therefore ontology. Moreover, the ground of philosophy is the question of being and nothing besides being.[17]

Heidegger appropriates this ground of the proper of philosophy from Aristotle's ***Metaphysics*** – the question of being qua being. In his lectures of 1924 to 1925 entitled ***Plato's Sophist***, Heidegger posits the proper of philosophy via a doubled reading of Aristotle – a reflection on the being of beings (that reveals) the (authentic) Sophist in their being.[18] In other words, the proper ground of philosophy is found by recovering the origin of thinking about being, insofar as being is the proper matter of thought,

and insofar as this recovery discloses the authentic way of being-human that motivates and grounds philosophy as a way of existence. Aristotle, as such, is the point of origin for this recovery of authentic being.[19]

Equally, Heidegger's appropriation of Aristotle as the point of origin for grounding philosophy-proper also reveals the 'hyper-Aristotelian' dimension of Heidegger's ***seinsfrage***. In the first instance, it is precisely Aristotle's question of being qua being that is preconceived as the proper matter of thought. Further, it is Aristotle's interpretation of his predecessors within the question of being that serves as the basis for Heidegger's recovery of the authentic way of being of philosophy. Finally, it is Aristotle's question of being that serves as the ground of Heidegger's destruction of the tradition of metaphysics and the quest to recover a pre-metaphysical question of being.

B. The Destruction of Metaphysics as onto-theology:

The quest for ground, or the question of being as ground, leads to Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics as onto-theology. To oversimplify; Heidegger seeks to overcome metaphysics by showing that metaphysics is onto-theology: a kind of philosophy that is founded on an abstraction of everyday concern for being. Heidegger argues that metaphysics is founded upon the everyday inauthentic concern of Greek-Dasein: a concern for the relation of φυσις and the divine – the divine as the objectified ground of physis.[20]

There are at least three primary dimensions to this destruction of metaphysics as onto-theology. The first is what Heidegger describes as the corruption of the idea of physis; the gradual change in the Greek concept from the original sense of the 'emergence of being' to a static 'always-presence' or causality.[21] This corruption of philosophy is, in Heidegger's view, exemplified in the way in which Aristotle's ***Physics*** serves as the foundational motive of the ***Metaphysics*** and the formulation of ground and being as first cause. The second dimension is what Heidegger characterises as the subsumption of being under the idea(l).[22] Here, the static characterisation of being as always-presence forms the basis of constituting being as an idea – a transcendent ideal that stands over and above beings in their being. Finally, then, this subsumption of being under the idea(l) then allows what gets called metaphysical ground as first cause – the

divine, the ought, as the supreme idea(l) that lies beyond being: "being never is yet, but always ought to be".[23]

C. The Rejection of Ethics as grounded on onto-theology

So, it is no surprise that Heidegger rejects Ethics as a philosophical endeavour. First, Ethics is constituted as metaphysical grounding on an everyday understanding of being as: the ought, the ideal, and always-presence. Moreover, Heidegger critiques the ***Nicomachean Ethics*** as the ground of the metaphysical distinction between being and the ought of being; for Aristotle's conceptualisation of σοφια poses a distantiation between being-human and being-Divine insofar as the foundation of the 'good' is not being-human but rather the divine (1177^{b}26-35). Ethics is also a kind of metaphysical thinking grounded on a 'factical experience' in which authenticity, the good life, is experienced as otherwise than being-human - 'the ought' – which Heidegger views as the tyranny of value over philosophy.[24] Therefore, Heidegger's rejection of Ethics ultimately reflects a rejection of the kind of 'factical' life that generates this metaphysical distinction between being and 'the ought of being'.

4. The Ontical Reduction of Religion and the Problem of Ετηος:

It is no secret that Aristotle posits the foundation of Ethics upon the beliefs or opinions of what could be called 'Greek Religion'. Additionally, it is no secret that the tradition of metaphysics has been dominated by 'Christianity' – a religious tradition. So, it should come as no surprise that Heidegger's rejection of ethics is also founded upon a deconstruction of the phenomenon of Religion.

Herein, there are three primary arguments given in the interpretation of Religion that are relevant to the rejection of ethics. In the lectures of 1920-1921 entitled 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion' Heidegger argues that Religion signifies factical life; an expression of everyday concern for God as a present object.[25] Further, the phenomenon of religion shows itself as a kind of understanding of being-human that is founded upon the idea of God as other, or knowing about the inner human founded on an experience of God.[26] As such, the religious notion of authenticity, of truth, and of knowing is grounded on the idea of God - the objectification of an experience of the truth of being. Thus, in his lectures on St. Augustine Heidegger argues that Religion is factical living that seeks the truth of being[27], and yet misunderstands being by constituting being as a supernatural, ideal entity.

The underlying assertions of Heidegger's interpretation of religion form three arguments against Ethics. First, Religion is interpreted as the kind of factical living that motivates ethics insofar as religious experience constitutes being as an ideal entity that is absolutely other to being-human. Thus, Religion motivates the question of the good on the basis of an experience of not-being-good, of not-being-the-ideal entity. Moreover, Religion is the ground of ethics insofar as religious experience constitutes knowing as an understanding of that which is not-human, and yet, is what humans 'ought to be'. Finally, religious experience has a tendency to constitute the idea of God as supernatural – an always-present entity. In other words, the implicit argument of Heidegger's interpretation is that Religion, or something like religion, founds both metaphysics and ethics – it is essentially the grounding of thinking and living on something otherwise than being-human. For Heidegger, insofar as the truth of being is the identity of truth and being, the factical life of religious experience is the absolute enemy of authenticity and thus the enemy of thinking the truth of being.[28]

5. The Way that Indicates αρχη – The retrieval of early Greek thinking:

So… we have arrived at the point at which Heidegger has justified the rejection of Ethics as ultimately grounded on the idea of 'the ought' – an idea founded upon a religious experience of authenticity as something otherwise than being-human. The potential ground for a formulation of Ethos as being-truly-human has also been established in the identity of being and truth… and yet Heidegger needs to complete this movement via a recovery of the origin of philosophy in order to show just how this truly-being-oneself is a possibility of human existence.

There are three primary dimensions to what Heidegger finds in the retrieval of Pre-metaphysical thought in relation to the question of ethos. First, Heidegger finds that αλετηεια, the truth of being shows itself in Pre-metaphysical thought in two ways: through the λογος and μυτηος of Plato's ***Politeia***.[29] The truth of being, therein, is disclosed as the δαιμονες – the uncanny – the unhomely.[30] In other words, the truth of being emerges for Dasein as the uncanny within the ordinary… and therein… calls Dasein into becoming at home with the truth of being; of being truly oneself as the uncanny. The experience of the truth of being in an authentic pre-metaphysical sense, has two possibilities: logos or thinking, and mythos or the poetic. The former, as ontology proper, is neither experienced or the ground of living, for ontology only discloses the truth of being and how it emerges for Dasein. The latter, as μυτηος, is the poetic expression of the truth of being that is an authentic experience… an authentic facticity.

6. Ethos – A Lived dwelling with-in the truth of being disclosed by the poet:

I would like, in conclusion, to attempt a brief overview of how Heidegger arrives at an aesthetic notion of ethos. Heidegger's path begins with the prioritisation of the question of being wherein there are three foundational preconceptions about ethos: First, ethos signifies being-human. Further, the primary sense of being is truth. Moreover, being signifies ground. Thus, ethos signifies being-truly-human in our ground. This formulation is the basis of Heidegger's rejection of Ethics insofar as ethics is traditionally founded upon a distinction between being-human and who humans ought to be. This ought is constituted as the id-entity of ground as creator or first cause. Having rejected ethics, metaphysics and religion as intertwined modes of inauthenticity, Heidegger then needs to find an alternative 'authentic' mode of facticity which does not distinguish between being-human and the truth of being.

This question of ethos, of an authentic factical life, is thus a problem of disclosing what it is to be truly-human in our ground. This disclosure is only possible through the ways in which being shows itself as the ground of being-human: history, thinking and language. With regard to history, the truth of being is disclosed as originary ground – a pre-metaphysical way of being which also forms an eschatological horizon of the historical return of a way of being-truly-human. But this historical horizon is not-yet an authentic factical life. With regard to thinking, the truth of being is disclosed as ethos – of being-truly-human in our ground that is understood, but not-factically lived. Thinking is not an authentic factical life, for thinking is for the sake of ethos. As such, both history and thinking do not fully express the possibility of an authentic ethos. In language, however, the truth of being emerges as an authentic factical life – a being-truly-human that is experienced through and founded upon poetry. In other words, the aesthetic is the truth of being-human and thus also the ground of being-human.[31] The poet, is as such, that which gets called the demigod – the human who indicates the ground and truth of being-human.[32]

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the lectures on ***Holderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*** contain four primary expressions of an authentic factical life. The first is the historical affinity of pre-metaphysical Greek facticity and the destiny of the German people.[33] The second is the link between Greek and German thinking: the relation constituted by Heidegger's own quest for the truth of being that fulfils the pre-metaphysical way of thinking. The third, then, is the affinity of Greek and German poets – whose poetry is the divine revelation of the truth of being.[34] Finally, there is the affinity of the goddess Αλετηεια and the goddess ***Germania*** – for the truth of being is essentially an aesthetic mythical experience of being-truly-human in one's own home-land; the originary homeland of Αλετηεια and the destined home-land of mother ***Germania***.[35]

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[1] Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', ***Pathmarks***, p.245
[2] Ibid. p.269
[3] Ibid. p.268
[4] Ibid. p.271
[5] Ibid. p.272
[6] Ibid. p.239
[7] Ibid. p.272
[8] Martin Heidegger, ***Holderlin's Hymn "The Ister",*** p.120
[9] Ibid. p.120
[10] Martin Heidegger, 'Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle', ***Man and World***, Michael Baur (trans.) vol.25 (State College: I.P.R Associates, 1992) p.370
[11] Ibid. pp.359, 360-1
[12] Ibid. pp.363-5
[13] Ibid. p.369
[14] Martin Heidegger, ***The Basic Problems of Phenomenology***, Albert Hofstadter (trans.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) p.16
[15] Ibid. pp.19-23
[16] Martin Heidegger, ***Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle***, Richard Rojcewicz (trans.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) pp.43-6.
[17] Martin Heidegger, ***An Introduction to Metaphysics***, Ralph Manheim (trans.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) pp.1-6
[18] Martin Heidegger, ***Plato's Sophist***, Richard Rojcewicz & Andre Schuwer (trans.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) p.9
[19] Ibid. pp.9-10
[20] Ibid. pp.153-155
[21] Ibid., pp.93-94, Martin Heidegger, ***An Introduction to Metaphysics***, pp.100-106
[22] Ibid. pp.196-197
[23] Ibid. p.197
[24] Ibid. pp.198-199
[25] Martin Heidegger, 'An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion', ***The Phenomenology of Religious Life***, Matthias Fritsch & Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (trans.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) pp.54-55, 66.
[26] Ibid. pp.88-89
[27] Martin Heidegger, 'Augustine and Neo-Platonism'***, The Phenomenology of Religious Life***, Matthias Fritsch & Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (trans.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) pp.130-131, 141-142
[28] Martin Heidegger, ***An Introduction to Metaphysics***, pp.6-7
[29] Martin Heidegger, ***Parmenides***, Andre Schuwer & Richard Rojcewicz (trans.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) pp.88-104
[30] Ibid. pp.105-130
[31] Martin Heidegger, ***Holderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'***, p.166

[32] Ibid. p.139
[33] Ibid. pp.123-124, 137, 164-165
[34] Ibid. pp.146-156
[35] Ibid. pp.32, 158-164

Angus Brook

Abstract: 'Martin Heidegger's Path to an Aesthetic Ετηος'

Martin Heidegger is infamous for his rejection of the validity of Ethics as a philosophical endeavour ('Letter on Humanism') and moreover, for his aesthetic formulation of ετηος (***Holderlin's Hymn "The Ister"***). In this paper I would like to trace the path of Heidegger's thought from his engagement with Aristotle's metaphysics, through a recovery of pre-Socratic thought, to the formulation of ετηος as an authentic dwelling in which the poet becomes the demigod; the divine messenger of the truth of being.

I will argue, along the way, that Heidegger's formulation of an aesthetic ετηος hinges on the question of grounding; of grounding philosophy and dwelling on the proper (the truth of being). Further, the question of ground also implicitly involves the process of rejecting alternative potential ways of grounding – in this case – the rejection of onto-theology: science and religion. In tracing Martin Heidegger's path to an aesthetic formulation of ετηος I will also attempt to draw out two of the basic presuppositions of Heidegger's thought, namely: the 'hyper-Aristotelian' foundation of the ***seinsfrage*** and the strange belief that the German language and dwelling is somehow the spiritual descendent of early Greek authenticity.