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**Errant Thought:**  
**On**  
**Philosophy and its Past**

**by**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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*For my parents*

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## **Declaration**

*This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university*



## Abstract

This thesis consists of two major strands. The first addresses a series of questions concerning philosophy's relation to its own past, chief among them: Why does philosophy have a history? And how can philosophers take account of their past, situating themselves as part of an ongoing tradition? The second strand constitutes an investigation of the concept of error. What is error? How can we explain its origin, and to what extent is it a necessary feature of thought?

Contrary to initial appearances, I show that these two sets of questions are intimately connected. Throughout the modern era, accounts of thought's historicity have frequently hinged on the concept of error. It is by appeal to the concept of error—and thereby to the idea that thought sometimes goes astray, falling short of truth—that a vast majority of modern philosophers have attempted to explain the historicity of thought. To ask after the ground of historicity and the status of philosophy's past thus requires us to pose the question: what is error, and how does it arise? An examination of accounts of human errancy thus allow us to better understand the nature and scope of thought's historicity.

As such, the thesis constitutes both a history of philosophy's approaches to its own past, and a history of the concept of error. It takes the form of a critical reconstruction of this conceptual constellation, with a view to renewing the question of the relation of philosophy to its past by way of a reappraisal of the nature of error.

The thesis is divided into four chapters, each of which is dedicated to a major figure from the Western tradition: Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. In each case, I demonstrate that their respective approaches to the question of philosophy's historicity is reflected in the status of error in their thought.

For both Descartes and Kant, the historicity of thought arises from the tendency of thought to fall short of truth. It is thus thanks to error, conceived of as a kind of epistemological waste product, that philosophy becomes historical. It is the task of philosophical method to overcome this shortfall, thus liberating philosophy from its historicity. I argue that this attitude prevails in many philosophical quarters to this day, making of thought's historicity at best a secondary matter.

By contrast, Hegel and Heidegger both adopt approaches according to which historicity is intrinsic to the nature of truth itself. I show how Hegel's concept of negativity on the one hand, and Heidegger's notion of ontological errancy on the other, come to supplant the notion of epistemological failure, treating historicity as a fundamental characteristic of being.

I argue that this notion of a 'history of truth' allows for a new relation between philosophy and its history, in which the latter is not merely dismissed as a kind of accidental waste-product of thought. At the same time, I show how both Hegel and Heidegger's specific approaches to the history of philosophy are characterised by shortcomings which prevent them from adequately responding to the questions they raise.

In spite of these shortcomings, I argue that philosophy ought not abandon the idea of a connection between historicity and error. Instead, it is necessary to raise the question of the status of error anew, while at the same time seeking to expand the scope of the history of philosophy beyond the confines of the Western tradition.

# Abbreviations

## Works by Descartes

- DM            *Discourse on Method*, trans. by Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- MFP          *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

## Works by Kant

- CPR          *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- LL            *Lectures on Logic*, trans. by J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

## Works by Hegel

- DS            *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. by H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977)
- PS            *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)
- SL            *The Science of Logic*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989)

VGP *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie. Teil I. Einleitung in die Geschichte der Philosophie; Orientalische Philosophie*, ed. by Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1993)

### **Works by Heidegger**

AF ‘Anaximander Fragment’ in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. by David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper, 1984) pp. 13-58.

BT *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967)

CP *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012)

ET ‘On the Essence of Truth’ in *Basic Writings*, trans. & ed. by David Farrell Krell, revised and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 111-138.

LH ‘Letter on Humanism,’ in *Basic Writings*, trans. & ed. by David Farrell Krell, revised and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 213-266.

OWA ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ in *Basic Writings*, trans. & ed. by David Farrell Krell, revised and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 139-212

Heidegger’s original German texts are referred to by their *Gesamtausgabe* (GA) number.

## Introduction

*‘Throughout history, philosophy has never ceased to do violence to its history, sometimes joining forces with it, sometimes violently divorcing itself from it, modifying its historiography and slowly becoming aware of the problem created for it by the existence of its history.’*

Martial Gueroult, ‘The History of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem.’<sup>1</sup>

*‘We have no logic of error, no real clarification of its essence, because we always take error as negative. This is the fundamental error that dominates the entire history of the concept of truth.’*

Martin Heidegger, ‘Being and Truth.’<sup>2</sup>

### 0.1 Philosophy and its History: Two Recent Orientations

With what must philosophy begin? This question—fundamental to philosophers as diverse as Descartes, Hegel, and Heidegger—continues to animate the historical development of philosophy. In recent years, for example, European philosophers have begun to question the emphasis that mid-twentieth century thinkers placed upon thinking *historically*, as if one could not philosophise without perpetually engaging with the *history* of philosophy. Alain Badiou speaks eloquently for this new

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<sup>1</sup> *The Monist*, Volume 53, Issue 4, 1 October 1969, pp. 563–587; p. 574.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 177.

movement<sup>3</sup> when he argues that ‘philosophical presentation must initially determine itself in the absence of any reference to its history.’ He continues: ‘Philosophy has to have the audacity to present its concepts without first arraigning them before the tribunal of their historical moment.’<sup>4</sup> Thus, playing on Heidegger’s notion of the ‘forgetting of being,’ Badiou advocates a deliberate ‘forgetting’ of philosophy’s past:

For my part, I shall propose a violent forgetting of the history of philosophy, thus a violent forgetting of every historical assemblage of the forgetting of being. A ‘forget the forgetting of the forgetting.’ This imperative to forget is a matter of philosophical method, and of course not at all of ignorance of this history. Forget history: this means, above all, making decisions of thought without turning back towards a presupposed historical meaning that has been set for these decisions. It is a matter of breaking with historicism so that we may endeavour, like a Descartes or a Spinoza, to produce an autonomous legitimation of discourse. Philosophy ought to decide its axioms of thought and draw the consequences. Only after so doing, and on the basis of its immanent determination, should philosophy summon its history.<sup>5</sup>

Badiou’s point is clearly not that we should simply ignore the history of philosophy. Far from it—his texts attest to his own ongoing engagement with the history of philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Rather, he advocates the insulation of ‘first philosophy’ from this history. For Badiou and those sympathetic to his perspective, the ‘decisions of thought’ must be carried out in a kind of historical vacuum, according to a measure which is thoroughly ahistorical. Only retrospectively can we then turn to examine their relation

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<sup>3</sup> Badiou is merely one example of a contemporary continental philosopher whose project either explicitly advocates or else implicitly entails a strict separation between philosophy and its history. Similarly, Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*, with its attempt to move beyond the ‘correlationist’ paradigm, essentially implies that the problems of hermeneutics and deconstruction belong to correlationism. His attempt to ‘break the correlationist circle’ in the direction of the ‘great Outside’ thus implies a similar break with historicity. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2008) p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> One need only consider what Badiou calls the ‘textual meditations,’ the engagements with figures from the history of philosophy, in *Being and Event* to see this confirmed, while equally confirming the limits of this engagement. Badiou stages readings of a range of figures from within the Western tradition; and yet he insists that they are strictly insulated from the ‘conceptual meditations’ and the ‘meta-ontological meditations’ which make up the remainder of the work. All three strands of the work can be read in abstraction from one another; crucially, for Badiou, there is no strict relation of dependence between the historical and ahistorical components. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, (London: Continuum, 2005) p. 18 ff.

to the history of thought. This history must never itself be allowed to serve as a kind of measure for philosophy; nor is philosophy obliged to account for this history at an immanent level.

From a certain perspective, this orientation toward the history of philosophy can be seen as following in the footsteps of Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation, On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*. There, Nietzsche poses the question of the philosopher's relationship to history in *ethical* terms, with an orientation toward the conditions under which human life and culture can flourish, and above all with an orientation toward the *future*. He writes:

knowledge of the past has at all times been desired only in the service of the future and the present and not for the weakening of the present or for depriving a vigorous future of its roots.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary philosophers who seek to return to a Cartesian or Spinozist 'beginning'—those who wish to 'cut ties' with the past in order to bring about a new way of thinking—exhibit an *ethical* orientation toward history, i.e. an orientation that concerns itself with the future and looks to the future precisely by turning away from the past.<sup>8</sup> Much like Nietzsche, Badiou suggests that a focus on the past risks 'weakening' present philosophy, and uprooting its future.

This thesis is motivated by a concern with what might be lost by pursuing such an ethical orientation toward history. For the Nietzschean who seeks to put the past 'to use' in service of the future fails to ask the question regarding what the past *is*. 'What *is* the past?' This ontological question differs from Nietzsche's ethical question, which treats the past solely in terms of its utility, without asking after its essence.

I am by no means suggesting that it is here, in this thesis, that the question of the being of the past is first raised. On the contrary, it is my view that the recent, Nietzschean turn in European philosophy can be understood as a reaction *against* the

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche's point certainly cannot be dismissed lightly. Periodically, philosophy has undergone renewals precisely by casting off its past in the name of a new beginning. This freedom from the past sometimes seems to be a condition of doing philosophy, as Badiou asserts. Nietzsche's question remains vital: how much of a memory can we endure, before it becomes injurious to life? In terms of philosophy, this can be restated: how much can philosophy focus on its own past, without thereby being rendered impotent, as Badiou suggests? Yet behind the ethical question lurks an ontological one. Even if we are to look away from this past, what is this past from which we look away?

major current of twentieth-century European thought in which engagements with past texts came to form a necessary component of philosophical practice, in some cases even coming to supplant the traditional tasks of first philosophy. In the hermeneutic and deconstructive traditions, it is precisely through an engagement with past texts that philosophical questions are first raised. To ask after a specific concept or problematic always involves turning to an examination of its historical articulations. In a remark which could be applied to a far broader range of thinkers from the twentieth-century European tradition, Jean-Luc Nancy notes that ‘in the final analysis (and although neither Heidegger nor Derrida ever explicitly say so), perhaps deconstruction means this: from now on, philosophy cannot be absolved from the question of its own historicity.’<sup>9</sup> It is precisely this deconstructive orientation toward history which Badiou has in mind when he states that ‘philosophy today is paralysed by its relation to its own history.’<sup>10</sup> That is, philosophy cannot make its way to any new sort of *future*.

Those sympathetic to Heidegger, Derrida, Nancy and the general deconstructive orientation toward history might respond that the only possible relation to the future *as future* will necessarily involve the kind of profound attention to the past displayed in deconstructive thought. Although this thesis is largely motivated by the deconstructive tradition, it does not take the approach of arguing that the past must be understood for the sake of the future. On the contrary, it seeks to simply understand what it means to question the nature of the past and thereby to suggest an alternative orientation toward past history that is ontological rather than ethical. To be sure, Heidegger ultimately subordinates the question of the past to the question of the future through his emphasis on the possibility of the ‘other beginning;’ and the same might be said of Derrida’s reflections upon that which is always ‘to come.’ In both cases, there is thus a clear echo of Nietzsche’s ethical orientation which sits uneasily with other aspects of their thought.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it seems that the ontological question of the

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Philosophy Without Conditions,’ in Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 4

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in spite of its close attention to past history, much continental philosophy in the 20th century was predominantly concerned with the possibility of holding open the possibility of a history yet to come, and was thus explicitly oriented towards the future. This concern with the future dominates Heidegger’s thought, and has also become a major motif in recent Hegel scholarship. See in particular Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (London: Routledge, 2005).

past has only rarely been posed in its own right, without reference to this ethical problematic.

Thus, one of the fundamental aims in this thesis is to take a first step towards redressing a relative neglect of the question concerning the ontological status of the past. I take it that neither Badiou on the one hand, nor the deconstructive tradition on the other, possess the conceptual resources to raise this question adequately. Instead, I claim that the terms in which this question must be raised can be found in a series of key figures in Western philosophy, whose thought decisively shaped the terrain on which contemporary continental philosophy unfolds. I thus turn to a specific historical development—from Descartes through Kant and Hegel to Heidegger—in which the history of philosophy is thematised and gradually comes to take centre stage in the practice of philosophy itself. Thus, throughout this thesis, we will be concerned with the relation of philosophy to its own history—or more specifically, to its *past*.

## **0.2 The Incubation Time of Thought and the Significance of Historical Difference**

One of the perplexing questions that confronts us as soon as we turn our attention to philosophy's past is why thought should *take time*. Following Heidegger, we will refer to this as the question of *incubation*. In his lecture course *The Principle of Reason*, Heidegger raises the question of the 'incubation period' of this most fundamental of principles. He asks why it should have taken so long—more than two thousand years—for such a simple principle to come to expression. He writes:

This formulation of the principle of reason was first mentioned and specifically discussed in the course of those meditations Leibniz carried out in the seventeenth century. In the West, however, philosophy has been reigning and transforming itself ever since the sixth century BC. Hence it took two thousand three hundred years until Western European thinking actually discovered and formulated the simple principle of reason. How odd that such an obvious principle, which always directs all human cognition and conduct without being stated, needed so many centuries to be expressly stated as a principle in the formulation cited above. But it is even odder that we never wonder about the slowness with which the principle of reason came to light. One would like to call the long time it needed for this its "incubation period": two thousand



three hundred years for the positing of this simple principle. Where and how did the principle of reason sleep for so long and presciently dream what is unthought in it?<sup>12</sup>

Here, Heidegger poses the question of the strange paradox of apparently atemporal, eternally valid laws of thought that nonetheless emerge at a specific point in history. How is it that a principle as fundamental as the principle of reason should have remained undiscovered by thought for so long?

Heidegger thus points to the inherent strangeness of the discovery of a fundamental, timeless law of thought at a certain point in time—in this case, Leibniz’s discover of the principle of sufficient reason. In this thesis, we generalise Heidegger’s concern regarding the ‘incubation time’ of thought. When philosophers claim a certain privilege for their own philosophical projects, how do they explain the *delay* in the arrival of those projects? If each philosopher claims to establish a previously unattained understanding of what is true, how can they explain their place in an ongoing tradition?

The question of the incubation period of thought is further complicated by the fact that the history of philosophy is not characterised by a linear, cumulative development, but is constituted by a series of often conflicting and mutually exclusive positions. In other words, the history of thought is fundamentally *differentiated*. Throughout this thesis, we refer to this form of difference as ‘historical difference,’ and we suggest all philosophers must address it in one way or another. Indeed, whether a philosopher appeals to some timeless truth or emphasises the irreducible historicity of truth itself, the question remains: how can we take into account the radical differences between past systems of thought? Are such differences simply contingent, such that philosophy’s past can be brushed aside as a series of mistakes which need never have taken place? Or is there something about this historical difference that is itself necessary?

In what follows, we will put all of these questions to four thinkers: Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger.<sup>13</sup> We will thus ask, on the one hand, how each of these

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason* (Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> This selection is by no means random. As we will see, Descartes typifies the ‘ahistorical’ view of philosophy, advocating an absolute breach with the past. It is significant that Badiou should invoke Descartes as an ally on this score. In the following, I will suggest that through Kant, Hegel and Heidegger, the question of the past comes to greater prominence; and it is only through an engagement with this philosophical heritage that the question of the past can be adequately posed.

philosophers accounts for the ‘incubation time’ of their own thought; and, on the other hand, we will be concerned with how they account for the existence of a tradition characterised by multiple, mutually exclusive philosophical positions. Such questions may seem obscure. Yet this makes it all the more remarkable that all of the thinkers examined in this thesis offer up significant answers to them. Moreover, as will become clear, in all four cases, the incubation period of thought and historical difference are bound up with the status of *error* in their thought.

### 0.3 The History of Error

Martial Gueroult argues that the concept of error first came to be explicitly associated with the historicity of philosophy in the wake of Christianity’s growing cultural and intellectual dominance in Europe. He notes that the advent of Christianity was decisive in bringing philosophy to explicitly reflect on its own historicity, since it introduced the idea of a rupture in time, dividing the tradition into a ‘before’ and ‘after’:

For the first time, philosophical consciousness, drawing together its past in a solid block as profane or pagan philosophy, projected it into times past and judged it as historical, in short, gave it the coloration of history and of temporality that ancient historiography, which was nothing but nontemporal erudition, let go unnoticed. For the first time, and above all, the problem of the value of philosophy's past was brought before the philosophical consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Gueroult divides Christian philosophy’s response to this issue into two major forms: *historia stultitiae* and *historia sapientiae*. *Historia stultitiae* ‘makes a nullifying value judgment on tradition, but it thereby keeps it as the history of the aberrations of the human mind, in order to show the weakness of that mind when left solely to the light of its own reason.’<sup>15</sup> In other words, *historia stultitiae* treats the history of philosophy as a product of a human tendency toward error. Even as it engages with this history, it does so purely as a warning, a kind of precautionary tale intended to

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<sup>14</sup> Martial Gueroult, ‘The History of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem,’ in *The Monist*, Volume 53, Issue 4, 1 October 1969, p. 575.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 576.

delimit mankind's pretensions to knowledge. The past is preserved as a series of errors that must be remembered insofar as they constitute a warning; one learns from this past in the name of a better present and better future. He contrasts this with *historia sapientiae*, which treats the history of philosophy as an expression of man's eternal wisdom, in spite of its imperfections.

The idea that the history of philosophy is a product of error provides an intuitive explanation of both historical difference and the incubation period of thought. If truth is taken to be univocal, while the history of philosophy consists of a series of conflicting and contradictory positions, the most obvious explanation is that many of these positions are false, the product of thought straying from the path to truth. The 'time taken' by thought is simply the time it takes for thought to overcome its tendency to err—to eliminate distortions to thought, whether they are contingent or in some sense made unavoidable by the nature of human thought.

This approach to history is present, implicitly or explicitly, throughout much of the modern era, and indeed in much contemporary philosophy.<sup>16</sup> In his 1964-65 seminar, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, Derrida sums up its basic logic: '[o]nly knowledge, and not truth, would be historical, and it would be so only to the extent of its distance from truth, that is in its error.'<sup>17</sup> In other words, the historicity of philosophy is understood as a product of thought's *falling short of truth*. The concept of error, then, is essential in explaining *why there is a history of thought* and *why this history is (in some sense) incompatible with knowledge of what is true*.

The word 'error' is closely related to the term 'errancy.'<sup>18</sup> The latter can mean wandering or roaming in a neutral sense, but also going astray in the sense of making a mistake. Conceived as a history of error, the history of philosophy is thus frequently described in terms of thought's straying from the true path. We will encounter this metaphor of errancy at various junctures throughout this thesis. Kant, for example, understands his critical project in terms of putting metaphysics on the 'royal road' after centuries of errancy. And even before Kant, Descartes understands

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<sup>16</sup> We will see in chapter three below that Hegel exposes the prevalence of this idea, subjecting its logic to a critique in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and elsewhere.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Significantly for our purposes, the English terms error and errancy have direct cognates in, respectively, the German *Irrtum* and *Irre*, as well as the French *erreur* and *errance*. They have their common root in the Latin *errare*, meaning both 'to wander' and 'to go astray.'

‘method’ itself as a matter of putting thought back on the *right path*. Prior to the arrival of the one genuine philosophy (be it Cartesian or Kantian), thought has *erred*; and the purpose of their respective philosophical methods is to restore thought to its rightful path. Indeed, the Greek root of the term *method*—*meta hodos*—points to this idea of a *path* that might finally liberate philosophy from its aimless wandering.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast, we will see that Hegel attempts to reinterpret the history of philosophy not as a series of ‘errant’ wanderings or wrong turns, but rather as a *single*, logically necessary path along which philosophy had to move before it could reach its culmination. In this way, Hegel constitutes an exception among the thinkers considered in this thesis, as he rejects the connection between history and error, instead endorsing a version of *historia sapientiae*. Nonetheless, we will see that Hegel’s concept of *negation* is informed by Kant’s theory of error. Indeed, the concept of error is conspicuous by its absence in Hegel’s thought—not just in his account of the history of philosophy, but throughout his system. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel goes to great lengths to show why the ‘negative’ path of thought’s history is apt to be misinterpreted in terms of error, and to explain why it can only retrospectively be understood as the negativity immanent to truth itself. As such, Hegel’s critique of the understanding of history in terms of error goes hand in hand with a rejection of the modern concept of error and its central place in philosophical thought.

Like Hegel, in several of his works, Heidegger reflects explicitly on the traditional connection between historicity and error. Yet unlike Hegel, Heidegger does not reject this connection, instead reconceiving it in ontological terms: ‘Errancy’ is no longer conceived as a shortfall of thought from being, but rather a kind of untruth or self-concealing immanent to *being* itself. Heidegger’s notion of a *history of being* thus goes hand in hand with his development of an *ontological* concept of error.<sup>20</sup>

Various thinkers writing in the wake of Hegel and Heidegger take their respective turns to history seriously, perhaps more seriously than they themselves took

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<sup>19</sup> On the etymology of the term ‘method’ and the significance of the metaphor of the path, see Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, *Weg und Methode, Zur hermeneutischen Phänomenologie des seinsgeschichtlichen Denkens*, (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1990). The image of the path clearly echoes Parmenides’ poem, which draws a distinction between the path of truth and the path of doxa.

<sup>20</sup> In deploying the term ‘ontological’ in relation to the later Heidegger’s thought, I am aware that he himself rejected this term on the basis of its metaphysical connotations. In the following, I nonetheless retain the term to denote the idea that for Heidegger, historicity is made necessary not by an epistemological shortfall, but rather by the very nature of being.

them. What is lacking after Heidegger, however, is a corresponding theory of error. The turn to history that followed in Heidegger's wake—embodied in figures such as Derrida and Nancy on one hand, and Gadamer and Ricoeur on the other—constitutes an impressive attempt to take history more seriously than Hegel or Heidegger had done. At the same time, however, reflections on the concept of error—essential to the trajectory from Descartes to Heidegger—seem to vanish in the post-Heideggerian period. It is my ambition to reawaken this enquiry into the role of error in thinking about the nature of the past.

Before providing an overview of the thesis as a whole, one final remark is in order. The thinkers discussed in this thesis are all 'Eurocentric' thinkers; indeed, even Hegel, who demonstrates a greater interest in non-Western traditions than the others, places the history of *European* thought at the centre of historical-philosophical analysis. In Heidegger's case in particular, the 'history of philosophy' is largely restricted to a Greek-German philosophical history, everything outside of which is at best ignored, and at worst violently rejected. On my view, this is not in itself a reason to simply set aside the conceptions of history and error that are to be found in Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. On the contrary, we ought to examine these concepts in order to discover how we might pose the question of historicity *otherwise*, to raise the questions of history and error once more. We return to this issue in the conclusion of this thesis.

#### **0.4 Overview**

In chapter one, we investigate Descartes' understanding of his own place within the broader philosophical tradition. We argue that his method of radical doubt implies a break with the past. Through a reading of the fourth Meditation, we show how his conception of philosophy's historicity is reflected in his concept of error. We show that implicitly, historicity is a product of this error and of man's fallenness. We argue that Descartes' thought can be understood as the archetype for an approach to history which remains prevalent to this day.

In chapter two, we show how Kant understands his project of critique as an intervention in the errant history of thought, which will finally put metaphysics on the right path. Yet unlike Descartes, Kant argues that this errant path was in some sense a necessary precursor of his own project. It was only after passing through the

various errors of metaphysics that the critical philosophy could finally arise. Through a reading of his *Lectures on Logic* and the Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we will see that this change in attitude towards philosophy's past is reflected in Kant's theory of error—specifically, in his notion of *illusion* [*Schein*] as the ground of error. His notion of *transcendental illusion* developed in the *CPR* allows him to take account of the incubation time of his own thought, and the contradictions inherent in the metaphysical tradition—albeit within certain strict limits.

Descartes and Kant both treat historical difference in terms of an epistemological shortfall. In a brief 'intermezzo' at the conclusion of chapter two, we consider the implications of this approach to historical difference, while also looking forward towards Hegel and Heidegger as two thinkers who understand historical difference in ontological terms.

In chapter three, we turn to the place of the history of philosophy in Hegel's system, examining his much maligned and frequently neglected claim that the history of philosophy develops in parallel with his own system, and particularly his *Science of Logic*. We argue that Hegel has essential reasons for advancing this claim, examining the relation between his history of philosophy and his ontology. We argue that, in spite of the limitations of Hegel's project, his approach to the history of philosophy constitutes the most extensive attempt in Western thought to take account of its own past, confronting philosophy with a challenge to which it has rarely risen.

Finally, in chapter four, we turn to Heidegger's notion of the *history of being*, arguing that it goes hand in hand with an *ontological* concept of errancy. We will see that the notion of a history of being is crucial to Heidegger's apparently paradoxical claim that 'the essence of truth is untruth,' showing that this claim can be interpreted to mean 'historicity belongs essentially to the economy of truth.' Heidegger attempts to understand historicity as a necessary dimension of truth. We argue that his notion of an errant history of being blurs the line separating philosophy from the history of philosophy, pointing the way towards a mode of thought which takes the past seriously in its autonomy.

Nonetheless, in the conclusion to this thesis, we argue that such a project was ultimately undermined by Heidegger's Nietzschean ethical orientation towards the 'other beginning,' understood as the specific destiny of the German people. We show how through an arbitrary gesture, he excludes all moments which do not belong to

his privileged Greek-German account of history, ultimately rendering his history of philosophy violent and reductive. We then consider prospects for a renewal of the question of the relation between error and philosophy's past beyond the confines of Heidegger's violent gesture of exclusion.

# Chapter One. Descartes: Errancy Inter Deum et Nihil

## 1.1 Introduction

Martial Gueroult takes Descartes' thought to be exemplary of philosophy's indifference to the question of its own historicity, arguing that Cartesian thought can be considered paradigmatic of the modern attitude toward the history of philosophy still dominant in many quarters today. Gueroult claims that according to this paradigm, 'philosophy does not have to concern itself with history, it has only, as requested by Descartes, to dismiss its history for good.'<sup>21</sup>

Despite this, Descartes demonstrates a keen awareness of the historical situatedness of his own philosophical project. Indeed, alongside the more prominent motivation of his awareness of the falsity of many of his own opinions, it is partly in response to the perceived failures of the history of philosophy that he develops his new method. In this chapter, we examine how Descartes understands the relation of his own thought to this broader tradition. While he does not explicitly pose the question concerning thought's historicity, we nonetheless suggest that his texts contain an implicit account of how his own project relates to the tradition from which it emerges. As such, even as his task consists in making a clean break with the philosophies of the past, the question remains: *what is the principle of the initial dispersal of these philosophies in a history characterised by difference and contradiction?* In other words: what is the nature of historical difference? We suggest that, for Descartes, a history characterised by irreducible differences can only have emerged through a misuse of the faculties, resulting in *error*. The contradictory claims of the tradition are in this way contrasted with the absolute singularity of truth. By means of the adequate regulation of the faculties, philosophy can hope to transcend its errant historicity and establish a new, ahistorical foundation.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, we examine Descartes' attitude toward the philosophical tradition. We show that his method begins by

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<sup>21</sup> Martial Gueroult, 'The History of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem,' in *The Monist* (2014) 53 (4): 563-587, p. 567.



explicitly excluding the tradition from consideration, seeking instead to build on the secure foundation of the self-certainty of the *ego cogito*. In this way, his thought exemplifies the enlightenment ‘prejudice against prejudice’ diagnosed by Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>22</sup> We will see that Descartes’ emphasis on the certainty of the individual subject as the locus of truth is bound up with the idea that the economy of truth is entirely withdrawn from history.

In the second part of the chapter, we turn to an analysis of Descartes’ account of error in the fourth meditation. We show that he considers error to be a product of our *misuse* of our faculties. Insofar as our capacity for thought proceeds from God, it can never fall into error. And yet error persists. In order to account for this, Descartes appeals to an argument borrowed from theodicy. Specifically, he locates human thought *between being and the nothing*. We indicate that Descartes’ invocation of the nothing at this juncture anticipates the Hegelian concept of negativity, as well as aspects of Heidegger’s notion of errancy. Our account of Descartes thus provides us with the conceptual framework which underlies the remainder of the thesis.

## **Part One: Descartes and the Tradition**

### **1.2 Against the Tradition**

Nowhere in his corpus does Descartes reflect extensively on the issue of philosophy’s historicity—the question as to *why* philosophy should have a history. Nonetheless, his works attest to an acute awareness on his part that his own thought is situated within a broader tradition. In those passages in which this history is addressed, it is characterised in purely negative terms, invoked as evidence of philosophy’s lack of an adequate foundation. Thus, we read the following in the first part of the *Discourse on Method*:

I shall not say anything about philosophy except that, when I realized that it had been cultivated by the best minds for many centuries, and that nevertheless there is nothing in it that is not disputed and consequently is not subject to doubt, I was not so presumptuous as to hope to succeed better than others; and that seeing how

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<sup>22</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004) p. 273 ff.

different learned men may defend different opinions on the same subject, without there ever being more than one which is true, I deemed anything that was no more than plausible to be tantamount to false.<sup>23</sup>

Descartes' sentiment here is familiar from many works of the modern era. Indeed, the prefaces and introductions of many modern works are characterised by the consciousness of belonging to an 'errant' tradition which, over the course of many centuries, has made little or no progress. Furthermore, the tradition is depicted as a series of conflicting opinions, the plurality of which contradicts the necessary singularity of truth. Like many such thinkers, Descartes understands his own philosophical undertaking as a calculated intervention in this history of failure. We find similar ideas in the works of Descartes' near-contemporary Francis Bacon, whose project of a great 'instauration' amounts to an explicit break with the tradition.<sup>24</sup>

Descartes invokes the failings of the tradition as grounds for a clean methodological break with his predecessors. As he declares in the *Discourse*: 'as soon as I reached an age that allowed me to escape from the control of my teachers, I abandoned altogether the study of letters.'<sup>25</sup> If philosophy is to be established on a secure foundation, this requires a total suspension of all appeals to the tradition. Gueroult adds that for Descartes, it would even be preferable to have *never known* the doctrines of the tradition<sup>26</sup>—to which we might add that the next best thing would surely be to *forget* them as soon as possible.

According to Descartes' method, the claims of the tradition are to be granted no special authority, but instead must be subjected to the same trial by doubt as his own uncertain beliefs. Moreover, we must actively seek to overcome the influence they exercise over our thought. In refusing dogmatic assent to the tradition, Descartes is following the first (and arguably most significant)<sup>27</sup> of the four rules which he elaborates in the second part of the discourse, namely

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<sup>23</sup> DM, p.10.

<sup>24</sup> As we shall see in chapter two below, we also find similar ideas at work in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>25</sup> DM, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Martial Gueroult, 'The History of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem,' in *The Monist* (2014) 53 (4): pp. 563-587. pp. 569-70.

<sup>27</sup> See Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) p. 19.

[the resolve] never to accept anything as true that I did not *incontrovertibly* know to be so; that is to say, carefully to avoid both *prejudice* and premature conclusions; and to include nothing in my judgements other than that which presented itself to my mind so *clearly* and *distinctly*, that I would have no occasion to doubt it.<sup>28</sup>

The rule is developed above all in the light of Descartes' awareness that many of the opinions he had long held were in fact false; yet the philosophical tradition ultimately is submitted to the same trial by doubt.

The radicality of Descartes' gesture here can be brought into relief by way of a contrast with Aristotle's *endoxic* method. Aristotle opens many of his works, including the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, with a consideration of the 'credible opinions' [*endoxai*] of his predecessors.<sup>29</sup> He begins by reviewing the limitations of these opinions and the conflicts between them before proceeding with his own analysis. At the end of these texts, Aristotle generally reaffirms the (at least partial) truth of the opinions from which he set out.<sup>30</sup> *Endoxai* thus constitute a legitimate resource for his philosophical project to which he makes apparently unproblematic appeal, even as he is prepared to call such opinions into question where they give rise to problems which cannot be resolved.

By contrast, Descartes' philosophy begins by suspending all such appeal to one's predecessors and to the tradition as a whole, beginning again with the certainties that can be established by the isolated *ego cogito*—a program which he realised most radically with his method of doubt in the *Meditations*.

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<sup>28</sup> DM, p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> On *endoxic method*, see Christopher Shields, *Aristotle* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) p. 25 ff. Cf. Martial Gueroult, 'The History of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem,' in *The Monist* (2014) 53 (4): 563-587, p. 574; Gueroult suggests that in the light of his endoxic method, Aristotle may be considered the 'true founder' of the philosophy of the history of philosophy. A more comprehensive account of Aristotle's method is beyond the scope of this thesis; nonetheless, it is worth noting that, even as he engages in a dialogue with his predecessors, his approach does not attempt to take account of their *historical* status; instead, he engages them as if they were his contemporaries.

<sup>30</sup> See Dominic Scott, *Levels of Argument: A Comparative Study of Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 187ff.

### 1.3 The Prejudice Against Prejudice

Seen in a certain light, Descartes' resolve vis-à-vis the tradition seems entirely unobjectionable. It may seem self-evident that it should not be enough that a Plato or an Aristotle should have made a particular claim that we should assent to the truth of this claim. If philosophy is to lay claim to the status of a critical discipline, it seems that we need some criterion distinct from the mere authority of the great names of the past—an authority which, in the Scholastic milieu in which Descartes was educated, was very real indeed.

Nonetheless, Descartes' statement of the problem presents us with a dichotomy which Gueroult describes as the 'radical antinomy, "*either philosophy or tradition.*"'<sup>31</sup> We are confronted with a choice between *either* dogmatic assent to the tradition, *or* a critical philosophical undertaking which precludes the possibility of an engagement with its history. We shall consider alternatives to this dichotomy in the chapters to follow. For now, we need to ask: how does Descartes come to find himself faced with this dichotomy?

Hans-Georg Gadamer understands Descartes' method to be exemplary of what he calls the enlightenment 'prejudice against prejudice itself.'<sup>32</sup> The term prejudice (and its German equivalent *Vorurteil*) originally simply meant a preliminary judgement, 'rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined.'<sup>33</sup> During the enlightenment, however, the term increasingly came to mean an *unfounded* judgement, a negative meaning it retains in its present day usage.

Recall once more the example of Aristotle. If Aristotle drew on the *endoxai* of his predecessors as a useful resource (albeit one which was not simply dogmatically deferred to), Descartes suspends all such appeals under the banner of prejudice. Even as Descartes refers to the thinkers of the tradition as the 'best minds,' he recognises no obligation to engage with their claims. Instead, they must be

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<sup>31</sup> Martial Gueroult, 'The History of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem,' in *The Monist* (2014) 53 (4): 563-587. p. 579.

<sup>32</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Continuum, 2004) p. 273; cf. p. 279.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

suspended until such time as they can be confirmed or disconfirmed by means of his own method. Until then, they can only be considered *prejudices* —judgements reached not by the light of reason, but through dogmatic assent to the authority of the tradition.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues for the need to rehabilitate the concept of prejudice.<sup>34</sup> Prejudices are not simply faulty judgements which arise through overhastiness or dogmatic assent to received doctrines. Instead, they constitute a necessary component of our understanding. It is in terms of our prejudices in this broader sense that we first approach a problem. Drawing on a series of examples, including our understanding of works of art and of texts from the tradition, as well as ethical questions, Gadamer attempts to show that prejudices constitute the positive condition of our very capacity to approach such matters.<sup>35</sup>

Gadamer asks: '[d]oes being situated within traditions really mean being subject to prejudices and limited in one's freedom? Is not, rather, all human existence, even the freest, limited and qualified in various ways? If this is true, the idea of an absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity.'<sup>36</sup> For Gadamer, to reject our prejudices outright is thus to renounce our most fundamental orientation in the world in the name of an impossible standard, thereby impoverishing our self-understanding as finite, historical beings.

Gadamer's notion of the necessity of prejudice has not infrequently been received as a call for an uncritical acceptance of past doctrines, a form of purely dogmatic assent.<sup>37</sup> Yet as Donald Ipperciel notes, Gadamer's restoration of prejudice is founded on a broader critique of the Cartesian conception of the nature of thought and subjectivity.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, Descartes envisages a mode of philosophical enquiry premised entirely on an idea of truth which can be established without any appeal to the history of thought. By contrast, Gadamer claims that thought is always embedded

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 278 ff.

<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere, he argues for the necessity of prejudice in all spheres of knowledge, including the natural sciences. See 'The Universality of the Problem' in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1974), p. 3 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Continuum, 2004) p. 277.

<sup>37</sup> Perhaps most prominently, this was the core issue at stake in Gadamer's debate with Habermas. See Demetrius Teigos, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding: A Study of the Habermas-Gadamer Debate*. (London: Bucknell University Press, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> See Donald Ipperciel, 'Descartes and Gadamer on Prejudice,' in *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2002, p. 635-652.

in a broader history which it cannot simply transcend by means of method. To deny this is to lose sight of thought's true nature.

Gadamer's point is a broader one than concerns us here. What is significant for our purposes is that the prejudice against prejudice exemplified by Descartes implies an *intrinsically ahistorical conception of truth*. By denying the necessity of an engagement with the tradition, Descartes simultaneously denies the relevance to philosophy of the historical boundedness of our relation to truth. Even as Descartes is acutely aware that his own thought is located in the context of an ongoing history, he nonetheless operates under the assumption that the fact that 'truth' is something which seems to have first become manifest over the course of a history is irrelevant when considering the ultimate nature of truth. Indeed, for Descartes, the very criterion of truth is that it should admit of a completely ahistorical grounding in the certitude of the *ego cogito* in its absolute self-presence. Truth is entirely insulated from the historical mode of its presentation; and first philosophy thus has nothing to say about this historicity.

It is important to emphasise that Descartes never simply denies that the individual thinking subject is always caught up in a broader history. As stated at the outset, Descartes is all too aware that philosophy has a long and complicated history, characterised by detours, difference and contradiction. Yet for Descartes, the thinking subject first attains to truth by *withdrawing from* this historical dimension. The implication of this gesture is that the economy of truth itself is withdrawn from this history. The history of thought is precisely what is *left behind* by his method; the end goal is the simple *presence* of truth to the individual thinking subject.

Gadamer's critique of the prejudice against prejudice owes a clear debt to the thought of his teacher, Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger insists that, in order to properly pose the question concerning being, it is first necessary to carry out an analysis of that being which poses the question concerning being, i.e. of *Dasein*. His analysis shows that *Dasein* is always *thrown*—that is, bound up in a particular world-historical context.<sup>39</sup> Again, Descartes does not deny this as such; and yet he considers it to be irrelevant in defining the thinking subject as the one who asks about *truth*. For Descartes, to ask after truth is precisely to transcend one's

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<sup>39</sup> See BT, p. 219 ff & p. 424 ff.

historical setting. In *BT*, by contrast, Heidegger insists that this historical situatedness of the one who asks the question concerning being is not a mere accidental feature from which we can simply abstract. Descartes' pure subject which transcends its historical bounds is thus rejected in favour of a questioner who is intrinsically bound up in a concrete world with concrete historical conditions.

As we shall see in chapter four, Heidegger's difference from Descartes on this score grows more radical in the 1930s. His shift away from the analysis of *Dasein* in the writings which follow *BT* toward a concern for truth as such constitutes a shift away from an account of the historical conditions of *Dasein's* access to truth, towards a historical conception of truth itself. It is no longer a question of the historical nature of *our* relation to the economy of truth, but rather, the historicity of the economy of truth itself—what Heidegger will call *the history of being*.

As such, Heidegger's history of being is doubly removed from the Cartesian method. The prejudice against prejudice, typified by Descartes' thought, brings with it an intrinsically ahistorical conception of thought and its relation to truth. On the one hand, it asserts the possibility of a mode of thought withdrawn from historicity, seeking to establish an ahistorical foundation for philosophy. On the other, it precludes the possibility that the fact that truth becomes manifest over the course of a history might be an irreducible feature not merely of the one who asks after truth, *but rather of truth itself*.

#### 1.4 The Subject as Measure

Descartes' suspicion vis à vis the tradition can be understood in terms of the question of his *entitlement* to draw on it. A.W. Moore notes that Descartes' method incorporates

a preparedness to reflect critically on his heritage and to ask, using no other resources than are available from that position of critical reflection, what *entitles* him to draw on his heritage in the ways in which he does; a preparedness to question all authority except for that of his own reason, his own faculty for 'clear and evident intuition' and the 'certain deduction' of its consequences.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> A.W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*, (New York: Cambridge University Press) p. 27.

Moore's formulation is apt: Descartes begins by suspending all authority *except for that of his own reason*. Indeed, Descartes makes the certainty of the thinking subject the *sine qua non* of truth. According to his method, only what the individual subject can establish beyond all doubt is to be admitted at the level of philosophical discourse.<sup>41</sup>

Heidegger makes a point closely related to this about the entitlement of reason. According to Heidegger, Descartes establishes the certainty of the thinking subject as the *measure* of truth.<sup>42</sup> That which the thinking subject can establish as certain by means of its own reason alone is considered true; everything else remains subject to doubt, and is consequently suspended. By making the certainty of the subject the ultimate measure of truth, Descartes necessarily excludes the possibility that the history of philosophy should come into view for philosophy *as a history*. Instead, it is reduced to a sequence of more or less plausible claims, each of them subject to the scrutiny of individual reason. The fact that these claims should stand in a *temporal* relation to one another simply does not register at the level of first philosophy, since it takes as its measure the absolute self-presence of the thinking subject.<sup>43</sup>

### 1.5 Error as the Implicit Ground of Historicity

In the introduction, we cited Derrida's description of the metaphysical concept of refutation: '[o]nly knowledge, and not truth, would on this view be historical, and it would be so only to the extent of its distance from truth, that is in its error.'<sup>44</sup> We claimed that this notion of history as a product of error is definitive of modern

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<sup>41</sup> This should not be taken to imply that Descartes' conception of truth is in some way solipsistic. The subjective reason which acts as the criterion of truth is accessible to us all, and can thus form the basis of a shared, intersubjective discourse on truth. Yet it begins precisely by abstracting from all differences between subjects—including those associated with our 'thrownness.'

<sup>42</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche IV*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 108.

<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting at this juncture that, by subjecting all claims of the tradition to the scrutiny of reason, Descartes tars *memory* with the brush of (illegitimate) prejudice. The collective memory which binds us to the tradition is submitted to the authority of the intellect, such that philosophy takes account of its past only in the mode of suspicion. This precludes the possibility of conceiving memory as a source of knowledge in its own right.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 2.



approaches to the question of philosophy's history, and that this approach is typified by Descartes.

It is not immediately obvious, however, that Descartes considers historicity in terms of error. Indeed, it is important to note that his critical attitude by no means implies the *falsity* of any particular claims or philosophical positions within the tradition. Instead, his method simply involves the suspension of assent on the basis of authority alone. Past systems of thought are treated as dubious or as 'tantamount to false' until they have been subjected to the scrutiny of the understanding, a position which clearly differs from simply denouncing the entire tradition as false.

Nonetheless, the ultimate aim of Descartes' method of doubt is to exclude error by suspending all uncertain claims. As he states at the opening of the first meditation, it is his awareness of the large number of 'falsehoods' which he had accepted as true in his youth which first motivated his project of radical doubt.<sup>45</sup> He resolves to suspend all of his opinions which are *uncertain*, in order to thereby guarantee that all errors are excluded.

The implication is that both our own opinions, as well as the received wisdom of the tradition, constitute a set of uncertain claims, some of which may be true, but others of which are certainly errors. Indeed, the method is only necessary insofar as our opinions and the tradition contain errors, which it is the task of method to exclude.

Furthermore, in the passage from the *Discourse* cited at the outset,<sup>46</sup> Descartes characterises the philosophical tradition in terms of a series of ongoing *conflicts*. He writes: 'seeing how different learned men may defend different opinions on the same subject, without there ever being more than one which is true, I deemed anything that was no more than plausible to be tantamount to false.'<sup>47</sup>

On Descartes' account, it seems that the only way of accounting for these differing opinions, and thus for historical difference, is by appeal to the concept of error. As we shall see in chapter three, Hegel will develop a different approach to the contradictory opinions of the history of philosophy, allowing him to integrate seemingly opposed doctrines into a broader economy of truth. For Descartes,

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<sup>45</sup> MFP, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> See section 1.2 above.

<sup>47</sup> DM, p. 10.

however, where the tradition is equivocal, truth itself is necessarily univocal. The history of philosophy is constituted by a series of *conflicting opinions on the self-same matter*, of which *no more than one can be true*. By treating all as ‘tantamount to false,’ Descartes seeks to avoid assent to the errors within the tradition, retaining only those which stand up to the scrutiny of his own method.

If the history of philosophy deviates from the economy of truth, then it does so in terms of error. We can only explain its conflicts and irreducible differences by assuming that at least some of its claims are false. This is confirmed by another crucial passage from the *Discourse*, in which Descartes notes the tendency of even the ‘greatest minds’ to *stray from the path*:

It is not enough to possess a good mind; the most important thing is to apply it correctly. The greatest minds are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues; those who go forward but very slowly can get further, if they always follow the right road, than those who are in too much of a hurry and stray off it.<sup>48</sup>

In the introduction, we discussed the figure of errancy.<sup>49</sup> Errant conceptions of historicity begin with the notion of a ‘path’ to truth, from which human reason in its finitude strays, giving rise to a series of conflicting opinions which lie beyond truth. For Descartes, the history of philosophy is populated by just such ‘great minds’ who have strayed from the ‘right road.’

Thus, the need of method arises precisely because of our tendency to *err*. Descartes need not declare the whole tradition, nor any specific positions within it, to be the product of errors. Instead, he implicitly takes error to be the condition of the possibility of the conflict between different philosophical positions—or in other words, he takes error to be the ground of historical difference. Without suspending the authority of the tradition, treating all its claims as ‘tantamount to false,’ we risk falling into error, as have so many great minds of the past. The task of Descartes’ method is thus to prevent our assent to the false claims of the tradition, the errors which arise when we do not conduct our thinking according to the correct method. It

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<sup>48</sup> DM, p.5.

<sup>49</sup> See section 0.3 above.

announces a clean break with history, and with it, an end to philosophy's ceaseless straying from the true path.

## **Part Two: Error in the Fourth Meditation**

In this section, we begin our account of the history of the concept of error which forms the second major strand of this thesis. In the introduction, we claimed that the differing conceptions of the relation between philosophy and its history of the thinkers examined in this thesis are reflected in their respective concepts of error. We will see throughout the remainder of the thesis that *the concept of error is the primary concept in terms of which philosophy elaborates its relation to its own history.*

As we have seen, the task of method for Descartes is explicitly to exclude error. In this section, we examine Descartes' concept of error as a kind of *lack* or privation which arises through a *misuse of the faculties*. We argue that implicitly, the errant history of philosophy can be considered to be a kind of epistemological waste product, which can be rendered neutral by the methodological regulation of the faculties. By appeal to the concept of error, the historicity of thought can be both grounded, and set aside as irrelevant to truth.

### **1.6 Error as an Anomaly**

Descartes devotes his fourth meditation to the problem of error. The fourth meditation constitutes a kind of exception in the broader context of the work, a striking interruption of the logic of the text. By the end of the third meditation, Descartes has reached a series of conclusions which follow from a 'clear and distinct perception' of God. Firstly, it has become clear that God is not a deceiver, since 'it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect.'<sup>50</sup> Nor can our faculties be said to deceive us, since they are of divine origin. For God to have given us faculties which intrinsically tend toward error would be for him to be the author of a defect, a possibility which has already been ruled out.

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<sup>50</sup> MFP, p. 35.

Descartes thus concludes that we are capable of grasping truth. Yet having established this, he encounters a fresh difficulty: namely, how to explain that untrue thoughts should ever be possible—or in other words, how *errors* should come about. As Bernard Williams puts it:

at this point [...] Descartes is moved to wonder whether he may not have proved too much. For if indeed the benevolence of God guarantees [...] that the faculty of judgement cannot be systematically prone to error, how does it come about that Descartes is *ever* mistaken? Yet it was precisely from the recognition that he had been very frequently mistaken that his process of doubt started.<sup>51</sup>

That error should show up precisely as a *problem* that interrupts the logic of Descartes' text up to this point is no coincidence. His project in the *Meditations* is premised on the natural inclination of human thought towards truth, an inclination which follows from the divine provenance of thought. Even as he does not seek to deny the existence of error, nor our entanglement in an errant history, Descartes does not consider this to be a positive feature of our thought, but merely a kind of brute fact, an obstacle to be overcome. If it is true and even unavoidable that errors obtain, this nonetheless seems to run contrary to the fundamental nature of thought.<sup>52</sup>

Error shows up here as a kind of excess over the economy of truth, something which, according to the logic of the *Meditations* thus far, ought not to be.

Descartes himself sums up this difficulty in a striking formulation: 'if everything that is in me comes from God, and he did not endow me with a *faculty for committing errors*, it appears that I can never go wrong.'<sup>53</sup> While Descartes posits such a faculty for purely rhetorical purposes, it is worth noting that we shall have cause to return to the idea of a faculty for committing errors. It calls to mind Nietzsche's notion of a positive faculty of forgetting, which contradicts traditional conceptions of forgetting as a mere failure of memory.<sup>54</sup> More significantly for our purposes, however, it also anticipates a strand of Kant's account of reason we will

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<sup>51</sup> Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.149.

<sup>52</sup> In chapter two, we will see that Kant too treats errors as a kind of anomaly, considering them 'unnatural,' and apparently contrary to the nature of thought. See section 2.6 below.

<sup>53</sup> MFP, p. 38 (translation modified, my emphasis).

<sup>54</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' in *Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 57–124; see also Heidegger's interpretation in GA 46.

turn to in the next chapter. Many commentators have misunderstood Kant's dialectic as a kind of 'logic of error,' which would seem to make of reason (at the level of theoretical philosophy) a faculty for committing errors of the kind Descartes mentions here. In fact, Kant's claim is subtly different from this, positing reason not as a faculty for committing errors, but as a faculty of illusion—or the 'seat of transcendental illusion.'<sup>55</sup>

In the absence of such a faculty for committing errors, Descartes must find another way of grounding error which does not undermine his conclusions at the end of the third meditation.

### 1.7 Error and the Faculties: Intellect, Will and Judgement

Descartes defines errors as *false judgments*. We err whenever we assent to a judgment P, where in fact not-P obtains. As such, it is in his account of judgement that we will find the key to his theory of error. (We will see in the next chapter that the same is true of Kant).

Yet Descartes also suggests that errors must be defined in terms of a *lack*. He insists that strictly speaking, errors have no positive being (or are not 'a thing'),<sup>56</sup> but rather denote a mere shortfall from truth. Descartes uses the scholastic concept of privation—the lack of some property which I *ought* to have, to define error. To take a common example: a human being can be said to be blind, because they *ought* to have the power of sight; by contrast, a tree cannot be said to be blind, since no trees possess the power of sight. A human being's blindness is thus an example of privation, whereas a tree's lack of sight amounts to a simple negation.<sup>57</sup> Error is an example of privation because it seems to be possible that God *could* have given us faculties which never go wrong;<sup>58</sup> and of course, cognition of truth remains the overriding goal of the *Meditations*.

Descartes' definition of error in terms of privation has led some commentators—including Hobbes in his famous objections to Descartes—to note

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<sup>55</sup> CPR B355/A298. As we shall see below, Kant maintains a strict distinction between illusion and error. See chapter two below, esp. section 2.13.

<sup>56</sup> MFP, p. 42.

<sup>57</sup> See Richard Davies, *Descartes: Belief, Scepticism and Virtue* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 86.

<sup>58</sup> MFP, p. 38.

that this leads to difficulties in distinguishing error from mere ignorance.<sup>59</sup> Whereas ignorance simply amounts to a lack of knowledge that P (or that -P), errors involve the *positive assent* to a false judgement. They do not merely denote a lack of knowledge of truth; instead, they introduce a content which is wholly absent from the economy of truth.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, Descartes is consistent in maintaining their status as a form of privation.

We return to this issue in more detail in below. For now, let us return to Descartes' account of error. In order to explain the origin of error, Descartes turns to an analysis of our faculty of judgement. If errors do not come to us from *without* in the form of deceptions, nor do they arise naturally from our God-given faculties, they must have some distinct origin within the thinking subject.

In the fourth meditation, as elsewhere, Descartes divides human cognition into two primary faculties, the intellect and the will.<sup>61</sup> He suggests that, while neither can itself be the origin of error, it is through the *relation between the two* that errors arise. Let us briefly consider his account of how this comes to be.

Descartes defines the intellect as that which 'enable[s] me to perceive the ideas which are subjects of possible judgements.'<sup>62</sup> The intellect is not a faculty of deliberation or decision, but rather of simple, unequivocal insight. We might say that the intellect merely 'gives' a content to be seen. It presents ideas to me, allowing me to see them clearly and distinctly in 'the natural light.' As Stephen Menn notes: 'Intellection, by contrast with judgment, is purely receptive [...] This reception is knowledge; so knowledge is simply the passive perception of an idea-content, where this is a real being deriving ultimately from God.'<sup>63</sup>

As already stated, Descartes has established that God is not a deceiver. That the intellect should provide *false insights*, that is, perceptions of purely *false* contents such as illusions, has thus already been ruled out. The insight with which it provides

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<sup>59</sup> See René Descartes *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett), 2006), p. 111.

<sup>60</sup> We will see that this distinction plays an important role in Kant's theory of error, in which he insists that it is impossible to derive something positive (assent to a judgement) from a mere lack. See section 2.7 below.

<sup>61</sup> Williams notes that Descartes makes clear elsewhere that he considers this distinction to be both fundamental and exhaustive. See Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 152.

<sup>62</sup> MFP, p.39.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 311.

us is, as Menn states, always knowledge of ‘real being deriving ultimately from God.’<sup>64</sup> As such, the intellect alone cannot be responsible for errors.

Nonetheless, the intellect is limited in scope. The human intellect differs from the divine intellect in terms of its *finitude*. Descartes notes that his own intellect is ‘extremely slight and very finite,’ in contrast to which he knows God’s intellect to be ‘supremely great and infinite.’<sup>65</sup>

The implication is that where for God, to relate to any object is immediately to *know* it, human beings can encounter objects for which they do not yet possess an adequate idea.

This is the first juncture in Descartes’ text at which we can see how his account of the faculties might be invoked to explain the historicity of human thought. If the human intellect is finite in scope, the implication is that it will *take time* for us to reach an adequate understanding of the world around us (and indeed of being as such). We can thus conceive of a history in which mankind gradually progresses towards an increasingly perfect knowledge of the world, and in doing so draws ever closer to infinite divine knowledge. This does not preclude the possibility of a regression, i.e. a fall back into ignorance from a position of relative knowledge; nor does it necessarily imply the possibility that mankind should ever attain to such perfect knowledge, for human progress may simply take the form of an asymptote which draws ever nearer to such knowledge without ever touching the axis, and so remaining in a permanent state of relative ignorance.

Such ideas are pervasive in many accounts of the historicity of knowing in general, be it of philosophy or of scientific knowledge conceived more broadly. Even where this model is purged of its theological foundations, i.e. where the existence of a divine intellect is denied, the implication remains that human finitude means that we constantly fall short of an absolute knowledge which might be obtained by a hypothetical infinite intellect. Finitude thus denotes our *distance* from truth, our falling short of perfect knowledge. Even where the possibility of absolute knowledge is denied, it retains the role of a (merely hypothetical) goal toward which knowledge ought to strive. As we shall see in the second part of this thesis, Hegel and Heidegger both deviate from this model significantly, instead insisting on the *immanence of*

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> MFP, p. 39-40.

*finitude to the economy of truth itself.* For Heidegger in particular, finitude is conceived not merely as a limitation of the thinking subject, but as the defining characteristic of *being*.

From a Cartesian perspective, the finitude of the intellect alone allows us to see why thought should take time to attain to truth, thereby providing a potential ground for thought's historicity. Yet in the previous section of this chapter, we suggested that this is not adequate to understand Descartes' conception of his place in the history of philosophy. For the history of thought cannot be accounted for solely in terms of progress and regressions along the path from ignorance toward truth. Rather, this path is *errant*, incorporating *false* contents. The 'vices' of which the greatest minds are capable do not consist of a mere falling short of truth in the form of ignorance, but rather of an active *straying from the path*, into a territory which falls *entirely beyond the economy of truth*. As such, the above-mentioned distinction between ignorance and error, while initially unclear, will be decisive.

This errant history once again has its implicit root in the structure of the human faculties. If the intellect can only account for the difference between ignorance and knowing, it is with the *will*, the 'faculty of choice' as Descartes calls it, that the possibility of actual errors first arises.

By contrast to the intellect, the will is an active faculty responsible for decisions. Descartes defines the will as 'our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid).'<sup>66</sup> In contrast to the singular vision of the intellect, then, the capacity of the will to *either* affirm or deny introduces the bivalence necessary for error. My capacity for choice makes it possible for me to do *either* the right thing or the wrong thing, to assent to what is true or to what is false. The bivalence of judgement which is the necessary condition of falsehood thus seems to have its ground in the will as the faculty of choice.

Nonetheless, Descartes insists that the will itself is not responsible for error. Appealing once more to the divine provenance of the faculties, Descartes insists that the human will is 'perfect in its kind.'<sup>67</sup> Indeed, far from being defective, the will is the human faculty in whose exercise we most closely resemble God. For while the human intellect is finite, human will is infinite. Descartes' point is clearly not that it

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<sup>66</sup> MFP, p. 40.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.



falls within the scope of our will to achieve anything we wish; indeed, he points out that in this way, we still differ from God.<sup>68</sup> Yet he suggests that in the ‘strict and essential sense,’ our will is no less infinite than God’s, since there is no limit to the scope of its potential application. For any situation or object with which I find myself confronted, it is within my power to affirm or deny it, to choose to act or not to act.

Since both the intellect and the will are of divine origin, neither can of itself be responsible for error. Instead, Descartes identifies the *relation* between the intellect and the will as the true source of error. Specifically, it is due to the difference in scope between the will and the intellect that errors arise. Descartes writes:

So what is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. (40).

Descartes’ point here is straightforward. The human intellect is finite insofar as it discloses truth only gradually. In relating to an object, we are not necessarily immediately presented with an adequate idea of it by our intellect, so that we often lack an adequate intellectual grasp of the objects we encounter. By contrast, the will does not encounter any such limitations in its relation to its object. Owing to the unlimited scope of the will, I can reach judgements about any possible object to which I relate; yet this means I am often moved to reach judgements about matters of which I have no adequate idea, owing to the finitude of the intellect. This gives rise to a situation in which we reach judgements in the absence of the ‘natural light’ of the intellect. Where the natural light will always guarantee the absolute univocity of discourse, in its absence, thought strays from this singularity, and introduces moments contradictory of truth. Thanks to the lack of congruence between the finite intellect and infinite will, I can not only fail to know things (ignorance), but can also actively get things wrong, making false judgments about things which I do not know.

As such, we can see how the relation between the intellect and the will makes possible an *errant history* of human thought. Unlike a historicity founded purely on the finitude of the intellect, the discrepancy between the intellect and the will allows

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

us to account for the possibility of contradictory positions emerging within the history of thought. This history is not merely a matter of progressions and regressions on the path from ignorance to truth. Instead, it amounts to a series of dead ends, illusory contents which are simply ‘beyond’ truth.<sup>69</sup> By forming judgements in the absence of the natural light of the intellect, philosophy is plunged into an errant history from which we can be liberated only by strict adherence to Descartes’ methodological precepts.

### 1.8 Who errs?

It seems that the explanatory circle has been closed, and the anomaly of error accounted for. God does not deceive us by giving us faculties which actively produce errors. Instead, error arises through the relation between the faculties.

Yet the question remains as to how it is that the faculties should come to relate to one another in this manner. Descartes assumes that, in spite of the discrepancy in scope between the two faculties, with the proper caution, we can refrain from reaching judgements in the absence of the natural light. Yet what is it which moved us to draw such erroneous judgements in the first place?

At this juncture, Descartes seems to introduce a distinction which destabilises his account of the self as presented in the *Meditations* thus far. In order to account for our tendency toward error, he draws a distinction between the self and the will. He does so repeatedly in the passages which follow, claiming that, in those instances where errors arise, ‘I am not using my free will correctly;’ adding a few lines later ‘[t]he privation, I say, lies in the operation of the will *in so far as it proceeds from me*, but not in the faculty of will which I received from God, nor even in its operation, in so far as it depends on him.’<sup>70</sup> While it is the discrepancy in the scope of the intellect and the will which makes my error possible, this is only a necessary and not yet a sufficient condition of error. Rather, it is *my misuse* of my will which

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<sup>69</sup> As we will see in chapter four below, for Heidegger, such ‘errant’ paths are a necessary moment of the economy of truth. See esp. section 4.14 & 4.15.

<sup>70</sup> MFP, p. 41 (my emphasis).

bears the true responsibility.<sup>71</sup> Thus, error proceeds not from the faculties I received from God, nor simply from their relation to one another, but rather from *me*.

Yet this gives rise to the following question: who or what is this ‘I,’ as something distinct from my will and my other faculties? The implication is that this ‘I’ does not depend on God in the same manner as the faculties. Errors introduced by this ‘I’ are thus not to be traced back to a divine origin, but proceed solely from ‘me.’

Bernard Williams raises an objection to Descartes' text here, suggesting that the implied distinction between the ‘I’ and the will is incoherent. He notes that ‘these uses and misuses of other faculties must themselves be a matter of the will, and to say that a man misuses *his will* could only be to imply either that his will misuses itself, or that he has another will which is applied to the use of the first one.’<sup>72</sup> Either the will misuses itself, in which case there must be some imperfection immanent to the will; or we must appeal to some will distinct from the one which God has granted us.

Williams suggests that it might be possible to evade the problem by way of paraphrase. Perhaps the distinction that is implied in these passages is merely a matter of clumsy wording on Descartes’ part.<sup>73</sup> And yet it would seem that the introduction of this ‘I’ coheres perfectly with Descartes’ logic up to this point in the *Meditations*. For it allows Descartes to absolve the faculties of all blame, and thus to entirely dissociate error from God, while nonetheless taking account of error as a genuine and pervasive phenomenon.<sup>74</sup>

This absolving of God of responsibility for error has implications far beyond questions of piety. By keeping error at a distance from God, Descartes is able to maintain a conception of truth in which error is entirely superfluous to the economy

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<sup>71</sup> Or as Lex Newman puts it, ‘limitation in our intellect explains the possibility of judgment error; misuse of our free will explains its actuality;’ cited in Noa Naaman-Zauderer, *Descartes’ Deontological Turn: Reason, Will, and Virtue in the Later Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 85.

<sup>72</sup> Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.156. Cf. Stephen Menn, who concludes that ‘[i]t is the will itself that uses and abuses itself, and no further cause can be assigned for its activity.’ Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 316.

<sup>73</sup> Williams suggests that some of the associated difficulties may be dissolved in this way, where others may be irresolvable. See Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 155-6.

<sup>74</sup> Heidegger notes at this juncture in his reading of the fourth meditation that: ‘God is absolutely absolved of any responsibility for the being of error. The *cupla* falls to me;’ GA 23 p. 132, my translation.

of truth.<sup>75</sup> By denying any kind of divine origin of error, Descartes suggests that such error is superfluous from the position of divine knowing. The economy of truth, as present in God's knowledge, is entirely purged of error; the task of method is likewise to purge our thought of error, leaving it behind as a remainder.<sup>76</sup>

Descartes' gesture of distinguishing the I from the faculties recalls an argument advanced by Thrasymachus in book one of Plato's *Republic*. According to Thrasymachus, an expert never makes a mistake *qua* expert, but rather, only as a fallible individual who fails to live up to their role as an expert. It is not the doctor *qua* doctor who makes a mistake leading to the death of a patient; one is only a doctor insofar as one flawlessly carries out one's medical duties. Rather, it is the individual 'behind' the doctor who errs.<sup>77</sup> Descartes' talk of *my* misuse of my will seems to share this structure: it is not the will that is responsible for error, but some other dimension of the 'I' behind the will. In so far as we are made in the image of God, we do not err. Yet we can and do fall short of the divine image. In the example from the *Republic*, it is clear what we mean when we talk about the 'I' who fails to live up to their role; every doctor is *also* a fallible human being. Yet who is this 'I' which misuses its faculties in the *Meditations*?<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> While such an exclusion may seem self-evident, we will see in the following chapters that it is this far from the case.

<sup>76</sup> In his reading of Parmenides' poem, Heidegger notes that it is the *Goddess truth* who tells Parmenides of the path of *doxa*. The implication would seem to be that even a 'perfect' intellect recognises *doxa* as an irreducible feature of being, and thus that an account of truth is incomplete without an account of *doxa*. The Cartesian god, however, has precisely nothing to say of regarding the content of errancy, since the economy of truth is entirely purged of any relation to error. Unlike Parmenides' goddess, Descartes' God *cannot speak untruth*. For Heidegger's account of the Goddess truth, see Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. by Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>77</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, 340d – 341a.

<sup>78</sup> Williams opts not pursue this question further, writing '[t]his sort of difficulty, however, is perhaps not the most profitable to pursue.' Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.156. Nor is it a widely discussed aspect of Descartes' text. This owes perhaps to the ongoing predominance of the Cartesian attitude toward error, which takes it to be a mere byproduct of thought which is of little philosophical interest.

## 1.9 *Inter Deum et Nihil*: Descartes' Theodicy

We have seen above that the misuse of our faculties seems to imply a dimension of the human which does not proceed from God. We saw that according to Descartes, our faculties are of divine origin. Human beings are created in God's image, and as such are capable of truth. Yet if we return to the very opening of the fourth meditation, we find an allusion to a dimension of the I which marks its distance from God:

so long as I think only of God, and turn my whole attention to him, I can find no cause of error or falsity. But when I turn back to myself, I know by experience that I am prone to countless errors. On looking for the cause of these errors, I find that I possess not only a real and positive idea of God, or a being who is supremely perfect, but also what may be described as a negative idea of nothingness, or of that which is farthest removed from perfection. I realize that I am, as it were, something intermediate *between God and nothingness* [*inter Deum & nihil*], or *between supreme being and non-being*: my nature is such that in so far as I was created by the supreme being, there is nothing in me to enable me to go wrong or to lead me astray; but *in so far as I participate in nothingness or non-being*, that is, in so far as I am not myself the supreme being and am lacking in countless respects, it is no wonder that I make mistakes. I understand, then, that error as such is not something real which depends on God, but merely a defect.<sup>79</sup>

Here, Descartes reproduces an argument from classical theodicy. Specifically, he invokes our proximity to *nothingness* as the ground of human error in a way which perfectly mirrors Augustine's invocation of the nothing to explain the possibility of evil.<sup>80</sup> Augustine found himself confronted with the problem of accounting for the presence of evil in the world. Evil cannot be explained as a positive attribute of

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<sup>79</sup> MFP, p. 38, my emphasis. Heidegger alludes to this passage in *Nietzsche IV* in the context of a discussion of Descartes. See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche IV*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 143.

<sup>80</sup> On Descartes' indebtedness to Augustine, see Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

human beings, since this would ultimately have its origin in God as the creator. Rather, evil must be understood in terms of *privation*—the lack of something I *ought* to have (i.e. goodness). God is not the author of evil; instead, evil denotes mankind's tendency to *fall* from God, a possibility which arises since man was created from nothing.

Descartes uses the same argument to account for our tendency toward error. Human beings are located *between God and the nothing*, and as such, they are at risk of a fall into error which is simultaneously a fall away from God. As Stephen Menn puts it:

Descartes and Augustine conclude: the cause of my errors is found not in God, but in the fact that, being other than God, I have been created out of nothing, and continue to have some character of nothingness about me. I am not nothing, but I have been created from nothing purely by God's decision, and can as easily be returned to nothingness: so I have no prior claim on any perfections, before God decides what to give me. In creating me, he gives me some perfections I did not have before, but there are other perfections that he does not give me; the lack of these other perfections is not itself something that comes from God, but merely a remainder of the original nothingness or lack of all perfections out of which I was drawn.<sup>81</sup>

For Descartes, this concept of the nothing merely delimits the space within which man can 'fall short' of divinity. That is to say, insofar as human beings are not identical with God, one can talk of a 'distance' between the human and God; and any such distance presupposes some kind of outer boundary that is at the furthest possible remove from God. As such, the nothing is merely a theoretical corollary of the thought that human beings do not attain to God's perfection.

For Descartes, to suggest that errors arise as a result of man's proximity to the nothing is simply another way of saying that they arise from man's imperfection. Yet this imperfection is clearly not simply the same as the 'finitude' of the intellect. It is in this context that the significance of the distinction between error and ignorance discussed above becomes clear. The limited scope of the intellect can be invoked to explain the fact that man does not intrinsically possess all truth from the very outset,

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<sup>81</sup> Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 304.

and indeed may never attain to the absolute insight of the divine intellect. But this does not explain how it comes about that human beings should actively *stray* from truth, reaching judgments which constitute a kind of excess over truth. As we suggested above, this would seem to suggest some impetus on the part of humans to misapply their will.

It would seem that invoking the nothing as the ground of error would allow us to take account of the difference between errors and ignorance. If the nothing were invoked as the ground of error in this way, it would be possible to elaborate a kind of economy of errant human thought, as distinct from divine truth. By extension, the historicity of philosophy would be a feature of this ‘negative’ economy in its difference from eternal truth.

Yet such a project is not conceivable within a Cartesian framework. As previously stated, for Descartes, the nothing is merely the outer boundary of man’s imperfection. It ‘is’ not, precisely insofar as it has no ground in God. Likewise, the errors to which it gives rise themselves strictly speaking have no being; they constitute a sheer lack, and nothing more. To attempt to examine their ground, or to elaborate a ‘logic of error,’ of the kind alluded to by Heidegger, would be to engage in a self-contradictory science of non-being.

Nonetheless, it is significant that the nothing should play such a pivotal role in Descartes’ fourth meditation. For at this point in his argument, Descartes foreshadows key aspects of both Hegel’s and Heidegger’s thought. In their respective accounts of the historicity of thought, neither of them begins by departing radically from Descartes’ conceptual framework. Instead, they call into question the notion of the nothing posited simply as *nothing*, and of error as a sheer lack. We will see that unlike him, they do not simply exclude negation<sup>82</sup> from the economy of truth. In both Hegel’s logic of negation, and Heidegger’s ‘nothing,’ we can hear a distinct echo of Descartes’ appeal to the nothing in the fourth meditation. Yet where Descartes simply moves to exclude the nothing and the error he associates with it from his philosophy, Hegel and Heidegger treat them as an irreducible component of truth. In doing so, they come to incorporate human ‘errancy’ within their respective conceptions of

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<sup>82</sup> For Heidegger, this negation cannot be understood as dialectical; see CP, p. 140.

truth. The history of thought is not merely *opposed to truth*, but belongs to it in an essential manner.

That Descartes should invoke the nothing here is not accidental. For it allows him to locate an aspect of the ‘I’ which is at the furthest possible remove from God's perfection, and thus to explain the origin of error without implicating God in this error.<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, Descartes does not thematise this nothingness in any detail, precisely because he posits it only in order to *dismiss it*, excluding the error associated with it from the economy of truth. Recall that error originally showed up as a kind of surplus, something which ought not to be, insofar as our intellectual capacities can be traced back to God. Locating man between God and nothingness allows Descartes to introduce an origin of error distinct from God, such that neither God nor our faculties need ever be made culpable of error. Posited as *nothingness*, which is nothing real, but rather a mere ‘negative idea,’ we can say that this ground of error ‘is not.’ By this logic, the excess over truth which error constitutes is itself a form of mere ‘non-being.’ At the same time, it seems that it is a negation of a very specific sort; since it is not simply identical with ignorance, or the lack of knowledge. Yet within Descartes’ conceptual resources, it seems that this distinction necessarily remains unclear. For it would be a matter of comparing one form of ‘non-being’ with another—a project which, at least since Parmenides, has been dismissed by the Western tradition as incoherent.

While this discussion has been very abstract, it has decisive consequences at the level of philosophical praxis. For it authorises an approach in which human error—and with it, the errant history of thought—falls beyond the scope of philosophy’s legitimate concerns. Descartes fulfils his obligation to take account of our tendency to err; and yet he equally makes of this errancy a form of non-being, ruling out the possibility of a logic of error. As such, it is sufficient to dismiss the errors of the past as the result of thought’s imperfection, rather than attempting to account for their specific content.

The fact that Descartes finds in himself a ‘negative idea of nothingness’ alongside the ‘real and positive idea of God,’ the latter of which plays such a

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<sup>83</sup> Heidegger writes: ‘But if God is God he cannot know the nothing, assuming that the “Absolute” excludes all nothingness.’ Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, in *Basic Writings*, trans. & ed. by David Farrell Krell, revised and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 107-108.



fundamental role in determining the course of the *Meditations*, is rarely remarked upon. And yet this duality is striking in its anticipation of the opening of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, in which the concept of pure being is followed immediately by (or indeed 'co-positd' with) the concept of the nothing. As is well known, Hegel deconstructs the simple opposition between these concepts, and rejects the idea of the nothing posited simply as nothing.

For now, it is sufficient to note that the appeal to the idea of nothingness allows Descartes to close the explanatory circle, accounting for the ground of error without thereby attributing it to God. Error has been accounted for in such a way as to hold it at absolute remove from God and from the economy of truth. Since it is strictly speaking nothing, a mere lack, there is no need to take further account of it—nor of the errant history to which it gives rise. Instead, this history comes to be thought simply as the product of humanity's fall from God. By regulating the use of the faculties appropriately, philosophy can aspire to establish itself on a new ahistorical foundation, leaving its errant history behind it.

### **1.10 Descartes and the Tradition Revisited**

Before moving on, it is worth noting that there is a certain irony in Descartes' approach to the problem of error. Descartes, who seeks to suspend all appeals to the authority of the tradition, falls back on an argument borrowed from traditional theodicy. This is, of course, far from being the only recourse that Descartes has to the tradition in the course of his *Meditations*.<sup>84</sup> As Gueroult notes, Descartes himself concedes his substantial debt to the tradition in a letter to Voetius.<sup>85</sup> Above all, the entire framework of his project depends on a Christian conception of a benevolent God who embodies eternal truth.

Is it not then ill-advised to suggest, as we have done, that Descartes rejects the authority of the tradition altogether—or as Andrew Benjamin puts it, that he refuses 'the gift of the tradition?'<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. Heidegger's discussion of this issue in BT, p. 46.

<sup>85</sup> Martial Gueroult, 'The History of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem,' in *The Monist* (2014) 53 (4): 563-587., p. 571.

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *The Plural Event: Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 38.

Concerning Descartes' apparent deference to the Christian tradition, A.W.

Moore writes:

If we find it puzzling that [Descartes] nevertheless accepts, seemingly uncritically, so much of what we find unacceptable, then we are probably overlooking both the extent to which thinking in general, not just Descartes' thinking, is determined by its historical and cultural context and the extent to which what we find unacceptable is in any case, ironically, a long-term effect of Descartes' own iconoclasm.<sup>87</sup>

Moore's point here is clear. Even as Descartes seemingly uncritically accepts many of the doctrines of his predecessors, his true legacy lies in his iconoclasm and his rejection of the authority of the tradition. Even as he borrows heavily from the tradition, it is his commitment to suspend all such appeals that constitutes the enduring lesson of his method. Much of the tradition he inspired sought to purge his attempt at establishing a secure foundation for philosophy of the last remnants of its debt to the tradition.

With this gesture, Descartes' simple opposition between ahistorical truth and historical human knowledge, as well as the opposition between divine truth and human errancy, is retained, even as its theological foundation threatens to be lost from view. The essential faith that human cognition, on the basis of individual reason alone, should be able to transcend its historical setting remains dominant in much contemporary thought, as does the corresponding ahistorical conception of truth, albeit in the absence of a divine intellect acting as guarantor.

Derrida also notes the limitation of Descartes' attempt to distance himself from the tradition. In the passage in question, Derrida remarks that Heidegger distances himself from all attempts at 'beginning again in the ahistorical style of Descartes or perhaps (things are not so simple) of Husserl.' He continues:

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<sup>87</sup> A.W. Moore, *the Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (New York: Cambridge University Press) p. 27. Cf. Bernard Williams, who claims that Descartes' employs a 'religious bridge' in order to return from the position of doubt to one of knowing. He writes: 'philosophy after Descartes was driven to a search for alternative ways of getting back from the regions of skepticism and subjective idealism in which it was stranded when Cartesian enquiry lost the Cartesian road back.' Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 147.

Not that the Descartes of the *Discourse* or Husserl in his Cartesian vein decided to create from scratch a new language to escape from the historical heritage. In any case, if that had been practically possible, one can suppose that they would have done so and that nothing in their philosophical intention was opposed to it.<sup>88</sup>

And this is the essential point: even as Descartes' fails to insulate his thought entirely from the tradition, nothing in the fundamental orientation of his thinking implies any obligation to take account of it. In spite of the limitations of its own attempt to do so, his method authorises the gesture of simply *forgetting* the tradition, spurring philosophy on to complete the task of purging itself of former prejudices, and ultimately leading philosophy to declare the question of its own historicity to be irrelevant at the level of first philosophy.

### **1.11 Conclusion to Chapter One: Method's Belated Arrival**

We bring our account of Descartes to a close by confronting him with a variation on Heidegger's question concerning the 'incubation period' of the principle of sufficient reason examined in the introduction.<sup>89</sup> Given that the faculties have a natural normative tendency toward truth, how can we explain that the correct method for the application of the faculties should first emerge in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the inception of Descartes' philosophical project? Given thought's natural tendency toward truth, what does Descartes have to say about the nature of this delay?

We raise this question only to leave it unanswered, since Descartes' texts do not provide us with a clear response. Certainly, he can appeal to the idea of man's imperfection to explain the fact that human thought should have erred in the past. Yet he cannot explain why his own method should have arisen at the specific juncture that it did. His near contemporary Francis Bacon, who advocated a similar methodological revolution, proposed a theological explanation: his project of instauration meant man's return to his rightful dominion over nature as guaranteed in

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<sup>88</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), p. 24.

<sup>89</sup> See section 0.2 above.

the scriptures, thus forming part of a grand theological narrative.<sup>90</sup> Descartes offers no such explicit explanation. We are left simply with the idea of an errant tradition which, but for the right method, *need not have been*, and whose gradual unfolding over centuries seems to be a matter of sheer contingency. Cartesian method arrives as a sudden, inexplicable rupture, which with a single stroke alters mankind's relation to truth, transcending its historicity by appealing to a set of methodological rules which, much like the principle of sufficient reason in Heidegger's lecture course, had simply been awaiting discovery.

The question is apt to strike some readers as trivial. It may seem senseless to pose a question to Descartes' text which it is clearly neither equipped nor concerned to answer. His failure to address the question can hardly be considered fatal to his broader project. Nonetheless, we note the absence of a response here precisely by way of contrast to the thinkers considered in the remainder of this thesis. For as we shall see, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger all offer explanations as to why their thought should have in some sense been delayed or deferred, emerging only at a specific point in the history of Western thought. Not only are their philosophical projects conscious interventions in an ongoing history; they also offer an account of why this history should have taken the form it did.

Descartes' method appears to be simply *belated* in its arrival. There is no reason why the method should have emerged when it did, nor why it should have been preceded by the specific developments which in fact preceded it. By contrast, we will see in the next chapter that Kant suggests that his project of critique had necessary precursors. It does not arrive merely belatedly; rather, it *could not* emerge prior to other developments made necessary by the very nature of reason. This idea would be developed further still by Hegel and Heidegger, albeit in radically different ways.

For Descartes, history is not intrinsic to the economy of thought. Instead, it marks our falling short from the economy of truth. The economy of truth is the economy of *divine* truth; our falling short falls outside the remit of philosophy proper, conceived as the account of *truth*. Like Thrasymachus' doctor, philosophers do not err—or at least, not once they are equipped with the right method. By

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<sup>90</sup> See Stephen A. McKnight, *The Religious Foundations of Francis Bacon's Thought* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

suspending all engagement with the tradition at the level of first philosophy, and by excluding error and negativity from the economy of truth, Descartes' method establishes the template for philosophy's silence concerning its own historicity.

## Chapter Two: Kant's Logic of Illusion and the History of Special Metaphysics

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we examine the status of the history of philosophy in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In particular, we consider how Kant is able to engage with certain aspects of this history at the level of his 'theoretical' philosophy by means of his concept of *transcendental illusion*.

In the first part of the chapter, we examine Kant's 'external' comments on the place of critique in the history of philosophy. In other words, we are concerned with those marginal comments in the prefaces and other peripheral writings in which Kant explicitly discusses the relation of his project to the broader tradition. We will see that like Descartes, Kant envisages critique as a kind of methodological intervention intended to bring to an end the 'errant' history of metaphysics. Nonetheless, unlike Descartes, Kant suggests that there are reasons why critical philosophy should first arise in the wake of this errant history. The history of metaphysics admits of a certain necessity, such that critique only became possible after reason had passed through a sequence of specific stages.

In the second part of the chapter, we examine the extent to which Kant's 'external' account of the place of critique in the history of philosophy is grounded at the level of his 'first philosophy.' In other words, we ask whether his account of human reason in his *CPR* adequately grounds the kind of historical necessity described in part one. We will see that like Descartes, Kant considers philosophy's historicity to be the product of thought's tendency to err. Yet we will also see that in his notion of *transcendental illusion*, Kant provides an account of the origin of error far more detailed than anything Descartes had envisaged. In the dialectic of *CPR*, Kant seeks to show that the content of the history of special metaphysics arises necessarily as a result of the very structure of human cognition. Finally, we investigate the limits of this notion of transcendental illusion in explaining the historicity of thought.

## Part One: Kant and the Tradition

### 2.2 The Errors of the Metaphysical Tradition

Kant added a motto taken from Bacon's preface to the *Great Instauration* to the second edition of *the Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>91</sup> The motto closes with the following words: 'each may well hope from our instauration that it claims nothing infinite, and nothing beyond what is mortal; for in truth it prescribes only the end of infinite errors, and this is a legitimate end.'<sup>92</sup>

Kant's choice of motto is telling. It suggests that, like Bacon (whom he admired greatly),<sup>93</sup> he considers his own work to be a kind of instauration, a renewal or restoration following a period of decline. Furthermore, it suggests that this instauration proceeds by way of the *prevention of error*.

Kant makes this point explicit in the introduction to the work. He writes of critique that 'its utility would really be only negative, serving not for the amplification but only for the purification of our reason, and for keeping it free of errors, by which a great deal is already won.' (A11/B25). The task of *CPR* is not the development of a new metaphysics. Instead, Kant considers it to fulfil the task of a 'propaedeutic,' which prepares the way for the actual tasks of metaphysics by delimiting the legitimate scope of human reason.<sup>94</sup> Much like the Cartesian method of doubt, critique aims to suspend errors in order to make way for truth.

Throughout the prefaces to *CPR*, Kant refers to the need to put metaphysics on the 'right path.' We saw in the introduction to this thesis that the trope of the 'path' and the associated notion of 'errancy' recur throughout modern accounts of the history of philosophy.<sup>95</sup> For Kant, as for Descartes, metaphysics has thus far found itself on the 'wrong' path; and the task of the critical method is to return it to

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<sup>91</sup> Hereafter *CPR*.

<sup>92</sup> *CPR*: Bii (my emphasis).

<sup>93</sup> On Bacon's importance for Kant, see Shi-Hyong Kim, *Bacon und Kant: Ein erkenntnistheoretischer Vergleich zwischen dem "Novum Organon" und der "Kritik der reinen Vernunft"* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008). Kim argues that there is significant continuity between Bacon and Kant on the question of error, arguing that both make the attempt not merely to dispel the errors of the former metaphysics, but rather to explain and ground them. Bacon thus be considered an important forebear of the historical dimension of Kant's critical project, as well as of his concept of illusion discussed in detail below. See esp. p. 87ff.

<sup>94</sup> *CPR* A11; on Kant's conception of propaedeutic, see *CPR* A 84I/B 869.

<sup>95</sup> See section 0.3 above.

the right path—the ‘royal road,’ as Kant refers to it<sup>96</sup>—once and for all. This can only be brought about by a methodological revolution—whereby we must understand method etymologically as the search for the right path [*hodos*], which will bring the errant wandering of philosophy to an end.

There are nonetheless significant differences in the way in which Kant and Descartes frame their concern to suspend error. Descartes’ project of doubt was motivated by his awareness that many of his own personal opinions were dubious, with many proving to be simply false under closer scrutiny. We noted that this method of doubt also implicitly served to suspend the heritage of the ‘errant’ tradition; yet ultimately, Descartes cast the project in terms of the possibility of *personal certainty*.<sup>97</sup> By contrast, Kant makes no mention of his own personal errors or opinions in the prefaces and introduction to the *CPR*, nor those of any individual, whether concrete or hypothetical.<sup>98</sup> Instead, it is the contemporary state of metaphysics as a science which motivates his intervention. If Kant moves to suspend error in the *CPR*, he is not simply concerned with *errors as such*, but rather precisely with *those errors into which metaphysics has fallen* for want of an adequate method. Expressed positively, his concern is not with the possibility of personal certitude, but rather with the restoration of the science of metaphysics within its proper bounds.

In distinction to Descartes, Kant thus explicitly casts his project as an intervention at a certain juncture in the history of metaphysics. He famously characterises metaphysics as a ‘battlefield of [...] endless controversies.’<sup>99</sup> His own intervention comes at a point in time at which the former ‘queen of all the sciences’<sup>100</sup> has fallen into disrepute. As John Sallis notes, Kant’s critique can thus be understood as a response to a certain ‘crisis of metaphysics,’<sup>101</sup> unprecedented in its history. Much as Hegel would later do in his own philosophical system, Kant thus explicitly presents his *CPR* as emerging in a specific historical context.

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<sup>96</sup> The German term is ‘*Heeresweg*,’ *CPR* bxii.

<sup>97</sup> See section 1.4 above.

<sup>98</sup> Of course, in the famous passage from the *Prolegomena*, Kant recalls the way in which Hume awoke him from his ‘dogmatic slumber;’ yet this too can be understood as a concern for his own commitment to a particular historical form of metaphysics (dogmatic rationalism). See Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, ed. Gary Hatfield, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 10

<sup>99</sup> *CPR* Aviii

<sup>100</sup> *CPR*, aviii.

<sup>101</sup> John Sallis, *The Gathering of Reason*, second edition (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), p. 3ff.



### 2.3 Errancy, Science and Revolution

In the preface to the second edition of *CPR*, Kant writes:

If after many preliminaries and preparations are made, a science gets stuck as soon as it approaches its end, or if in order to reach this end it must often go back and set out on a new path; or likewise if it proves impossible for the different co-workers to achieve unanimity as to the way in which they should pursue their common aim; then we may be sure that such a study is merely groping about, that it is still far from having entered upon the secure course [*den sicheren Gang*] of a science; and it is already a service to reason if we can possibly find that path [*Weg*] for it, even if we have to give up as futile much of what was included in the end previously formed without deliberation.<sup>102</sup>

In this citation and the passages which follow it, Kant takes what may be seen as evidence for the impossibility of metaphysics as a science, and recasts it in the context of a broader historical narrative. Where the sceptic might see the failures of dogmatic metaphysics as cause to abandon it altogether, Kant understands the contemporary crisis of metaphysics to be the final stage in its history before it is finally set upon the ‘path’ which will lead it to its fulfilment. To lend this narrative greater plausibility, Kant develops a comparison between the history of metaphysics and those of other sciences, which he notes all passed through an initial stage of ‘groping about’ before finally finding their respective ‘royal roads.’

Kant contrasts metaphysics with three further sciences: logic, mathematics, and physics. Of these sciences, logic was the first to find the correct path. Kant notes that it has long since travelled a ‘secure course’ [*sicherer Gang*], not being forced to take a single backward step since at least Aristotle.<sup>103</sup> Mathematics, too, ‘has from the earliest times to which the history of human reason reaches, in that admirable people the Greeks, travelled the secure path of a science.’<sup>104</sup> He notes, however, that its path was not so simple as that of logic, and that it spent a lot of time ‘groping about’ looking for the right path, primarily among the Egyptians.<sup>105</sup> It was only thanks to a *revolution* among the Greeks that it finally found the ‘royal road.’ Finally,

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<sup>102</sup> *CPR*, Bvii.

<sup>103</sup> As the citation above makes clear, a backward step is proof of the lack of an adequate foundation, of a science not having found the ‘right path.’

<sup>104</sup> *CPR*, Bx.

<sup>105</sup> *CPR*, Bxi.

natural science took far longer to find the ‘highway of science,’ finally achieving this only with the methodological revolution proposed by Francis Bacon.<sup>106</sup>

Kant introduces his own famous ‘Copernican revolution’ after the pattern of these prior revolutions in mathematics and natural science. The implication is that, just as mathematics and physics *took time* to find the right path, so too, he understands his own critical project as a revolution which arises following a long history of failure. That metaphysics should have thus far proved fruitless is no cause to abandon it, but rather indicates that it still awaits its ultimate foundation.

Furthermore, for Kant, the order in which these sciences were set upon the right path is far from contingent. Rather, he argues that it is the relative *difficulty* of each science which accounts for the delays. This question of difficulty is not simply a matter of complexity, but has its root in the varying relations between the faculties which obtain in each science. Thus, logic arrives at its proper method earliest, since in logic, the understanding must engage only with its own laws.<sup>107</sup> Mathematics and physics are more difficult, since they involve the application of the understanding to objects of experience. Finally, metaphysics is the *most difficult* science, precisely because it has to do with objects which fall *beyond experience*. Kant thus claims that it is by no means contingent that metaphysics, in spite of being the *oldest* science, should also be the last of the sciences to reach maturity.<sup>108</sup>

As such, it is already clear that for Kant, it is not a matter of sheer accident that his critical project should have been delayed in its arrival. The revolution in metaphysics arrives later than other scientific revolutions owing to the intrinsic difficulty of its content. This revolution will finally bring metaphysics’ centuries of errant wandering to an end, much as the revolutions in the other sciences had done so previously: ‘it is on this path, the only one left, that I have set forth, and I flatter myself that in following it I have succeeded in removing all those errors that have so far put reason into dissension with itself in its nonexperiential use.’<sup>109</sup>

Kant claims here that the critical path is the *only one remaining* for metaphysics. The revolution entailed by critique is final. It does not amount to one of those periodic revolutions in the sciences for which Thomas Kuhn coined the term

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<sup>106</sup> CPR, Bxii.

<sup>107</sup> CPR, Bix.

<sup>108</sup> CPR, Bxiv.

<sup>109</sup> CPR, Axii.

‘paradigm shift.’<sup>110</sup> By locating the critical path, Kant has *brought an end* to the errancy of metaphysics, and finally put it on the path to truth. Accordingly, he ends the critique on a triumphant note. He invites the reader to consider whether, now that the critical path has been discovered, ‘that which many centuries could not accomplish might not be attained even before the end of the present one: namely, to bring human reason to full satisfaction in that which has always, but until now vainly, occupied its lust for knowledge.’<sup>111</sup>

Kant thus hopes that within less than two decades,<sup>112</sup> metaphysics might attain the goal it has striven after in vain for centuries.

Kant’s claims regarding the difficulty of metaphysics go some way to explaining why critique should have been delayed in its arrival. Nonetheless, his account of the reasons for this delayed arrival of the critical project go far beyond this mere appeal to difficulty. Indeed, Kant not only explains why metaphysics should find its royal road later than the other sciences; he also accounts for the specific forms through which it had to pass before its revolution could take place.

## 2.4 The Posteriority of Critique

Various commentators have noted the explicit historical dimension of Kant’s conception of his critical project. Yovel and Henrich both argue that for Kant, critical philosophy can only emerge after the limitations of metaphysics have been made explicit by its failings. Yovel summarises this as follows:

Kant [...] had a strong sense both of the historical nature of philosophy and of the new, trans-historical era that was opening. Even before Hegel, he was the first philosopher of the “end of philosophy” in the *historical* sense of the word. Many philosophers before him considered that their work had reached the final truth. But for them the history of previous philosophy was accidental, a contingent series of errors and opinions, unessential to the emergence of truth through their own work.

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<sup>110</sup> See Thomas Kuhn, *the Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012).

<sup>111</sup> CPR, A855/B883.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Eckart Förster, *the Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Kant, on the other hand, situates his revolution at the end of a necessary process of gradual explication, a process that has made his own system possible and has been preserved and systematized by it. Kant's philosophy is the conclusion and overcoming of the inevitable historization of reason, its need to undergo a *process* of self-explication.<sup>113</sup>

Similarly, Henrich claims that for Kant,

before there can be an insight that there is some illusion in [...] metaphysics, there has first to be an original metaphysics. Only then can one start on the program of critical philosophy. In this sense, Kant is, so to speak, the inventor of the philosophical history of philosophy. Because, in his view, one cannot get to the truth all at once at the beginning, there are necessary stages of the development of philosophy.<sup>114</sup>

We have seen above that Kant considers the critical path to be the only one left open for metaphysics. Henrich suggests that for Kant, this path itself could not come into view until the other paths pursued by metaphysics had proven to be dead ends. The ‘mistakes’ of former metaphysics were in fact not simply contingent, superfluous errors; rather, their failings constituted a kind of epistemological prerequisite for the project of critique.

Certainly, in *CPR*, there is ample evidence that Kant does not believe former metaphysics to have been simply contingent. He ends the *CPR* with a chapter entitled ‘the History of Pure Reason’—though he notes that this title names a task which is yet to be fulfilled, and that he will only cast a ‘cursory glance’ at the problem.<sup>115</sup> In this chapter, he considers a set of opposed schools of thought which have characterised metaphysics since the Greeks, showing how each of them relates to his transcendental account of human reason.

Nonetheless, nowhere in *CPR* does Kant claim that this history is strictly *necessary* in the manner Henrich suggests here—that is, that critique should only be

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<sup>113</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, (Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 225. It is clear that Yovel’s comments on philosophers prior to Kant cohere with our account of Descartes in the previous chapter.

<sup>114</sup> Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 32.

<sup>115</sup> *CPR* A852/B880 ff.

possible after these earlier stages had been passed through. To find an explicit statement to this effect, we have to turn to Kant's posthumously published, fragmentary 'Progress' essay.<sup>116</sup> There, Kant writes that there are

three stages which philosophy had to traverse in its approach to metaphysics. The first was the stage of dogmatism; the second that of skepticism; and the third that of the criticism of pure reason.

This temporal sequence is founded in the nature of man's cognitive capacity. Once the first two stages have been passed, the state of metaphysics can continue to vacillate for many centuries, leaping from an unlimited self-confidence of reason to boundless mistrust, and back again. But a critique of its own powers would put it into a condition of stability, both external and internal, in which it would need neither increase nor decrease, nor even be capable of this.<sup>117</sup>

The history of metaphysics thus does not comprise a sheer contingent development, but passes through three necessary stages. The first stage is dogmatism, in which *a priori* reason is applied uncritically, extending to objects beyond the bounds of experience.<sup>118</sup> This illegitimate employment of reason gives rise to a series of contradictions, forcing metaphysics to return over and again to the beginning, starting along a new, equally inadequate path. The second stage, he notes, is 'almost as ancient as the first,' and is 'based on the total failure of all attempts in metaphysics.'<sup>119</sup> *Skepticism* intervenes on the basis of dogmatism's failings, consequently rejecting all *a priori* knowledge as unfounded (or indeed, in its most radical forms, even the evidence of the senses).<sup>120</sup> It falls finally to critical philosophy to circumscribe the legitimate uses of *a priori* reason, and the possibility of synthetic judgments *a priori*, a task it can fulfil only after the limitations of the two previous positions of dogmatism and skepticism have become apparent.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff,' in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy After 1781*, ed. Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 349 ff. The essay was written in the 1790s for an essay competition, but remained incomplete. See Henry Allison's introduction, *Ibid.*, p. 339 ff.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

Note that in this passage, Kant claims that this history is *inscribed in the very constitution of the human faculties*, writing: ‘[t]his temporal sequence is founded in the nature of man’s cognitive capacity.’ We argued above that Cartesian errancy, too, has its implicit ground in the constitution of the human faculties; Kant renders this point explicit. Furthermore, in contrast to Descartes, for Kant, not only does the ground of this history lie in the faculties, the *actual concrete temporal sequence in which it unfolds follows from the very nature of human cognition*. It will be our task in the second part of this chapter to trace the way in which the controversies of a certain domain of the pre-critical philosophical tradition, namely special metaphysics, have their origin in the very nature of human reason, and why Kant considers them to have been necessary precursors to his own project.

In the previous chapter, we claimed that Descartes’ method is characterised by its *belated* arrival. There is no reason why it should have emerged at the particular historical juncture that it did; nor does it stand in any necessary relation to that which preceded it. By contrast, as we have seen, Kant argues that critique can only emerge after certain other forms of thought have been passed through. We refer to this as the *posteriority* of critique, i.e. its necessary ‘coming after,’ to distinguish it from the *belatedness* of Cartesian method.<sup>122</sup>

The idea that historicity should be a function of the limitations and interactions of human faculties is distinctive of the modern era, and is common to Kant and Descartes. The implications of this thesis are wide-ranging. For it suggests that it is the structure of the faculties which accounts for the very *being* of the history of thought, such that this history must be understood as a product of the operations of the atemporal and eternally fixed structure of human reason.

For Kant, as for Descartes, the fact that truth should become manifest over the course of a history is not an irreducible feature of truth itself. Instead, it is a consequence of the structure of human cognition, i.e. of the conditions of *our access* to truth. Once again, it is in its *distance from truth* that this history unfolds; and this history will ultimately prove to have been a product of error.

In spite of the significance of Kant’s divergence from Descartes, he clearly stops short of the Hegelian project of a full reconciliation between reason and its

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<sup>122</sup> We return to this distinction in section 2.14 below, where we show that the distinction is, in fact, not as straightforward as it may appear.

history.<sup>123</sup> Nonetheless, in a series of notes written in preparation for his Progress essay,<sup>124</sup> Kant does strike a series of distinctively Hegelian notes. At one point, he speculates as to

whether a schema could be drawn up a priori for the history of philosophy, with which, from the extant information, the epochs and opinions of the philosophers so coincide, that it is as though they had had this very schema themselves before their eyes, and had progressed by way of it in knowledge of the subject. Yes! if, that is, the idea of a metaphysic inevitably presents itself to human reason, and the latter feels a need to develop it, though this science lies wholly prefigured in the soul, albeit only in embryo.<sup>125</sup>

In a further formulation, striking in its anticipation of Hegel's position, Kant writes that such a history of philosophy would be the 'history, not of the opinions which have chanced to arise here or there, but of reason developing itself from concepts.'<sup>126</sup>

Kant never undertook the task described here. It seems unlikely that Hegel ever read these posthumously published fragments; and yet their anticipation of his own project is undeniable.

In spite of all of this, the motto with which Kant opens his *CPR* stands: the task of critique is the suspension of the *errors* which constitute the history of metaphysics, even if these errors admit of a certain necessity. Although he moves to take account of a certain necessity at work in this history, it remains a form of *historia stultitiae*, albeit of a very specific kind.<sup>127</sup> In part two of this chapter, we will see that the key to understanding the necessity at work in the history of philosophy can be found in Kant's concepts of error and illusion [*Schein*].

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<sup>123</sup> See chapter three below.

<sup>124</sup> Published as 'Jottings for the Progress of Metaphysics' in *Theoretical Philosophy After 1781*, ed. Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 413 ff.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418-9.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419. We will see in chapter three below that Hegel develops a detailed critique of the idea of the history of thought as a sequence of mere 'opinions.'

<sup>127</sup> On the distinction between *historia stultitiae* and *historia sapientiae*, see section 0.3 above.

## Part Two: Kant, Error and Illusion

In this part of the chapter, we examine how Kant takes account of the relation between critique and the tradition at the level of his first philosophy—specifically, in the context of the dialectic of the *CPR*.<sup>128</sup> In accordance with the fundamental aim of this thesis, we show that the relation of critique to the tradition is reflected in his conception of error.

As such, before turning to *CPR*, we begin with an account of Kant's general theory of error, which he develops most extensively in his *Lectures on Logic*. The account of error given here helps us to better understand both his motivations and his conceptual framework in the dialectic of the *CPR*. We will see that Kant's account of error differs substantially from Descartes,' denying the possibility of absolute error, and positing a *positive ground of error*, which he calls *illusion* [*Schein*]. We will see that this concept of illusion is central to his conception of a necessary history of philosophy, and to an ambiguity at the heart of his account of critique's place within this history.

### 2.5 The Lectures on Logic

Kant's most detailed account of error is contained in his *Lectures on Logic*. Kant lectured on logic over a forty-year period, beginning in his pre-critical years and continuing into the 1790s.<sup>129</sup> His lectures were based on Gottfried Friedrich Meier's *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre* (1752), which served as a kind of textbook for students taking the course. The lectures address *formal logic*, rather than the transcendental logic that Kant would first develop with his critical turn. Several course transcripts, as well as a book version of the lectures edited by his student Jäsche, have survived. The reliability of these transcripts is a matter of some dispute, and it is clear that the

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<sup>128</sup> The restriction to the *CPR* is of course artificial; a comprehensive account of Kant's position would need to take into account all of his critical and late writings. The restriction is imposed partly for restrictions of space, and partly because it is in the *CPR* that the link between error and the history of philosophy is most explicit.

<sup>129</sup> Gerd Irrlitz, *Kant Handbuch: Leben und Werk*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler), 2010, p. 495.



volume edited by Jäsche mixes together material from different points in Kant's career, as well as adding material found in none of the lecture transcripts.<sup>130</sup>

Nonetheless, the account of error in these lectures is remarkably consistent, save for a subtle but decisive shift accompanying Kant's critical turn.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, Kant does not simply present a summary account of Meier's conception of error. Rather, from the earliest surviving transcripts onward, he is highly critical of Meier's position, presenting his own competing theory in response. We will see that Kant's revision of Meier's account of error provides important clues to the motivation for his account of dialectic in *CPR*.

Before turning to the detail of Kant's critique of Meier, it is important to note a major continuity between Descartes and Kant on the topic of error in these lectures—namely, its status as an *anomaly*.

## 2.6 Error as an Anomaly

Like Descartes, Kant defines error as the positive assent to a false judgement. Errors thus obtain wherever we reach a judgement that P where in fact not-P (or vice versa).<sup>132</sup>

Like Descartes, Kant begins with the fundamental assumption that the human faculties are fundamentally oriented toward truth.<sup>133</sup> This assumption presents Kant with a fundamental difficulty in explaining the phenomenon of error, similar to the one encountered by Descartes in the fourth meditation. If human cognition tends naturally toward truth, how can we explain its pervasive tendency to fall into error?

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis to develop a comparative reading of the various drafts of *the Lectures on Logic* and the significance of the changes which his concept of error undergoes with his critical turn. Tillmann Pinder provides a partial account of this development; see Tillmann Pinder, p. 90ff. 'Zu Kants Logik-Vorlesung um 1780, anlässlich einer neu gefundenen Nachschrift,' in *Kant Forschungen*: Band 1, Reinhard Brandt & Werner Stark (eds.) (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1987), pp. 79-104. Throughout, I draw on the most relevant passages from the various drafts, distinguishing between the pre-critical and critical periods.

<sup>132</sup> In distinction to Descartes, Kant defines judgement as an operation not of the will, but of the understanding. For Kant, the understanding is self-legislating, operating according to its own intrinsic rules. As an isolated faculty, there is no reason why it should ever go wrong; nonetheless, it is clear that errors do occur.

<sup>133</sup> Stephen Watson identifies this assumption on Kant's part as a fundamental assumption of the metaphysics of presence; see Stephen Watson, 'Regulations: Kant and Derrida at the End of Metaphysics,' in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. by John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp.71-86.

As such, from the outset, Kant frames errors as an anomaly. Throughout the various transcripts of the *Lectures on Logic*, Kant points to the unnatural nature of error. In the *Blomberg Logic*, he writes that ‘every error is a phaenomenon, a puzzle in regard to the concept of its own possibility. It is, as it were, a wholly unusual, unnatural appearance, which contradicts the laws of nature.’<sup>134</sup> Similarly, in the *Jäsche Logic*, we read:

It is easy to have insight into *how truth is possible*, since here the understanding acts in accordance with its essential laws. But it is hard to comprehend *how error in the formal sense of the word, i.e.*, how the *form of thought contrary to the understanding* is possible, just as we cannot in general comprehend how any power [*Kraft*] should deviate from its own essential laws.<sup>135</sup>

Kant’s characterisation of error as unnatural and anomalous echoes the initially paradoxical status of error in Descartes’ *Meditations*. Descartes encounters this problem because he assumes a fundamental orientation toward truth on the part of the faculties, which follows from their divine provenance. Throughout the lectures, Kant puts the same point in terms of natural forces: no natural force, he claims, can of itself deviate from its course.

Like Descartes, Kant attempts to incorporate an account of the conditions which give rise to error without sacrificing the assumption that thought is fundamentally oriented toward truth. Indeed, his task is to provide an adequate account of error which does not undermine this fundamental assumption. Kant certainly recognises the obligation to account for thought’s tendency to err; yet it is important to note that from the outset, he fundamentally assumes that it is the task of philosophy to *overcome* error. Error remains an exception, and one which it is the task of method to eliminate altogether. The Heideggerian notion, considered in detail in chapter four below, that error intrinsically belongs to our thinking relation to the world, is thus foreclosed as a possibility from the very beginning.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> LL, p.79.

<sup>135</sup> LL, p. 560.

<sup>136</sup> Nonetheless, we will argue below that Kant comes closer to Heidegger’s position than is initially apparent – while error does not belong intrinsically to our thinking relation to the world, *illusion* does. See section 2.10 below.

This corresponds perfectly to Kant's conception of the historicity of philosophy. For Kant, the errant history of metaphysics will itself have been a kind of *anomaly*, a state of exception in which reason has not yet reached maturity. Even as Kant claims that this history admits of a certain necessity, so nonetheless, it is only when philosophy puts this history behind it—only, that is, when it has brought a close to the era of endless errors—that it will have arrived at its proper state, i.e. that it will fulfil its proper task of cognising ahistorical truth. That thought *should ever have been historical* amounts to a kind of exception, mirroring the anomalous status of error.

## 2.7 Kant's Critique of Meier: The Positive Ground of Error

Meier's account of the origin of error in the *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre* corresponds closely to Descartes' account in his fourth meditation. Meier identifies the primary source of error as a combination of *ignorance* (*Unwissenheit*) with overhastiness (*Übereilung*).<sup>137</sup> This clearly echoes Descartes, for whom errors arise through judgements reached by the will in the absence of adequate intellectual insight.<sup>138</sup> As such, Kant's critique of Meier proves a valuable point of comparison, serving as a kind of indirect demonstration of how Kant departs from Descartes' conception of error.

Already in the earliest full transcript of Kant's lectures, the so-called *Blomberg Logic*, which dates from his pre-critical period,<sup>139</sup> Kant takes issue with Meier's account of error. He argues that the account fails, since errors can never arise simply from a combination of ignorance and overhastiness. Kant's criticism thus returns us to one of the key problems of the fourth meditation: namely, the distinction between error and ignorance. Kant writes:

Does error not arise [...] from the lack of reason combined with the desire to judge?

Answer: He who knows certainly that he is ignorant will not presume to judge about

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<sup>137</sup> Georg Friedrich Meier, *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre* (Halle: 1752), §110.

<sup>138</sup> See section 1.8 above.

<sup>139</sup> The precise dates are not clear, though evidence suggests the text is based on a course given in the early 1770s. See Paul Guyer, 'Introduction' in Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, trans. by J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. xxiv.

something that he does not understand. But assuming that he did not feel himself unable, and that he thought he knew much and thus wanted to judge about much, then nothing more would arise from this, his efforts to judge would be in vain.<sup>140</sup>

Kant's conclusion here initially seems surprising. In stark contrast to Descartes, he seems to suggest that, even if we seek to form judgements in the absence of intellectual insight, we will *not be able to do so*.

For Kant, this does not mean that we never fall into error through overhastiness. Rather, his point is that overhastiness combined with ignorance is not sufficient to account for error.

To explain Kant's point here, we need only consider the fact that, in the event that we *do* pass judgement in the absence of adequate insight, this can only be because we are presented with some content which misleads us. To take an empirical example: suppose I am ignorant of the true cause of the rising and setting of the sun. It is clearly possible that I might reach some false judgement regarding this cause: for example, that the sun rotates around the Earth. Yet in this case, it is clear that I cannot reach this judgement through the desire to judge alone; on Kant's account, there must be some *positive ground* for my believing that this should be the case. A whole chain of reasoning, the evidence of the senses etc., thus lie behind my judgement. Furthermore, even if I were to come to a completely outlandish conclusion with absolutely no mooring in reality, this would involve some other faculty such as the *imagination* stepping in to provide a fictitious content.

Note that in the latter case, in which the imagination is the origin of a purely false content, we can still talk about the imagination as the 'ground' of the judgement. To be grounded thus does not necessarily mean to contain an element of truth—it simply implies that *some* origin must be posited as the ground of my judgement. In this sense, while my judgement may be false, it is never entirely without ground—and as such, however false it may be, it cannot be explained solely by appeal to a combination of ignorance and overhastiness.

In arguing this, Kant addresses the major problem we identified with Descartes' conception of error in the previous section—namely, that if error is defined solely in terms of a lack, it seems we cannot account for its fundamental

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<sup>140</sup> LL, p. 78

difference from ignorance. Where ignorance denotes a shortfall from truth, error constitutes a kind of *excess* over truth. We suggested that it is not enough to invoke the imperfection of human thought to explain how this excess should come to be, and that—to employ Kant’s terminology—there must be some *force* which grounds this deviation from truth.<sup>141</sup>

As Pinder notes, Kant’s critique of Meier rests on the fact that Meier attempts to derive something positive—the taking to be true [*Fürwahrhalten*] of a false judgement—from something negative, i.e. a lack.<sup>142</sup> Kant puts this point explicitly in the (pre-critical) *Philipi Logic*:

Errors do not arise from the limitations and weakness of the understanding. This can only give rise to ignorance, and not to error. Whenever a force which moves a body diminishes, the body in question does not change direction, but merely goes more slowly. To error belongs a positive moment, and not merely a lack.<sup>143</sup>

Defined in terms of natural forces, we can thus say that some *secondary force* must intervene which causes the understanding to deviate from its natural course. As such, any account of error is incomplete without an explanation of this external force.

We saw in the previous chapter that in order to resolve this same question, Descartes appealed to the *nothing*. This allowed him to posit a ‘ground’ of error, yet one which he located outside of both the economy of truth and of the faculties of human thought in their proper operation. Indeed, qua nothing, this ground *is* technically not at all, such that Descartes offers no further account of it. By contrast, Kant insists on the need to account for this ground in positive terms. We will see in the later sections of this chapter that this involves the introduction of a distinction between the economy of truth on the one hand, and the economy of human reason on the other.

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<sup>141</sup> See section 1.8 above.

<sup>142</sup> Pinder, Tillmann, ‘Zu Kants Logik-Vorlesung um 1780, anlässlich einer neu gefundenen Nachschrift,’ in *Kant Forschungen: Band 1*, ed. by Reinhard Brandt & Werner Stark (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1987), p.92-3.

<sup>143</sup> My translation. Kant Werke 24,1 1:1; p.403. Cf. CPR, A293-295/ B350-351

## 2.8 Against Absolute Error

This notion of a positive ground of error goes hand in hand with a further dimension of Kant's conception of error. In distinction to Descartes, Kant excludes the possibility of *absolute error*. Kant states this explicitly in the critical era *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, where he states that '[n]o judgment could be found that would be *wholly* false. This cannot occur as long as our judgments are derived from the understanding.'<sup>144</sup>

I take it that, contrary to initial appearances, in making this claim, Kant does not wish to suggest that in every false judgement, there is some degree of truth, however slight. This would ultimately commit Kant to a pluralist conception of truth at odds with his entire philosophical project. Instead, it follows from his claim that no error is entirely *ungrounded*. While the judgement reached may be absolutely false, for Kant, there is always some explanation as to *why* the understanding should have reached this judgement.

This rejection of absolute error is of central importance in understanding the historical dimension of Kant's critical project. For it suggests that *Kant's attempts to take account of the errors of former metaphysics is not motivated first and foremost by a desire to account for the historicity of thought*. Rather, giving an account of the grounds of thought's errant past is made necessary by Kant's conviction that human cognition is fundamentally oriented towards truth, and as such can never fall into absolute error. His conception of historicity is grounded in his concern to ward off the spectre of absolute error, rather than the other way around. Irrlitz puts this point negatively, claiming that Kant's rejection of absolute error has nothing to do with any kind of 'cultural relativism,' nor with a 'syncretism in the bad sense, according to which everyone is right to a certain extent.'<sup>145</sup>

Nonetheless, Irrlitz also notes that this move on Kant's part does introduce an implicit moment of historicity into his account of reason.<sup>146</sup> For if Kant does away with the notion of absolute error, this means that philosophy's past, too, cannot

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<sup>144</sup> Kant, *LL* p. 458, (Dohna-Wundlacken).

<sup>145</sup> Gerd Irrlitz, *Kant Handbuch: Leben und Werke*, (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2002) p. 238.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

simply constitute a sequence of contingent, absolute errors, but must be grounded in some way. Kant's own attempt to position critique in relation to the broader history of philosophy can thus be understood as a corollary of his rejection of the notion of absolute error. By grounding them in the nothing, Descartes treats the 'errors' of the history of philosophy as a form of absolute error. As such, he recognises no obligation to give any further account of their origin. By contrast, Kant sees himself obliged to explain where these errors come from, thereby offering an account of the ground of philosophy's historicity.

## 2.9 Illusion as the Ground of Error

In versions of the *Lectures on Logic* dating from Kant's critical turn onward, Kant's account of error undergoes a fundamental terminological shift. We saw above that even in the earliest drafts, Kant had suggested that the limitations of human cognition alone cannot explain the tendency to err. Instead, it is necessary to identify a *positive ground* of error—a force which intervenes from without, resulting in the understanding's deviation from its natural trajectory.<sup>147</sup> In the manuscripts dating from the era of Kant's critical turn, Kant begins to refer to this positive ground of error as *illusion* [*Schein*].<sup>148</sup>

It is here that the import of Kant's conception of error for an adequate understanding of the dialectic of the *CPR* becomes apparent. In *CPR*, Kant defines dialectic as a 'logic of illusion.'<sup>149</sup> As we shall see below, he identifies reason as the 'seat of transcendental illusion'—a set of illusory ideas which have historically constituted the content of the disciplines of special metaphysics. In the light of the *Lectures on Logic*, we know that 'illusion' is not simply identical with error, but rather constitutes the ground of error; and we have also seen that Kant is obliged to

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<sup>147</sup> As we will see in more detail in the following sections on transcendental illusion, this force is not alone responsible for error. It is also necessary that we should assent to the judgement in question, which remains a free decision. We are thus never *compelled* to assent to such a judgement. See section 2.13.

<sup>148</sup> On this terminological shift, see Tillmann Pinder, 'Zu Kants Logik-Vorlesung um 1780, anlässlich einer neu gefundenen Nachschrift,' in *Kant Forschungen: Band 1*, Reinhard Brandt & Werner Stark (eds) (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1987), pp. 79-104; p. 90ff.

<sup>149</sup> *CPR*, B68.

provide such an explanation owing to his commitment to the impossibility of absolute error.

There is, however, one major inconsistency between *CPR* and the *Lectures on Logic* on the question of illusion. In the context of the latter, Kant identifies not reason, but *sensibility* as the ground of illusion. He writes:

How is it possible for a power to depart from its own laws?—The restrictions on the human understanding are not the ground of errors. They are grounds of a great lack in our cognition {—of ignorance (which we cognize only after [acquiring] much science of reason)}, but not of contradiction. Now since it is nothing negative, and the understanding alone by itself cannot err, it must be something positive—sensibility. The *oppositum* of the understanding does not judge at all, however. Now we have no other source. We see, then, that it occurs through the combination of the understanding and sensibility {thus we call the subjective in our representations}. Insofar as this ground lies in sensibility, we call it illusion [*Schein*]. This is usually explained as the subjective that is falsely held to be something objective.<sup>150</sup>

Why does Kant identify illusion solely with *sensibility* as the origin of error here, where in *CPR* he will claim that *reason* constitutes a source of illusion? This contradiction is the subject of ongoing discussions in secondary literature on Kant.<sup>151</sup> A possible explanation for this fact is that, as mentioned above, Kant is solely concerned with *formal logic* in the lectures. For Kant, at the level of formal logic, neither understanding nor reason can ever be a source of error, since both function solely according to their own intrinsic and valid laws, unless sensibility exerts an unnoticed influence on them. Where we commit an error at the level of formal logic, this error cannot issue solely from either the understanding or reason, since each

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<sup>150</sup> LL (Dohna-Wundlacken), p. 457.

<sup>151</sup> Indeed, the problem is heightened by an account of error which Kant gives at the opening of the dialectic of *CPR*. There, Kant repeats his claim from the *Lectures on Logic* that it is an unnoticed influence of *sensibility* which leads the understanding to fall into error (B 349/A293 ff.). Allison notes that this seems to be flagrantly contradicted by his claim in the passages which follow that *reason* is the source of illusion; see Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 323. One possible solution would be to suggest that it is precisely by treating the ideas of reason *in terms of the pure forms of sensibility*, i.e. space and time, that transcendental illusion arises. As such, one could claim that transcendental illusion, even as it has its origin in the ideas of reason, actually arises as the result of a certain influence of sensibility on the faculty of reason. Cf. Michelle Grier, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 116 ff.



faculty always operates according to its own laws. As we know, a judgement or syllogism can be *logically* correct, even though it is *empirically* false, owing to the falsity of its premises. Such empirical falsity is of no relevance when considering the merely formal logical function of the faculties. It is first at a *transcendental* level that reason becomes a source of illusion—that is, once it steps beyond the bounds of formal logic and begins to make claims concerning objective reality.

At a general level, collating the accounts given in the *Lectures on Logic* and in *CPR*, it seems we can define illusion as the *unnoticed influence of one faculty on another*. As Michelle Grier puts it, for Kant, errors arise ‘through the failure to take notice of the source of our conceptions.’<sup>152</sup> In the *Lectures on Logic*, this takes the form of sensibility exercising an illegitimate influence on logical judgements. In *CPR*, this role is played by the ideas of reason.

In the *Lectures on Logic*, having identified illusion as the ground of error, Kant indicates that it is never enough to simply expose an error; rather, we must seek to explain the ground of the error in question:

To avoid errors—and no error is unavoidable, at least not absolutely or without qualification, although it can be unavoidable relatively, for the cases where it is unavoidable for us to judge, even with the danger of error—to avoid errors, then, one must seek to disclose and to explain their source, illusion [*Schein*]. Very few philosophers have done that, however. They have only sought to refute the errors themselves, without indicating the illusion from which they arise.<sup>153</sup>

Kant’s claim here might easily be mistaken for mere pedagogical guidance. Indeed, he goes on to suggest that it is a matter of ‘fairness’ to the one whose thought one is criticising.<sup>154</sup> Yet as we have seen above, his reasons go far beyond this. It is only by explaining the errors in which reason becomes entangled that Kant can maintain his commitment to the idea of a natural tendency of human cognition toward truth.

Kant suggests that very few philosophers have ever sought to expose the illusions underlying errors, instead merely seeking to refute them. In his own critical

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<sup>152</sup> Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 109.

<sup>153</sup> LL, p. 562.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 563

project, he will attempt to do just this. This obligation on Kant's part is key to understanding his conception of the relation between critique and the history of philosophy.<sup>155</sup> As we will see, where Descartes was content to merely dismiss the errors of the tradition, Kant recognises an obligation to give an account of the *illusions* which give rise to these errors—illusions which, as we will see, are made necessary by the very structure of human reason. In this way, he provides an account of the ground of thought's errant history.

In sum, we can see that Kant's account of error coheres with Descartes' in several ways. It is once again through the interaction of the faculties that errors arise. The task of critique is thus to regulate the use of the faculties, prescribing their proper limits, and thereby overcoming the errors into which the tradition had fallen.

Yet Kant's account differs precisely insofar as he insists on the necessity of accounting for the *ground* of these errors. As we will see, this allows him to give an account of historicity not simply in terms of a kind of contingent epistemological waste product, but rather as a necessary product of the faculties. By examining the way in which the faculties interact, Kant is able to construct a typology of the errors of the tradition. There is nothing contingent about the specific errors into which the tradition falls; instead, they are inscribed in the very nature of the faculties.

We stated in the previous section that Kant does not provide a comprehensive account of the root of this history in reason, merely proposing the possibility of a 'history of reason' which would fulfil this task. Nonetheless, in the Transcendental Dialectic of *CPR*, he realises a fragment of this project, explaining how the structure of reason gives rise to the conflicts which define a major strand of the Western philosophical tradition, namely special metaphysics.

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<sup>155</sup> Karin de Boer identifies Kant as an early practitioner of 'immanent critique,' a practice which Hegel would later develop more fully. While a detailed discussion of this conception of immanent critique is not possible within the scope of this thesis, it is closely related to the idea that the positions of previous philosophers cannot simply be dismissed as errors, but must be explained from within the conceptual resources of one's own philosophical project. See Karin de Boer, (2012) 'Hegel's Conception of Immanent Critique: Its Sources, Extent and Limit' *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed by Karin de Boer and Ruth Sonderegger, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) p.83 ff.

## 2.10 Transcendental Illusion in CPR: Is the Dialectic Redundant?

Kant divides the Transcendental Logic of the *CPR* into a Transcendental Analytic and a Transcendental Dialectic. While the former gives an account of the categories of the understanding necessary for our cognition of actual objects of experience, the concepts of reason dealt with in the latter do not yield any actual knowledge concerning possible objects of experience. While the understanding has its legitimate use in its discursive exchange with sensibility, reason has no legitimate application to sensibility. Accordingly, Kant refers to the analytic as a ‘logic of truth’ (B87/A62), while dialectic, insofar it is applied in an attempt to expand our theoretical knowledge, is a ‘logic of illusion’ (B85-6/A60-62).

As such, it seems that the task of the dialectic is purely negative in a more radical sense than the remainder of the *CPR*. While the whole task of the *CPR* is negative, inasmuch as it seeks to circumscribe the limits of possible knowledge, dialectic seems to be concerned solely with a form of cognition which intrinsically transgresses the bounds of possible theoretical knowledge, such that it makes no positive contribution to our knowledge.<sup>156</sup> By contrast, in the analytic, by establishing the proper limits of the understanding, i.e. its dialogue with sensibility, Kant is able to establish principles for actual theoretical knowledge which proceed directly from the understanding.

This has led some critics to suggest that the dialectic is superfluous to the essential task of Kant’s *CPR*. In particular, it seems that, since the analytic has already established that the understanding is valid only insofar as it works in conjunction with sensibility, and the dialectic concerns a form of conceptual knowledge which never enters into direct relation with sensibility, the conclusions of the analytic alone are enough to prevent the errors which arise from dialectic. As Henry Allison puts it, ‘the lengthy critique of the pretensions of reason is frequently viewed as largely redundant, since much of the demolition of traditional metaphysics was already accomplished in the Analytic through the limitation of knowledge to possible experience.’<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> In fact, dialectic does in fact play a modest positive role, albeit at a purely subjective level. We discuss this in section 2.11 below.

<sup>157</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p.307. Both Allison and Grier provide a detailed overview of these

Bennett thus begins his book-length study of Kant's dialectic by casting doubt on the validity and value of the entire undertaking. It is worth dwelling briefly on Bennett's reading, since his underlying assumptions reflect a broader pattern of neglect of the dialectic of Kant's *CPR*, particularly within the analytic tradition—a tendency which in turn reflects a set of fundamental assumptions about the relation of philosophy to its own past. While Bennett finds certain arguments within the text to be of philosophical interest,<sup>158</sup> he considers the broader framework to be highly problematic, in as much he takes it to consist in a critique of errors which Kant alleges *must* arise according to the very structure of human cognition. Bennett claims that Kant does not 'seriously explain why there are just such and such metaphysical problems,' adding that it is simply 'Kant's undignified attempt to derive his choice of topics from the structure of human reason rather than the philosophical preoccupations then current in German universities.'<sup>159</sup>

To understand the value that Kant attributes to dialectic, we need only recall his account of error presented in the previous section of this chapter. There, we saw that for Kant, human cognition can never fall into absolute error. He argues that it is never enough to simply expose errors, but rather that we must take account of their origin.

Seen from this standpoint, it seems evident that Bennett remains attached to an essentially *Cartesian* conception of error. That is to say, his account implies that it should be enough to simply dismiss the errors of metaphysics, and begin again with a clean slate, much as Descartes had done. He is not committed to the Kantian thesis that thought does not produce absolute errors, nor does he recognise any obligation to explain the ground of the errors of the tradition. For Kant, on the other hand, it is not enough to simply expose the error; if his account of thought is to be consistent, he is obliged to explain *why* reason should go wrong in the way it does.

Particularly striking is Bennett's claim that in the dialectic, Kant simply inscribes the 'philosophical preoccupations' of his time into the structure of reason. It seems that for Bennett, the ideas that constitute the objects of the different branches of special metaphysics are little more than fictions which modern philosophy,

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skeptical responses to the dialectic. See *Ibid.*, p. 307ff., and Michelle Grier, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 4ff.

<sup>158</sup> Jonathan Bennett *Kant's Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 2.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

liberated from the prejudices of former ages, can simply leave behind—while ‘useful’ ideas from this tradition can be freely retained. By approaching the dialectic in this manner, Bennett exemplifies a form of the enlightenment ‘prejudice against prejudice’ discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>160</sup> For Bennett, the prejudices of former ages are mere errors which can be simply dismissed by contemporary philosophical method. The obligation to engage with these prejudices, or to take account of their origin in some manner, is simply alien to his philosophical orientation.

In this way, we can recognise Kant himself as a kind of early critic of the prejudice against prejudice, albeit within certain strict limits. For Kant, it is certainly not a matter of treating prejudice broadly conceived as a positive source of understanding, as Gadamer would later do. Instead, it amounts to the claim that a specific set of ‘prejudices’ which characterise the history of metaphysics are not simply contingent, and that this history is not a matter of entanglement in absolute error.<sup>161</sup> By contrast to Descartes, for Kant, it is not enough to simply put the prejudices of the tradition to one side; instead, if he is to account for the entanglement of the history of metaphysics in these illusions without appeal to the concept of absolute error, he must grant these prejudices a certain necessity, even as he seeks to banish them as legitimate objects of theoretical reason.<sup>162</sup>

As Sebastian Gardner puts it, ‘the dogmatic philosophers who have sought to describe reality have not selected their topics at random, nor are their doctrines arbitrary fabrications. Rather they give voice to convictions that are natural to human beings (above all, according to Kant: that there is a God, that our wills are free and that we have immortal souls.)’ As such, ‘[c]ritical philosophy must explain why transcendent speculation takes the particular forms that it does, and why we are disposed to form certain beliefs concerning transcendent reality, and it must resolve the conflicts that result therefrom.’<sup>163</sup>

Furthermore, if our account of the ‘posteriority’ of Kantian critique in part one of this chapter is correct, it would seem that these prejudices are indeed a kind of precondition of reason’s capacity to give a reflexive account of itself. For it is only

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<sup>160</sup> See section 1.3 above.

<sup>161</sup> Indeed, in the following, we will see below that the specific prejudices associated with special metaphysics, the ideas of reason, play a positive role in human knowing.

<sup>162</sup> Of course, in the context of practical philosophy, these ideas are clearly no mere prejudices. For Kant, they become prejudices only insofar as they are posited as objects of theoretical reason.

<sup>163</sup> Sebastian Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 137.

by examining the disputes of the philosophical tradition that the limits of reason first come into view.

At this juncture, it is worth recalling Heidegger's claim concerning the logic of error cited in the introduction to this thesis. Heidegger writes: 'We have no logic of error, no real clarification of its essence, because we always take error as negative. This is the fundamental error that dominates the entire history of the concept of truth.'<sup>164</sup> We suggested that for Heidegger, it is this lack of a positive understanding of error which has prevented the tradition from raising the question of the history of being. As we shall see in chapter four, the key to his own account of *Seinsgeschichte* is a rehabilitation of the concept of error, which makes of it an irreducible moment of truth.

Kant's dialectic is not quite a 'logic of error' of the kind Heidegger envisages, but rather a logic of *illusion* as the *ground of error*. We consider the nature and significance of this difference in more detail below. Nonetheless, Kant's attempt to ground error in the dialectic means that, unlike Descartes, he is able to account for the historicity of thought at the level of his first philosophy. This confirms our claim in the introduction that the capacity of a philosophical system to take account of its own place within the history of thought is reflected in its attitude toward error. It also demonstrates that, contrary to Heidegger's claim, the question of error has not simply been neglected throughout the Western philosophical tradition; nor is his own account of historicity in terms of a form of irreducible errancy without important precursors within the tradition. Kant's dialectic presents us with something closely resembling Heidegger's absent 'logic of error,' and brings with it a turn towards the integration of historicity at the level of first philosophy, albeit within strict limits.

We turn now to the text of the dialectic itself, in order show how Kant's 'logic of illusion' reflects his account of the place of critique within the broader history of philosophy.

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<sup>164</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 177.

## 2.11 Reason as a Source of Concepts (The Transcendental Ideas)

Kant's Transcendental Dialectic introduces a third faculty of human cognition, reason, in addition to those of sensibility and the understanding, treated in the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Transcendental Analytic respectively. Kant defines reason as the highest faculty, in as much as 'all our cognition starts from the senses, goes from there to the understanding, and ends with reason, beyond which there is nothing higher to be found in us to work on the matter of intuition and bring it under the highest unity of thinking.'<sup>165</sup>

Reason thus stands in a relation to the understanding analogous to the relation of understanding to sensibility. If the understanding introduces conceptual unity to the manifold of sensibility, reason serves to bring the manifold of the understanding under systematic unity (B671/A643 ff). In doing so, like the understanding, it follows its own intrinsic principles, which are unique to it.

Reason fulfils this task by means of the logical function of syllogistic reasoning.<sup>166</sup> As Sebastian Gardner defines it, 'syllogistic reasoning is concerned with the general conditions under which one piece of knowledge follows from another; as when 'all men are mortal' provides the condition under which the mortality of a particular man, Socrates, may be inferred from Socrates' being a man.'<sup>167</sup>

Gardner notes that alongside this 'descending' function of reason, Kant also posits an 'ascending' function.<sup>168</sup> The 'descending' function provides the mediating premise or middle term of a syllogism which allows for one piece of knowledge to be inferred from another. Yet reason is not content to remain here. As Allison puts it, 'the unifying process does not cease with the subsumption of a given cognition under a universal rule by means of a mediating premise;' rather, 'the rule itself requires its rational grounding, which it can receive only by being derived from a higher

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<sup>165</sup> CPR, A298/B355.

<sup>166</sup> A299/B355

<sup>167</sup> Sebastian Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 140-1.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

principle, and so forth.’<sup>169</sup> For every mediating premise, reason compels us to seek out the conditions of this premise, in a series of ‘ascending’ prosyllogisms.

Yet nor is reason content to simply posit an endless chain of such ascending prosyllogisms. Instead, it assumes that for any conditioned sequence, it must be possible to find the *totality of conditions*. In Kant’s words, reason obeys the maxim to ‘find the unconditioned for the conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed.’<sup>170</sup> As Allison notes, this maxim can be considered to be the ‘supreme principle’ of reason.<sup>171</sup>

In seeking out the unconditioned, reason clearly oversteps the bounds of possible experience. While the different conditions in a series of prosyllogisms can be confirmed in experience, the totality of this series can never be given. To take an example, a causal chain of events can be given at the level of experience. The application of the concept of causality is legitimate here, having been established as an a priori condition of sensible experience. Yet reason goes a step further in positing the *world* as the total causal chain of events. Yet even though reason compels us to deduce this totality—since we are compelled to assume that this causal chain cannot go on indefinitely, but must rather have some ultimate origin<sup>172</sup>—this deduction remains illegitimate, since the world itself can never be given as an object of experience.

In spite of this, Kant claims that this task of introducing unity to the manifold of the understanding by seeking out the unconditioned is legitimate so long as it is limited within subjective bounds. Indeed, Kant devotes the ‘appendix’ of the dialectic to an account of the ‘regulative’ use of reason.<sup>173</sup> Here, Kant argues that the imperative to seek out the unconditioned functions to introduce systematic unity to our knowledge. This unity is merely a *projected* unity, i.e. one toward which reason strives, as its normative principle, even as it is intrinsically unobtainable.<sup>174</sup> It thus

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<sup>169</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 311.

<sup>170</sup> CPR, A307/B364.

<sup>171</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p.312.

<sup>172</sup> In fact, reason compels us to assume *both* that such causal chains go on indefinitely, and that they do not. It is this tension which gives rise to the *antinomies* of pure reason.

<sup>173</sup> CPR, A642/B670 ff.

<sup>174</sup> CPR, A647/B675.



functions solely to bring order to our knowledge, allowing us to unite them into an (always open-ended and incomplete) system.

However, alongside this legitimate, regulative use, the compulsion to find the unconditioned for any sequence of conditions also means that reason functions as a unique source of concepts. Kant refers to these concepts as *ideas*.<sup>175</sup> They are distinct from the concepts of the understanding, in that they have no legitimate application to objects of possible experience. Indeed, the objects to which they refer cannot ever be given in experience, but instead are purely products of reason's own intrinsic imperative to search for the unconditioned for any sequence of conditions.

According to Kant, there are three such transcendental ideas—that is, ideas which have their origin *a priori* in the faculty of human reason: the soul, the world and God. Kant deduces the ideas of reason from the forms of syllogism. He notes that this runs parallel to his 'metaphysical deduction' of the categories of the understanding from the forms of judgement.<sup>176</sup> Allison notes that this deduction is perhaps the worst received doctrine in the entirety of the *CPR*. Both Allison and Grier<sup>177</sup> mount a detailed defence of the plausibility of this deduction; a more detailed treatment of their arguments lies beyond the scope of this thesis. It should be clarified, however, that Kant does not simply claim that to make use of syllogistic reasoning automatically implies appealing to the transcendental ideas—i.e. that to make use of syllogistic logic in some sense entails appealing to the ideas of the soul, the world and God. Rather, as Allison notes, Kant merely claims that it is 'one and the same function (seeking the totality of conditions for a given unconditioned) that is operative in both syllogistic reasoning and the metaphysical reasoning leading to the transcendental ideas as distinct concepts of the unconditioned.'<sup>178</sup> Similarly, Grier concludes that 'to say that the ideas are derived from the forms of syllogism is to say merely that they are the ways of determining a particular through universal concepts

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<sup>175</sup> *CPR* A312/B368 ff. Kant adopts the name from Plato, on the basis that Plato's ideas precisely transcend all possible experience.

<sup>176</sup> A323/B379; Cf. Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 313.

<sup>177</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p.314ff; Michelle Grier, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 133 ff.

<sup>178</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 314-5.

(rules) entailed in categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive judgements, respectively.’<sup>179</sup>

The logical rules associated with each of these three forms of syllogism each give rise to an idea—the categorical syllogism gives rise to the idea of the soul; the hypothetical to the idea of the world, and disjunctive to the idea of God. Kant notes at this point that each of these ideas is the object of a particular discipline from the history of philosophy—namely *psychologia rationalis*, *cosmologia rationalis* and *theologica transcendentalis*.<sup>180</sup> These three disciplines make up the traditional discipline of *special metaphysics*, in contrast with general metaphysics, i.e. ontology. The distinction dates back to Aristotle, though Kant seems to have followed Wolff’s division of special metaphysics into precisely these three disciplines.<sup>181</sup>

Grier notes that Kant’s dialectic thus offers ‘an account of the ultimate source of the disciplines of special metaphysics.’<sup>182</sup> Kant treats these three disciplines of special metaphysics in the Paralogisms of Pure Reason, the Antinomy of Pure Reason, and the Ideal of Pure Reason respectively. In each of these chapters, Kant is concerned to demonstrate how the *illusions* which motivate each of these disciplines arise naturally from reason, while equally dispelling the *errors* which follow from them. The errors arise because the disciplines treat the ideas of reason as actual objects. In Kant’s terminology, they ‘hypostatize’ the ideas.<sup>183</sup>

As such, Kant derives the objects of the three disciplines of special metaphysics *a priori* from the very nature of reason. For Kant, these disciplines are all examples of dogmatic metaphysics, i.e. of an extension of reason beyond the realm of possible experience. Significantly, Kant’s account of their origin in pure reason allows him to consider these disciplines, and the place they occupy in the history of metaphysics, to be no mere contingent inventions of individual

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<sup>179</sup> Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 136.

<sup>180</sup> CPR, A334-5/B391-2.

<sup>181</sup> Lucas Thorpe, *The Kant Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 225.

<sup>182</sup> Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 118.

<sup>183</sup> See e.g. CPR A384. Kant claims that this hypostatization of the ideas follows from the erroneous assumptions of a position he calls ‘transcendental realism,’ which takes the subjective conditions of space and time to apply independently of our sensibility. See CPR A369, and Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 98 ff.

philosophers. Instead, in developing these disciplines, the tradition was following the imperatives of reason itself.

Kant refers to the ideas which function as the objects of the disciplines of special metaphysics as *transcendental illusions*. In order to understand their precise place in Kant's system, as well as the function they play in explaining thought's historicity, we need to examine Kant's definition of illusion in more detail. In particular, we need to understand why for Kant, the illusions are necessary, even if the associated metaphysical errors are not, and furthermore to consider what implications this has for the relation between Kantian critique and the history of philosophy.

## 2.12 Reason as the Seat of Transcendental Illusion

Kant's account of the positive, 'regulative' task of reason occupies a minor place within the *CPR*, confined largely to the appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic.<sup>184</sup> He opens the Dialectic with an account of reason as a *source of illusion*; and it will be his primary task throughout the remainder of the dialectic to dispel the associated errors.

As already noted, the ideas are illusory precisely because, although they seem to be actual, they refer to objects which fall beyond the realm of possible experience. Nonetheless, as we saw above, this seems to be analogous to the application of the categories of the understanding beyond the realm of experience. What is distinctive about the concepts of reason such that Kant singles out reason as the 'seat of illusion?'<sup>185</sup>

In the opening section of the dialectic, Kant notes that the hypostatization of the ideas differs from the 'transcendental employment' of the categories beyond the bounds of experience. The ideas are different from the categories of the understanding, in that they do not merely *admit* of illicit use beyond the realm of experience; rather, they *actively invoke* us to transgress these boundaries.<sup>186</sup> Reason

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<sup>184</sup> *CPR* A642/B670 ff.)

<sup>185</sup> In fact, in the chapter on 'Phenomena and Noumena,' Kant suggests that the understanding, too, can be a source of a kind of illusion or 'deception' [*Täuschung*]. See *CPR* B305.

<sup>186</sup> Cf. Michelle Grier, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.114.

is thus the source of what Kant calls ‘*transcendent* principles,’ that is, principles which actively compel us to transgress the limits of experience.<sup>187</sup> Kant writes:

We will call the principles whose application stays wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience immanent, but those that would fly beyond these boundaries’ transcendent principles. But by the latter I do not understand the transcendental use or misuse of categories, which is a mere mistake of the faculty of judgment when it is not properly checked by criticism, and thus does not attend enough to the boundaries of the territory in which alone the pure understanding is allowed its play; rather, I mean principles that actually incite us to tear down all those boundary posts and to lay claim to a wholly new territory that recognizes no demarcations anywhere. Hence transcendental and transcendent are not the same. The principles of pure understanding we presented above should be only of empirical and not of transcendental use, i.e., of a use that reaches out beyond the boundaries of experience. But a principle that takes away these limits, which indeed bids us to overstep them, is called transcendent.<sup>188</sup>

As such, while the categories of the understanding *admit* of an application beyond the realm of experience, there is no ‘rule’ immanent to the understanding which compels us to their transcendental application. By contrast, reason itself compels us to stray beyond the bounds of experience, and hypostatize the ideas. As Grier puts it, ‘the demand for the systematic unity of thought is necessarily conceived by reason as a transcendental principle which is objective.’ She thus notes that we *cannot help but* treat the demand for the unconditioned as objective.<sup>189</sup>

This has important consequences. Firstly, inasmuch as these illusions follow necessarily from the structure of reason, which *actively compels* us to seek an objective correlate to the ideas, they do not first arise as products of our *misuse* of the faculty of reason. Indeed, Kant claims that the ideas ‘are sophistries not of human beings but of pure reason itself,’ adding that ‘even the wisest of all human beings cannot get free of them; perhaps after much effort he may guard himself from error, but he can never be wholly rid of the illusion, which ceaselessly teases and mocks

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<sup>187</sup> CPR A296/B353.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 121.

him.<sup>190</sup> The illusions are thus not simply contingent, nor the product of some failing on our part; instead, they are irreducible features of our cognitive capacities.

It is for this reason that Kant identifies reason as ‘the seat of transcendental illusion.’<sup>191</sup> It gives rise to illusions because it positively bids us to treat merely subjective principles as objective, and thus to posit the ideas as actual objective entities.

As such, the dogmatic disciplines of special metaphysics are not the mere contingent invention of individual philosophers. The ‘endless disputes’ of the tradition are not merely a product of human error in the Cartesian sense—a contingent wandering of human thought through a shadowy realm of error which might just as well never have taken place. We saw in the first part of this chapter that Kant claims this history is inscribed in the very nature of human cognition; his account of dialectical illusion shows how this claim is integrated into his project at the level of first philosophy.

### **2.13 Is Reason a ‘Faculty for Committing Errors?’**

The idea of reason as a ‘seat of illusion’ seems to draw us very near to the ‘faculty for committing errors’ which Descartes introduced in a purely rhetorical mode in his fourth meditation.<sup>192</sup> This would seem to contradict Kant’s commitment to the idea that the faculties are fundamentally oriented toward truth, and cannot in and of themselves give rise to errors.

Nonetheless, in spite of the necessity of these illusions, Kant stops short of identifying reason as a source of necessary error. Michelle Grier claims that this is one of the most frequent misunderstandings of Kant’s dialectic.<sup>193</sup> While the illusions are necessary, and persist even once they have been exposed, nothing makes the associated *errors* necessary. Kant identifies illusion as the ground of error. By exposing this ground, we can explain how special metaphysics came to fall into the errors it did, without however necessarily succumbing to the same errors ourselves.

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<sup>190</sup> CPR A339/B397.

<sup>191</sup> CPR A298/B355.

<sup>192</sup> See section 1.6 above.

<sup>193</sup> Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 4ff.

Even as the illusion persists, we need not err further once the ground of illusion in reason has been exposed by critique.

Kant uses an analogy borrowed from astronomy. He notes that the moon appears to be larger when it is rising. The astronomer knows that the moon is in fact constant in size, and can explain the perspectival illusion which makes it appear otherwise. Nonetheless, in spite of her knowing better, the astronomer cannot prevent the moon from *appearing* to be larger to her senses (B354). She is no longer ‘deceived’ by the illusion; and yet it persists in its *seeming* to be so. Her vision is doubled, at once perceiving the illusion and understanding the science which contradicts and explains it. Even as she assents solely to the latter, dismissing the truth value of the former, so nonetheless, she cannot dispel its hold on her altogether.

It is by way of a reassessment of such illusions, the ground of our errors, that Kant comes to inscribe the historicity of thought into the very structure of reason. By redefining illusion not as a mere excess over reason, but rather as a product of reason *in its proper functioning*, Kant is able to ascribe a new necessity to the ideas of special metaphysics. At the same time, by maintaining that the associated errors are not necessary, he is also able to retain his commitment to the theory that the faculties do not in and of themselves generate errors. This also allows him to maintain that this history can be brought to an end by means of the critical method.

It is worth emphasizing the radicality of Kant’s notion of illusion. To appreciate this, we need only consider how we ordinarily understand the term. Within the Western philosophical tradition, it has largely been understood as that which *obscures* truth. Furthermore, it is something which, on being recognised for what it is, *gives way* to truth. To get to grips with an illusion is precisely to ‘see through’ it, and to rob it of its power to deceive. For the majority of the tradition, illusion is something to be overcome; once overcome, it need no longer be of further concern to us.<sup>194</sup> This ‘will-to-overcome’ is inscribed in our very definition of illusion. Rarely do we ask after its origin, or consider it in terms of its necessity, since, when it is thought against the horizon of the goal of insight into truth, our task is always its dissolution.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, it is generally by means of *reason* (in the

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<sup>194</sup> Nietzsche is a kind of exception here, insofar as he claims illusions can only be replaced with further illusions.

<sup>195</sup> Heidegger thus notes that for the vast majority of the philosophical tradition, untruth has always been treated as ‘what is to be cleared away [das zu Beseitigende];’ see CP p. 277 / GA 65 p. 350.

broadest sense) that illusion is to be overcome. The idea of an illusion which is not dissolved through reason, but rather positively *follows* from the nature of reason, is thus a highly distinctive feature of Kant's critical project.

Kant's understanding of illusion remains traditional in the sense that he ultimately treats the errors it gives rise to as something to be overcome. Nonetheless, his claim that these illusions follow necessarily from the structure of reason, such that philosophy is obliged to take account of them, constitutes a significant deviation. Why do these illusions persist? And, even granted that they do, why does Kant go to such lengths to ground them when they are, after all, *nothing but illusions*? This is precisely the point at which many commentators find the motivation behind Kant's undertaking obscure.

Within Kant's broader system, we can offer up various answers to this question. As we have seen above, the ideas are made necessary by reason's search for totality, independent of any 'use' to which we may put them. Furthermore, they fulfil a legitimate subjective role in providing unity to our discourse. Finally, even where they violate the strictures of theoretical reason, the ideas of reason play an irreducible role in practical reason.<sup>196</sup>

For our purposes, however, what is significant is how this doctrine of necessary illusion relates to the question of the relation between critique and the history of special metaphysics. For Kant is able not only to prevent future errors; he is also able to explain the particular errors that have dogged the metaphysical tradition.

## **2.14 Conclusion to Chapter Two: Belatedness, Posteriority and Ultimacy Revisited**

We have seen in the above that Kant's notion of transcendental illusion as the ground of error allows him to explain certain moments from the history of philosophy. He is able both to give a plausible account of why his own method was delayed in its

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<sup>196</sup> Deleuze thus suggests that transcendental illusion is merely a matter of a 'shadow' of the 'higher interest' of practical reason cast over theoretical philosophy. See Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties* (London: Continuum, 1984), p. 27.

arrival, and to account for a certain necessity running through the history of special metaphysics.

Nonetheless, the limits of his approach are equally apparent. It is clear that Kant did not recognise any obligation to engage in a reading of the tradition writ large. Even as he proposes the possibility of a ‘history of reason,’ both in the closing chapters of *CPR* and in the posthumous writings, he never carries out this project. Furthermore, it seems that, unlike the account of special metaphysics in *CPR*, any such project would constitute a mere supplement to Kant’s thought, rather than an integral moment within his first philosophy.

Let us return to the questions we asked at the outset of the introduction: Does raising a philosophical question entail an engagement with the history of this question? In Kant’s case, we can answer this question in the affirmative. The very project of critique presupposes the ‘dead ends’ of rationalist metaphysics and skepticism before it can get underway. An undertaking such as the Dialectic of *CPR* would not be possible without reference to this history. Special metaphysics is not considered to be a merely contingent product of human errancy, but rather a necessary stage in the development of the critical method.

In spite of this, it is worth casting a critical glance over the success of Kant’s explanation of this delay. It remains to be seen whether it is truly sufficient to explain the ‘incubation time’ of Kant’s critical project. Does transcendental illusion provide us with the resources to explain why metaphysics should for so long have strayed from its true path?

We saw in the previous section that while transcendental illusion is unavoidable, the associated errors are not. Indeed, we argued that were these errors necessary, Kant could no longer defend his thesis that the human faculties tend naturally toward truth; reason would be a ‘faculty for committing errors,’ and would thus ultimately be deceptive.

Grier writes: ‘although the illusions that ground the metaphysical errors are, in each case, “unavoidable,” and “necessary,” the subsequent errors (fallacies) are not.’<sup>197</sup> Grier writes in the present tense here. The conclusion she draws is in

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<sup>197</sup> Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 304



complete accord with Kant's text. Nonetheless, we can put a slightly different question to Kant's text: is it necessary that we *should ever have* been deceived?

As we saw above, Kant's *external* account of the place of critique in the history of philosophy suggests that this is indeed necessary. He argues that reason first had to pass through the stages of dogmatism and skepticism in order that the limitations of reason come into view; only then is the critical path opened. In part two, however, we set out solely to investigate whether Kant's *a priori* account of human cognition has the conceptual resources necessary to support this argument. We must thus ask: is Kant able to ground the necessity of these errors a priori in the structure of human cognition? Is there anything about the structure of the human faculties that prevents us from seeing illusion for what it is from the very beginning? Is there any reason that the 'incubation period' of metaphysics should have lasted many centuries, rather than a decade, or perhaps even no time at all? In Kant's 'external' account of the place of critique within the broader tradition, he was able to switch freely between tenses. Yet the question strains against the grammar of the *CPR* itself, a text whose logic is bound to the present tense.

The ambiguity is heightened in the light of a footnote to the introduction to the *CPR*, which seems to contradict his claims in the *Progress* essay that the history of metaphysics was a necessary precursor to critique. In the passage in question, Kant has just introduced the question concerning the possibility of synthetic judgements *a priori*. In the footnote, he writes: 'If it had occurred to one of the ancients even to raise this question, this alone would have offered powerful resistance to all the systems of pure reason down to our own times, and would have spared us so many vain attempts that were blindly undertaken without knowledge of what was really at issue.'<sup>198</sup>

Here, Kant seems to suggest that nothing need have prevented the Greeks from raising this question; and that, had they done so, a good deal of the history of metaphysics might have been circumvented. To be sure, this does not imply that the *entire* history of metaphysics was simply superfluous. And yet it exposes the limitations of Kant's approach to explaining the delays of the history of philosophy; for it suggests that, *but for the lack of the right method*, we might after all have been

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<sup>198</sup> CPR A10/B23.

spared many of the delays which characterise the history of philosophy. There is nothing ‘positive’ to this passage through history, as it amounts to nothing more than the overcoming of a shortfall. As such, had we been handed the key in advance, we need never have passed through it. Here, as we will see, Kant differs substantially from Hegel.

This ultimately suggests that the arrival of the critical method is poised somewhere between *belatedness* and *posteriority*. Even as Kant maintains that the passage through metaphysics was necessary before critique was possible, this passage serves only to bring us to the correct starting point, such that it can be safely bracketed off as a mere errant past.

It is perhaps this limitation of Kant’s approach which John Sallis has in mind, when he writes (in stark contrast to the claims of Yovel and Henrich cited above):

not even that concealment that has rendered metaphysics a battleground of endless controversies (A viii) is intrinsically necessary; it is merely the consequence of the fact that “the common principle” had not previously been discovered—sheerest accident astray at the very source of all necessity.<sup>199</sup>

Sallis follows these comments with the following remark:

It is almost as though the history of metaphysics ought not to have been, as though it were, at most, the passage of reason through childhood. Having now reached the maturity marked by the inception of critique, reason would establish its own self-possession beyond the reach of any radical crisis.<sup>200</sup>

Sallis is surely correct to note the extremely limited scope of the historicity of Kant’s project. Regardless of the ambiguity as to whether the errors associated with illusion are ever strictly necessary—which sees critique ultimately suspended between belatedness and posteriority—it is clear that for Kant, historicity is a feature of thought in its immaturity. This makes of the history of metaphysics a kind of ‘childhood of reason.’ Certainly, this passage through childhood is necessary. Yet once thought has attained to ‘maturity,’ it becomes irrelevant.

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<sup>199</sup> John Sallis, *The Gathering of Reason*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Furthermore, much like Cartesian method, Kantian critique is the ‘ultimate’ philosophy, bringing the history of thought to a close. The historicity of thought is thus not an enduring feature of reason, but at most a product of its immaturity, its childhood—and one that is simply cancelled as soon as the critical method puts metaphysics onto its royal road.

## **2.15 Intermezzo: The Economy of Cognition and the Economy of Truth**

We have seen that Kant claims that reason produces necessary illusions. While these illusions are necessarily generated by reason, they have only limited value at the level of theoretical philosophy, inasmuch as they have no legitimate application to objects of experience. Once we have identified their transcendental origin, we need only guard ourselves against succumbing to the associated errors. The ideas of reason continue to play an important regulative role, enabling us to expand our objective knowledge of the empirical regularities of nature. The content of the history to which they give rise, however, is simply left behind. It is by means of this ‘excess’ of reason over truth that Kant is able to give an account of a necessary history of philosophy. He maintains that it is only after human thought has fallen into the mistakes of dogmatic metaphysics that critique can intervene, giving an account of the proper limits of human reason.

Given this necessity of illusion at the level of reason, and its lack of truth value, we can draw the following conclusion: for Kant, the *economy of human cognition* [*Erkenntnis*] is distinct from the *economy of truth*. That is to say, human cognition, whose goal is the attainment of truth, intrinsically produces moments in excess of truth under conditions of its own normal, correct operation.<sup>201</sup> To explain this more fully, it will be helpful to once more draw a comparison with Descartes. Recall that for Descartes, the intellect was a faculty of pure insight. So long as the will did not overstep its bounds by reaching judgements in the absence of intellectual insight, there was no reason why human cognition should ever stray from truth.

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<sup>201</sup> Again, it is important to emphasize that we are concerned here solely with the economy of ‘theoretical’ truth for Kant. It is clear that one of Kant’s reasons for restricting theoretical knowledge was to make way for a different form of knowing, i.e. practical reason, within which the ideas of reason play an important part. Yet this does nothing to alter the fact that for Kant, the history of special metaphysics is precisely a product of the excess of reason over ‘theoretical’ truth.

Properly employed, the human intellect admits of the same univocity as truth. For Descartes, *the errors of the history of philosophy have their origin beyond both truth and beyond the proper economy of human cognition*. As such, we can say that for Descartes, the economies of cognition and truth simply coincide; any error must be explained by appeal to some element which falls beyond the bounds of cognition. They are a natural feature neither of the economy of truth, nor of the human faculties.

By contrast, in Kant, the correct functioning of the faculties, which together make up the economy of human cognition, is not alone enough to guarantee the truth of their conclusions. Unlike for Descartes, the fact that the structure of human cognition necessarily compels us to a certain conclusion does not entail the *truth* of this conclusion. Instead, critique is first necessary to delimit the legitimate usage of reason. In the absence of critique, human cognition necessarily tends to fall into the ‘errors’ associated with the misapplication of reason, thus generating moments entirely superfluous to truth.

Irrlitz captures the import of this distinction well when he writes that for Kant, ‘false theories do not arise from faulty thinking, but rather from the innocence of our predisposition for metaphysics. To look at the world and ourselves directly means to see them falsely.’<sup>202</sup> This predisposition for metaphysics is a product of the economy of human cognition not in its faulty usage, but precisely in its correct operation. If we attempt to explain the world beginning from the natural vantage point of human cognition, we necessarily become entangled in illusion. The task of critique is to identify the law of this distortion, and so to render it neutral, even as the distortion persists.

We can thus define the errors associated with transcendental illusion as a *necessary moment of the economy of cognition*, which nonetheless has no objective place in the *economy of truth*. Transcendental illusion persists even after its falsity has been revealed precisely because it is an irreducible feature of the natural economy of human cognition. The task of the first critique is precisely to make explicit the gap between the two economies. That is to say, Kant wishes to prevent human cognition from simply circulating between the poles of the contradictions which are intrinsic to its own natural economy, and restrict its usage in such a way

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<sup>202</sup> Gerd Irrlitz, *Kant Handbuch: Leben und Werk, 2nd Edition (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2010)*, p. 239, my translation.

that it attains to the univocity proper to truth.<sup>203</sup> Even as the illusions of reason can never be dispelled entirely, we can guard against succumbing to the error of treating the associated illusions as necessary moments in the economy of truth.

*It is in this disjunction between the economies of human cognition and truth that Kant locates the origin of the historicity of thought.* The history of special metaphysics unfolds in this space, generated by the natural inclinations of the faculties of human cognition. The necessary moments of the history of special metaphysics can thus be deduced by accounting for the precise way in which the economy of human cognition deviates from the economy of truth. The ‘errors’ into which it falls are thus far from contingent, but rather follow from a failure to reflect on this disjunction between truth and reason.

It is worth dwelling on this distinction further here, as it will play a major role in the remainder of this thesis. Indeed, it is possible to situate all of the thinkers considered in this thesis schematically in terms of this distinction. Furthermore, in each case, this distinction is crucial to their account of the ground of thought’s historicity.

We have already located Descartes and Kant in terms of this distinction. In the next two chapters, we will see that Hegel once more posits the *identity* of the two economies. However, his position is distinct from Descartes,’ precisely because he *introduces the mediations and contradictions immanent to the economy of human cognition into the economy of truth itself.* He thus does not return to the idea of a static, self-identical economy of truth; rather, he claims that reason, with its intrinsic differences and contradictions, reflects a series of mediations *at the level of truth itself.*<sup>204</sup> This mediation, which Hegel calls negativity, accounts for the historicity of reason as a necessary product of the nature of truth. As we shall see, this coincidence of the dynamic economies of truth and reason accounts for the fact that Hegel is the only thinker in this thesis who rejects explanations of historicity in terms of error.

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<sup>203</sup> Again, it is important to emphasize that this applies only at the level of theoretical philosophy; the ideas play a legitimate role at the level of practical reason.

<sup>204</sup> As such, we reject ‘transcendental’ readings of Hegel, exemplified by Pippin’s classic study *Hegel’s Idealism*, as well as various pragmatist readings, which are premised on a similar distinction between reason and truth to the one we find in Kant. We claim that Hegel’s account of the historicity of thought gives us reason to reject such transcendental readings. When we refer to the ‘ontological’ nature of Hegel’s thought, it is this we have in mind. See Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

Finally, for Heidegger, the economy of truth is dynamic, yet in such a way that it *exceeds the economy of reason*. The history of being precisely exceeds the grasp of human thought conceived as reason, without thereby entailing that it cannot be thought at all. As we shall see, a whole chain of Heideggerian terminology, including the notions of *Abgrund* (abyss or un-ground) and *Verbergung* (concealment) can be understood as his attempt to render this excess of truth over reason explicit. The history of being means that truth is historical in a way which cannot be reduced to the dynamism of reason, but rather requires a different mode of thinking. For Heidegger, ‘untruth’ no longer names a falling short of truth, but rather, the *surplus of truth over the economy of thought*. It is this excess which gives rise to the history of being; and it is in as much as modern human beings fall deeper and deeper into a relation to truth founded solely on the reason of the thinking subject that this history threatens to draw to a close.

This overview is purely schematic, and will need to be justified in the chapters to follow. Nonetheless, it serves as a point of orientation, and helps make explicit how Kant relates to the other thinkers considered in this thesis. We have reached a point at which the different potential relations between ‘first philosophy’ and the history of the discipline have begun to take on definite conceptual shape, centred around the disjunction between thought and truth, and the place of error in relation to these economies.

As such, both Descartes and Kant can be said to ground historical difference in a form of *epistemological difference*—that is to say, in the tendency of human thought to fall short of truth. Philosophy has a history precisely because of thought’s tendency towards *error*, an excess over truth generated by the faulty application of the faculties. The differences proper to the history of philosophy thus ultimately have an epistemological ground.

By contrast, we will see that for Hegel and Heidegger, historical difference is grounded in forms of difference immanent to truth itself.

Let us return briefly to Kant. In the light of his distinction between the natural economy of human cognition and the economy of truth, it seems that, in spite of all the differences separating Kant from Descartes, Derrida’s formulation regarding the metaphysical attitude toward history remains valid for Kant: thought has a history

insofar as it errs, i.e. in its distance from truth.<sup>205</sup> For Descartes, this tendency towards error is not made necessary by the nature of thought itself, but arises from ‘our’ misuse of thought. By contrast, Kant takes it that these errors arise as a result of the *natural* tendencies of our faculties. Nonetheless, they concur that, once these errors have been overcome, the history of errancy preceding their own projects ceases to be of ongoing philosophical relevance. Philosophy’s past has no positive content, serving ultimately only as a cautionary tale about the limits of human cognition.

This underlying agreement should not serve to conceal the differences between the two. The conceptual apparatus of transcendental illusion allows Kant to insert critique into history in a far more sophisticated manner than was available to Descartes. Yet ultimately, this history remains the product of the shortfall of the economy of reason from that of truth. Even as the economy of reason will have made the illusions of special metaphysics *necessary*, the task of method remains that of dispelling the associated errors—and so putting an end to the errant history of metaphysics once and for all.

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<sup>205</sup> See section 0.3 above.

## Chapter Three. Hegel's Onto-logical History of Philosophy

### 3.1 Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis, we noted that Hegel constitutes an exception to our core thesis: namely, that the relation of first philosophy to its history is reflected in the concept of *error*. By contrast to both Descartes and Kant, Hegel understands thought's historicity not as evidence of its errancy, but rather as a consequence of a development intrinsic to the economy of truth.

In the first part of this chapter, we begin with an account of Hegel's critique of the idea of understanding the history of philosophy simply in terms of the opinions or errors of the great thinkers of the past. In the *Differenzschrift*, he defends a variant of the doctrine of *historia sapientiae*: the idea that the history of reason is a manifestation of mankind's eternal reason. Nonetheless, at this stage in his development, Hegel had no way of accounting for historical difference: the contradictions between different historical philosophical systems, nor for the incubation period of his own system.

We then show that Hegel set out to respond to this problem in his mature system in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. While these lectures have been relatively neglected in the reception of Hegel's thought, we suggest that they constitute an essential part of his philosophical system. In the lectures, Hegel suggests that the development of the history of philosophy runs parallel to the immanent development of the idea in his *Science of Logic*.

In part two, we turn to an assessment of this claim. We show that Hegel's idea of a correspondence between his *Logic* and the *VGP* can be understood as an extension and radicalization of Kant's grounding of the history of special metaphysics in the Dialectic of the *CPR*.

We will see that, while this allows Hegel to account for historical difference without appeal to the concept of error, his account of incubation ultimately sees him revert to the idea that thought's historicity is the result of an epistemological shortfall—thus invoking the epistemological difference as the ground of historicity. While Hegel's account remains consistent on its own terms, this ultimately means



that he does not escape the association between historicity and epistemological shortfall.

## **Part One: Hegel's Project of a Philosophical History of Philosophy**

### **3.2 Prelude: History in the *Differenzschrift***

From his earliest works onwards, Hegel was critical of any strict separation between first philosophy and the history of philosophy. In the opening pages of his early Jena era essay *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's Systems of Philosophy*, the so-called *Differenzschrift*, he develops a critique of what he calls the 'historical view of philosophical systems.'<sup>206</sup> By this, he understands an approach to philosophy's history which disregards the truth value of past systems, instead treating them as a succession of 'opinions' to be categorized and collected in the manner of a contingent series of historical artefacts. While this satisfies a certain curiosity on the part of the collector, it ultimately destroys what is 'living' in a philosophical system, by fully disregarding its relation to truth. While noting that all philosophies are susceptible to being treated in this manner, Hegel suggests that the 'spirit' immanent to any given philosophical system will only reveal itself to the 'kindred spirit' [*verwandter Geist*] of another philosopher engaged in the search for truth.<sup>207</sup>

Hegel notes that an alternative to the sheer indifference to truth can be found in Reinhold's approach to the history of philosophy. He claims that for Reinhold, the study of the 'idiosyncratic' views of past philosophers constitutes a kind of invaluable 'preliminary exercise' [*Vorübung*] for philosophy. By exposing the limits of these earlier philosophical systems, we may hope to improve on them, and thus to finally succeed where they had failed. In contrast to the sheer indifference of the historian, Reinhold thus envisages the history of philosophy as a kind of 'useful,' indeed perhaps indispensable resource for contemporary philosophy.

Nonetheless, Hegel is once again critical of this approach. The precise details of his critique are worth examining, as they reveal a great deal about the radicality of

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<sup>206</sup> DS, p. 80.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

his own position. Hegel caricatures Reinhold's position by suggesting that he treats philosophy as a kind of 'handicraft.' He writes:

As can be seen, the project of such an investigation presupposes an image of philosophy as a handicraft, something that can be improved by newly invented turns of skill [*Handgriffe*]. Each new invention presupposes acquaintance with the turns already in use and with the purposes they serve; but after all the improvements made so far, the principal task remains. Reinhold evidently seems to think of this task as the finding of a universally valid and ultimate turn of skill [*ein allgemeingültiger letzter Handgriff*] such that the work completes itself automatically for anyone who can get acquainted with it.<sup>208</sup>

Hegel argues that Reinhold views philosophy as a kind of 'handicraft' whose 'turns of skill' or techniques [*Handgriffe*] are gradually improved over time. Knowledge of prior philosophy can help us to improve this technique; yet ultimately, those familiar with the latest techniques are always better equipped to deal with philosophy's tasks than their predecessors. Above all, Reinhold considers his own task to be the discovery of a 'universally valid ultimate turn of skill,' which would effectively allow anyone who had mastered it to resolve the tasks of philosophy once and for all. The history of philosophy would thus be overcome and rendered obsolete by the mastery of this new *Handgriff*.

In fact, this is a figure that can be found in many more recent engagements with the history of philosophy. Such readings assume that earlier thinkers lacked the necessary conceptual means to correctly phrase the problems of philosophy, instead expressing them in an imperfect vocabulary, which thus hindered their ability to solve them. Ultimately, this amounts to the claim that the history of philosophy has been a question of awaiting the development of the right *method*. For Reinhold, as indeed for Descartes and for Kant, it is the discovery of such a method that finally puts philosophy on a secure footing.

Viewed from the perspective of this universally valid final *Handgriff*, all prior philosophical systems are thus reduced to nothing more than 'the preliminary

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<sup>208</sup> DS, p. 86.

exercises of great minds,<sup>209</sup> or worse still, mere ‘mental confusions.’<sup>210</sup> They may have been a useful or even necessary stage along the way to the development of this method; yet ultimately, they are rendered obsolete by the new method, which allows anyone who has learned it to answer the questions of philosophy as if ‘automatically.’

Hegel insists, on the contrary, that all philosophical systems must be understood as a product of reason, which is itself a manifestation of the absolute, which is eternally ‘one and the same.’<sup>211</sup> Philosophy is not a matter of learning to apply some set of rules or principles worked out over the course of a contingent history. On the contrary, he claims that wherever reason ‘has complied with and recognised itself,’ it has produced a ‘true philosophy,’ thus fulfilling philosophy’s task, which is ‘the same for all ages.’<sup>212</sup>

At the time of the composition of the *Differenzschrift*, Hegel understood the history of philosophy in terms of *historia sapientiae*, as defined in the introduction to this thesis. The history of philosophy is not the history of humanity’s perpetual errancy, but rather a manifestation of its eternal reason. The most surprising element of Hegel’s account here is his claim that, with regard to the inner essence of philosophy, there are neither ‘predecessors nor successors’ in the history of philosophy.<sup>213</sup> This clearly contradicts his position in the published versions of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, where he envisages this history in terms of a progress culminating in his own system.<sup>214</sup> Indeed, Eckart Förster writes of Hegel’s position in the *Differenzschrift* that ‘it is hard to imagine a more dramatic about-face than Hegel’s announcement four years later in a lecture on the history of philosophy that “the further this development advances, the more perfect philosophy becomes”.’<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> DS p. 87; translation modified.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., translation modified.

<sup>211</sup> DS, p. 87.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Indeed, Jaeschke notes that Hegel’s own arguments against Reinhold’s position in the *Differenzschrift* would later be used against him as criticisms of his own mature conception of the history of philosophy. See Walter Jaeschke, *Hegel Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Schule*, (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2010), p. 115.

<sup>215</sup> Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 287.

Nonetheless, I take it that Hegel's mature approach to the history of philosophy does not constitute a simple reversal of his position in the *Differenzschrift*, such that the critical dimension of his account here remains valid from the perspective of his mature system. On the one hand, while Hegel clearly revokes the idea that there are no 'predecessors and successors' in the history of philosophy, he remains committed to the idea that philosophy is never a matter of mere 'opinions.'

Indeed, the only substantial shift is in Hegel's 'positive' account of the historicity of philosophy. In the *Differenzschrift*, Hegel has no way of taking account of historical difference. On the one hand, he has effectively rejected the notion that historical difference is the product of epistemological difference, as it was for Descartes and for Kant. For Hegel suggests that the various philosophical systems of the past are not the products of some of epistemological shortfall, but are always an expression of reason itself, and are always perfect in their kind.

On the other hand, he maintains that reason is eternal and self-identical. His account implies that all philosophical systems are effectively 'timeless' manifestations of universal reason, and are thus universally valid. Hegel draws a comparison between philosophy and art here. He writes:

Just as the works of Apelles or Sophocles would not have appeared to Raphael and Shakespeare—had they known them—as mere preparatory studies, but as a kindred force of spirit, so reason cannot regard its former shapes as merely useful preludes to itself.<sup>216</sup>

The implication is that, just as it makes little sense to talk of progress in art, automatically considering later artists superior to their predecessors, so too there is no reason to assume the superiority of later philosophical systems.

Walter Jaeschke notes that the analogy between art and philosophy here is imperfect. In particular, the multiplicity of the different forms in which philosophy appears requires further explanation in a way that the multiplicity of art does not, precisely because for Hegel, philosophy makes a claim to truth.<sup>217</sup> It may well be that

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<sup>216</sup> DS, p. 89.

<sup>217</sup> Walter Jaeschke, *Hegel Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Schule* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2010), p. 116.

we can treat the tragedies of Sophocles and Shakespeare as equally ‘perfect’ realizations of tragedy, each relative to its own time, such that talk of progress or decline is senseless. Yet since philosophy makes a claim to expressing the truth of the absolute, which is ‘eternally one and the same,’ Hegel must offer some explanation as to the different forms that philosophy takes over the course of history—either explaining away apparent differences as manifestations of one and the same reason in superficially different guises,<sup>218</sup> or by conceding substantial differences, and thus ultimately the superiority of some philosophical systems to others.

In his mature system, Hegel set out to explain the multiplicity of philosophical systems, as well as their temporal succession, without thereby renouncing his claim that philosophy is an expression of the eternal and self-identical absolute—and thus without appeal to the epistemological difference in the form we have encountered it so far. His most extensive engagement with the question can be found in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. In the following, we will not engage in a reading of the full lecture course. Instead, we will focus on Hegel’s introductions to his various lecture courses on the history of philosophy.<sup>219</sup> For it is here that he develops both his critique of the traditional approach to the history of philosophy, as well as his own positive account of the historicity of philosophy.

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<sup>218</sup> Hegel hints at this solution in the *Differenzschrift* when he claims that ‘The true particularity of a philosophy lies in the interesting individuality which is the organic shape that reason has built for itself out of the material of a particular age. The particular speculative reason [of a later time] finds in it spirit of its spirit, flesh of its flesh, it intuits itself in it as one and the same and yet as another living being.’ DS, p. 88.

<sup>219</sup> Various versions of Hegel’s lectures on the history of philosophy have been published. For many years, the only readily available version was based on a collation, in which Hegel’s manuscripts were mixed with students notes from the various lecture courses spanning Hegel’s entire philosophical career. In this chapter, I will draw on the edition published by Felix Meiner based on the original manuscripts (referred to here as VGP). For the most part, our reading will focus on the 1820 and 1823 manuscripts of the introductions to the lecture course – the only versions written in Hegel’s own hand. Where appropriate, we draw on students’ notes from the later lecture courses. See Walter Jaeschke, ‘Einleitung’ in G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie. Teil 1. Einleitung in die Geschichte der Philosophie; Orientalische Philosophie*, ed. by Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1993), p. xxxiv. A comprehensive English translation of this edition has not yet been published; in the following, all translations are my own.

### 3.3 The Philosophy of the History of Philosophy

The *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* have generally received far less critical attention than Hegel's other lecture courses.<sup>220</sup> Yet as Walter Jaeschke notes, besides logic and metaphysics, there is no single topic to which Hegel returned so frequently in his teaching.<sup>221</sup> He first lectured on the topic in Jena in 1805/6, returning to it in Heidelberg and in alternating years throughout his time in Berlin. Jaeschke adds that the frequency of Hegel's lectures on the topic is all the more remarkable for the fact that, in spite of the burgeoning interest in the topic, the history of philosophy did not at the time belong to the standard syllabuses of German philosophy departments.<sup>222</sup>

The relative neglect of these lectures itself reflects prevailing assumptions regarding the strict division between philosophy and its history. We saw in the introduction to this thesis that the history of philosophy is generally treated as a kind of secondary subdiscipline. The study of philosophy's history can be a useful resource for systematic philosophy, providing potentially useful insights, or helping us to avoid falling into the same errors as past philosophers. Yet this history is rarely understood to constitute a necessary moment of systematic philosophy. Above all, first philosophy rarely confronts itself with the question as to *why* philosophy has a history. As such, it is frequently assumed that, where we are concerned with Hegel's systematic philosophy, his account of the history of philosophy is of at best secondary importance.

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<sup>220</sup> Notable studies and collections of essays of Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy include Klaus Düsing, *Hegel und die Geschichte der Philosophie: Ontologie und Dialektik in Antike und Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Wissenschaftliche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1983); Quentin Lauer, *Hegel's Idea of Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983); David Duquette (ed.) *Hegel's History of Philosophy: New Interpretations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); and Dietmar H. Heidemann and Christian Krijnen (eds.) *Hegel und die Geschichte der Philosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007).

<sup>221</sup> Walter Jaeschke, 'Einleitung' in G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. by Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1993), p. vii.

<sup>222</sup> Walter Jaeschke, *Hegel Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Schule* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2010), p. 478. A comparative study of the various lecture courses lies beyond the scope of this thesis. In any case, little is known of the lecture courses from Jena and Heidelberg, for which neither Hegel's own manuscripts, nor students' notes, are extant. Nonetheless, Jaeschke notes in the above cited text that already in Jena, Hegel presented the history of philosophy in terms of a dialectical progression, rather than a mere succession of opinions – a position which made a strong impression on his audience. Interestingly for our purposes, Jaeschke suggests that there was a far less developed connection between logic and history in these early lectures. This is also supported by the lack of historical remarks in the Jena drafts of the *Metaphysics and Logic*.

By contrast, Quentin Lauer argues that the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* can be understood as the final part of Hegel's triad of lecture courses on absolute spirit, which begin with the philosophy of art and the philosophy of religion, corresponding to the threefold division of absolute spirit in his *Encyclopaedia*.<sup>223</sup> They do not constitute a merely external series of reflections on the history of philosophy, but instead comprise the final part of Hegel's system. As Emil Angehrn puts it, 'the history of philosophy, which did not belong to the traditional canon of philosophical subjects (such as metaphysics, ethics etc.), is here treated as part of philosophy itself for the first time.'<sup>224</sup> As such, Hegel's task is not merely to give a summary of the philosophical standpoints of the great thinkers of the past. On the contrary, much as he did with regards to art and religion, he seeks to understand the history of philosophy as a necessary moment of spirit's development.

Hegel poses the problem he confronts in the *VGP* in two distinct but closely related formulations. On the one hand, he treats it in terms of the problem of the multiplicity of competing philosophical systems. He writes: 'it is certainly a sufficiently grounded matter of fact that there are and have been different philosophies. Yet truth is One—this insurmountable feeling or belief belongs to reason's instinct.'<sup>225</sup> This is the problem of historical difference, which he had failed to adequately address in the *Differenzschrift*. A genuine science of the history of philosophy must explain how, although truth is one, it comes to be manifest in a series of often conflicting and apparently mutually exclusive philosophical systems.

On the other hand, Hegel poses the problem in terms of *temporality*. This is the question as to why 'philosophy appears as a development in time, and has a history.'<sup>226</sup> Again, Hegel confronts us with an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, the idea is timeless and eternal. Yet philosophy as the comprehension of truth appears in time, in the form of a gradual progression. If human thought is always an instantiation of eternal truth, as he claimed in the *Differenzschrift* and continues to maintain throughout the *VGP*, why does the history of this thought take the form of a progressive development which unfolds over the course of time?

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<sup>223</sup> Quentin Lauer, *Hegel's Idea of Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), p.9.

<sup>224</sup> Emil Angehrn, 'Das Denken der Geschichte. Hegels Theorie des Geistes zwischen Geschichtsphilosophie und Philosophiegeschichte,' in *International Yearbook of German Idealism*, Vol. 10/2012, p. 207. My translation.

<sup>225</sup> *VGP*, p. 19.

<sup>226</sup> *VGP*, p. 29.

Although Hegel does not pose the question in precisely these terms, this ultimately amounts to the question of the ‘incubation period’ of philosophy discussed in the introduction to this thesis. For it involves answering the question as to why truth should not be given to thought ‘all at once’ and from the very beginning, but should rather only emerge at the end of a long history. Hegel presents his own philosophical system as an *a priori* presentation of the idea in its eternal presence. In posing the question as to why the idea should appear in time, Hegel thereby poses the question as to the ‘delayed’ arrival of both the various systems of the history of philosophy, and ultimately of his own system.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, our concern will be to assess Hegel’s responses to these two distinct but closely related problems.

It should be emphasized at this juncture that Hegel’s project in the *VGP* constitutes a fundamental shift in the relation between philosophy and its history. By posing the questions of historical difference and incubation at the level of first philosophy, moving them from their traditional place in the prefaces to philosophical texts to questions worthy of consideration in their own right, Hegel refuses the strict separation between philosophy and its history which dominates much of the philosophy of the modern era, as well as contemporary philosophy. In the introduction, we cited Jean-Luc Nancy’s claim that Heidegger and Derrida’s projects of deconstruction mean that ‘from now on, philosophy cannot be absolved from the question of its own historicity.’<sup>227</sup> The same claim could equally be made of Hegel’s project in the *VGP*.

While Hegel’s very project of a rational reconstruction of the history of philosophy is often met with skepticism, or otherwise simply ignored as an inessential moment of his system, I take it that for Hegel, it was a problem of first philosophical rank. Ultimately, one cannot understand Hegel’s very conceptions of truth and reason without engaging in these questions. To dismiss them out of hand at the level of a reading of Hegel’s system risks either falling back into a strict separation between philosophy and its history, thus leaving the problem of historicity unaddressed; or else reverting to an essentially Cartesian conception of historicity, according to which the history of philosophy is nothing other than, in Hegel’s words,

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<sup>227</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Philosophy Without Conditions,’ in Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2004), p.44.



a ‘gallery of follies,’ or of the ‘aberrations [*Verirrungen*] of people who immerse themselves in thought and mere concepts.’<sup>228</sup>

### 3.4 The Parallel Between History and Logic

In the *VGP*, Hegel maintains his commitment to the idea of *historia sapientiae* he defended in the *Differenzschrift*—namely, that the history of philosophy is a manifestation of eternal reason. Nonetheless, he now commits himself to his famous thesis that the multiplicity of philosophical systems can be traced back to a development immanent to the truth itself. The various systems of philosophy of the Western philosophical tradition are now understood in terms of a gradual progress, corresponding to different stages within his own system.

As such, his readings in the history of philosophy are from the beginning guided by the results of his own philosophical system. He notes that the science of the history of philosophy is by no means without presuppositions, but rather requires that we must ‘bring the knowledge of the idea with us.’<sup>229</sup> The study of the history of philosophy is thus not a study of the contingent opinions of great thinkers of the past, but rather ‘the study of philosophy itself, above all of the *logical*.’<sup>230</sup>

Indeed, Hegel asserts a direct parallel between the history of philosophy and the immanent development of the idea presented in his *Science of Logic*. All of the extant versions of the introduction to the *VGP* contain a variant of the claim that the course of the history of philosophy corresponds to the development of the idea as presented in the *Science of Logic*.<sup>231</sup> In the 1820 manuscript, Hegel writes: ‘The succession of philosophical systems in history is one and the same as the succession of logical categories in the development of the idea. The one is merely the counter-image [*Gegenbild*] of the other.’<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> *VGP*, p. 15.

<sup>229</sup> *VGP*, p. 28.

<sup>230</sup> *VGP*, p. 222.

<sup>231</sup> Cf. Walter Jaeschke, ‘Einleitung’ in G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. by Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1993), p. xvii.

<sup>232</sup> *VGP* p. 27. Hegel makes a similar claim in the *Encyclopedia Logic*: ‘The same development of thinking that is portrayed in the history of philosophy is also portrayed in philosophy itself, only freed from its historical externality, *purely in the element of thinking*.’ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic, with the Zusätze (1830): Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. by Théodore F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), p. 42-43.

This point is put even more explicitly in the 1829/30 lecture course:

The course of the Science of Logic and the history of philosophy must be in and for themselves one and the same. [...] The progress of the Logic thus serves to verify the history of philosophy, and vice versa.<sup>233</sup>

The task of the history of philosophy is thus not to give a comprehensive account of the claims made by any given philosopher. Rather, Hegel argues that the task consists in ‘stripping away’ the external form of the successive systems of the history of philosophy, exposing their ‘fundamental concept.’<sup>234</sup> Hegel explicitly sets out with the assumption that all past philosophical systems contain such a ‘fundamental concept’ or ‘highest principle,’ which corresponds to a specific category in his own logic.

Taken at its most extreme, this would seem to imply a strict one-to-one correspondence between the succession of the categories presented in the *Science of Logic*, and the sequence of ‘highest principles’ in the history of Western philosophy.

Walter Jaeschke notes that this claim was already called into doubt in the 1830s in the debates immediately following Hegel’s death. It was objected that, while Hegel makes a ‘programmatically’ claim concerning this correspondence, ‘he only singled out a few cases to illustrate such a correspondence between the historical and the logical *ordo*, and in even fewer cases were these illustrations plausibly grounded.’ He concludes that further investigation of this idea of a strict parallel can only result in its discreditation.<sup>235</sup>

It is certainly true that Hegel gives relatively few examples of such a strict correspondence between the *Science of Logic* and the *VGP*, and that those he does give are often problematic. Perhaps the most famous example is the parallel between the passage from being and nothing to becoming in the opening pages of the *Logic* and the passage from Parmenides’ account of pure being to Heraclitus’ principle of

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<sup>233</sup> VGP p.321. It should be noted that the 1829/30 lecture course is not written in Hegel’s own hand, but is based on student transcriptions.

<sup>234</sup> VGP, p. 27.

<sup>235</sup> Walter Jaeschke, ‘Einleitung’ in G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. by Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1993), p. xviii.

flux. Not only is it founded on the now widely rejected assumption that Parmenides preceded Heraclitus.<sup>236</sup> Moreover, it would seem to involve placing Parmenides at the beginning of Western philosophy—where on Hegel’s own account, he was preceded by both the Ionian and Pythagorean schools.<sup>237</sup>

We will return to this problem later in this chapter; yet it is already clear that the claim concerning the parallel is at least problematic. Nonetheless, I take it that Hegel posits this parallel between logic and history for essential reasons. There is every evidence to suggest that he intended it to be taken seriously, given that he repeated it in one form or another in every extant version of the lecture course, spanning the years 1819 to 1831. Many of the readings which reject or play down the significance of the parallel are concerned to protect the integrity of Hegel’s broader system. Given the low importance attributed to the problems of the philosophy of the history of philosophy as a discipline, its loss could hardly be considered a fatal blow to Hegel’s broader thought or significance.

Our concern, however, is with the conceptual structures which allowed Hegel to posit a new form of relation between first philosophy and the history of philosophy. Even if we assume that the parallel between logic and history is insufficiently empirically grounded over the course of the *VGP*, or even that such a grounding is impossible,<sup>238</sup> we can still endeavour to understand the conceptual shifts which led Hegel to make the claim, and assess its merits relative to Descartes’ and Kant’s grounding of historicity in error.

I take it that the plausibility of Hegel’s ‘parallel’ claim can best be investigated by treating separately the questions of *historical difference* and *incubation*. On the one hand, Hegel’s assertion of the parallel is intended to explain the *multiplicity* of past philosophical systems, demonstrating that, even in cases where they clearly contradict one another, they are nonetheless manifestations of one and the same eternal reason. To justify this part of his claim, Hegel simply needs to

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<sup>236</sup> See Walter Jaeschke, *Hegel Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Schule* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2010), p. 480; cf. Clark Butler, *Hegel’s Logic: Between Dialectic and History* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. 39.

<sup>237</sup> Jaeschke adds that there is no historical parallel to the concept of ‘nothing;’ Walter Jaeschke, *Hegel Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Schule* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2010), p. 480.

<sup>238</sup> Fulda insists that this impossibility should by no means be taken for granted; see Hans Fulda, ‘Hegels These, dass die Aufeinanderfolge von philosophischen Systemen dieselbe sei wie die von Stufen logischer Gedankenentwicklung,’ in *Hegel und die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. by Dietmar H. Heidemann and Christian Krijnen (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007) p. 12.

show that the idea presented in the *Science of Logic* constitutes a kind of ‘transcendental ground’ of the various systems of the Western philosophical tradition. Any position defended over the course of the history of philosophy must merely be shown to correspond to a certain stage in the development of the idea in the *Science of Logic*, while the question of the specific *order* in which these systems appear falls away.

On the other hand, Hegel also intends the parallel to explain the ‘incubation time’ of the various philosophical systems, and ultimately of his own philosophical system—the delay separating the passage from one system to the next, and ultimately to his own system as the a priori presentation of atemporal truth. It is this second claim which gives rise to the most problematic dimension of the parallel, namely the question of the specific order in which the philosophical systems emerge.

Hegel clearly intends the ‘parallel’ thesis to provide an answer to *both* of these questions. Nonetheless, it is surely not by accident that he poses the two questions separately several times in the various introductions to the *VGP*. Indeed, we will see that the conceptual underpinning of his response to each problem is different. It is to an investigation of these conceptual underpinnings that we now turn in the second part of the chapter.

## **Part Two: Logic and History, Negation and Time**

### **3.5 The Science of Logic**

Hegel’s *Science of Logic* is the cornerstone of his mature philosophical system. It commences from the standpoint of the identity of thought and being, such that it is at once a deduction of the pure categories of thought, and an ontology, i.e. an account of the fundamental structure of being.<sup>239</sup> It is thus concerned not merely with the categories of human thought which determine the horizon of human experience—the

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<sup>239</sup> See Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel’s Logic: From Being to Infinity* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), p. 115 ff.; cf. André Doz, *La Logique de Hegel et les problèmes traditionnels de l’ontologie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, 1987), p. 26.

project pursued by Kant in the *Analytic of the CPR*. Rather, it is a deduction of the universal *logos* which reveals the horizon of the determinacy of beings themselves.

The work opens with the most indeterminate category—pure, indeterminate being—before progressing through a series of ever more determinate categories. This progression unfolds in accordance with a strict logical necessity, such that each subsequent category emerges immanently from the preceding category.

In the first two sections of the work, the Doctrine of Being and the Doctrine of Essence, the passage from one category to the next unfolds without any reference to the idea. In the former, the categories pass over into one another in the form of a *transition* [*Übergang*].<sup>240</sup> While each category follows logically from the previous, they nonetheless appear to retain a certain independence from one another. While the categories become more closely integrated in the Logic of Essence, they nonetheless retain an independence from one another.<sup>241</sup>

This process comes to a halt in the final chapter of the work, the *Absolute Idea*. For at this stage, we reach another category characterized by the ‘simple unity’ and immediacy of the very first category, being. In distinction to being, however, which was empty, excluding all determinacy from itself, the absolute idea is a *mediated* immediacy. It is no longer opposed to any external moments, but rather, contains all of the prior moments within it as the moments of its own development.

In the final section of the work on the absolute idea, it becomes clear that this development was all along the development of the *idea*. This can only become apparent retrospectively, the result of an immanent process of which the idea is the culmination, and not the starting point.

As such, the absolute idea is not merely one ‘final category,’ which supersedes all of those which preceded it. Instead, it is the self-generating totality of the various categories through which the logic has passed up to this stage. The idea cannot be thought in abstraction from the process leading up to it, but is by its very nature a result.

As such, the categories of the logic are all affirmed as ‘true,’ necessary moments in the development of the idea. At the same time, they are now

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<sup>240</sup> See SL, p. 121.

<sup>241</sup> Cf. Michael Theunissen, *Sein und Schein: Die Kritische Funktion der Hegelschen Logik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), p. 25 ff.

incorporated within the absolute idea, which functions as the principle of their underlying unity. Each category retains its validity only as a moment generated by the self-development of the idea.

Miguel de Beistegui thus notes that the Logic:

reveals the various ways in which beings can be said to be (the traditional role of the categories); at the same time, however, it reveals the fundamental unity of being, which is no longer simply of the order of the homonym, of analogy, or even of univocity, but of the self-unfolding of thought itself in the element of thought.<sup>242</sup>

In other words, while all of the categories contained in the logic are ‘ways’ of being, it is only the absolute idea which provides us with the principle of the unity of these different ways of being. Each category is true, and plays a distinctive role in constituting the unity of the idea; and yet its truth ultimately derives from its belonging to this higher unity.

Over the course of the work, Hegel appends a series of ‘remarks’ to his text, in which he relates various stages of the development to moments in the history of philosophy. Commentators generally agree that these comments must be understood as *external* to the immanent development of the logic. That is to say, these remarks play no role in moving the dialectic forward—rather, it unfolds according to the strict logical necessity of the development of the idea.

Nonetheless, it is worth asking after the precise nature of the ‘externality’ of these remarks to the text. While it may be true that they do not play any role in advancing the dialectic, they reflect Hegel’s ambition to demonstrate that the development of the categories in the *Logic* ‘reflects’ the development of the history of philosophy.

We return to this question of the externality of the remarks below. First, we turn to an account of Hegel’s critique of Kant’s conception of dialectic in the *Science of Logic*. We saw in the previous chapter that for Kant, the Dialectic of the *CPR* constituted an *a priori* refutation of the discipline of special metaphysics. In the following, we will claim that Hegel’s thesis of a parallel between the *VGP* and the

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<sup>242</sup> Miguel de Beistegui, *Truth and Genesis: Philosophy as Differential Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 85.

*Science of Logic* can be understood as a radicalisation of Kant's claims concerning the relation between dialectic and history. By rejecting the idea that dialectic has no objective application at the level of theoretical truth, Hegel is able to offer a comprehensive account of the historicity of reason—not as a shortfall from truth, but as a reflection of a development immanent to the economy of truth.

### 3.6 Kant and Hegel on Dialectic

We have seen above that Hegel considers the dialectical progression in his *Science of Logic* not as the work of 'external reflection,' but rather as immanent to the idea itself. In the introduction to the work, however, Hegel claims that dialectic has generally been understood as an 'external, negative activity that does not pertain to the matter itself.'<sup>243</sup> He notes elsewhere that, while it had the status of a science among ancient philosophers, it has largely been misunderstood in the modern era.<sup>244</sup>

Nonetheless, he suggests that Kant's thought has served to restore the dignity of dialectic in the modern age. He writes that it is among Kant's 'greatest merits' that he treated dialectic not merely as an arbitrary external act, but rather as a necessary function of reason itself. He goes on to claim that Kant's merit is to have vindicated 'the *objectivity of the illusion* and the *necessity of the contradiction* which belongs to the nature of thought determinations.'<sup>245</sup>

On the face of it, this assertion seems patently false. For Kant claims precisely that the illusions which arise from pure reason have no *objective* legitimacy, but must instead be treated as purely subjective ideas.<sup>246</sup> Why does Hegel claim, on the contrary, that Kant considers this illusion to be *objective*?

We saw in the previous chapter that Kant treats dialectic as a logic of illusion. The contradictions which arise from the application of the ideas of reason to things in themselves was shown to give rise to the incompatible positions adopted across the

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<sup>243</sup> SL, p. 56. Cf. The discussion in the work's final chapter on the 'Absolute Idea,' where Hegel writes: 'Dialectic has often been regarded as an *art*, as though it rested on a subjective *talent* and did not belong to the objectivity of the concept.' SL, p. 831.

<sup>244</sup> SL, p. 831.

<sup>245</sup> SL, p. 56.

<sup>246</sup> Hegel also here overlooks the fact that for Kant, it is not reason itself that is contradictory; rather, contradiction arises when reason is applied to objects of experience. He draws this distinction elsewhere; see G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. by Théodore F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), §48.

history of special metaphysics. Kant concluded on this basis of these contradictions that the ideas of reason have no legitimacy at the level of theoretical truth, except as ‘subjective principles’ providing unity to our theoretical discourse.<sup>247</sup>

Nonetheless, we also saw that Kant argues that, even once the ground of these errors is identified, the illusions of reason *persist*. While the critical philosophy allows us to avoid falling into the associated errors, it nonetheless does not simply dissolve the associated illusions. Rather, they are shown to be necessary products of reason operating according to its own internal rules.

As such, Hegel’s claim is that Kant correctly established the fact that the economy of reason intrinsically contains contradictions. These illusions are ‘objective,’ not in the sense that they belong to the economy of truth, but rather in the sense that they are unavoidable and necessary products of human reason.

In the final chapter of the *Logic on Absolute Knowing*, Hegel writes of Kant’s dialectic: ‘It must be regarded as a step of infinite importance that dialectic is once more recognized as necessary to reason, although the result to be drawn from it is must be the opposite of that arrived at by Kant.’<sup>248</sup> On the basis of the contradictions arising from the application of reason to things in themselves, Kant draws the conclusion that reason has no legitimate application at the level of objective truth. He moves to resolve the contradiction generated by the illusions of reason by drawing a distinction between the economy of reason and the economy of truth. By contrast, Hegel *collapses* this distinction. The contradictions to which reason gives rise are contradictions immanent to truth itself. He thus draws the ‘opposite’ conclusion to Kant, in the sense that he does not seek to resolve the contradiction by limiting the pretensions of reason to truth, but rather sees the contradictions associated with reason as the highest expression of truth. Grasped in its ‘positive aspect,’ dialectic is ‘nothing else but the inner negativity of the determinations as their self-moving soul, the principle of all natural and spiritual life.’<sup>249</sup>

Seen in this light, I take it that we can see Hegel’s thesis of a parallel between the *Science of Logic* and the history of philosophy as an extension of Kant’s project in the dialectic of the *CPR* of a partial rational grounding of the historicity of

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<sup>247</sup> See section 2.11 above.

<sup>248</sup> SL, p. 831.

<sup>249</sup> SL, p. 56.



thought. In the dialectic of the *CPR*, Kant endeavoured to show that the errors of special metaphysics arise necessarily as a consequence of the structure of human cognition. This did not entail the reduction of his dialectic to a merely ‘historical’ narration of human errancy. On the contrary, he provided an *a priori* account of the ground of the history of special metaphysics.

I take it that Hegel’s ambitious project in the *VGP* is to demonstrate that his own *Science of Logic* provides a similar *a priori* account of the ground of the history of Western philosophy—not merely of the specific subset of special metaphysics, but rather of fundamental principles underlying each successive system throughout the entire history of Western metaphysics. This clearly does not entail the reduction of the *Logic* to a mere series of reflections on the history of philosophy. Yet at the same time, it implies that Hegel’s broader project involves showing how the dialectic immanent to pure thought is itself reflected at every turn in the history of philosophy. I take it that Hegel’s system is ultimately incomplete without this demonstration.

This also serves to explain the status of the historical ‘remarks’ appended to the text throughout the *Logic*. It is certainly true that they are ‘external’ to the immanent development of Hegel’s text, in the sense that they never serve to move the dialectic forwards. Nonetheless, this does not mean that they are reduced to the status of mere ‘illustrative examples,’ intended solely to assist the reader in getting to grips with the abstract categories presented in Hegel’s text. Rather, I take it that they constitute a fragmentary attempt, to be realized more comprehensively in the *VGP*, to demonstrate that the historicity of philosophy is itself grounded in the immanent dialectical development of the idea.

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We have seen that Hegel’s project in the *VGP* has its roots in an extension and reversal of Kant’s conception of dialectic. Where for Kant, the history of special metaphysics was shown to be grounded in the *a priori* structure of reason, Hegel attempts a more ambitious synthesis, accounting for the entire history of Western philosophy in terms of his *a priori* account of pure thought in the *Science of Logic*.

The major difference between Kant and Hegel on this score comes in the role of *error* in explaining historicity. For Kant, the history of thought was held at one

remove from the economy of truth. While the illusions of reason are necessary, the associated errors are not. While passage through these errors may have been necessary in overcoming the gap between the natural economy of thought and the economy of truth, once this breach has been overcome, they simply fall away, and play no positive role in the economy of truth itself. The *space of history* was thus opened up by the fall into error. Indeed, it is only thanks to the faulty application of the faculties that thought has a history at all.

As such, Kant effectively reduces one of the most fundamental and irreducible aspects of thought—its historicity—to the status of a *mistake*, an excess over truth which strictly speaking ‘ought not’ be. A whole modality of our thinking engagement with the world is reduced to the status of a product of a ‘mismatch’ between the faculties which, but for the want of the right method, need never have been. The nature of the historical difference separating us from the thinkers of the past—the object of study of the disciplines of philology, hermeneutics, and the history of philosophy—is to be treated as a mere chimera produced by a distortion in the economy of truth. Though a passage through this illusory history was a necessary condition of our ascent to the economy of truth, it can in no way be considered a history of truth itself.

This returns us to the second major strand of this thesis, namely, the history of the concept of error. We have already stated that Hegel constitutes an exception among the thinkers considered in this thesis, in that he dissociates historicity from error. As we have seen, the history of philosophy does not unfold in the ‘space of error,’ but rather is grounded in the dialectical development of pure thought.

In the following, we will see that Hegel claims that a science of the history of philosophy is only possible if we begin by *suspending* the ordinary concept of error. This reflects a broader suspicion on Hegel’s part concerning the role played by error and falsity in philosophical thought that extends throughout his entire system.

### **3.7 ‘The Abstract Opposition between Truth and Error’**

In the *VGP*, Hegel suggests that the ordinary concept of error is an obstacle to the correct understanding of the history of philosophy. Nonetheless, he notes that error

has long been the primary means by which philosophy explains its own past. In the 1820 manuscript, he explains the logic behind this attitude:

it is certainly a sufficiently grounded matter of fact that there are and have been different philosophies. Yet truth is One—this insurmountable feeling or belief belongs to reason’s instinct. And so only One philosophy can be the true philosophy, and since they are all so different, the conclusion is drawn that all others must be errors.<sup>250</sup>

Indeed, we saw in chapters one and two that this is the logic behind both Descartes’ and Kant’s attitudes toward the history of philosophy. Since truth is univocal, and does not tolerate contradictions, both Descartes and Kant appealed to error as the ground of the multiplicity of competing philosophical systems. It was necessary to appeal to some ‘external force’ which distorts thought’s natural tendency toward truth, and so introduces a separation between finite thought and the economy of truth.

We saw in the previous section that for Hegel, this attitude can be traced back to a misapprehension of dialectic. Descartes attributes no importance to dialectic, insisting that thought in its proper operation reflects the univocity of truth. For Kant, on the other hand, the dialectic which gives rise to illusion is intrinsic to reason—yet on this basis, he draws the conclusion that reason can play no legitimate objective role in finite human cognition.

Hegel writes: ‘the philosophical knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] of what truth and philosophy are allows for an altogether difference sense of this multiplicity than according to the abstract opposition between truth and error.’<sup>251</sup> In other words, the recognition of the dialectical nature of pure thought gives us a means to explain the multiplicity of philosophical systems without appeal to the concept of error. The genuine ground of thought’s historicity is the negativity immanent to the idea itself, as presented in the *Science of Logic*. It is only by recognizing that negation is not the product of a defect of thought, or of a falling short of its object, that the genuine nature of thought’s historicity can be understood.

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<sup>250</sup> VGP, p. 19.

<sup>251</sup> VGP, p. 20. Cf. VGP, p. 121: ‘From the perspective of genuine thought, the usual abstract opposition between truth and falsity drops out completely. By the very fact that a philosophy *is*, it is true.’

Hegel had already developed a critique of the abstract opposition between the true and the false at the end of his Jena period, in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There, he notes that the tendency to understand the negative in terms of falsity ‘obstructs’ the approach to truth.<sup>252</sup> He explains that falsity is generally understood to denote a ‘disparity’ between knowledge and substance. Where thought contradicts its object, it is generally concluded that thought has gone astray, falsifying its object. Yet he suggests that this disparity must not be understood as revelatory of a defect on the part of thinking. Rather, it reflects a disparity or negativity immanent to substance itself.<sup>253</sup>

As such, the passage through disparity is not the product of thought’s falsification of its object. Rather, the negative moment is an irreducible moment of truth. Truth is attained where thought overcomes this disparity, such that the resultant identity is truth. He writes: ‘But it is not truth as if the disparity had been thrown away, like dross from pure metal, not even like the tool which remains separate from the finished vessel; disparity, rather, as the negative, the self, is itself still directly present in the true as such.’<sup>254</sup>

It is important to note that Hegel is not claiming here that falsity *per se* is somehow an intrinsic dimension of the truth—so that all patently false statements must be understood to contain some element of truth.<sup>255</sup> Rather, Hegel claims that when confronted with a contradiction, it is the first instinct of ‘ordinary thought’ (but also of past philosophers) to try to explain this contradiction by appeal to the concept of falsity or error. While Hegel thus stops short of treating error *per se* as a moment of truth, he nonetheless incorporates contradiction into the economy of truth, which has traditionally been treated as a mark of error.

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<sup>252</sup> PS, p. 22.

<sup>253</sup> Hegel writes: ‘Although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the ‘I’ and its object, it is just as much the disparity of the substance with itself;’ *Ibid.*, p.21

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>255</sup> Cf. Frederick G. Weiss, who claims that Hegel ‘equates falsity (not truth) with otherness or self-discordance, and holds that the true must in some way contain the false as a vanishing element in itself.’ Frederick G. Weiss, ‘Cartesian Doubt and Hegelian Negation’ in *Hegel and the History of Philosophy*, ed. by J. J. O’Malley et al. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 87. I take it rather that Hegel’s claim is that *negation* – the moment of otherness or self-discordance – is frequently *mistakenly* understood to be grounded in falsity, where in fact it constitutes a necessary moment of truth’s self-development. Nonetheless, I take it that the main thesis of Weiss’ article is correct – namely, that we can best understand Hegel’s difference from Descartes through an examination of the concept of error.

The concepts of error, falsity and untruth are conspicuous by their absence in Hegel's system. Even in his 'philosophy of mind,' the *Psychology* in the third part of his *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel offers no explanation of how it is that thought should ever go wrong—to say nothing of the spectre of a 'faculty for committing errors' which Descartes was moved to entertain.<sup>256</sup>

I do not take this to imply that for Hegel, thought *never* goes wrong.<sup>257</sup> Rather, it reflects the fact that for Hegel, truth is no longer *defined* primarily by way of the exclusion of error. For Hegel, the task of philosophical method is not the Kantian task of clearing away the 'infinite errors' of the past in order to make way for truth. Rather, it is to develop a comprehensive ontology of spirit, which includes giving an account of its past, not merely as an errant wandering, but as a *necessary* dimension of spirit's concrete existence.

We have thus reached a crucial juncture in the development of our thesis concerning the connection between error and historicity. In the introduction to this thesis, we suggested that error is the major concept in terms of which philosophy attempts to take account of its own history. Not only does Hegel reject this model; he also offers an account as to *why* philosophy has generally made use of the concept of error, showing that it rests on a misapprehension of the nature of negation.

Hegel's position sees us confronted with several crucial questions. Does the overcoming of the abstract opposition between truth and error allow Hegel to provide a more comprehensive explanation of philosophy's past? This would mean that ultimately, error has no role to play in accounting for historical difference. Or does his dissolution of the opposition between truth and error ultimately prevent him from

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<sup>256</sup> See section 1.6 above.. Hegel comes closest to giving error a place in his system in his §408 of the *Encyclopaedia Anthropology* on derangement [*Verrücktheit*]. Here, however, error [*Irrtum*] is not treated in terms of false judgements in general, but rather of an inability to distinguish subjective representations from objectivity. Hegel has in mind unrealistic wishes or hopes – an inability to reconcile one's own conception of the world with its reality. He writes: 'Unintelligent people have empty, subjective representations, unrealizable wishes, which all the same they hope to actualize in the future. They confine themselves to entirely individualized aims and interests, cling to one-sided principles and thereby come into conflict with actuality. But this narrow-mindedness and those mistakes are still not in the least deranged if the unintelligent are at the same time aware that their subjectivity does not yet exist objectively. Error and folly only become derangement in the case where someone believes he has his merely subjective representation objectively present to him and clings to it in face of the actual objectivity standing in contradiction with it.' G.W.F Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 119.

<sup>257</sup> Indeed, in the passage on falsity from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel claims is necessary to distinguish the negative from the false 'on account of the importance of designating the moment of *complete otherness*' - i.e. of actual falsity. PS, p. 23.

offering a genuine account of the historicity of thought? Is the only genuinely historical thought an errant thought? These questions will occupy us above all in the final chapter on Heidegger.

In the following, we examine in more detail Hegel's account of historical difference in terms of the negativity immanent to the idea. By giving an account of his concept of *refutation*, we will explore in more detail the relation between his *Logic* and the different stages of the history of philosophy. We will see that while Hegel's dissolution of the opposition between truth and error allows him to explain historical difference, it nonetheless renders his response to the question of incubation problematic, and that ultimately, he ends up having to posit a form of epistemological shortfall to explain it—thus reverting to a position far closer to that of Descartes and Kant than is immediately apparent.

### **3.8 Refutation and One-Sidedness**

Hegel's conception of the nature of the historicity of philosophy is perhaps most succinctly expressed in his doctrine of *refutation* [*Widerlegung*]. It is here that he reflects most explicitly on the nature of the relation between the 'highest principles' of the systems of the history of philosophy, and the comprehensive account of the idea in his *Science of Logic*.

According to Derrida, the very concept of refutation goes hand in hand with an ahistorical conception of truth. For to engage in the refutation of past philosophies implies that the task of an engagement with former systems is simply to show up their falsity, making way for one final account of truth. He writes:

the concept of *refutation* belongs—implicitly—to an anti-historical metaphysics of truth. If it is possible to refute, this is because the truth can be established once and for all as an object, and only particular conceptions of truth, more or less valid approximations to this ahistorical truth, belong to history. Only knowledge, and not

truth, would on this view be historical, and it would be so only to the extent of its distance from truth, that is in its error.<sup>258</sup>

Derrida notes that Hegel goes a long way towards overcoming this traditional notion of refutation, and with it the anti-historical metaphysics of truth. Nonetheless, he claims that there are essential reasons why Hegel cannot completely abandon the idea of refutation.<sup>259</sup> Indeed, Hegel remains caught between a rejection of refutation, and its necessary retention. In the 1819 lecture course introduction, he writes: ‘With regards to refutation, we can say: no philosophy has been refuted; but equally: every philosophy is refuted and true.’<sup>260</sup> In the following, we will need to consider in what sense Hegel considers past systems to nonetheless have been ‘refuted’ by his own system, even as he continues to affirm their truth.

Hegel’s most extensive account of this notion of refutation can be found in the chapter entitled ‘The Concept in General,’ which functions as an introduction to the *Logic of the Concept*. In the chapter, Hegel gives a summary of the transition from the *Logic of Essence* to the *Logic of the Concept*. At the end of his account of this transition, he turns to a discussion of Spinoza’s concept of substance.

In the third section of the *Logic of Essence*, Hegel claims that Spinoza’s concept of substance corresponds to the category of the *absolute*.<sup>261</sup> In other words, Spinoza’s thought takes the absolute as its ‘highest principle,’ around which his entire system is built.

The absolute is the ‘totality’ of all prior determinations presented in the *Logic*. Nonetheless, it still falls far short of Hegel’s absolute idea. This is because the unity of the absolute stands in an abstract opposition to the moments of determinacy, remaining indifferent to them. In contrast to Hegel’s idea, it contains no internal principle of self-differentiation which would give rise to its moments of difference. While these moments are ‘traced back’ to the absolute, they nonetheless do not ‘take

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<sup>258</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 2. Derrida suggests that Hegel does not completely escape the traditional logic of refutation; we return to this point below.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>260</sup> VGP, p. 119. Hegel does not extensively discuss refutation in his hand-written drafts of the lecture manuscripts; nonetheless, as we will see below, he repeats this conception of refutation SL.

<sup>261</sup> SL, p. 536. In fact, Hegel distinguishes between the absolute and substance, distributing his engagement with Spinoza across the two categories. See SL, p. 541 ff.

their beginnings' from the latter.<sup>262</sup> Instead, the absolute persists as a self-identical unity, with no way of incorporating internal differences, or particularizing itself.<sup>263</sup>

Hegel claims that this captures the relation between substance and its attributes in Spinoza's system. In his lectures on Spinoza in the *VGP*, he thus asserts that 'if thinking stops with this substance, there is then no development, no life, no spirituality or activity.'<sup>264</sup>

Nonetheless, in the introductory section of the *Logic of the Concept*, Hegel insists that we cannot conclude on the basis of the limitations of Spinoza's conception of substance that it is simply *false*. Indeed, the category of the absolute is a necessary stage of the development of the idea, and as such constitutes an integral part of Hegel's own system. Hegel writes:

'speculative thinking finds itself necessarily occupying that standpoint and to that extent the system is perfectly true; *but it is not the highest standpoint*. Yet this does not mean that the system can be regarded as *false*, as requiring and being capable of refutation; on the contrary, the only thing about it to be considered false is its claim to be the highest standpoint.'<sup>265</sup>

What is 'refuted' is not Spinoza's position as such, but merely its elevation to the status of the 'highest principle.' As a necessary moment of the idea, Spinoza's conception of substance is 'true.' Nonetheless, it remains *one-sided* as an ontology—an account of the fundamental structure of being.

As such, Spinoza's system cannot be 'refuted' by simply contrasting it with the absolute idea, the highest principle of Hegel's own system, externally. Rather, the only legitimate critique comes in *occupying* Spinoza's own position, and demonstrating that it contains the principle of its own refutation within itself. Hegel writes:

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<sup>262</sup> SL, p. 537.

<sup>263</sup> See Yovel, Yirmiyahu, 'Substance Without Spirit – On Hegel's Critique of Spinoza,' p. 78.

<sup>264</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: The Lectures of 1825-1826 Volume III Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Robert F. Brown 1990, p. 155.

<sup>265</sup> SL, p. 580.



‘the only possible refutation of Spinozism must therefore consist, in the first place, in recognizing its standpoint as essential and necessary and then going on to raise that standpoint to the higher one through its own immanent dialectic.’<sup>266</sup>

In other words, it is in the *Logic* itself that the refutation of Spinoza is carried out. For the category of the absolute demonstrates itself to be merely one moment of the idea’s self-development.<sup>267</sup> By tracing the immanent transition of the absolute to the stage of the concept, we achieve the ‘sole and genuine refutation of Spinoza.’<sup>268</sup>

Taken strictly, this means that the refutation is carried out not by external reflection, but rather by the *categories themselves*. The category of the absolute arises as a necessary moment in the logical development of the idea, and is ‘overcome’ or sublated by this same logic. It is thus retained as a necessary category, which ultimately proves to be a necessary moment of the idea. This refutation is thus not merely a discursive operation, carried out by Hegel in his ‘remarks’ to the text and his *VGP*. Rather, it is a form of ‘onto-logical’ refutation—a self-overcoming immanent to the economy of truth.<sup>269</sup>

I take it that Hegel intends his account of his refutation of Spinoza to be paradigmatic for his engagement with the entire history of philosophy. He writes in the *VGP* of ‘refuted’ systems:

‘The content has thus not been refuted; all that has been refuted is its status as the highest, exclusive [principle]. The refutation is thus simply the reduction of a determination to a subordinate status, to a moment.’ (*VGP* p. 227)

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<sup>266</sup> SL, p. 581.

<sup>267</sup> Yovel thus notes that we can best understand Hegel’s critique of Spinoza not through an engagement with the relevant passages from the *VGP*, but rather by ‘examining the concluding part of the ‘Objective Logic’ (the chapter on ‘Actuality,’ with special attention to the sections of the ‘Absolute’ and the ‘Absolute Relation’) and its passage to the ‘Subjective Logic,’ in order to see — following Hegel’s own advice — how the major Spinozistic ideas, such as the Substance or the Absolute, are integrated, developed and aufgehoben in the systematic unfolding of the Logic.’ Yirmiyahu Yovel, ‘Substance Without Spirit – On Hegel’s Critique of Spinoza’ in *Spinoza : His Thought and Work. Entretiens in Jerusalem, 6-9 September 1977*, ed. by Nathan Rotenstreich and Norma Schneider, (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1983), p. 73.

<sup>268</sup> SL, p. 581.

<sup>269</sup> Derrida refers to Hegel’s concept of refutation as an ‘ontological extension’ of what is ordinarily understood as a ‘discursive and logical operation’ carried out at the level of discourse. Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 6.

As such, no philosophical system is *refuted*, as they all correspond to a necessary moment in the development of the idea. Instead, what is refuted is its elevation to the status of the *highest principle*—and the only legitimate refutation is the one carried out by the specific category concerned in each case as presented in the *Science of Logic*. Every successive system in the history of philosophy corresponds to a necessary stage in the development of the idea. They are refuted only inasmuch as they prove to be merely one-sided determinations of the idea—and thus inadequate to the project of a systematic ontology.

Hegel's doctrine of refutation can be understood to follow from his reversal of Kant's understanding of dialectic.<sup>270</sup> We saw that for Kant, the dialectic of the *CPR* provided an *a priori* account of the ground of special metaphysics. Kant did not simply 'refute' the ideas of special metaphysics externally. Instead, he saw himself obliged to account for the ground of their errancy. They were not strictly speaking 'refuted,' in the sense of being traced back to a mere mistake. Instead, they were acknowledged to constitute a necessary moment in the correct operation of the economy of cognition. The 'errors' arose solely due to the failure to recognize the limits of human cognition.

For Hegel, Kant's distinction between the economies of human cognition and truth collapses. Like Kant, Hegel traces the positions of the history of philosophy back to their ground in reason. Unlike Kant, however, Hegel does not conclude that the contradictions of historical difference arise through the faulty application of reason. Instead, he takes it that these contradictions are immanent to the economy of truth, and they are 'refuted' only inasmuch as they remain one-sided.

I take it that this continuity between Kant and Hegel helps to explain Hegel's motivation for pursuing his thesis of a parallel between the categories of the *Logic* and the *VGP*. It is not a doctrine which emerges from nowhere, but rather one which emerges from Hegel's Kantian heritage. It is surely no accident that the relation between the *CPR* and the history of thought on the one hand, and the *Logic* and the

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<sup>270</sup> Karin de Boer understands Hegel's notion of refutation as a form of 'immanent critique,' and suggests that it has its heritage in the dialectic of the *CPR*. See Karin de Boer, 'Hegel's Conception of Immanent Critique: Its Sources, Extent and Limit,' in *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. by Karin de Boer and Ruth Sonderegger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 83-100.

history of thought on the other, is reflected in the differences between Kant and Hegel at the level of their *a priori* philosophical projects.

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Hegel's *Science of Logic* can be understood to fulfil the role of an account of historical difference—the multiplicity of philosophical systems—without appealing to the concept of error. Like Kant, Hegel shows that core problems in the history of philosophy can be traced back to the structure of *a priori* reason. Yet Hegel conceives of a way of integrating these differences into the economy of truth itself—such that this history is never anything other than a manifestation of truth. This was the question he had failed to answer in his early *Differenzschrift*, as his solution only became possible with his mature understanding of the idea as a self-developing process.

We have seen that for Hegel, the operation of ‘refutation’ is no longer understood as an external act carried out by the philosopher. Instead, the only genuine refutation of a philosophical system consists in identifying its ‘highest principle,’ and demonstrating that it logically gives way to a higher position in which it is preserved. It is thus demonstrated to be a necessary moment in the development of the idea, and thus true—and yet is at the same time refuted as a merely *one-sided* account of the idea.

As such, the transition from the *Logic of Essence* to the *Logic of the Concept* constitutes the only genuine refutation of Spinoza. Yet at this point, we are confronted with a pressing question. For Hegel must offer some explanation as to why Spinoza should have remained at this ‘one-sided’ conception of the absolute. What led Spinoza to posit the absolute as the ‘highest principle’ of his philosophy? If Spinoza’s system contains within it the ‘immanent dialectic’ by means of which it is refuted, why does Spinoza himself not recognize this? If Spinoza’s own thought is nothing but a manifestation of eternal reason, according to what *defect* does he remain at this underdeveloped conception of the idea?

In his own immanent critique of special metaphysics, Kant was able to appeal to the disparity between the economy of reason and the economy of truth to explain this delay. It was necessary that philosophy should ‘fall into’ the errors generated by

the misapplication of pure reason before it could recognise the limits of reason, such that dogmatic philosophy necessarily preceded Kant's own critical philosophy.<sup>271</sup>

In Hegel's case, however, there can be no such appeal to a disjunction between reason and truth. For the 'highest principles' of the philosophical tradition are not mere errors awaiting dissolution, but moments of truth itself. Expressed in Kantian terms, we can ask: what *force* is responsible for this arrestation of the development of eternal reason?

We cannot expect to find an answer to this question in the *Logic* itself. For the *Logic* is a presentation of pure thought in its eternal truth.<sup>272</sup> Instead, we must turn once more to the *VGP*. For it is here that Hegel explains the particular nature of the 'externality' of history to the idea.

### 3.9 The Incubation of the Idea

In part one of this chapter, we saw that Hegel poses two distinct questions in the introduction to his *VGP*. On the one hand, he asks why it is that, given the intrinsic unity of reason, the history of philosophy incorporates multiple, apparently mutually exclusive philosophical systems. We referred to this as the question of 'historical difference.' On the other hand, he asks why it is that philosophy appears in the form of a development *in time*. This is the question of the 'incubation time' of philosophy—the question as to the temporal lapse which separates the different systems of the history of philosophy, and ultimately the question as to the *delayed arrival* of his own system.

This latter question is the one with which we found ourselves confronted at the end of the previous section. According to what necessity did Spinoza come to a standstill at the level of the absolute? The same question can be posed of any thinker within the tradition—what 'force' intervened to arrest the timeless self-development

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<sup>271</sup> See sections 2.4 & 2.14 above.

<sup>272</sup> Macdonald thus notes there is 'no logic of failure' in Hegel's *Logic* by means of which he might explain why thought should come to a halt at a particular point in its development. I take it that there is no place for such a logic of failure in the *Logic*, precisely because it is an account of pure thought. Instead, we must turn to the *VGP* to answer this question. Iain Macdonald, 'The Concept and Its Double: Power and Powerlessness in Hegel's Subjective Logic' in *Hegel's Theory of the Subject*, ed. by David Gray Carlson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 82.

of the idea at a particular stage, causing a subordinate category to be elevated to the status of the highest principle?

In the 1820 manuscript, he writes: ‘the idea, thought in its repose, is indeed timeless.’<sup>273</sup> The question is thus how, if philosophy is nothing other than the cognition of the eternal, timeless idea, philosophy itself should come to be manifest over the course of a history, characterized by temporality.

Hegel’s response to this question is to claim that the history of philosophy is nothing other than the idea in its concrete existence in the external element of time.<sup>274</sup> It is at this point that the relation of the *VGP* to Hegel’s broader system comes into play. At the end of the *Logic*, Hegel argues that, having posited itself as the absolute unity of the pure concept, the absolute idea passes over into *nature*.<sup>275</sup> Having developed thus far at a purely logical level, prior to space and time, the idea now ‘freely releases’ itself into the external elements of space and time.<sup>276</sup>

Hegel never wrote a full ‘systematic’ account of the idea’s passage through the element of external existence. Nonetheless, in his *Encyclopaedia*, he shows how the idea first determines itself as nature, before passing over into the realm of spirit. It is over the course of this externalization that the idea takes on *concrete* shape. His *Philosophy of Right* and lectures on the philosophy of world history, art and religion all constitute moments of his account of the passage of the idea through the realm of spirit. At the level of spirit, the self-realization of the idea takes the form of a *history*, over the course of which human institutions are gradually transformed into instantiations of the freedom proper to the absolute idea.

In accordance with the positioning of philosophy as the final form of absolute spirit in the *Encyclopaedia*, the *VGP* constitute the final moment of the idea’s passage through external existence. Nonetheless, we will suggest that Hegel considers the development of the history of philosophy to run in parallel with spirit’s development in its other modes.

Inasmuch as this development unfolds in the element of time, each successive stage is a reflection of its own age, as the stage of development that the idea has

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<sup>273</sup> *VGP*, p. 30.

<sup>274</sup> *VGP*, p. 30-31.

<sup>275</sup> *SL*, p. 843.

<sup>276</sup> On this notion of ‘release,’ see Christopher Lauer, *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 163 ff.

reached in its concrete existence. Hegel thus writes that ‘precisely because it is a presentation of a particular stage in the development, every philosophy belongs to its age, and is caught in its limitation.’<sup>277</sup>

Hegel thus claims that we cannot ‘blame’ past philosophers for lacking the higher determinations of the idea, because these determinations did not yet belong to their stage in the ‘development [*Bildung*]’ of spirit.<sup>278</sup> It is only once the idea has completed its passage through time that the idea can become manifest as the ‘highest ontological principle.’

Stephen Houlgate notes that for Hegel, in distinction to Kant, the categories of thought are not transhistorical. In other words, they are not universally accessible to human thought at any point over its history, but instead only gradually become manifest over the course of this history. He notes that for Hegel:

human thought generates the basic categories over a period of time, so they are not all to be found—or at least not all given the same prominence—in every epoch of history or in every culture. Consequently, although Hegel believes that all the categories discussed in the *Logic* will be familiar to the inhabitants of our post-Reformation Western world, they would not necessarily all be familiar to ancient Egyptians or Greeks.<sup>279</sup>

What is the nature of the ‘limitation’ which applies to the ancient Egyptians or Greeks, but not to subjects of the contemporary world? I take it that for Hegel, the idea cannot be recognized as the ‘highest’ principle, the fundamental structure of being, until it has fully *permeated* the totality of spirit’s reality. In other words, the ‘freedom’ proper to the idea cannot be recognized by thought as the fundamental structure of being until it has been realized in the institutions of spirit’s world. Indeed, it is only with the freedom proper to the highest forms of art, religion and political institutions that the idea has demonstrated itself to be the highest principle of spirit’s being.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> VGP, p. 48.

<sup>278</sup> VGP, p. 40-41.

<sup>279</sup> Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic: From Being to Infinity* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), p. 13.

<sup>280</sup> Hegel suggests this when he notes that the inhabitants of ancient Greece and Rome lacked an understanding of the freedom of spirit. They did not know that *man is born free*. In this passage, Hegel associates the emergence of this consciousness of freedom with the emergence of Christianity. I take it

Hegel develops this idea in the final chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* on Absolute Knowing. There, he claims that, when the immediate unity of thought and being is initially posited in the sphere of religion, spirit ‘recoils in horror’ from the abstract unity. For the earliest forms of religion—the religion of light—spirit does not recognize the animating principle of its own subjectivity, instead being confronted with a mere ‘*self-less* substantiality.’<sup>281</sup> He claims that ‘only after it has externalized this individuality in the sphere of culture, thereby giving it an existence, and establishing it throughout the whole of existence’<sup>282</sup> can it affirm the unity of thought and being.

This account confronts us with multiple problems. Above all, it would be necessary to show how the history of philosophy, as the history of the idea thinking itself, correlates with the other branches of history—world history, art and religion. Such a synthesis of the different ‘modes’ of spirit’s historicity would clearly be an immense undertaking. That Hegel should not have fulfilled the task at an empirical level need not be taken to imply its impossibility.<sup>283</sup>

It is not our task here to examine the argument that Hegel presents for this idea of the passage of the idea through time, nor to give an extensive account of it. Rather, our question is how it allows Hegel to respond to the question concerning the incubation time of philosophy.

Hegel’s account of the idea’s passage through time implies that the finite thinkers of the history of philosophy necessarily *fall short* of an adequate grasp of the absolute idea. It is only once this process reaches a close that Hegel’s own systematic account of the idea can be realised. Yovel thus writes:

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that Hegel’s point is that the freedom which characterizes the concept cannot be thought as the highest principle of being until it has been actualised at the level of spirit’s concrete existence. In this case, the conditions of this actualisation involve both political and religious institutions. See Hegel, VGP, p. 36-7.

<sup>281</sup> PS, p. 489.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> At the same time, we might wonder why the institutions which constitute the conditions of accession to Hegel’s philosophical system should take time to emerge. Hegel writes ‘Concerning the slowness of world spirit, one must consider 1. that it need not hurry, that it has *plenty of time*, - 1000 years before you are like a day – it has plenty of time, precisely because it is itself outside of time, and eternal.’ VGP, p. 35. I take it that Hegel’s point is that, while world spirit is infinite, the individuals who carry out the ‘labour of history’ are themselves finite; yet from the perspective of world spirit, this passage through history is ultimately negligible.

‘From the viewpoint of their historical sequence, systems of philosophy are properly refuted in that one accepts the element of partial truth contained in them while developing their logical implications to the point where their inconsistencies—due to the partiality and one-sidedness of their governing principle — are brought to light. This calls for transcending the system towards a more satisfactory one that preserves the basic ideas of the former in a more coherent form. This process continues as long as the final system of philosophy — the synoptic synthesis of ‘absolute knowledge’ — is not attained. However, when the final system emerges, we gain a new and better viewpoint for refuting former philosophical theories.’<sup>284</sup>

This ‘better viewpoint’ is ‘better’ precisely because it is no longer encumbered with the epistemological limitations imposed by spirit’s passage through time. Hegel’s own system could only emerge once this sequence of refutation was complete at the level of concrete history. The arrival of Hegel’s system is thus not ‘belated,’ but presupposes everything which went before it. Nonetheless, from the vantage point of this system, the epistemological shortfall proper to spirit in its history is overcome, and a complete account of the idea can be developed, allowing for a fully rational reconstruction of philosophy’s past.

It should be noted that *Hegel’s account is perfectly consistent here*. His account of the idea’s passage through time allows him to close the explanatory circle, answering the question of incubation. Yet for the purposes of our thesis, the important point is that he is only able to resolve the question concerning incubation by appeal to a form of *epistemological shortfall*. While this does not involve any appeal to ‘error’—for there is no *false* content in the history of philosophy—it nonetheless means that the space of historicity is once again opened up by the epistemological difference. It is once again as a result of a form of epistemological shortfall—albeit of a very particular kind—that characterises thought’s historicity.

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<sup>284</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel, ‘Substance Without Spirit – On Hegel’s Critique of Spinoza’ in *Spinoza : His Thought and Work. Entretiens in Jerusalem, 6-9 September 1977*, ed. by Nathan Rotenstreich and Norma Schneider, (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1983), p. 72.



### 3.10 Negation and Time: Historical Difference and Incubation

Hegel is thus able to answer the question concerning historical difference without appeal to the idea of error or an epistemological defect. Each successive system in the history of philosophy is an instantiation of the self-development of the idea. There is thus nothing ‘false’ in the history of philosophy except for the elevation of limited categories to the status of totality. The *Science of Logic* can be taken to provide the immanent principle of self-differentiation underlying the multiplicity of difference systems.

Nonetheless, Hegel cannot explain the incubation of philosophy without appeal to the idea of some form of epistemological shortfall. This does not constitute an inconsistency in the context of Hegel’s system. Nonetheless, it means that, like Descartes and Kant, Hegel ultimately traces historicity back to a form of epistemological defect. Certainly, this defect is not a ‘mistake’ on the part of individual thinkers within the philosophical tradition. The absolute idea cannot be articulated by philosophy until such time as the idea has completed its becoming at the level of its immediate existence. No philosopher can ‘leap over’ their own time. As such, we cannot talk of Spinoza, Plato or Parmenides’ ‘failing’ to attain to the level of the absolute idea—for it was structurally beyond their reach. Indeed, it is only through their thought that it gradually became manifest. In each case, the epistemological shortfall is a consequence of the idea’s passage through time.

I take it that this disjunction between Hegel’s accounts of historical difference and incubation accounts for the fundamental division in the reception of Hegel’s thought among philosophers seeking to take historicity seriously. On the one hand, Hegel is celebrated for his refusal to denounce philosophy’s past as a mere succession of errors, instead allowing us to conceive of this history as a becoming of reason itself. On the other, Hegel’s detractors suggest that he fails to take historicity seriously, ultimately subordinating it to logic.

I take it that this reflects a fundamental ambiguity in the relation between *negativity* and *time* in Hegel’s system. Jean Hyppolite famously noted that:

This passage from history to absolute knowledge, the passage from the temporal to the eternal, is Hegelianism's most obscure dialectical synthesis; history is self-creating, like the Logos, but this creation is there temporal, here eternal.<sup>285</sup>

Negativity is not refuted—such that historical difference is always preserved, albeit as sublated. The space of history is not a ‘space of error,’ a mere accident into which spirit happens to fall—a space beyond the absolute from which philosophy must liberate itself by means of one final ‘*Handgriff*’ which sets it on the ‘royal road’ to science. It is not a ‘foolish detour [*törichte Umweg*],’<sup>286</sup> taken by spirit, but rather a path which it *must* follow, a necessary moment in its own becoming. *Pace* Descartes and Kant, there is no ‘method’ whose discovery might cut this process short. Time is nothing other than the becoming of the idea at the level of concrete existence.

Nonetheless, in his mature system, Hegel takes it that time is not the ultimate ‘horizon’ of truth. Rather, he claims that the history of thought proves to have been a process in which the logical negation immanent to truth works itself out in the element of time. Spirit’s being in time is thus still the product of an epistemological shortfall, albeit of a very specific kind, in which the idea repeatedly falls short of itself, before finally ‘thinking itself’ as the absolute idea in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, thereby transcending the bounds of time.

In the 1819 synopsis of the *VGP*, Hegel repeatedly refers to the idea’s passage through its concrete existence as its ‘fall into time.’<sup>287</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger takes this notion of a ‘fall into time’ to be paradigmatic of the metaphysical concept of time.<sup>288</sup> I take it that Heidegger’s point is that Hegel’s position ultimately implies that truth is achieved through a withdrawal from the element of time. The passage through time is a fall from truth—not in the sense of a fall into error, but rather, as a fall into a mode of thought which repeatedly falls short of truth. Even where this fall was absolutely necessary, his own philosophical system begins by leaving spirit’s long immersion in the element of time behind it.

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<sup>285</sup> Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, trans. by Leonard Lawlor and Amit Sen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 188.

<sup>286</sup> *VGP*, p. 116.

<sup>287</sup> He claims that it is necessary that ‘thought must fall into time’ [*daß das Denken in die Zeit fallen muß*].’ *VGP*, p. 112.

<sup>288</sup> See *BT*, p. 480 ff.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes: ‘spirit necessarily appears in time, and it appears in time just so long as it has not grasped its pure concept, i.e. has not annulled time.’<sup>289</sup> This passage through time, along with its annulment, is necessary, and cannot be circumvented. Nonetheless, it is ultimately overcome—making Hegel’s philosophical system the *ultimate*, final system, with which the history of philosophy draws to a close. In doing so, Hegel’s system overcomes the epistemological limitations of past systems—thereby liberating spirit from a history in which its knowledge of truth was always only partial and one-sided. The space of this history was thus ultimately a product of a form of epistemological difference — albeit one which could not be leapt over, but instead had to be passed through as a necessary moment in the self-manifestation of truth.

### 3.11 Conclusion to Chapter Three: Hegel’s Challenge to Philosophy

In the above, we argued that the idea as it is presented in the *Science of Logic* can be understood to provide a kind of ‘transcendental ground’ of historical difference, without any appeal to error or epistemological shortfall. By asserting a parallel between the *Logic* and the *VGP*, Hegel attempts to show that every moment in the history of philosophy corresponds to a necessary moment in the immanent self-development of the idea, by way of an extension and reversal of Kant’s project of an *a priori* grounding of the history of special metaphysics in the *CPR*.

The *Logic* itself provides us with no explanation of the incubation of philosophical systems—the question as to why philosophy should unfold over the course of time. We saw that Hegel accounts for this in his *VGP*—but in doing so, reintroduces the idea of an epistemological shortfall.<sup>290</sup> This reliance on an epistemological shortfall does not undermine the internal coherence of Hegel’s system. For our purposes, however, it means that Hegel’s thought does not entirely escape the connection between historicity and epistemological difference. As such, while Hegel’s develops a critique of the Cartesian and Kantian connection between

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<sup>289</sup> PS, p. 487.

<sup>290</sup> This shortfall is not merely epistemological, but might equally be said to be political and religious in nature. As we saw above, for Hegel, the cognition of truth also requires the existence of the institutions necessary to the proper realisation of human freedom.

error and historicity, he nonetheless ends up closer to them than is initially apparent—for historicity once again unfolds in the space of epistemological difference.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Hegel's great achievement is to have shown how philosophy can approach historical difference not simply in terms of error, but rather as a positive dimension of truth. For Hegel, in distinction to both Descartes and Kant, the past is not simply left behind and dismissed as a product of human thought's tendency towards error. Rather, Hegel defends a position according to which this history is the necessary product of the fact that truth cannot be given all at once 'like a shot from a pistol,'<sup>291</sup> but must rather emerge over the course of a long history.

This allowed Hegel to take philosophy's past seriously in a way that has rarely been matched in the history of philosophy. For him, the history of philosophy was no mere 'sub-discipline' of philosophy, but rather a necessary moment in his system. The conflicts which characterise historical difference were no longer seen as grounds to dismiss any serious philosophical consideration of the past; instead, Hegel's position suggests an obligation to take account of this difference.

Furthermore, his approach constitutes a challenge to philosophy which has rarely been adequately met. Many of Hegel's critics have pointed to what they consider the reductive side of his approach to historicity. Yet for the most part, these same critics have lapsed back into a position which simply dismisses this engagement with the past as a legitimate philosophical enterprise, preferring instead the kind of clean break advocated by Descartes. The same can be said of commentators sympathetic to Hegel's project, yet who prefer to dismiss his claims concerning the parallel between his logic and the history of philosophy, thereby neglecting one of the most crucial questions raised by his system.

In this way, Hegel's alleged 'reduction' of the past to a moment of his system has in many quarters been countered with a sheer indifference to the past. By contrast, Hegel always understood the past in terms of its truth. In spite of objections to the allegedly reductive nature of his readings, his *VGP* undoubtedly constitute the richest and most extensive engagement with philosophy's past in the entire Western

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<sup>291</sup> PS, p. 16.

canon. To think philosophy's history in Hegel's wake must mean rising to this challenge, and not simply reverting to the idea of the past a series of errant 'opinions.'

## Chapter 4. Heidegger's Errant History of Being

### 4.1 Introduction

In the final chapter, we turn to an account of the status of philosophy's past in the thought of Martin Heidegger. The question of historicity is a constant theme from his earliest writings onward. Yet it is first in the years following the publication of *Being and Time* that Heidegger developed a stringent conception of the relation of philosophy to its own past. With his notion of the 'history of being,' developed in a series of writings beginning in the 1930s, Heidegger aims to take seriously the idea that truth itself has a history, while also overcoming the perceived pitfalls of Hegel's onto-logical approach.

We will see that, in contrast to Hegel, Heidegger returns to the idea of a connection between historicity and untruth. Nonetheless, in distinction to Descartes and Kant, Heidegger no longer understands untruth to be a product of epistemological difference. Instead, it is treated as a moment of *ontological difference*. It is thus not thought which errs, but rather being itself—such that being must be understood to be intrinsically historical. In a position that clearly echoes Hegel's, for Heidegger, the history of philosophy is not merely a history of thought, but also a history of being. Yet by reintroducing the connection between history and errancy, Heidegger attempts to think a form of historicity which exceeds the economy of Hegelian reason. The history of thought is thus once again understood in terms of *errancy*—and yet this errancy does not constitute a falling short of truth, but the very essence of the truth of being.

In part one of this chapter, we give an account of the key features of Heidegger's idea of a 'history of being.' We show how Heidegger treats the history of thought not in terms of an epistemological shortfall, but rather as a product of ontological difference. We then consider how this coheres with his project of a critique of metaphysical thought.

In part two, we then show how this is reflected in his concept of untruth. Specifically, we will see that Heidegger understands the historicity of thought not in terms of error as a shortfall from truth, but rather as the product of an interplay

between two forms of untruth immanent to the economy of truth itself. We argue that Heidegger's apparently paradoxical claim that 'the essence of truth is untruth' must be understood against the background of the connection between untruth and historicity, such that it can be interpreted to mean: 'truth itself has a history.'

At the same time, we show how Heidegger's distinction between the first and other beginnings ultimately sees him subordinate the ontological question concerning philosophy's past to a Nietzschean ethical concern for the future. We explore this further in the conclusion to this thesis, with specific reference to the recently published *Black Notebooks*.

## **Part One: The History of Being**

### **4.2 Prelude: Destruction in *Being and Time***

We can only understand the later Heidegger's approach to the history of philosophy by keeping in mind its relation to the question which dominates his entire philosophical project from his earliest to his final writings, the question concerning being. While he always considered his readings in the history of philosophy to be an indispensable component of his renewal of the question concerning being, his understanding of its significance underwent a crucial shift in his later writings, beginning in the 1930s.

From his very earliest writings, Heidegger explicitly argued for the need for philosophy to engage with its own history. Throughout the 1920s, he wrote and lectured extensively on the history of philosophy, and many of the key ideas in *Being and Time* were developed over the course of these engagements with the tradition, above all his Marburg lectures on Aristotle from the summer semester of 1924.<sup>292</sup>

*Being and Time* itself maintains an ambiguous relation to the history of philosophy.<sup>293</sup> Within the work, Heidegger distinguishes between the analytic of

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<sup>292</sup> GA 18, *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie*; translated as *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* trans. by Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>293</sup> In the following, we will not be concerned with Heidegger's account of Dasein's historicity in the final chapters of the published work, instead concentrating on his account of the 'destruction' of the Western tradition. In so doing, we follow Heidegger's own suggestion in the late essay *Time and*

Dasein and the ‘destruction’ of the history of ontology—a task which was to be carried out in the final part of the work, which famously remained unpublished. As such, while Heidegger insists on the necessity of an engagement with the tradition, much of the analysis of Dasein presented in the work unfolds without any explicit reference to the history of philosophy.<sup>294</sup> Indeed, the work is often read as a kind of transcendental account of Dasein in a Kantian vein, which provides the ultimate horizon for the question of the meaning of being in general.<sup>295</sup>

Recall that for Kant, the critique of human reason provided an ahistorical, timelessly valid horizon against which the questions of metaphysics were to be resolved once and for all. Similarly, it would seem that the analysis of Dasein’s temporality in *Being and Time* is intended to establish the horizon of a new fundamental ontology that would finally reveal the genuine nature of being. With this ‘analytic’ framework in place, fundamental ontology would no more need to make reference to the history of philosophy than did Kant’s critical philosophy.

Heidegger’s account of the ‘destruction’ of the history of ontology in the introduction to *Being and Time* certainly goes a long way towards undermining the plausibility of such a reading. There, he treats the ‘task of destroying the history of ontology’ as the second part of the ‘twofold task in working out the question of being,’ apparently putting it on equal footing with the analytic of Dasein.<sup>296</sup> In spite of the fact it was never carried out in the originally envisaged form, it is clear that Heidegger considers the fulfilment of the task to be a necessary condition of any future ontology, claiming that ‘the question of being does not achieve its true concreteness until we have carried through the process of destroying the ontological tradition.’<sup>297</sup>

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*Being* that it is this latter element which anticipates his own later position. He writes: ‘Because one everywhere represents the destiny of Being only as history, and history only as a kind of occurrence, one tries in vain to interpret this occurrence in terms of what was said in *Being and Time* about the historicity of man (Dasein) (not of Being). By contrast, the only possible way to anticipate the latter thought on the destiny of Being from the perspective of *Being and Time* is to think through what was presented in *Being and Time* about the dismantling of the ontological doctrine of the Being of beings.’ Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 9.

<sup>294</sup> Significantly, the published portion of the work does contain an extensive engagement with Descartes, in which Heidegger contrasts his conception of worldhood with Descartes conception of the world as ‘res extensa’ (BT, p. 122. ff), and with Hegel’s concept of time (BT, p. 480. ff).

<sup>295</sup> See BT, p. 36 ff.

<sup>296</sup> BT, p. 36 ff.

<sup>297</sup> BT, p. 49.



It would certainly be possible to read his later writings on the history of philosophy as his attempt to carry out the task which was to have occupied the unpublished portion of *BT*, a work which remains structurally incomplete. This would be to move too quickly, however, assuming a stricter continuity between *BT* and the later works than is justified. In fact, while Heidegger consistently remains committed to the necessity of an engagement with the tradition, his reasons for doing so undergo a fundamental shift. A brief consideration of the form of necessity which Heidegger attributes to the project of destruction in *BT* will help bring into relief what is at stake in his mature notion of the history of being.

In *BT*, Heidegger emphasizes that the task of destruction is not a *negative* undertaking, tasked with ‘shaking off the ontological tradition.’<sup>298</sup> In other words, it is not a matter of clearing away the ‘errors’ of the past in order to make way for truth. The only ‘negative’ component of destruction takes aim not at the past, but at the *present*, and its tendency to interpret the past in a rigid manner shaped by the dominant philosophical problems of the day, or to treat it as being of merely ‘historical’ interest.

Instead, Heidegger claims that the task of destruction is the retrieval of the ‘primordial experiences’<sup>299</sup> which shaped the thinking of the figures of the tradition. Beneath the surface of our received interpretations of the major texts of the history of philosophy lie a series of engagements which provide vital clues to the task of fundamental ontology. Heidegger insists that these primordial experiences can only be retrieved if we dispense with modern historiological practices, which tend toward mere doxography, and allow our readings to be guided by the question concerning being.<sup>300</sup>

Heidegger thus seems to come close to advocating a form of *historia sapientiae*, according to which the history of philosophy constitutes a series of encounters with truth.<sup>301</sup> While the resulting accounts remain limited, they are an

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<sup>298</sup> *BT*, p. 44.

<sup>299</sup> *BT*, p. 44. Heidegger gives a more detailed outline of this idea in the opening sections of the 1924 Aristotle lectures, where he claims that such experiences can only be retrieved by studying the ‘conceptuality’ [*Begrifflichkeit*] of Aristotle’s concepts. See Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* trans. by Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 4 ff and p. 11 ff.

<sup>300</sup> ‘The destruction of the history of ontology is essentially bound up with the way the question of Being is formulated, and it is possible only within such a formulation.’ *BT*, p. 44.

<sup>301</sup> On *historia sapientiae*, see section 0.3 above.

indispensable resource to the philosopher seeking to establish a new relation to truth. It is by way of a repetition of these primordial experiences or encounters with being that the conditions arise in which the question concerning being can be posed anew.

As such, it is certainly clear that in *Being and Time*, Heidegger distances himself decisively from the tradition of *historia stultitiae*. The history of philosophy is not a collection of errors which must be cleared away, allowing ontology to finally be put on a secure footing. Moreover, he explicitly claims that the analytic of Dasein alone is not sufficient to allow us to adequately restate the question concerning being. Instead, the ground for Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology can only be prepared by way of a 'positive' retrieval of philosophy's past.

Nonetheless, it is not clear that Heidegger actually succeeds in adequately motivating his claim concerning the *necessity* of this destruction in *BT*. Granted that the 'primordial experiences' of the philosophers of the tradition provide a kind of propaedeutic to the question concerning being, Heidegger nowhere demonstrates that the project of deconstruction constitutes a *necessary precondition* of adequately posing the question concerning being.

This point can be clarified by considering an example. In the introduction, Heidegger argues that Kant is the 'first and only person' to have investigated the dimension of temporality which *BT* demonstrates to be the horizon of the question concerning being. The reading of Kant Heidegger gestures toward here was eventually worked out in his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Certainly, we can see that Heidegger's reading of Kant in this work goes some way towards clarifying his own position in *Being and Time*. One might even argue that, although his reading of Kant remains highly controversial, it lends some weight to his own position, by illustrating that his own conception of temporality has precursors within the tradition, and because it allows us to discover a dimension of Kant's project that had previously gone unnoticed.

What is not clear, however, is that his reading of Kant has any implications for the project of a fundamental ontology which were not already made apparent by the analytic of Dasein presented in *Being and Time*. Indeed, in a slight variation of Bennett's objection to Kant's transcendental dialectic,<sup>302</sup> we might ask whether

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<sup>302</sup> See section 2.10 above.

*destruction* is truly a necessary condition of fundamental ontology, since the analytic of Dasein alone has already established the fundamental horizon from within which the question of being is to be posed. In any case, it is clear that much of the reception of *BT* has unfolded in precisely this ‘ahistorical’ spirit—while most interpretations at least pay lip service to the importance of the destruction of the history of ontology, it is nonetheless treated as secondary to the analytic of Dasein.

There is another sense, however, in which this necessity is limited. This becomes apparent if we ask whether the relation between destruction and fundamental ontology implies a need for fundamental ontology to provide any account of the *historical difference* that characterises the tradition. Granted that the tradition constitutes a kind of indispensable resource for Heidegger’s enquiries, is there any sense in which a fundamental ontology will need to take account of the actual content of the history of Western philosophy, in the way in which Hegel (and to a limited extent, Kant) did so?

*BT* does not answer this question. This is perhaps because, in spite of the central place it has come to occupy in Heidegger’s reception, it remains a ‘preparatory’ work, with the task of providing the background necessary to raise the question of being anew. It is only in the subsequent works that Heidegger would turn explicitly to the question of being itself, and the related notion of the history of being. At this stage, Heidegger still envisages the next stage of his project as the development of a fundamental ontology; in the next section, we will see that he abandoned this term for essential reasons.

If in the context of *Being and Time*, the engagement with the history of philosophy seems to be, at most, a necessary precursor to the posing of the question of being, his later writings constitute a substantial advance on this position. There, the engagement with the tradition is no longer treated as a kind of propaedeutic to ontology; instead, to pose the question concerning being and to engage with the history of philosophy become two inseparable dimensions of one and the same task.

### **4.3 The History of Being**

The idea of the ‘history of being’ [*Seynsgeschichte*] first emerges in Heidegger’s texts from the early 1930s, and remains a constant theme down to his final published

writings. Like most of the key terms in the later Heidegger's thought, there is no single passage or text in which one can locate a comprehensive statement of the nature of the history of being. Rather, it is a notion whose import only gradually becomes apparent through the complex weave of interrelated terms which populate his later texts.

Rather than follow the series of closely related figures by means of which Heidegger gradually brings the idea of the 'history of being' into view, we begin with a highly schematic overview. We will then spend much of the remainder of this chapter justifying and clarifying this schematic account, showing how it can be used to explain a series of key features of the later Heidegger's thought—and above all, his account of *untruth*.

Let us begin, as Heidegger so often does in his own readings, with the very form of the word, *Seynsgeschichte*. The conjunction of these two terms, being and history, in a single word already announces a radical break with the attitude of the philosophical tradition towards historicity. Derrida emphasizes this radicality, claiming that prior to Heidegger, 'never in the history of philosophy has there been a radical affirmation of an essential link between being and history. Ontology has always been constituted through a gesture of wrenching itself away from historicity and temporality.'<sup>303</sup>

Indeed, we have seen in the preceding chapters that, throughout much of the Western philosophical tradition, historicity is treated as a product of thought's *distance* from being. We suggested that in such cases, the aim of philosophical method was to overcome the distance separating thought from being, thereby overcoming historicity. In attaining to a genuine relation of 'correspondence' to being, thought leaves its historicity behind it. Even in Hegel's case, where the history of philosophy is taken to reflect the very nature of being, nonetheless, his systematic ontology is ultimately attained precisely by way of an 'overcoming' of this history.

We saw above that Heidegger's position in *BT* remains ambiguous. By contrast, the later Heidegger's notion of *Seynsgeschichte* suggests that being and history in some sense belong together. This immediately calls for two qualifications:

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<sup>303</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p, 21.

1) *The history of being is not independent of our thinking relation to being.*

There can be no history, in other words, without Dasein, just as there is no truth without Dasein (and we will see in the second half of this chapter that these two claims go hand in hand).<sup>304</sup> Rather, like Hegel before him, Heidegger diverges from the tradition here by suggesting that within the relation between thought and being, thought's historicity is not a measure of its *distance from being*; in fact, as we shall see in more detail below, for Heidegger, it is only by way of a certain *openness to being* that humanity becomes genuinely historical. It can do so only by 'co-responding' (*Ent-sprechen*) to being; and the forgetting of being goes hand in hand with the encroaching ahistoricity of the modern technological age.

2) *Heidegger's history of being is not simply identical with history as we ordinarily understand it, nor with the history of philosophy.* Heidegger goes to great lengths to distinguish the history of being from all forms of history as it is ordinarily understood. Peter Warnack notes that in *Time and Being*, he thus goes as far as to deny that *Seynsgeschichte* is anything 'historical [*geschichtlich*].'<sup>305</sup>

Indeed, the history of being bears little resemblance to history in the sense in which we ordinarily understand it. According to Heidegger, the discipline of history, or 'historiology',<sup>306</sup> is generally concerned to explain the world-historical events in causal terms. Certainly, the form which this causality takes differs radically from the causality of the natural sciences, such that historians have their own specific methodologies and means of explanation.<sup>307</sup> Nonetheless, Heidegger claims that this insistence on causal explanation leads to a misapprehension of the genuine nature of historicity.

Applied to the history of philosophy, this results in the familiar chronological stories which are told about how a philosopher relates to their forebears and

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<sup>304</sup> See e.g. ET, p. 127. It is important to note that Dasein is not simply identical with the human being for Heidegger. Above all, it should be emphasized Dasein's truth is not Nietzsche's 'all-too-human' anthropocentric truth, which he makes entirely contingent on the particular evolution of the human animal. Rather, Heidegger is far closer to Hegel than to Nietzsche on this point – inasmuch as for Hegel, too, the structure of the subject can be understood to transcend the 'merely' human, constituting a universal, transcendental ground for human thought. Heidegger's Dasein, too, must be understood as a transcendental structure which human beings 'take over.'

<sup>305</sup> Peter Warnack, 'The History of Being,' in *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, ed. by Bret W. Davis (Durham: Acumen, 2010) p. 155.

<sup>306</sup> *Historie*, as distinct from *Geschichte*; we follow Vallega-Neu in translating the term as 'historiology.' See CP, p. 115 ff.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

contemporaries. For example, the history of German idealism is generally taken to commence with Kant, whose critical project emerges from the impasse between rationalism and empiricism. The classical variant of this story explains how Kant's project then gave rise to Fichte's 'subjective' idealism and Schelling's 'objective' idealism, which were then unified in Hegel's system. In more recent years, this story has been challenged, as Fichte and Schelling have been demonstrated to constitute more than mere steppingstones to Hegel's position, with some commentators arguing that they surpass his position, and more attention has been paid to supposedly 'marginal' figures.

Nonetheless, even as the specifics of this history are challenged, the essential mode of explanation remains the same, attempting to establish patterns of influence and disagreement, and assessing relative merits of each successive thinker.

Heidegger does not deny the legitimacy of such historiology. Nonetheless, he suggests that beneath the surface of the apparent continuity, there are ruptures which cannot be explained according to the logic of such stories. Even if we were to narrate such a causal history of Western philosophy from the earliest Greek thinkers down to the present day, this story would remain structurally incomplete. For this history can only be fully understood by references to shifts in the background meaning of Being which cannot be grounded in such causal sequences, but only by reference to a certain excess over such narratives.

For Heidegger, the only way of explaining this 'deeper' history is to attend to the 'epochal' shifts in the meaning of being. These shifts are not merely a matter of 'our' understanding of being, but rather are intrinsic to being itself. Precisely because they exceed all causal explanation, they tend to escape our attention; they can never be explained by making use of the methodological resources of historiology, however sophisticated, since they are strictly speaking nothing 'historical,' but are withdrawn from all historiological causality.

As such, the history of being is not a history in the ordinary sense of the term. Rather, the historical difference proper to Heidegger's history of being can only be understood in terms of the difference between being and beings. The question of this 'ontological' difference is the question on which Heidegger's entire philosophical project is centred. In the following sections, we will see that Heidegger traces historical [*geschichtlich*] difference back to the ontological difference.

#### 4.4 Ontological Difference and Ontotheology

We noted above that Heidegger's approach to the history of philosophy can only be understood if we keep in mind the single question underlying his entire philosophical project, the question concerning being. In the introduction to *BT*, he defines this in terms of the task of stating the difference between being and beings, the so-called ontological difference.

The ontological difference is Heidegger's name for the fact that 'the being of beings 'is' not itself a being.'<sup>308</sup> According to Heidegger, much of the Western tradition has tended to define the being of beings by reference to some 'ultimate' being which constitutes the ground or 'highest cause' of all that is. Thus in the medieval era, God is understood to be the ground of all beings, such that beings are defined as *ens creatum*. Similarly, in the modern era beginning with Descartes, beings are defined as objects that stand in relation to thinking subjects; and subjectivity is thus treated as the 'ground' of the determinacy of all possible beings.

Heidegger refers to this practice of understanding being as a being which grounds all beings as 'ontotheology.' As Iain Thompson puts it, in ontotheology,

[o]ntologists understand the being of entities in terms of that entity beneath or beyond which no more basic entity can be "discovered" or "fathomed" (*ergründet*); they then generalize from their understanding of this "exemplary entity" to explain the being of all entities.<sup>309</sup>

Ontotheology thus recognizes that the being of entities is not exhausted in their simple givenness. Rather, to understand any given being, it is necessary to seek out the horizon of determinacy against which this givenness takes shape. In ontotheological explanations, however, this horizon is taken to be constituted by a specific being, by reference to which all other beings are understood. As a result, all

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<sup>308</sup> *BT*, p. 26, translation modified.

<sup>309</sup> Iain Thompson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 14. Thompson rightly emphasizes that in spite of the construction of the word, 'ontotheology' is by no means restricted to a critique of 'theological' modes of explanation. The role attributed to God here can equally be attributed to a 'secular' being, such as nature, matter, or Nietzschean 'will to power.' See *Ibid.*, p. 2 ff.

beings are located in terms of a closed economy of meaning whose logic can be spelled out in terms of an ultimate horizon.<sup>310</sup>

As such, there is nothing ‘mysterious’ about humanity and its destiny from the perspective of a large proportion of medieval thought. All human behaviours and world-historical events can be mapped out in terms of humanity’s proximity to or fallenness from the divine.

For Heidegger, however, being cannot be understood as a being among beings, nor even as the highest of all beings. Indeed, strictly speaking, being ‘is’ not, precisely because it lacks the givenness or presence common to all beings.

In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger poses the question of being in terms of the ‘es gibt.’ The phrase ‘es gibt’ is the German equivalent of the English ‘there is.’ It is constructed from the German impersonal pronoun ‘es’ and the verb *geben*, meaning to give, in the present third person indicative, and can thus be more literally translated as ‘it gives.’ In the *Letter*, he notes that the French *il y a* translates ‘es gibt’ only imprecisely (much like the English ‘there is’):

For the “it” that here “gives” is Being itself. The “gives” names the essence of Being that is giving, granting its truth. The self-giving into the open, along with the open region itself, is Being itself.<sup>311</sup>

We stated above that ontotheology does not consider beings to be exhausted by their simple givenness. Instead, they are traced back to their ground in some other ultimate being, which thus establishes their place against a fixed horizon of meaning.

According to medieval philosophy, what ‘gives’ being is God qua creator. For it is God who ‘grounds’ all beings in their being, bestowing upon them their presence.

In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger asks us to think this idea of the ‘giving’ of beings in their givenness, but without reference to any determinate being which ‘gives.’ As an indeterminate pronoun, the ‘es’ of ‘es gibt’ does not stand in for some determinate being, as it does in some other formulations (as in the phrase ‘ich habe es gefunden,’ ‘I have found it’). Rather, its indeterminacy points to being itself

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<sup>310</sup> Cf. AF, p. 364. Here, Heidegger claims that the presencing which precedes all presence comes to be thought of as something itself present.

<sup>311</sup> LH, p. 238.



as an excess over all givenness, which, without itself ever being given, nonetheless ‘gives’ beings in their presence.

#### 4.5 Ontological Difference and Historical Difference

Up to this point, our discussion of the ontological difference has remained highly abstract. Indeed, it seems that at most, we have succeeded in specifying what being is *not* (a being). Such formal explanations have a role to play; yet they tell us very little about the actual task for thought which Heidegger proposes in his later philosophy. Indeed, it seems they risk falling into a kind of empty formalism. ‘One cannot speculate about this *il y a* precipitately and without a foothold,’<sup>312</sup> Heidegger writes. He continues:

This “there is / it gives” rules as the destiny of Being [*Geschick des Seins*]. Its history comes to language in the words of essential thinkers. Therefore the thinking that thinks into the truth of Being is, as thinking, historical. There is not a “systematic” thinking and next to it an illustrative history of past opinions. Nor is there, as Hegel thought, only a systematics that can fashion the law of its thinking into the law of history and simultaneously subsume history into the system. Thought in a more primordial way, there is the history of Being to which thinking belongs as recollection of this history, appropriated by it.<sup>313</sup>

It is clear that Heidegger’s position here takes us beyond the one he presented in *BT*. We saw that there, Heidegger argues that an engagement with the history of ontology is a necessary condition of his renewal of the question concerning being—providing, one might argue, a kind of ‘foothold’ without which the question could never adequately be posed.

Yet in this passage, Heidegger collapses the distinction between ‘systematic’ thought and the history of philosophy altogether. The history of philosophy no longer plays a merely ‘illustrative’ role, constituting a kind of resource (however indispensable) for first philosophy. Rather, to think being is always to think

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<sup>312</sup> LH, p. 238.

<sup>313</sup> LH, p. 238-9. Cf. *BT*, where Heidegger cites Count Yorck’s claim that ‘the separation between systematic philosophy and Historical presentation is essentially incorrect.’ *BT*, p. 454.

historically. It is to think the history of being as manifest in the ‘words of essential thinkers.’

In other words, the history of philosophy does not merely constitute a series of more or less successful attempts to say being, ‘behind’ or ‘beyond’ which being remains self-identical and indifferent to this historical flux. Rather, this history is itself the *manifestation* of the truth of being. In making this claim, I take it that Heidegger is not suggesting that we cannot distinguish between more or less adequate accounts of being. Indeed, it is clear that in his own readings in the history of philosophy, he privileges certain thinkers over others. Rather, I take it that his point is that historical difference cannot be reduced to a sequence of more or less adequate accounts of truth, but that it reflects a form of difference intrinsic to the truth of being.

Heidegger captures this in his equation of the ‘es gibt’ with the ‘destining of being,’ or *Geschick des Seins*. As such, the task of thought is not simply to think the formal difference between beings in their presence and the ‘es gibt’ which precedes them. Rather, it is to think being as the ‘destining’ of various historical epochs of being.

As such, the ‘destining’ of being is Heidegger’s name for the fact that history arises not according to some ultimate horizon whose logic could be worked out by thought. Instead, it is a matter of being’s sheer excess over presence. One of the ways in which ontological difference becomes manifest is in the succession of different epochs of thought. These epochs are not treated as various falsifications or approximations of being, but rather as various ‘destinings’ or manifestations of being. None of these destinings is ever exhaustive of being, which remains structurally withdrawn, in excess over any given epoch.

We have seen in previous chapters that the tradition has tended to explain the historicity of thought in terms of the difference between thought and being. Historical difference is treated as the product of thought’s tendency to fall short of being, and the task of philosophy is to overcome this shortfall.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> This is less clear in Hegel’s case. As we saw above, Hegel does not treat the various stages of the history of philosophy in terms of a shortfall of thought which any given thinker might overcome. Rather, the history of philosophy describes the way in which being itself is gradually worked out over the course of a history. In contrast to Heidegger, however, Hegel does not treat being as an *excess* over this process. Instead, the idea gradually unfolds over the course of spirit’s history, until in his own

By contrast, Heidegger considers historical difference to be grounded in the ontological difference. It is not the difference between thought and being that gives rise to the conflicting positions that characterize the history of philosophy. Rather, it is a difference immanent to being itself.

In this passage, Heidegger also makes a brief allusion to Hegel. We have seen in chapter three that for Hegel too, historical difference is not an ‘excess’ over being which arises from thought’s difference from being. Rather, it is grounded in the negativity immanent to the idea itself. It is thus not simply a product of thought’s falling short, but rather of a form of difference immanent to being itself. Heidegger is aware of his own proximity to Hegel on this score, crediting him elsewhere with being the only thinker to have thought the history of philosophy *philosophically*.<sup>315</sup>

Nonetheless, Heidegger claims here that Hegel maintains a distinction between systematic philosophy and the history of philosophy, ultimately subordinating the latter to the former. We considered this distinction in the previous chapter. Although for Hegel, spirit must pass through this history, the concept itself remains indifferent to this history. While it ‘takes time’ for the concept to realise itself over the course of the history of spirit, retrospectively, the different stages of this history can be seen as merely ‘one-sided’ expressions of a truth which receives its full logical articulation in Hegel’s own system. Indeed, Hegel’s ontology, presented in his *Science of Logic*, need make no reference to the history of philosophy. Instead, it can be worked out *a priori*, thus providing us with the hermeneutic key to the history of thought.

By contrast, for the later Heidegger, there can be no systematic philosophy whose logic could unfold prior to or apart from the history of philosophy. We cannot give a ‘systematic’ account of being by means of which we could then retrospectively ground the different epochs of the history of being. For being is, strictly speaking, *nothing apart* from this history. Just as there can be no being without beings, so too being cannot be isolated or thought apart from the various epochs of being made manifest by the ‘essential thinkers’ from the history of thought. In this way, for the late Heidegger, the ‘es gibt’ is never simply a matter of

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logic, it is finally rendered entirely present to thought. See chapter three. Heidegger resists the idea that being could ever be rendered fully present in this manner.

<sup>315</sup> See CP, p. 167; cf. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 43-44.

the ‘giving’ of beings in their presence; rather, it is always at the same time a ‘destining’ or *Geschick* which determines the horizon of an historical epoch. For beings to be given at all is for them to be caught up in the ongoing history of being, such that to think being is necessarily to think this history.

As such, the term *Seinsgeschichte* does not name a kind of ‘subdiscipline’ within the later Heidegger’s thought, such that we might hope to distinguish his ‘systematic’ texts from his readings in the history of philosophy. In reading the history of philosophy, Heidegger is not simply searching for useful aids to his own philosophical project; nor is he engaged in explaining the fact of thought’s historicity as a distinct question in its own right. Rather, it is of a piece with the single question guiding his thought from the very beginning, the question concerning being. To think being is thus to think the way in which it has become manifest in the various ‘destinings’ of being which make up the history of Western philosophy—along with maintaining the idea of a certain *excess* over this history, the nature of which we consider in more detail in part two below.

We have seen that, where the tradition has largely traced historical difference back to the difference between thought and being, treating it as the measure of thought’s *distance* from being, Heidegger treats historical difference as grounded in *ontological* difference. In the next chapter, we will show that this is reflected in Heidegger’s concept of untruth. To anticipate: we will show that Heidegger develops a notion of *ontological errancy*, according to which untruth constitutes an immanent moment of the economy of truth. For Heidegger, it is not thought which ‘errs,’ but rather being itself.

Before resuming our history of the concept of error, however, we need to address an aspect of *Seinsgeschichte* that is missing from our account so far. I stated above that the history of thought is nothing other than the history of the various ways in which being becomes manifest. While this is not wrong, it remains incomplete. For it fails to take into account the critical dimension of Heidegger’s engagement with the past. For Heidegger, the history of Western philosophy is not merely the history of the destinings of being, but also of the encroaching oblivion of being.

## 4.6 Beginnings

In the above, we have seen that Heidegger understands the various epochs of the history of philosophy as ‘destinings’ of being. Being is intrinsically historical, such that to think being necessarily means to engage with the history of the way it has become manifest in the ‘essential thinkers’ of the tradition. To do so does not simply mean to narrate a history of Western philosophy from its beginnings in Greece down to the present day. Rather, it is a matter of thinking the epochal destining of being which structurally precedes all logics of presence, and so to take account of a radical form of historical difference that escapes the explanatory means of modern historiology.

Thus far, we have emphasized this ‘positive’ dimension of Heidegger’s engagement with the tradition, presenting a one-sided account in order to bring to the fore his radical break with the other approaches examined in this thesis. Nonetheless, Heidegger’s project also incorporates a critique of the tradition. Indeed, Heidegger’s most enduring legacy has been his ‘critique of metaphysics,’ a motif which went on to dominate much of twentieth century continental philosophy. Heidegger does not stage his project in terms of a reconciliation with philosophy’s past, but rather as an urgent attempt to liberate thought from the strictures of metaphysics. In doing so, he frames his project of the history of being in terms of a narrative of decline and potential redemption far more dramatic than anything encountered in Descartes, Kant, or Hegel.<sup>316</sup>

Our task in the remainder of the first part of this chapter is to give an account of this critical dimension of Heidegger’s project, exploring how Heidegger seeks to reconcile it with the ‘positive’ assessment of the history of philosophy presented above. In doing so, we respond to the following questions: how can Heidegger’s project incorporate a critical dimension, given that it begins by rejecting the idea that the history of philosophy is a product of error generated by thought’s distance from truth? Crucially: if Heidegger cannot appeal to the idea of an historical errancy rooted in thought’s excess over truth, according to what logic does his critique

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<sup>316</sup> John D. Caputo argues that this account of decline is a product of Heidegger’s tendency towards ‘storytelling,’ which ultimately distorts his insights concerning the history of being. See John D. Caputo, ‘Demythologizing Heidegger: "Alētheia" and the History of Being,’ in *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Mar., 1988), pp. 519-546.

unfold? It would seem that Heidegger cannot propose a mere methodological shift as a corrective to metaphysics—for to do so would be to imply that it has been *faulty thinking* which gave rise to the historical oblivion of being. In other words, it would be a matter of epistemological and not ontological difference.

Without addressing this issue, we cannot understand Heidegger's account of his own place within the philosophical tradition. For it is clear that his notion of a history of being constitutes a kind of break with philosophy hitherto; yet the precise nature of this break remains indeterminate. Indeed, in elaborating his own place within the tradition, Heidegger makes a series of what seem to be very classical gestures. Not only does he suggest a lack which permeates the philosophical tradition hitherto, to be 'corrected' by his own thought—thereby grouping together the entire Western tradition under the banner of the metaphysics, unified by a common limitation. Furthermore, he proposes the need of an 'other beginning' which would constitute an overcoming of the metaphysical first beginning, and thus of the limitations of thought hitherto.

The opposition of the first and other beginning bears all the hallmarks of a Baconian instauration.<sup>317</sup> Heidegger's 'renewal' of the question concerning being seems to announce the restoration of thought to its rightful task after a period of errancy. In this way, he seems to repeat the gesture we found in Descartes, Kant and Hegel of finally putting philosophy on a sound footing.

We turn now to an examination of the structure of the first beginning. If the first beginning is not denounced as *false*, it is nonetheless clear that Heidegger hopes to win some critical distance from it. What is the nature of this distance? In what space does it unfold?

#### **4.7 The First Beginning and the Forgottenness of Being**

Daniella Vallega-Neu notes that Heidegger's notion of the 'first beginning' can be understood in both a narrow and a broader sense.<sup>318</sup> On the one hand, it refers to the emergence of Western philosophy in Greece with the thinkers now referred to as the

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<sup>317</sup> See section 1.11 above.

<sup>318</sup> Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 67.

pre-Socratics, down to Plato and Aristotle. In the broader sense, however, the first beginning extends all the way to the ‘end’ of Western metaphysics with Hegel and Nietzsche, and into the present technological age. This ‘end’ should not be taken to imply that the first beginning has simply come to a close. Rather, its possibilities have been exhausted, such that we now find ourselves at its outmost, most extreme limit, doomed to simply repeating its gestures.

As such, the first beginning refers to the entire history of Western philosophy hitherto, down to the present day. According to Heidegger, what unifies the thinkers of the first beginning is not simply their belonging to a specific tradition within certain geographical and temporal boundaries.<sup>319</sup> Rather, they belong to a common trajectory in which the excess of being over beings in their presence gradually withdraws from view. We now find ourselves at the culmination of this tradition, in which beings are completely abandoned to their presence, and the question concerning being is almost entirely forgotten.

According to Heidegger, it is the thinkers now referred to as the pre-Socratics who first raised the question concerning being. These early thinkers posed the question of the being of beings against the background of the ‘mystery’ of being. They thought beings in terms of their presence; yet the ground of this presence remained essentially concealed, implicitly pointing back to a horizon which exceeded all such presence. As John D. Caputo puts it, ‘The being for them is what rises up into well-formed and enduring appearance. Their thinking arises from the sheer wonder (*thaumazein*) that the being emerges into appearance and perdures there.’<sup>320</sup> While beings are thus defined in their presence, early Greek thought hints at their emergence from out of an indefinite horizon, whose ultimate nature remains mysterious.

The remainder of the first beginning is the story of a gradual decline, which resembles a kind of inversion of Hegel’s progressive account of the history of philosophy.<sup>321</sup> The indeterminate horizon from out of which beings arise vanishes from view altogether, replaced by various ‘ontotheological’ conceptions of the

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<sup>319</sup> In fact, we will see in the conclusion that Heidegger surreptitiously introduces just such boundaries into his idea of a history of being. See section 5.2 below.

<sup>320</sup> John D. Caputo, ‘Demythologizing Heidegger: "Alētheia" and the History of Being,’ in *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Mar., 1988), p. 524.

<sup>321</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger’s Ways*, trans. by John W. Stanley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 109.

ground of being, beginning with Plato's realm of ideas. The Medieval age further constricts this horizon, taking it away from the speculative account of the idea, whose logic remains open to question, and replacing it with a dogmatic conception of God as the 'cause' of all things.<sup>322</sup> In the modern age, beings come to be conceived as objects present to thinking subjects. This story reaches its culmination in the contemporary epoch of the *Gestell*, or 'enframing,' in which beings are reduced to mere 'standing reserve.'<sup>323</sup>

By grouping the entire history of philosophy hitherto into a single trajectory in this manner, unified by a common trait, Heidegger repeats a gesture commonly made by first philosophy in relation to the tradition which precedes it. Just as for Kant, the history of philosophy is reduced to the status of 'pre-critical' thought, such that its various moments can be explained by its failure to have established the proper bounds of reason, so too it would seem that Heidegger's 'first beginning' is unified by its failure to adequately heed ontological difference—an inadequacy which Heidegger's thought seeks to redress by posing the question concerning being anew. It would thus seem that Heidegger's own thought marks a kind of instauration, an overcoming of thought's errant past through the establishment of the proper relation between thought and being.

In spite of the undeniable similarities, Heidegger's relation to the tradition nonetheless differs from Kant's in two important ways. Firstly, it is clear that in thinking beings in their presence, metaphysics does not *falsify* them. Recall that for Kant, the errors of special metaphysics arose when it posited the ideas intrinsic to reason as real objects belonging to the domain of theoretical philosophy. In doing so, it transgressed the legitimate bounds of theoretical knowledge, introducing objects which fall beyond the scope of possible experience.<sup>324</sup>

For Heidegger, by contrast, the first beginning is not the product of a defective mode of thinking which introduces an illegitimate content. In other words, metaphysics is not the product of error as an 'excess' over truth. Indeed, rather than being the product of error as an excess, it is characterised by a certain *lack*. Even as thought does not falsify beings, but rather discloses them in their presence, so

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<sup>322</sup> See CP, p. 87-88.

<sup>323</sup> See 'The Question Concerning Technology' in *Basic Writings*, trans. & ed. by David Farrell Krell, revised and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>324</sup> See section 2.12.



nonetheless, it fails to adequately pose the question of being, and so to think the excess over presence which he claims precedes all presence.

This is why for Heidegger, the critique of metaphysics is not a matter of ‘refutation.’<sup>325</sup> If the first beginning is in some sense ‘defective,’ this defect cannot be taken to imply its sheer falsity. Indeed, Heidegger insists that metaphysics fulfils its own proper task of thinking beings in their presence. Heidegger’s own task is thus not to refute the first beginning, but to attempt to overcome this limitation, by restoring philosophy to what he considers its proper task of articulating the difference between being and beings.

Nonetheless, the nature of this ‘lack’ must be examined more closely. For even if the philosophical tradition has not falsified beings in their presence, it nonetheless seems that Heidegger’s thought corrects a ‘fault’ which has plagued the first beginning since its inception. Throughout the tradition, thought has been increasingly *turned away* from being, attending only to beings in their presence. It would seem that Heidegger’s aim is to develop a mode of thinking which would allow us to overcome this focus on presence, bringing the ontological difference into view by means of a new method (even as Heidegger himself rigorously rejects any such terminology).

If this were the case, it could still be argued that the first beginning was in some sense the product of a defect which might have been avoided. Recall that in the CPR, Kant suggests that, had the ancients thought to raise the question of the synthetic *a priori*, the critical project might have emerged much sooner, setting thought on the right path, and avoiding the pitfalls of unchecked rationalism that shaped much of the philosophical tradition.

Can the same be argued of Heidegger’s question concerning being? Had the Greeks adequately raised the question concerning being in the first stages of the first beginning, might the epoch of metaphysics, and the present age of enframing, have been averted?—Not as a succession of ‘endless errors,’ but nonetheless as an age in which beings in their presence came to overshadow being? Even if we consider the first beginning as a ‘destining of being,’ what prevented thought from obtaining

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<sup>325</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 2.

insight into the excess of being over beings, and posing Heidegger's question concerning being?

#### 4.8 The First Beginning and the Incubation Time of Being Historical Thinking

This brings us to a question we have posed to every thinker examined in this thesis—namely, the question of the 'incubation time' of their thought. Is the 'delayed' arrival of Heidegger's mode of thinking in some sense necessary? Is it, like Descartes' thought, merely *belated*, such that the shortfalls of the first beginning might have been rectified at any time, but for the right method? Or is the 'other beginning' characterized by *posteriority*,<sup>326</sup> such that it in some sense presupposes the passage through the first beginning?

In the essay *Overcoming Metaphysics*, Heidegger suggests that the first beginning is made necessary by the very nature of being. With reference to the metaphysical fate of Western philosophy, he writes:

This fate, which is to be thought in the manner of the history of Being, is, however, necessary, because Being itself can open out in its truth the difference of Being and beings preserved in itself only when the difference explicitly takes place. But how can it do this if beings have not first entered the most extreme oblivion of Being, and if at the same time Being has not taken over its unconditional dominance, metaphysically incomprehensible, as the will to will which asserts itself at first and uniquely through the sole precedence of beings (of what is objectively real) over Being?<sup>327</sup>

Here, Heidegger suggests that the genuine nature of the ontological difference can only become manifest over the course of the long history of being's withdrawal. We have seen that for Heidegger, beings 'refer' beyond themselves to being in its excess over presence. But the precise nature of this excess only comes into view over the long history of the oblivion of being which constitutes the first beginning. There is a clear resemblance here to Kant's position, according to which critical philosophy

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<sup>326</sup> On the concept of posteriority, see section 2.4 above.

<sup>327</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 91.

could only emerge after the conflicts of metaphysics had made clear the limits of human cognition.

Indeed, in spite of what is often taken to be Heidegger's privileging of the early Greeks, it must be emphasized that his renewal of the question concerning being does not mark a simple return to the question posed by the pre-Socratics.<sup>328</sup> What separates us from them is precisely the experience of the first beginning as it has unfolded over the course of Western history. While the early Greeks encountered being as the horizon from out of which beings in their presence emerge, they had not yet experienced the way in which this horizon is characterized by withdrawal, self-concealment and refusal.

John D. Caputo thus notes that the question concerning being was not the proper 'destiny' of the early Greeks:

Instead, it falls to us "late-comers" who live in the wake of the first beginning, at the ending and unravelling of this great beginning, to make the end-state transition to a new beginning. And the only way to do this is to do again what they did, to think again what they thought. We must recapture the wonder of the beginning by experiencing again the wonder that the being is in its unconcealment. For *us*—though not for them—that means to go back and see what was at work in their experience, to see the implicit clue which functioned in the enlivened beginning, which is the unspoken element of *aletheia*. We can think *aletheia* as such in a way that *they* could not.<sup>329</sup>

As such, it is only in the wake of the first beginning that being can become apparent as an excess over presence, which withdraws in the face of the predominance of beings. This is why, for Heidegger, the possibility of the other beginning emerges only in the context of the absolute 'plight' of being, its oblivion in the age of enframing. For it is only here that being's true nature as self-concealing becomes

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<sup>328</sup> On this point, see Karin de Boer, *Thinking in the Light of Time: Heidegger's Encounter with Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000) p. 87.

<sup>329</sup> John D. Caputo, 'Demythologizing Heidegger: "Alētheia" and the History of Being,' in *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Mar., 1988), p. 524-5. Cf. Daniela Vallega-Neu, who claims of the Greeks 'the fact that they were not able to think this original event is, according to Heidegger, not a failure of their thinking, but a necessity rooted in how the truth of being occurs in the first beginning.' Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) p. 69.

apparent. *We* are thus in a position to think being in its truth in a way in which *they*, the Greeks, and indeed any other thinker within the first beginning, could not.<sup>330</sup>

Heidegger thus writes in the *Contributions to Philosophy* that

A history, i.e., a beginning along with its derivations and its advancements, is required to make possible (for those who are beginning to question) the realization that refusal pertains intrinsically to the essence of being. This knowledge, because it thinks nihilism still more originarily, all the way down to the abandonment by being, is the genuine overcoming of nihilism. The history of the first beginning is in this way completely delivered from the semblance of futility and sheer errancy; now for the first time a great illumination comes over all previous works of thought.<sup>331</sup>

Seen as such, the first beginning does not occur out of some fault or defect in human thinking. Rather, it occurs because being necessarily refuses all attempts to render it present, withdrawing in the face of the successive epochs of history. It is only in the wake of this refusal that genuine insight into being is possible. At the same time, this ‘great illumination’ bears a strong resemblance to both Kant and Hegel. Recall that for Kant, it was only retrospectively, from the position of the critical philosophy, that the necessity of the passage through the moments of dogmatism and skepticism could be shown up. Hegel took this further still, suggesting that the entire Western tradition, which prior to his own system had been apt to appear nothing but a series of opinions and errors, was demonstrated to follow a strict logical necessity.

Heidegger thus suggests that the history of philosophy is not a matter of futility and ‘sheer errancy,’ but rather constitutes a precondition for an adequate posing of the question concerning being. At the same time, it is clear that his own position is in a sense privileged, first making the coherence of this history clear.

It is thus only in the wake of metaphysics that Heidegger’s own thought can finally pose the question of the ontological difference adequately. Nonetheless, Heidegger’s account of his own place in the history of philosophy differs substantially from the form of *posteriority* we encountered in Kant. For Kant, this ‘coming after’ announced an absolute rupture, in which the historicity of thought is

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<sup>330</sup> Heidegger thus writes in the CP that ‘Self-concealing [...] is the basic teaching of the first beginning and of its history.’ CP, p. 262.

<sup>331</sup> CP, p. 134.

radically transcended. While he attributed a certain necessity to the tradition which preceded them, so nonetheless, it was by way of a rupture with this history, and the establishment of a philosophy on an *a priori* footing, that philosophy was restored to its rightful task. Even as Kant offered reasons as to why the history of philosophy constituted a necessary condition of their own projects, his critical project proceeds in ahistorical terms.

By contrast, although Heidegger's project can only emerge at the closure of the first beginning, it does not strictly speaking come 'after' the first beginning. Rather, it continues to abide within this first beginning, while at the same time subjecting it to a certain displacement. It is thus not by simply transcending the history of philosophy hitherto, metaphysics, that Heidegger seeks to renew the question concerning being. On the contrary, it is only by attending to what remains unthought over the course of this tradition—the withdrawal of being in the face of beings in their presence—that the question concerning being can be adequately posed.<sup>332</sup>

In spite of these qualifications, it is clear that Heidegger claims a definite privilege for his own mode of philosophical thinking. Above all, it is only with his own project that the question of being is raised adequately. Like Kant, he provides an account as to why this should be the case, and furthermore does so without appeal to the idea that thought was previously in some sense defective.

Furthermore, Heidegger claims that his own thought constitutes a 'great illumination' of the history of philosophy hitherto. Like both Kant and Hegel, he claims to have reached a privileged perspective which constitutes a kind of hermeneutic key to the history of philosophy. Unlike Kant and Hegel, however, he does not claim to have discovered a 'logic' behind this history. This means that the history of thought cannot be subordinated to any logic which could be laid bare by first philosophy. On the contrary, it is the task of first philosophy to engage with the past, in a series of hermeneutic readings of key texts. This is a task which Heidegger makes no claim to have completed, but is left essentially open.

As such, and in spite of Heidegger's evident desire to avoid such a gesture, Heidegger does make a claim to a kind of ultimacy on the part of his thought. I take

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<sup>332</sup> Cf. AF, p. 365.

it that this gesture is in a sense unavoidable. For any mode of thought which seeks to take the past seriously as a manifestation of truth cannot but implicitly claim that first philosophy has up to this stage failed to do justice to the past.<sup>333</sup> It does so, however, in the name of a gesture of openness to the past, such that the truth of philosophy's past is never denied, nor subordinated to an overriding logic.

#### 4.9 The Other Beginning

We have seen that the 'incubation time' of Heidegger's thought is characterized by both a form of posterity, and a qualified sense of ultimacy. This ultimacy differs from that of Descartes, Kant or Hegel, in that it does not lay claim to having discovered a 'logic' underlying all past thinkers; nor does it claim to bring history to an end. As such, Heidegger's history of being requires of us an ongoing engagement with the past on its own terms, which categorically refuses any gesture of 'refutation,' and obliges philosophy to engage in an ongoing dialogue with its own past.

Yet there is still one decisive dimension of Heidegger's history of being which we have neglected up until this point. Above, we alluded to the fact that Heidegger opposes to the 'first beginning' the possibility of an 'other beginning' that is yet to come. Since this thesis is concerned above all with the ontological status of the *past*, we will not be concerned to address Heidegger's notion of an other beginning that is yet to come in any detail. Nonetheless, I take it that Heidegger's own orientation towards the other beginning fundamentally shapes his own approach to philosophy's past, inasmuch as he ultimately gives priority to the future over the past. This has decisive consequences for his history of being.

This priority is evident in CP, which Heidegger addresses to the 'future ones.'<sup>334</sup> His stated aim in the work is not simply to renew the question concerning being, and with that to develop a historical conception of truth. Rather, Heidegger

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<sup>333</sup> As such, I take it that e.g. Derrida's deconstructive project is implicitly founded on a similar gesture. The idea of a 'critique of the metaphysics of presence,' even where it refuses any claim to simply 'overcoming metaphysics,' necessarily involves a claim to a certain privilege on the part of deconstructive thought. Like Heidegger, I take it that Derrida goes to great lengths to avoid such a gesture, or at least to soften it by rejecting the idea of a 'method' which would 'correct' the mistakes of metaphysics.

<sup>334</sup> CP, p. 395 ff.

defers the genuine renewal of this question to an indeterminate future. Indeed, elsewhere, in what almost seems like a conscious inversion of Kant's claim in the final pages of the *CPR* that, with the critical method in place, philosophy might achieve everything it has failed at over the last two millennia before the close of the century,<sup>335</sup> Heidegger suggests that the end of metaphysics will last 'longer than the previous history of metaphysics.'<sup>336</sup>

Indeed, one of the frustrations in reading Heidegger on the history of being is that he frequently downplays the significance of his own insight into the historical nature of truth. His own philosophy does not reach its fruition in recognising that truth is essentially historical, and that philosophy is thus obliged to engage with its own past not as a sequence of errors, but as a manifestation of the destiny of being. Instead, he defers a genuine relation to truth to an indefinite future to come, which he labels the first beginning.

Daniela Vallega-Neu refers to the task of attaining to this other beginning as a 'more originary insertion into history.'<sup>337</sup> I take it that as it stands, this aim might be taken to fall together with the kind of conception of the history of philosophy advanced in the pages of this chapter above. Yet for Heidegger, the import of this 'more originary insertion' into history does not stop with a recognition of thought's intrinsic historicity. Rather, this constitutes only the first step towards a new mode of philosophical thought whose form, Heidegger insists, cannot be anticipated, but will only emerge (if at all) in a distance future.<sup>338</sup>

Crucially, in *CP*, he goes as far as to claim that 'Previously, the human being was never historical, although indeed this being "had" and "has" a history.'<sup>339</sup> In other words, the very form of historicity proper to the first beginning—and thus of philosophy's past as such—was in some sense defective. It is only in the wake of the new beginning that *Dasein's* genuine historicity will be realised.

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<sup>335</sup> See section 2.3 above.

<sup>336</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 85.

<sup>337</sup> Daniela Vallega-Neu, *Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 30 ff.

<sup>338</sup> He writes: 'To be sure, it is impossible to calculate whether the human being will attain history, whether the essence of history will befall beings, and whether historiology can be destroyed; these matters rest with being itself.' *CP*, p. 387.

<sup>339</sup> *CP*, p. 387.

I take it that this betrays a Nietzschean ethical orientation to the future on Heidegger's part. His aim in engaging with the history of philosophy hitherto is not simply to do justice to this past, but rather to put it to work in the name of a new form of humanity that is deferred to an indefinite future. Seen from this perspective, while the first beginning was in some sense necessary, it is nonetheless treated as defective, such that Heidegger maintains a critical distance from it. He does so in the name of a new modality of historicity that is yet to come. In this way, the first beginning is treated as a defective past, whose resources are to be exploited in the name of its own overcoming. While it is deferred, this suggests a break with the past as decisive as those proposed by Descartes or Kant.

This priority of the future is already apparent in Heidegger's earlier writings, specifically in BT, and remains dominant throughout Heidegger's later writings. As Miguel de Beistegui puts it, in Heidegger's thought, 'the centre of gravity of temporality is no longer the present, as was the case in the tradition, but the future. The future is the source or the origin from which time flows.'<sup>340</sup> In BT, this finds its expression in the structure of anticipatory resoluteness and being-towards-death. In his writings on the history of philosophy, it is expressed by the privilege of the task of preparing the other beginning.

This orientation towards the future is decisive in shaping Heidegger's engagement with philosophy's past. His task is never simply to reconstruct the history of being, but rather to prepare the way for a break with the first beginning, and thereby with the metaphysical tradition. In this way, the other beginning is the horizon against which Heidegger's readings in the history of philosophy unfold. It is his concern to prepare for the 'other beginning' which shapes—and I would argue, fundamentally distorts—his approach to philosophy's past.

Gadamer highlights a crucial example of this tendency. He notes that Heidegger's attitude towards Plato was ambiguous in his earlier writings, but that it became exclusively negative with the wake of his idea of a history of being, from which point onwards, he began to see Plato as a the decisive turning point in the history of the oblivion of being.<sup>341</sup> The logic of his later readings are thus

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<sup>340</sup> Miguel de Beistegui, *The New Heidegger* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 71.

<sup>341</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways*, trans. by John W. Stanley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 70.



increasingly driven not by the texts by themselves, nor but rather by his concern to break with the metaphysical past. It is on the same basis that he excludes certain moments—not through an engagement with texts, but rather by excluding them from the offset in deference to the narrative he constructed for his ‘history of being.’

This ambiguity—whereby the past is treated, on the one hand, as a manifestation of truth, and on the other, as something to be overcome—permeates all of Heidegger’s post-BT writings on the history of being. Moreover, as we will see in part two of this chapter, it is reflected in an ambiguity at the heart of his concept of errancy. Ultimately, even while Heidegger professes to understand the history of philosophy as nothing other than the errant history of being, he maintains a critical distance from the first beginning, which is deemed ‘errant’ in a manner to be rectified by the other beginning.

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In the first part of this chapter, we gave an account of Heidegger’s history of being. We saw that Heidegger considers philosophy’s past not as the product of an epistemological shortfall, but rather as a manifestation of ontological difference. We suggested that with this gesture, Heidegger effectively dissolves the line separating first philosophy from the activity of reading the history of philosophy. At the same time, we suggested that Heidegger’s critical attitude towards the ‘first beginning’ and his orientation towards an ‘other beginning’ raises questions as to how seriously Heidegger takes the autonomy of the past, and whether he does not ultimately the question of the past to that of the future.

In part two, we turn to the question of the status of error in Heidegger’s thought, thus bringing our partial history of the concept of error to a close. We show how Heidegger’s idea of a history of being is reflected in the two forms of ‘untruth’ elaborated in his thought—concealing and errancy. We will see how this double form of untruth provides the conceptual underpinning for his idea of a history of being.

In the conclusion to this thesis, we return to the question of Heidegger’s ambiguous relation to the past, showing that ultimately, he subordinates the

ontological question of the past to a Nietzschean ethical orientation towards the future of the kind discussed in the introduction to this thesis.<sup>342</sup>

## **Part Two. Heidegger and The Essence of (Un)truth**

In this part of the chapter, we conclude our fragmentary history of the concept of error. Our task is to show that the later Heidegger's historical conception of truth hinges on a reappraisal of the essence of *untruth*. Where the tradition has generally taken historicity to be a product of thought's fallenness from truth, we will see that Heidegger posits a form of untruth which is immanent to the economy of truth itself.

We will see that Heidegger's account of untruth reflects his notion of the history of being presented in the previous chapter. As such, like Descartes and Kant, Heidegger associates historicity with untruth. Yet for Heidegger, the distinction between truth and untruth is not grounded in the epistemological difference between thought and being, but rather in the ontological difference.

At the same time, Heidegger distinguishes between two distinct forms of untruth: *concealment* and *errancy*. We will see that this doubling of untruth is essential to his account of his history of being.

To do so, we turn to his essay *The Essence of Truth*. While our reading concentrates on this text, we nonetheless supplement it with other texts from the 1930s. We will see that Heidegger's apparently paradoxical claim that 'untruth is the essence of truth' can only be understood against the backdrop of his notion of the history of being.

### **4.10 The Usual Concept of Untruth**

On the surface, the essay *The Essence of Truth* seems to follow a simple structure, approaching the question of truth in similar terms to the account in §44 of *Being and Time*.<sup>343</sup> Beginning with an account of the 'usual' concept of truth as correspondence, Heidegger goes on to investigate the background conditions which must obtain in order that a statement can be said to correspond to the matter at hand. As such, the

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<sup>342</sup> See section 0.1 above.

<sup>343</sup> See BT, p. 256 ff.

essay has frequently been read as a kind of transcendental account of truth as correspondence.

Certainly, these readings take their cue from Heidegger's text. Yet in the *Contributions*, Heidegger warns that such interpretations are ultimately misleading.<sup>344</sup> Furthermore, in the 'remark' which closes the essay, Heidegger notes that in the text,

[o]ur thinking apparently remains on the path of metaphysics. Nonetheless, in its decisive steps, which lead from truth as correctness to ek-sistent freedom, and from the latter to truth as concealing and errancy, it accomplishes a change in the questioning that belongs to the overcoming of metaphysics.<sup>345</sup>

In other words, the line of questioning shifts decisively in the latter sections of the essay—and at the precise point where *untruth* becomes the major focus of the essay.<sup>346</sup> This transition involves thinking 'truth as concealing and errancy'—that is to say, thinking truth *as untruth*. 'Truth, in its essence, is un-truth,' he writes in the *Origin of the Work of Art*<sup>347</sup>—insisting, however, that this must not be understood as amounting to the paradoxical claim that truth is at bottom falsehood.<sup>348</sup> Instead, it is necessary to put aside the usual definition of untruth as falsehood in order to approach the genuine nature of untruth.

John Sallis notes that the question of untruth accompanies the question of truth from the very beginning of the *ET* essay, 'haunting' the first half of the text before revealing itself to be the essay's central focus.<sup>349</sup> Indeed, Heidegger introduces the theme of untruth in the first numbered section of the essay. Apparently in passing,

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<sup>344</sup> CP, p. 340. In OWA, he writes: 'We do, of course, occasionally take the trouble to concede that naturally, in order to understand and verify the correctness (truth) of a proposition, one really should go back to something that is already evident, and that this presupposition is indeed unavoidable. As long as we talk this way, we always understand truth merely as correctness, which of course still requires a further presupposition, that we ourselves just happen to make, heaven knows how or why.' OWA, p. 177.

<sup>345</sup> ET, p. 138.

<sup>346</sup> In a remark on the text not reproduced in the translation, Heidegger writes: 'between [section] 5 and six the leap into the turn (essencing in the event).' It is in section 6 that Heidegger begins his account of 'untruth.' GA 9 p. 193, my translation.

<sup>347</sup> OWA, p. 179.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>349</sup> John Sallis, 'Deformatives: Essentially Other Than Truth,' in *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, ed. by John Sallis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 38

he notes that truth as correspondence goes hand in hand with a particular conception of untruth:

Under the domination of the obviousness that this conception of truth seems to have but is hardly attended to as regards its essential grounds, it is considered equally obvious that truth has an opposite, and that there is untruth. The untruth of the proposition (incorrectness) is the nonaccordance of the statement with the matter. The untruth of the matter (nongenuineness) signifies nonagreement of a being with its essence. In each case untruth is conceived as nonaccord. The latter falls outside the essence of truth. Therefore, when it is a question of comprehending the pure essence of truth, untruth, as such an opposite of truth, can be put aside.<sup>350</sup>

In this passage, Heidegger appears to simply assent to this ordinary concept of untruth; yet as Sallis notes, this assent is ironic, a rhetorical strategy on Heidegger's part.<sup>351</sup> From the perspective of the ordinary concept of truth, it seems self-evident that untruth amounts to a 'nonaccordance,' the failure of a statement or judgement to correspond to the matter at hand. Not only does it appear self-evident; furthermore, it is considered to be irrelevant to enquiries into the nature of truth itself, since it falls 'outside the essence of truth;' it is therefore 'put aside.'

What does Heidegger mean when he says that untruth is 'put aside?' His point cannot be that philosophy tends to simply *ignore* the question of untruth. We have already seen that Descartes and Kant, both of whom define truth in terms of correspondence, devote lengthy discussions to the problem of error. Furthermore, a great deal of modern epistemology is concerned with rules to guarantee truth precisely by way of the exclusion of error. Far from rendering untruth irrelevant, this has led to a proliferation of texts devoted to the wide range of phenomena which ground error, including deception, hallucinations, etc.

Heidegger's point here is not that untruth is simply ignored, but rather that it is treated from the outset as an *excess over the economy of truth*. Recall that for Kant, untruth constituted a kind of 'anomaly,' a 'puzzle' which could only be explained on the basis of a force which intervenes from outside of thought's normative tendency

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<sup>350</sup> ET, p. 119.

<sup>351</sup> John Sallis, 'Deformatives: Essentially Other Than Truth,' in *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, ed. by John Sallis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 32.

toward truth. Similarly, error interrupted the logical economy of Descartes' *Meditations*; his task in the fourth meditation was to show that error plays no role in thought's normative relation to truth, but instead constitutes an excess which intervenes from 'outside' of this economy. As such, for all the attention paid to untruth, it is always assumed that it constitutes a simple surplus over truth, and thus something to be overcome through the establishment of a method that guarantees its exclusion. Later in the essay, Heidegger adds:

Certainly deceit and dissimulation, lies and deception, illusion and semblance—in short, all kinds of untruth—are ascribed to man. But of course untruth is the opposite of truth. For this reason, as the nonessence of truth, it is appropriately excluded from the sphere of the question concerning the pure essence of truth. This human origin of untruth indeed only serves to confirm by contrast the essence of truth “in itself” as holding sway “beyond” man. Metaphysics regards such truth as the imperishable and eternal, which can never be founded on the transitoriness and fragility that belong to man's essence.<sup>352</sup>

What remains unquestioned in the dominant definition of untruth is the underlying assumption that it has its origin in the human being qua thinking subject. Within the relation between thought and being, error is always assumed to constitute an excess of thought over being—a straying from truth in its eternal essence. All moments of untruth are ascribed to human thought, and considered a product of its distance from truth—or of what we have above called epistemological difference.

As Heidegger himself notes, this conception of untruth remains self-evident so long as we continue to define it solely in terms of incorrect statements. Certainly, an incorrect assertion does not bring us any closer to truth, merely serving to obscure the facts. It seems self-evident that such untruths are a kind of negative excess over truth with their origin in 'human' error, the straying of the subject from its object.

Yet for Heidegger, this conception of error serves to mask a deeper sense of untruth.<sup>353</sup> In *Being and Truth*, he writes: 'We have no logic of error, no real

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<sup>352</sup> ET, p. 124.

<sup>353</sup> As Heidegger himself notes, to speak of untruth as necessarily belonging to truth 'goes very much against the grain of ordinary opinion and looks like dragging up a forcibly contrived *paradoxa*.' ET, p.131. Heidegger suggests that for 'those who know about such matters,' the question of untruth points towards the 'still unexperienced domain of the truth of Being (not merely beings).' Heidegger's

clarification of its essence, because we always take error as negative. This is the fundamental error that dominates the entire history of the concept of truth.<sup>354</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that the question of untruth is central to the later Heidegger's entire project. *ET* must be understood in this light: not as an attempt to ground the possibility of truth as correspondence, but as a reappraisal of the nature of truth by way of an account of its other, untruth.

If we want to understand why Heidegger rejects the traditional concept of untruth, we can begin by considering the role that untruth has played throughout the tradition. While it seems uncontroversial to claim that untruth is a property of false statements, in the earlier chapters of this thesis, we have seen that a series of thinkers put this notion of untruth to work in order to explain the historicity of philosophical enquiry. Far from merely being a property of certain statements, it is also the implicit ground of the errant historicity of human thought.

In the following, I will show that *the traditional connection between historicity and untruth examined in this thesis thus far provides the hermeneutic background necessary to understand Heidegger's reappraisal of untruth.*

Heidegger's claim does not amount to a paradoxical identification of correct and incorrect statements; nor does it amount to a hopelessly longwinded and obscure restatement of the truism that to think is always to risk going wrong, such that knowledge is always partial and uncertain. Instead, we will see that the place of untruth in his later thought reflects his conception of the history of being outlined in the first part of this chapter.

Seen from this perspective, it will also become apparent that Heidegger's account of untruth does not amount to an absolute break with the traditional concept of untruth. In spite of the apparent radical difference, Heidegger shares with the tradition the conviction that historicity and untruth are intrinsically related. Rather than rejecting the traditional connection between error and historicity, Heidegger suggests that errant history belongs intrinsically to the economy of truth. There is thus a profound continuity behind the apparent absolute rupture.

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esotericism aside, our aim in the following is to elaborate a background against which this apparent paradox is resolved by showing how Heidegger's turn to the notion of the history of being shows up an underlying *continuity* with the approaches to historicity and untruth examined thus far in this thesis.

<sup>354</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 177.

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Heidegger's account of the ordinary concept of untruth here echoes Hegel's discussion of error and falsity examined above in chapter three.<sup>355</sup> We saw that there, Hegel claims that the negative has consistently been excluded from the economy of truth under the mark of falsity. 'Why bother with the false?,' Hegel asks ironically in the preface to PS.<sup>356</sup> Heidegger's ironic assent to the self-evidence of untruth as non-correspondence in the first section of *ET* can be understood as part of a similar rhetorical strategy on Heidegger's part. For Heidegger as for Hegel, the ordinary understanding of falsity 'is a topic regarding which established ideas notably obstruct the approach to truth.'<sup>357</sup>

The suspension of the 'abstract opposition' between truth and error allowed Hegel to give an account of the history of thought not as an *excess* over truth—an errant wandering of spirit, or a straying from the true path—but rather as the temporal manifestation of truth itself.<sup>358</sup> The history of thought is thus not a set of false statements or opinions, but rather a temporal manifestation of the necessary moments of the idea.

Like Hegel, Heidegger suggests that the accepted opposition between truth and untruth serves to obscure the genuine nature of truth. By treating the moment of untruth as a sheer excess generated by thought in its distance from truth, the tradition obscures a certain dynamism intrinsic to truth itself.<sup>359</sup> This results in a misunderstanding of historical difference, which is treated purely as a product of this 'errant' excess over truth.

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<sup>355</sup> Indeed, Heidegger's critique of the 'ordinary' notion of untruth can be read in parallel with his account of the metaphysical attitude toward negation. In §90 of CP, 'From the first to the other beginning: negation,' he writes: 'How few understand "negation," and how seldom is it firmly grasped by those who do have some understanding of it! Negation is spontaneously taken to be sheer rejection, dismissal, disparagement, and even disintegration.' CP, p. 140. While Heidegger is always careful to distinguish his own account of negation from Hegel's, so nonetheless, he shares Hegel's suspicion of the tradition's attitude toward negation. For both, the tradition is characterised by an absolute rejection of negation; and for both, this goes hand in hand with the 'rejection, dismissal and disparagement' of thought's history.

<sup>356</sup> PS, p. 22.

<sup>357</sup> PS, p. 22.

<sup>358</sup> This is why in CP, Heidegger claims Hegel is the only philosopher to have thought the history of thought philosophically. See CP, p. 167.

<sup>359</sup> The nature of this 'dynamism' is of course radically different for Hegel and Heidegger. I have deliberately chosen a term foreign to both Hegel and Heidegger's thinking in an attempt to capture a general affinity without suggesting any strict identity; Heidegger does not think in terms of Hegelian negativity, nor is Hegel a thinker of the Heideggerian 'event.'

The similarities between Hegel and Heidegger do not go any further than this. While their critique of the traditional concept of untruth shares certain features, Heidegger's account of what gets concealed behind the self-evidence of the modern concept of untruth is radically different from Hegel's.<sup>360</sup> Indeed, a crucial difference is already betrayed by the fact that for Hegel, negation properly understood is no longer a form of 'untruth' at all, but rather an intrinsic moment of truth which has been misunderstood by the tradition, but which his own ontology lays bare.<sup>361</sup> By contrast, Heidegger retains the term 'untruth' to denote the moment obscured by the tradition. Whereas for Hegel, the history of philosophy unfolds in the light of the eternally present idea, for Heidegger, this history remains 'errant' in a manner we will explore further below.

In the remainder of this chapter, we consider Heidegger's account of untruth, showing how he moves to inscribe it within the economy of truth. In doing so, we will need to explain why he continues to refer to this moment as untruth, but also why untruth is *doubled* in the process into the distinct moments of 'concealment' and 'errancy.'

#### 4.11 The Open Region

As we noted above, Heidegger begins his essay by claiming that truth is ordinarily understood in terms of correspondence. Following the same structure as the analysis of truth in §44 of *Being and Time*, he initially proceeds by asking after the background conditions which first make truth as correspondence possible. In order for us to take the thing in question as the measure of the validity of our statements, it is necessary that we should stand in an open relation to it, accepting it as the standard [*Richtmaß*] against which our statements are to be measured.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Heidegger notes that Schelling and Hegel constitute something of an exception regarding the status of untruth in their thought and that with their notion of negativity, they introduce a certain 'discord' into truth. Yet in a strikingly Cartesian mode, he suggests that it would be better to be ignorant of Schelling and Hegel than to confuse his own position with theirs. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.18-19.

<sup>361</sup> See section 3.7 above.

<sup>362</sup> ET p. 121-2; cf. BT, p. 260 ff.



This apparently self-evident relation comprises three distinct yet related moments. First, there is what Heidegger calls man's 'open stance' [*die Offenständigkeit des Menschen*] or 'open comportment' [*offenständiges Verhalten*]. In order to take the being in question as the standard of our statement, we must be receptive to it, 'open' to it as the standard according to which the truth-value of our statement can be determined. Second, the being to which the statement refers must be 'opened up' [*ein Offenbares*]<sup>363</sup>—it must be disclosed to us, must 'show itself' [*sich zeigen*]. Finally, and most significantly:

'this appearing of the thing in traversing a field of opposedness takes place within an open region [*innerhalb eines Offenen*], the openness of which is not first created by presenting but rather is only entered into and taken over as a domain of relatedness [*Bezugsbereich*].'<sup>363</sup>

This 'open region' is less immediately self-evident than the other two moments; and yet it is a decisive figure in the later Heidegger's thought. In other writings from the same period, he uses the term more or less interchangeably with 'world' [*Welt*] and 'clearing' [*Lichtung*].<sup>364</sup> In *ET*, Heidegger refers to the open region as a 'domain of relatedness.' This echoes his account of 'world' in *BT*. There, he claimed that everything Dasein encounters is always encountered as part of a system of relations he calls world.<sup>365</sup> Dasein does not merely find beings in the form of bare 'presence-at-hand,' only to then retrospectively incorporate them into this system of relations. Rather, such beings first become manifest as 'ready to hand,' i.e. as always already standing within the world as part of a broader network of concerns.

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<sup>363</sup> *ET*, p. 121.

<sup>364</sup> Thus in *OWA*, 'world,' 'the open' and 'clearing' appear to be used as synonyms. In other contexts, however, Heidegger seems to maintain a subtle distinction between the terms. In the context of *CP*, the distinction seems to reflect the place of *concealment*; where in the open region, the emphasis falls on the unconcealment of beings, the clearing is explicitly *clearing for concealment*. This difference, however, is merely one of accent.

<sup>365</sup> 'The ready-to-hand is always encountered within-the-world. The being of this entity, readiness-to-hand, thus stands in some ontological relationship towards the world and towards worldhood. In anything ready-to-hand the world is always 'there.' Whenever we encounter anything, the world has already been previously discovered, though not thematically.' *BT* p. 114. John Sallis notes the connection between the open region in the *ET* essay and the concept of world in *BT*; John Sallis, 'Deformatives: Essentially Other Than Truth,' in *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, ed. by John Sallis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 36.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the world or the related notion of the open region simply imply a kind of contextualist or relational conception of truth, according to which the veracity of a statement can only be established by reference to the place of an entity within a larger whole.<sup>366</sup> In the *Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger attempts to head off such misunderstandings of his concept of world:

‘The world is not the mere collection of the countable or the uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are at hand. But neither is it merely an imagined framework added by our representations to the sum of such given things. The world worlds, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. [...] Wherever those utterly essential decisions of our history are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds.’<sup>367</sup>

The ‘worlding of the world’ is another name for the presencing which precedes beings in their presence considered in the first part of this chapter. We saw there that within the first beginning, this moment of presencing has remained unthought, inasmuch as the moment of ‘givenness’ has been privileged over the ‘giving’ (the ‘*Es gibt*’). Within the metaphysical tradition, for beings to stand out in the open region is for them to be present, ‘open’ to thought. The open region thus seems to constitute a fixed horizon of presence. What remains unthought from the earliest moments of the first beginning down to its closure with Hegel and Nietzsche is the moment of *presencing* [*Anwesen*] which precedes all such *presence* [*Anwesenheit*]. The ‘worlding of the world,’ or the ‘clearing’ which first opens up the open region, is another name for being in its excess over presence.

I take it that Heidegger’s definition of the open region in terms of the ontological difference is key to his post-*BT* conception of truth. In the opening sections of the *ET* essay, it appears simply to constitute the horizon against which all intentional statements take shape. In other texts from the 1930s, however, Heidegger

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<sup>366</sup> Nor does such contextualism exhaust Heidegger’s account of worldhood in *BT*.

<sup>367</sup> OWA, p. 170. Cf. ‘On The Essence of Ground’ in *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 110.

specifies it more closely. In the *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger uses the analogy of the ‘hollow recess’ of a jug to try to capture the nature of the open more clearly.

Openness: is that not the emptiest of the empty? So it seems, if we try to take it, so to speak, for itself in the manner of a thing. Yet the open region, which conceals itself at the same time that beings come to stand in it in each case (indeed not only the things most proximately at hand), is in fact something like a hollow recess [*hohle Mitte*], e.g., that of a jug. Yet it must be recognized that the hollow recess is not just a haphazard emptiness which arises purely on account of the surrounding walls and which happens not to be full of "things." It is just the opposite: the hollow recess itself is what determines, shapes, and bears the walling action of the walls and of their surfaces. The walls and surfaces are merely what is radiated out by that original open realm which allows its openness to come into play by summoning up, round about itself and toward itself, such-and-such walls (the particular form of the vessel). That is how the essential occurrence of the open region radiates back from and in the embracing walls.<sup>368</sup>

The hollow recess of the jug appears to be empty; it is not a ‘being.’ Indeed, what is immediately evident to us is just the jug itself, a being which is present before us, which we can then make the subject of predicative statements (‘the jug is heavy’). Yet Heidegger suggests that it is the hollow recess which ‘bears’ the walls of the jug. It both ‘determines’ and ‘shapes’ it, giving it the form which we so often assume it simply ‘takes,’ as though from itself. Though it goes unnoticed, apparently constituting a mere ‘void,’ it nonetheless determines what Heidegger elsewhere calls the ‘what-being and how-being’ of the jug in its presence.<sup>369</sup>

At the same time, it is clear that this hollow recess is not given ‘apart’ from the jug. The recess ‘radiates back from the embracing walls,’ and in the same way, the open region only becomes evident through the beings which it bears. The open is thus not a ‘logos’ in the Hegelian sense of a horizon of the determinacy of all possible beings which could be articulated by abstracting from beings and turning

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<sup>368</sup> CP, p. 268; translation modified.

<sup>369</sup> The ‘Was- und Wie-sein;’ see GA 9, p. 131; ‘On The Essence of Ground’ in *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 104.

inward, examining the logical structure of pure thought. Rather, the open region only becomes manifest in and through the beings that stand within it.<sup>370</sup>

This is why in *ET*, Heidegger characterises truth in terms of Dasein's 'ek-sistence.' Dasein's 'ek-sistence' refers to its 'standing outside' of itself. In relating to beings in the open region, Dasein also *transcends* these beings in their immediacy, and stands in a relation to the open region as the horizon of their determinacy. Dasein thus always takes its orientation not simply from beings in their immediacy, but from the open region within which they take shape. It exceeds beings in their presence—yet at the same time, it is never given apart from them.

Heidegger closes the passage in the Contributions cited above with the following remark:

We must understand in a corresponding way, though as more essential and richer, the essential occurrence of the openness of the "there." The surrounding walling action of the "there" is of course not an objectively present thing; indeed it is not a being, nor even all beings. Instead, it pertains to being itself and is the trembling of the event in the intimation of the self-concealing.<sup>371</sup>

At this juncture, Heidegger introduces a moment of the open region never explicitly invoked in *ET*. The open region does not merely provide a static background against which beings come into view. Rather, it must be understood as an 'occurrence' or event. Again, a contrast with Hegel is useful here. While the open region does not share the structure of pure thought, so nonetheless, there are undeniable parallels between it and Hegel's idea. The idea is not a being; nor is it an interpretative framework which thought 'projects' onto beings. Indeed, it can be described as the universal *logos* which determines the 'what and how' of beings in their presence.

In the previous chapter, we saw that Hegel's account of the internal negativity of the concept allowed him to account for the different philosophical systems of the Western tradition as partial accounts of the concept. Nonetheless, his own system reveals the concept as the eternal, unchanging background against which this history unfolds. In his *Science of Logic*, he thus provides an account of the concept which

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<sup>370</sup> On this point, see Heidegger's account of transcendence in the 'On The Essence of Ground' in *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>371</sup> CP, p. 268; translation modified.

transcends the partial accounts of the history of philosophy, establishing a timelessly valid account of the horizon of determinacy.

Heidegger's open region occupies a similar place to Hegel's concept as the horizon of determinacy of beings. Nonetheless, unlike Hegel's concept, the open region is not a universal, fixed horizon, but is subject to change. He thus writes in the *Origin of the Work of Art* that 'the open place in the midst of beings, the clearing, is never a rigid stage with a permanently raised curtain on which the play of beings runs its course.'<sup>372</sup> For Heidegger, it is these shifts in the open region which bring about the transitions from one 'epoch' of history to the next. Heidegger hints at this in *ET* when he writes that 'the rare and simple decisions of history arise from the way the original essence of truth essentially unfolds.'<sup>373</sup> It is only in its relation to the open region that humanity becomes properly historical. History thus does not unfold against the 'backdrop' of the open region; on the contrary, it is the history of the open region itself.

Recall that Hegel suspended the opposition between truth and falsity in order to bring into view the *negativity* which characterizes the idea. For Heidegger, too, truth comes into view only when we suspend the standard opposition between truth and falsity. Yet what is revealed is not a negativity at the heart of truth, whose total mediation constitutes the horizon of the determinacy of beings. The epochs of history are not woven together into a coherent logical totality.

In the remainder of this chapter, it is my intention to demonstrate that the two forms of 'untruth' presented in *ET* have nothing in common with untruth understood as error or falsity; nor can they be understood simply in terms of the 'concealment' of beings standing in the open region. Instead, they pertain to the 'event' which first opens up the open region. Where traditionally, untruth is understood as a kind of defect in man's 'open stance,' a limitation in mankind's 'openness' to beings in their disclosure, we will see that Heidegger moves to inscribe untruth within the open region itself, thus removing it from the domain of epistemological error.

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<sup>372</sup> OWA, p. 179.

<sup>373</sup> *ET*, p. 127.

#### 4.12 Untruth as Concealing

The first form of untruth Heidegger introduces in ET is *concealment*. He opens his account with an apparently paradoxical statement: ‘Concealment deprives *alētheia* of disclosure, and does not yet allow its act of *sterēsis* (*privation* [*Beraubung*]); instead, it preserves what is most proper to *alētheia* as its own.’<sup>374</sup>

On the one hand, concealment seems to be defined by its opposition to unconcealment. In this way, it seems to constitute a kind of frustration of truth, ‘depriving’ it of disclosure. It would thus seem to be simply the ‘other’ of truth *qua* unconcealment.

At the same time, however, Heidegger suggests that this concealment ‘preserves what is most proper to *alētheia* as its own.’ One might assume that Heidegger is here simply reiterating the familiar idea that all human knowledge is intrinsically finite, such that our grasp of truth is necessarily always partial.<sup>375</sup> Yet in anticipation of such misreadings, he goes on to warn us that this concealment ‘does not first show up subsequently as a consequence of the fact that knowledge of beings is always fragmentary.’<sup>376</sup>

In the following paragraph, Heidegger defines concealment as the ‘non-essence’ of truth. In an extremely dense passage, he qualifies this statement, attempting to show how it cannot be understood in terms of the usual opposition between the essential and the unessential:

‘Non-essence here means not yet fallen to the sense of essence as what is general (*koinon, genos*), its *possibilitas* and its ground. In this way, non-essence is the pre-

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<sup>374</sup> ET, P. 130; translation modified. The original reads: ‘Die Verborgenheit versagt das *alētheia* das Entbergen und lässt sie noch nicht als *sterēsis* (Beraubung) zu, sondern bewahrt ihr das Eigenste als Eigentum.’ p.193. I have translated ‘noch nicht zulassen’ with ‘does not yet allow’ instead of ‘does not render it.’ Note that in BT, Heidegger uses *privation* or ‘robbery’ [*Beraubung*] as a synonym for disclosure. See BT, p. 265.

<sup>375</sup> I take it that Lee Braver has something like this in mind when he interprets concealment in ET as a question of ‘focus’: ‘Heidegger argues that a complete shadowless grasp of every aspect of something is not just unattainable by our finite minds, but is actually incoherent. The way unconcealment works is that when one aspect of something comes to light, its other aspects as well as beings as a whole fade into the shadows. Due to the very nature of focus, bringing one thing into the foreground of one's attention displaces all else to the background.’ Lee Braver, *Heidegger's Later Writings: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2009) p. 34.

<sup>376</sup> ET, p. 130.

essential essence. Yet “nonessence” means first and for the most part the deformation of essence in that fallen sense. Certainly, in both of these senses, the non-essence remains essential to essence, each in its own way, never becoming inessential in the sense of irrelevant.<sup>377</sup>

We ordinarily take ‘nonessence’ to mean the ‘deformation’ of essence in the sense of the general (*genos*). It is that which ‘deviates’ from the essence, corrupting it. And indeed, seen from the perspective of truth as the disclosure of beings, concealment would seem to constitute just such a nonessence. Yet Heidegger insists (emphasizing the difference with a hyphen) that we must here instead understand this ‘non-essence’ as *preceding* the ordinary distinction between the essential and inessential. Concealment is not simply the ‘nonessence of truth,’ but rather its ‘pre-essential essence.’

We saw above that Heidegger claims in the early sections of the essay that untruth is ordinarily understood as the ‘nonessence’ of truth in the sense of its deformation. He thus noted that, when it comes to considering the ‘pure essence’ of truth, untruth is ordinarily simply put to one side. Heidegger has now reversed this structure, positing untruth as the ‘pre-essential essence’ of truth. Far from being a simple excess over truth, he suggests that this ‘non-essence’ of truth ‘points to the still unexperienced domain of the truth of Being (and not merely of beings).’<sup>378</sup>

In other words, this moment of concealment points back to the ‘event’ by means of which the open region is first opened up. It thus does not denote the ‘covering over’ of beings which might otherwise be disclosed in the open region. Rather, as Heidegger writes in the *Origin of the Work of Art*, ‘concealment as refusal is not simply and only the limit of knowledge in any given circumstance, but the beginning of the clearing of what is cleared.’<sup>379</sup>

We saw above that the open region is not a static ‘horizon,’ but rather is essentially changeable. According to Heidegger, the open region first takes shape as the result of an interplay between truth and untruth which precedes all

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., translation modified.

<sup>378</sup> ET, p. 131.

<sup>379</sup> OWA, p. 178-9.

unconcealment of beings—what in the *Origin of the Work of Art* he calls the ‘primal strife between clearing and concealing.’<sup>380</sup>

It is by means of this ‘strife’ that Being delivers beings over into an epoch of presence. Yet Being, as the destining that first gives rise to an epoch of presence, itself always exceeds the horizon of presence. As the ‘Es gibt’ which precedes all givenness, being itself is structurally concealed. Truth *qua* unconcealment is thus always preceded by a moment of untruth—and yet it is this very untruth which first gives rise to the horizon of presence within which truth unfolds. As such, concealment *precedes* the economy of truth conceived in terms of presence. It is an ‘absence’ which precedes all presence, first making it possible,<sup>381</sup> ‘untruth’ inscribed at the very heart of truth.

I take it that this notion of concealment is crucial in explaining why for Heidegger, being itself has a history. For it means that being itself is never ‘present’—neither to thought, nor indeed to itself. For it means that being does not ‘have’ an essence, but rather ‘essences’ in a verbal sense. It ‘occurs’ as event, in which beings are disclosed in the open region, and in which being itself withdraws in self-concealment. Being lets beings stand forth only by concealing itself. Since it is structurally withdrawn, no ‘event’ of truth is ever final, such that the open region is always structurally open to further events. It is precisely because being is not an essence or ‘ground’ of things that it can never be rendered present, but rather only become manifest in a series of events, none of which are ever exhaustive of being.

In *ET*, Heidegger refers to concealment as the ‘mystery’ [*das Geheimnis*]. He explores the structure of the mystery in more detail in his Parmenides lectures. There, he argues that in the modern age, a mystery is conceived simply as something which has *not yet been explained*.<sup>382</sup> It is treated as something obscure which still awaits illumination—a ‘residue’ which our knowledge has not yet been able to incorporate. As such, its only relevance consists in the possibility of its eventual illumination. Insofar as it remains ‘mysterious,’ it is not properly speaking an object of knowledge, instead denoting a simple limit to our knowledge. On this account, the ‘truth’ of a

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<sup>380</sup> OWA, p. 180.

<sup>381</sup> Cf. Miguel de Beisetgui, *Truth and Genesis: Philosophy as Differential Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 127.

<sup>382</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 63.



mystery comes with its dissolution and illumination—such that it ceases to be a mystery.

Heidegger explains this point by playing on the meaning of the term “open secret” [*offenes Geheimnis*]:

We readily misuse the term “open secret” or “open mystery” and apply it to the situation where there is precisely nothing secret or mysterious at all but where what is already known by everyone is not supposed to be brought into the open. The “open mystery” in the genuine and strict sense, on the contrary, occurs where the concealing of the mysterious is simply experienced as concealedness and is lodged in a historically arisen reticence. The openness of the open mystery does not consist in solving the mystery, thus destroying it, but consists in not touching the concealedness of the simple and essential and letting this concealedness alone in its appearance. The insignificance of the concealment proper to the genuine mystery is already a result of the essence of the simple, which for its part is grounded primordially.<sup>383</sup>

The mystery, then, is not a puzzle awaiting resolution, nor something which is simply *as of yet* unknown or unexplained. Rather, Heidegger suggests that to stand in an open relation to the mystery involves allowing it to prevail as the mystery that it is. In other words, it involves adopting a stance in which one does not attempt to ground it in some being or economy of presence. All attempts to ‘get to the bottom’ of the mystery destroy the mystery *qua* mystery.

There is a similarity here with the status of illusion in Kant’s thought, although the parallel is far from absolute. In chapter two, we saw that ordinarily, the task of thought is to ‘overcome’ illusions; in the act of exposing an illusion, it ceases to deceive us. For Kant, however, transcendental illusion persists even after being exposed. Similarly, Heidegger argues that a mystery is generally conceived of as something to be overcome. Yet he goes on to suggest that this will to overcome the mystery is the consequence of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of truth. The ‘mystery’ of concealment is not something to be overcome, but rather something

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

which we must be allowed to persist—an irreducible moment of untruth inscribed at the heart of the economy of truth.

#### 4.13 *A-letheia* and the Clearing for Self-Concealing

It is often assumed that for Heidegger, *aletheia* is synonymous with truth. Yet in the *Contributions*, Heidegger suggests that his own conception of truth implies an overcoming of the notion of truth as *aletheia* in the sense in which it was understood in the first beginning. He writes:

A-letheia means un-concealment and the un-concealed itself, which already indicates that concealment itself is experienced only as what is to be cleared away, what is to be removed (a-).

Therefore questioning, too, does not address the concealment itself and its ground; and therefore also, conversely, the unconcealed as such is all that is essential, not the process of unconcealing and certainly not this as the clearing in which the concealment itself now actually comes into the open. Nevertheless, the concealment is not thereby cancelled [*aufgehoben*] but first becomes graspable in its essence.

Truth as the clearing for concealment is thus an essentially different projection than is *aletheia*, although the former projection pertains to the recollection of the latter, and vice versa.<sup>384</sup>

The term *aletheia* is constructed from the Greek *lēthē*, meaning concealment or forgetting and an alpha-privative. Heidegger privileges the term *aletheia* over the later terms *veritas* and truth because it contains a reference to this negative moment of concealing or forgetting. Nonetheless, he suggests here that within the first beginning, truth was always understood as a privative operation, in which concealment is reduced to a moment to be *overcome*. We saw in part one of this chapter that early Greek thought hints at the emergence of beings in their unconcealment from an indefinite horizon. Yet from the beginning, Greek thought was turned toward beings in their presence. Truth designated the rising up of beings in their presence in the open region. What remained unthought, even amongst the

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<sup>384</sup> CP, p. 277.

earliest Greek thinkers, was the moment of concealment which precedes all unconcealing.

By positing untruth as the essence of truth in the form of the concealing which precedes all unconcealment, Heidegger asks us to ‘recollect’ this moment of *lēthē* not as a simple surplus over truth as unconcealing, but rather as an essential moment of primordial truth. Truth does not occur as the privative act of overcoming concealment, but rather incorporates the strife in which being withdraws beneath beings in their unconcealment. Indeed, I take it that Heidegger gives precedence to concealment—claiming that it *precedes* all unconcealment—precisely so as to reverse the traditional idea that untruth constitutes a kind of corruption of truth which we might thus seek to overcome. Instead, it is the very nature of being to conceal itself, such that any moment of unconcealment is always already accompanied by an irreducible moment of concealment.

In order to emphasize the belonging of *lēthē* to aletheia, in the *Contributions*, Heidegger defines truth as *clearing for self-concealing*. We noted above that Heidegger uses the terms clearing and ‘open region’ more or less interchangeably in many writings from this period. Yet here, a slight difference in accent comes to the fore.<sup>385</sup> In *ET*, the open region is defined as the ‘domain of relations’ within which beings in their presence are disclosed. Yet we saw above that the unconcealment of beings presupposes a more fundamental sense of truth, the strife by means of which this open region is first ‘opened’ or cleared.

The notion of the ‘clearing for self-concealing’ brings this primordial moment of strife to the fore. Dasein’s truth consists not simply in being open to beings in their unconcealment. Instead, it consists in attending to the mystery, the moment of concealment which precedes all unconcealing. What is ‘concealed’ in the event of truth is not simply this or that being, nor some aspect of beings that might otherwise be revealed. Nor is it the open region as such, as the horizon against which these beings come into view. Rather, it is the excess of being over this horizon. It is this excess which ontotheology overlooks. Indeed, it is apt to be overlooked, as it cannot be thematized in positive terms. Yet for Heidegger, it is this excess over the totality

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<sup>385</sup> Heidegger says of aletheia, openness and the clearing of what is self-concealing that: ‘Roughly speaking, these are different terms with the same meaning. Nevertheless, behind these names lurks a decisive question.’ CP, p. 263, translation modified.

of beings which means that being is never exhausted by any particular ‘horizon,’ or epoch of beings. I take it that for Heidegger, one of the primary ways in which this excess becomes manifest is in the historical shifts from one horizon to another. These shifts do not obey a logic intrinsic to any given horizon, but rather point to an excess over all such horizons.

According to the *Contributions*, the task of inceptual thinking is thus the *sheltering* [*Bergung*] of being’s self-concealment.<sup>386</sup> Heidegger writes: ‘Whence does sheltering derive its urgency and necessity? From self-concealing. The sheltering of this occurrence is needed to preserve the self-concealing rather than do away with it.’<sup>387</sup> While the first beginning has tended to treat concealment as a moment to be overcome, Heidegger understands it as an essential moment of truth.

#### 4.14 Untruth as Errancy

In *ET*, having established untruth as the concealment which precedes all unconcealing, Heidegger goes on to introduce a second form of untruth, *errancy* [*die Irre*]. As ek-sistent, Dasein relates not only to beings in their presence, but equally to the mystery which precedes the openness of beings. Dasein is thus equally in ‘truth,’ as the unconcealment of beings, and ‘untruth,’ as the structural withdrawal of the ground of beings.

Yet Heidegger claims that, in the process of the unconcealment of beings, the moment of concealment itself gets covered up.<sup>388</sup> For the most part, human beings are turned towards what is unconcealed, ‘acquiescing’ in the openness of particular beings. In the face of beings in their presence, the mystery gets forgotten.

Heidegger refers to this as Dasein’s ‘insistence.’ He writes:

As insistent, man is turned toward the most readily available beings. But he insists only by being already ek-sistent, since, after all, he takes beings as his standard.

However, in taking its standard, humanity is turned away from the mystery. The ek-sistent turning toward what is readily available and the ek-sistent turning away from

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<sup>386</sup> See CP, p. 307.

<sup>387</sup> CP, p. 308.

<sup>388</sup> ET, p. 131.

the mystery belong together. They are one and the same. [...] Man's flight from the mystery toward what is readily available, onward from one current thing to the next, passing the mystery by – this is erring [*das Irren*].<sup>389</sup>

'In-sistence' is not simply opposed to Dasein's ek-sistence. Instead, it presupposes the latter, and can be understood as a modification of it. Indeed, is only as ek-sistent that Dasein stands in relation to beings in their openness at all. Heidegger notes that, even in Dasein's mode of insistence, the mystery continues to hold sway, as the implicit horizon of beings in their presence. Nonetheless, as errant, Dasein does not attend to the mystery, but is rather 'turned away' from it, instead taking its orientation from beings in their presence. The most fundamental form of truth, the interplay between concealment and unconcealment, gets covered over.

On the one hand, 'errancy' simply denotes the everyday comportment of Dasein—what in *BT* Heidegger called Dasein's inauthenticity. For the most part, Dasein is not concerned with the truth of Being, but is simply absorbed in its familiar world.<sup>390</sup> It thus takes beings in their presence for granted, simply accepting the interpretations of the 'public interpretation' of beings passed along by the 'they.'<sup>391</sup>

Note that like concealment, errancy bears little resemblance to the traditional concept of 'untruth' as falsity. By 'insisting' on beings in their presence, Dasein does not falsify them. On the contrary, beings are 'unconcealed' in errancy. Errancy 'errs' only inasmuch as it fails to attend to the mystery, the absence at the heart of beings in their presence.

As such, errancy would seem to denote a kind of *falling short* of primordial truth, as the interplay between concealment and unconcealing which first gives rise to the open region. Properly speaking, errancy is not opposed to truth as unconcealment, but rather to *un-truth qua concealing*. It is a secondary form of untruth, in which concealment as the pre-essence of truth falls from view.

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<sup>389</sup> ET, p. 132-3.

<sup>390</sup> Bret W. Davis thus notes that 'letting beings be' is not a permanent state into which one enters, but can occur only 'from time to time' by way of a 'glimpse into the mystery out of errancy,' that is, by stepping back from one's dealings with beings to expose oneself to the question of being.' Bret W. Davis, *Heidegger and the Will. On the Way to Gelassenheit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 284.

<sup>391</sup> Heidegger equates such 'falling' with untruth in *BT*; see *BT*, p. 264.

If errancy constitutes a ‘falling short’ of primordial truth, does this mean that Heidegger has reintroduced a moment of epistemological shortfall into his account of untruth? In the passage cited above, Heidegger talks of man’s ‘flight from the mystery toward what is readily available.’ On the face of it, this seems to suggest that, unlike concealment, errancy is not an intrinsic feature of the economy of truth, but rather denotes Dasein’s distance from truth.

Moreover, errancy clearly resembles the oblivion of being which characterises the history of philosophy hitherto. We saw in part one of this chapter that, over the course of the first beginning, thought is increasingly turned towards beings in their presence, such that the moment of giving which precedes presence falls from view.

It may thus seem as though, while concealment constitutes a moment of untruth that belongs irreducibly to the economy of truth, Heidegger considers errancy to be a moment of untruth in the more traditional sense of something to be overcome. The first beginning would thus be errant—and the task of inceptual thinking would be to overcome this errancy.

In *ET*, Heidegger is careful to insist that errancy is by no means accidental. It is not a contingent feature of the human condition, but rather an irreducible feature of being. Heidegger writes:

Man errs. Man does not merely stray into errancy. He is always astray in errancy, because as ek-sistent he in-sists and so is caught in errancy. The errancy through which man strays is not something which, as it were, extends alongside man like a ditch into which he occasionally stumbles; rather, errancy belongs to the inner constitution of the Da-sein into which historical man is admitted.<sup>392</sup>

As such, unlike Cartesian or Kantian error, it is clear that for Heidegger, errancy is not a merely contingent feature of thought. It is not an accidental feature of human existence, distorting thought’s ‘natural tendency’ toward truth. On the contrary, Dasein is intrinsically turned toward beings in their presence.

In this passage, Heidegger might be taken to be making a simple point about human finitude. The idea of a relation to truth in which error would be entirely

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<sup>392</sup> *ET*, p. 133.

eliminated is illusory. It is not by accident that we sometimes go astray; on the contrary, human thought always and will always tend towards error.

Yet I take it that Heidegger's point here is a different one. In ET, Heidegger defines errancy in terms of Dasein's turning away from the mystery. As a result, one is left with the impression that errancy is a product of a kind of defect in Dasein's open stance. Certainly, on this reading, Heidegger differs from Descartes and Kant, in that he suggests that this defect cannot be simply overcome. Nonetheless, errancy ultimately remains a product of a kind of shortfall of thought—albeit one which can never be redressed.

Yet in other writings from the same era, it becomes clear that for Heidegger, errancy is not merely the product of a kind of shortfall on the part of Dasein. Rather, it is a necessary moment of the economy of truth—a product not of an epistemological shortfall from truth, but rather a moment made necessary by the very nature of being.

#### **4.15 Errancy and History**

In ET, Heidegger defines errancy in terms of Dasein's turning away from the mystery. Yet in other writings from the same period, he offers what might be considered a more 'positive' definition of errancy. In *Mindfulness* [*Besinnung*], he writes:

Errancy and erring in errancy is the simplest experience of thinking unto which thinking sees itself relegated when it has given up the support of beings and the escape into beingness. This errancy itself is the clearing (openness - truth) of be-ing. Errancy does not set itself up against the truth, and is also not removed by truth and made to disappear. Rather, errancy is the appearing of the truth itself in its own sway. Errancy is that within which a particular interpretation of be-ing must err, which erring alone truly traverses the clearing of refusal—traverses in accord with the clearing of what is lighted up.

The fundamental consequence of errancy as the sway of the truth of be-ing is that any being that enters into and stays within the openness and can possibly preserve

this openness, simultaneously resides in 'un-truth' in the double sense of sheltering-concealing and dissembling.<sup>393</sup>

Here, Heidegger talks about errancy not in terms of Dasein's 'turning away' from the mystery, but rather as 'the appearing of truth in its own sway.' Crucially, errancy is not treated here as a defect in Dasein's open stance, nor as a product of its insistence. On the contrary, it is what thought experiences when it renounces its insistence on beings in their presence, 'giving up' the 'support of beings.' How are we to understand this apparent deviation from his account in *ET*?

I take it that here, Heidegger uses errancy simply to refer to the way in which beings are made manifest in their presence in the open region. Beings do not point back to the event of truth through which they first become manifest; nor do they stand in any direct relation to concealment. Rather, they are simply 'given' in their presence.

Heidegger puts the same point more explicitly in the *Anaximander Fragment*. He writes:

As it reveals itself in beings, Being withdraws. In this way, by illuminating them, Being sets beings adrift in errancy. Beings come to pass in that errancy by which they circumvent Being and establish the realm of error [*Irrtum*] (in the sense of a prince's realm [*Fürstentum*] or the realm of poetry [*Dichtertum*]). Error [*Irrtum*] is the space in which history unfolds.<sup>394</sup>

In the very same movement in which being reveals or 'illuminates' beings, it also 'sets them adrift' in errancy. I take it that this is Heidegger's way of denoting the fact that, for the most part, the open region is stable and apparently fixed. Where in *ET*, Heidegger claimed that it was Dasein's 'in-sistence' that gave rise to errancy, here, he

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<sup>393</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, trans. by Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 229.

<sup>394</sup> AF, p. 26. Heidegger is here playing on the suffix *-tum* in '*Irr-tum*,' suggesting it must be heard in the same sense as in the word '*Fürsten-tum*' – literally a principality, translated here as prince's realm. It is important to recognize that he does not use 'error' in a sense distinct from errancy here, and certainly not in the ordinary sense of a 'mistake;' on the contrary, he suggests that '*Irrtum*' must here be understood as the '*Irre-tum*'—the 'realm of errancy,' or the space opened up by the errancy of being.



seems to suggest that errancy is the name for the way in which beings are revealed in the open region.

Crucially, in this same passage, Heidegger claims that it is in the space opened up by errancy that history unfolds. It is only here that the full import of Heidegger's concept of errancy becomes apparent. The term does not simply denote Dasein's tendency to 'turn away' from the mystery. On the contrary, we must hear in this term an echo of the traditional notion of the 'errant' history of thought. Just as for Descartes, the history of philosophy was set adrift in errancy, for Heidegger too, history can be conceived as a kind of errant wandering.

Yet in distinction to Descartes, Heidegger conceives of this errancy not simply as a shortfall on the part of thought, but rather as an errancy immanent to being itself. The various 'destinings' of being are errant, inasmuch as they establish a fixed horizon of beings, within which any particular epoch of humanity dwells.

Heidegger makes the connection between errancy and history explicit in the passages which follow in the *Anaximander Fragment*, writing: 'Without errancy there would be no connection from destiny to destiny: there would be no history.'<sup>395</sup> Errancy thus does not simply describe Dasein's 'erring past the mystery,' and so a defect in Dasein's open stance. Rather, in a more 'positive' sense, it also denotes the way in which being discloses beings in a series of historical 'epochs' He adds:

From *the epoche* of Being comes the epochal essence of its destining, in which world history properly consists. When Being keeps to itself in its destining, world suddenly and unexpectedly comes to pass. Every epoch of world history is an epoch of errancy.<sup>396</sup>

Heidegger's point here is not that every epoch of world history is in some sense 'false,' or defective, nor that it arises through some defect in Dasein's open stance. Rather, as Derrida notes, the errancy of history follows from the fact being can never be rendered present, but is essentially concealed. As such, no horizon of presence can ever lay claim to being exhaustive of being:

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

Without this dissimulation of Being by the existent there would be nothing, and there would be no history. That Being occurs in all respects as history and as world means that it can only retire beneath ontic determinations in the history of metaphysics. For historical “epochs” are metaphysical (ontotheological) determinations of the Being which thus brackets itself, reserves itself beneath metaphysical concepts.<sup>397</sup>

In other words, being only reveals itself through this dissimulation, and thus in the form of an errant history. This errancy does not occur through some defect in Dasein’s comportment, but rather is simply Heidegger’s name for the fact that for the most part, beings persist in their simple presence, within which the original event of truth is not apparent.

As such, for Heidegger, the task of thought is thus not to ‘transcend’ errancy; indeed, this cannot be the case, as strictly speaking, there is nothing ‘beyond’ or ‘behind’ this errancy. The ‘metaphysical’ determinations of being are simply the way in which being reveals itself in the open region, even while at the same time withdrawing into self-concealment.

Rather, thought can only ‘overcome’ errancy in the limited sense of recognizing the essential groundlessness of a given epoch of being. By attending to the mystery, thought can recognize that its own epoch is not exhaustive of being, but rather that it is adrift in the errancy of being, which is essentially ungrounded, and open to change.

As such, even in the wake of the ‘other beginning,’ it is clear that Dasein’s history would remain ‘errant,’ in the sense that it will continue to exist within a particular ‘destining’ of being. The shift which Heidegger seeks to bring about is thus not one which would correct the ‘errant’ history of the past. This is why, in the passage from *Mindfulness* cited above, Heidegger claims that ‘errancy does not set itself up against the truth, and is also not removed by truth and made to disappear.’ Errant history is not bracketed, cast aside and rendered neutral, or made to vanish. Rather, it is the errant history of truth itself.

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<sup>397</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 180. Similarly, in his Heidegger seminars, he writes ‘Dissimulation is as originary and essential as unveiling. Cf. Vom Wesen der Wahrheit. If this were not so, then the historicity of being would be derivative and secondary.’ Jacques Derrida, Heidegger: *The Question of Being and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 63.

Recall that for Descartes and Kant, the ‘space’ in which history unfolded was opened up by thought’s falling short of truth. It was only due to a faulty application of the faculties that the space of thought’s history opened up at all, such that historicity ultimately took shape in the ‘gap’ between the economy of cognition and the economy of truth. By contrast, in these passages, Heidegger makes clear that this ‘space of error’ is not the product of a shortfall of thought, or of Dasein’s comportment, but is rather immanent to the economy of truth.

This means that accounting for historical difference belongs to the remit of ontology—conceived broadly as the thinking of being.<sup>398</sup> Moreover, for Heidegger, such ontology cannot be systematic. This is because there is no ‘law’ according to which history unfolds. Being is radically withdrawn and concealed, such that its ‘logic’ can never be rendered present to thought. As such, we cannot seek to trace historical difference back to the intrinsic structure of human cognition, as Kant does, nor to a universal logos at work behind this history all along, as Hegel seeks to do.

Another way of putting this point is to say that historical difference is granted a certain autonomy. It is not reduced to a form of ‘epistemological difference’ whose law could be specified by way of an account of the human faculties. Nor is it a product of the kind of ontological negativity which Hegel. If for Heidegger, historical difference is ‘grounded’ in ontological difference, this does not mean that we can expose the ‘logic’ of historical difference solely by attending to ontological difference. Rather, it means that historical difference is the way in which ontological difference becomes manifest. To attend to ontological difference is just to attend to historical difference, such that the two can only be thought together.

In practice, this means that philosophy is obliged to engage with its own past—not merely in the form of a secondary discipline, nor even as a subsection of a broader philosophical system. The line separating first philosophy from the history of philosophy is essentially erased altogether. To ask after truth is also to ask after the history of truth. There is nothing behind the errant paths or ‘*Holzwege*’ of history. And since no law can be specified which would circumscribe the limits of this

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<sup>398</sup> As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, Heidegger rejects the term ‘ontology’ in his later thought for its systematic connotations. I nonetheless employ it here to denote the fact that for Heidegger, historical difference does not have its root in an epistemological shortfall, but rather follows from the very nature of being itself.

history, it is only through a hermeneutic engagement with past texts that the labour of thought can proceed.

We stated above that Heidegger's claim that 'untruth is the essence of truth' must be interpreted against the background of the traditional association between untruth and historicity. In short, the statement means nothing less than 'truth is essentially historical.' We have now spelled out this connection in detail.

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The question remains, however, as to how we are to reconcile this notion of 'ontological' errancy with the account of errancy given in ET. Heidegger switches relatively freely in his writings between these two senses of errancy—Dasein's 'in-sistence' on the one hand, and the fixed horizon of beings in their presence on the other.<sup>399</sup> On the one hand, errancy simply denotes the way in which the history of truth unfolds. On the other, Heidegger treats it as a 'defect' characteristic not of history as such, but specifically of the first beginning, which, we are to assume, would in some sense be overcome in the other beginning.

We saw in part one above that Heidegger goes to great lengths to show that this first beginning does not arise out of some defect on the part of thought. Rather, he treats it as a 'destining' of being, through which concealment first becomes apparent.

Nonetheless, I take it that Heidegger exploits the concept of errancy as in-sistence to maintain a certain critical distance from philosophy's past. For Heidegger, the past is not simply a matter of the historical unfolding of truth, but also of a certain decline, which can only be redressed through a radical break with the past. In this way, Heidegger retains the idea that the first beginning is marked by a kind of shortfall, which his own project seeks to overcome

I take it that this is a consequence of Heidegger's privileging of the future over the past, as discussed at the end of part one of this chapter. For the ambiguity in

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<sup>399</sup> It falls beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the scope of these different usages here. Nonetheless, I take it that a detailed study of Heidegger's writings from this era would reflect that the tension between the meanings reflects the context in which the terms are used. Specifically, it is in his criticism of the first beginning that Heidegger associates errancy with Dasein's 'in-sistence,' and so a kind of defect in Dasein's open stance; while his other more general writings on the history of being reflect more neutrally on the idea that the history of being is intrinsically errant.

the concept of errancy allows Heidegger to maintain, on the one hand, that the past of thought is nothing other than being's own past; and on the other, to denounce the metaphysical past in the name of a 'more originary insertion' into history that is yet to come. We return to this issue in the conclusion to the thesis, with specific reference to the *Black Notebooks*.

#### **4.16 Conclusion to Chapter Four: The Doubling of Untruth**

We saw above that Heidegger understands the history of thought not as a product of thought's tendency towards error, but rather as a history of truth itself.

This has a number of consequences. Firstly, it means that for Heidegger, as for Hegel, the history of thought is not a product of thought's tendency toward error in the sense of falsity. Indeed, there is a strong resemblance between the 'errancy' of historical epochs in Heidegger's thought, and the 'one-sidedness' which defines the history of thought for Hegel. For both, the history of thought is never simply a question of thought 'falsifying' being.

By contrast to Hegel, however, for Heidegger, the truth underlying the history of philosophy can never be rendered present in a single, fixed economy of truth. As such, ineptual thinking cannot start with a 'new beginning' of the kind Hegel proposes in his presuppositionless logic, which would finally render the structure of being bare. Recall that Hegel's *a priori* account of the idea allowed him to reconstruct the logic underlying the history of philosophy, such that the VGP presupposed the logic as the hermeneutic 'key' to Hegel's readings of historical texts.

For Heidegger, there is nothing to be thought 'beyond' being's errant history. In this way, Heidegger comes close to Descartes' position, in the sense that the history of thought does not unfold according to any specific logic, but rather as a certain excess over the economy of truth. Yet for Heidegger, this excess is built into the economy of truth, which is not static and unchanging like Descartes' idea, but rather is intrinsically mutable.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> John Sallis refers to this as the 'monstrosity' of truth. See John Sallis, 'Deformatives: Essentially Other Than Truth,' in *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, ed. by John Sallis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 29 ff.

I take it that this is why untruth is ‘doubled’ in Heidegger’s thought. Heidegger understands the history of being as an interplay between concealment and errancy. Recall that for Descartes, truth was unequivocal. History consisted in a contingent ‘erring’ past the truth, until such time as thought could be put on the right track by his method.

For Heidegger on the other hand, truth itself is ‘errant.’ This should not be taken to constitute a simple paradox, in which truth and falsity are equated. Rather, the form of errancy identified by Descartes is now treated not as an excess over truth, a waste product generated by an epistemological shortfall, but is instead taken up as a moment of the economy of truth itself.

At the same time, this ‘errant’ wandering does not occur against the backdrop of a fixed ‘idea’ or truth. Errancy is not merely a consequence of Dasein’s finitude, such that from a higher, extra-human perspective, the truth of being might be stated in ahistorical terms. Rather, being is essentially self-concealing. It can never be rendered fully present, but rather constitutes an excess over all horizons of presence. It is for this reason that the errant history of being remains essentially open—since a new ‘destining of being’ always remains possible. It is thanks to being’s self-concealment that thought can never be other than errant, and that being is essentially historical.

With regards the question of the ‘incubation time’ of Heidegger’s thought, I take it that there remains the residue of the idea of an epistemological shortfall. It is true that for Heidegger, the errancy of thought’s history is nothing that can be overcome inasmuch as it belongs essentially to the economy of truth. Nonetheless, Heidegger cannot avoid claiming a certain privilege for his own thinking, which is taken to overcome the limitations of the first beginning, from which he maintains a critical distance.

Indeed, as we saw in part one of this chapter, Heidegger is strikingly close to Kant on this score. He goes to great lengths to insist that the first beginning is not simply the product of a ‘mistake’ on thought’s part. Rather, the withdrawal of being could only become apparent over the course of a long history. It is only at the point of being’s most extreme withdrawal that a genuine relation to truth can be established. This echoes Kant’s notion that the critical method only becomes possible

after metaphysics has passed through the stages of dogmatism and skepticism, and once the limits of reason have been rendered explicit.

Certainly, there are clear differences between Kant and Heidegger. The passage through the first beginning is not a matter of rendering clear a disjunction between human cognition and being; rather, it plays out immanently in the economy of being. As a result, the first beginning is not simply a matter of ‘errors.’ Yet the fact remains that the first beginning has always ‘erred past the mystery.’

We saw above that Heidegger’s notion of errancy remains ambiguous. I take it that this ambiguity reflects his aim to show simultaneously both that philosophy’s past is nothing false, and yet to maintain a critical distance from it. Above all, I take it that Heidegger’s notion of an ‘other beginning’ holds within it the promise of a kind of errancy that would not be marked by Dasein’s ‘in-sistence.’

In the conclusion to this thesis, we return to our account of the way in which Heidegger’s distinction between the first and other beginnings ultimately distorts his project of a history of being begun in section 4.9 above. Nonetheless, we suggest that in the wake of his failings, the task of philosophy is not simply to abandon the idea of a history of being, but rather to renew the question of the relation between error and history, and so to pose the question of the ontological status of the past beyond the limitations of Heidegger’s project.

# Conclusion

## 5.1 Summary

In the preceding, I traced an historical development in philosophy's attitude towards its own past. We saw how four major thinkers from the Western tradition understood their own relation to the tradition which preceded them—beginning with a gesture of exclusion, and moving through a series of approaches in which the line dividing first philosophy from the history of philosophy became increasingly blurred. Furthermore, I showed how in each case, the status of philosophy's past was reflected in the status attributed to *error* by each thinker.

In the first chapter, we saw how Descartes commences his project by suspending all appeal to the authority of the tradition. While he does not dismiss the tradition out of hand, I argued that implicitly, Descartes can only account for historical difference—the contradictory positions defended throughout the history of philosophy—by appeal to the concept of error. Turning to his fourth meditation, I showed how his attitude toward the tradition is reflected in his account of the ground of error. Errors arise due to the fact that human thought is positioned '*inter deum et nihil*'—between divinity on the one hand, and the nothing on the other. This means that for Descartes, historical difference is rigorously excluded from the economy of truth. It is the product simply of a shortfall from truth, and as such, philosophy need not engage with it. The history of philosophy is conceived as a contingent errant wandering, whose content need be of no concern to contemporary philosophy. We argued that this position remains prominent in a large proportion of contemporary philosophy.

In the second chapter, we saw that Kant repeats Descartes' gesture of treating the history of philosophy as the product of a tendency towards error. Yet in contrast to Descartes, Kant argued that these errors were not a product of sheer contingency. Rather, they arose naturally from a disjunction between the economy of human cognition on the one hand, and the economy of truth on the other. It was only by passing through the errors arising from this disjunction that the proper scope of human cognition could become clear. This allowed Kant to take account of the



specific content of the history of Western metaphysics, albeit within certain strict confines.

In spite of their differences, we claimed that Descartes and Kant both ultimately reduce historical difference to the product of an epistemological shortfall. The ‘incubation period’ of their respective systems was merely the matter of the overcoming of error, and one which, but for the right method, might have been leapt over. The past is thus rendered superfluous to truth—even as it was a necessary precondition of critique for Kant.

In the third chapter, we examined Hegel’s onto-logical account of the history of philosophy. Among the thinkers considered here, Hegel constitutes a major exception, inasmuch as he does not treat historical difference as a product of error. We showed how in lieu of such a concept of error, Hegel appeals to the idea of a form of negativity immanent to truth as the ground of thought’s historicity. We argued that his much-maligned claim concerning a parallel between his history of philosophy on the one hand, and his *Logic* on the other, in fact constitutes a major component of his philosophical system. Ultimately, we showed that Hegel subordinates philosophy’s past to his own onto-logical account of the idea, rendering an engagement with the past superfluous to the tasks of first philosophy. Nonetheless, we claimed that Hegel’s account of the history of philosophy constitutes the most extensive engagement with the past in the history of Western philosophy. Furthermore, many of his critics simply relapse into a Cartesian position, rather than attempting to find a way of doing justice to the autonomy of the past.

Finally, in chapter four, we turned to an examination of Heidegger’s ‘history of being.’ It would seem that Heidegger’s notion of a history of being gives us a way of considering the past without simply dismissing it as error, as had Descartes and Kant, but equally while avoiding the Hegelian gesture of treating it in terms of a logic of presence. Heidegger’s conception of errancy implies that all thought is intrinsically ‘errant,’ in the sense of being without any ground in the logic of presence. The history of thought is a history of being itself.

Nonetheless, we suggested that Heidegger ultimately subordinates his project of a history of being to his prioritising of the question of the future. This found expression in an ambiguity inherent to his conception of errancy. In the next two sections, we consider this limitation of Heidegger’s project in more detail, before

turning in the final section to a consideration of the prospects for a renewal of the question concerning the relationship between errancy and historicity.

## 5.2 Heidegger's Failure I

The publication of the so-called 'Black Notebooks'<sup>401</sup> beginning in 2014 has seen a renewed focus on the question of Heidegger's anti-Semitism, both within academic circles and in the German and international mainstream media. While it had previously already been the subject of extensive scrutiny, the content of the *Notebooks* forced a confrontation with the issue that had all too frequently been swept aside.

This thesis has not explicitly engaged with the *Notebooks*, nor has it sought to develop an exhaustive account of Heidegger's position. Rather, our focus has been on whether his notions of the history of being and errancy allow us to raise the question of philosophy's past in terms other than those of epistemological failure. Yet the *Notebooks* have made it unequivocally clear that Heidegger's own understanding of the 'history of being' is inseparably intertwined with both his anti-Semitism and the privilege he affords to the Greek-German 'destiny' of Western thought. Peter Trawny thus speaks of Heidegger's 'being-historical anti-Semitism';<sup>402</sup> and Donatella Di Cesare refers to Heidegger's 'metaphysical anti-Semitism'—a term that is in no way intended to 'soften' Heidegger's anti-Semitism through qualification, but rather to convey the fact that is not *solely* a product of his political commitments, but rather permeates the very heart of his thought.<sup>403</sup>

We noted in the introduction to this thesis that the association of history and error has its roots in the concept of *historia stultitiae* from early Christian philosophy, which 'makes a nullifying value judgment on tradition, but it thereby keeps it as the history of the aberrations of the human mind, in order to show the weakness of that mind when left solely to the light of its own reason.'<sup>404</sup> The early Christian philosophers needed a way of excluding pre-Christian, 'pagan' thought

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<sup>401</sup> Heidegger, GA 94-97.

<sup>402</sup> See Peter Trawny, *Heidegger and the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 18 ff.

<sup>403</sup> See Donatella Di Cesare, *Heidegger; die Juden, die Shoah* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>404</sup> Gueroult., p. 576.

from any claims to absolute truth—even as they continued to draw on the Greek tradition in their own thought.

In defining philosophy's relation to its own past, the concept of error has frequently been invoked as a means of *exclusion*. This exclusion can occur along purely 'theoretical' lines—the dismissal of thinkers or schools of thought as simply misguided in contrast to one's own position. Yet more often than not, they have occurred along political, ethnic, linguistic, cultural or theological lines. In the Christian tradition, the notion of error was invoked to relegate all which had preceded it to a space prior to history, a time prior to time proper.

Heidegger's notion that errancy does not constitute an excess over the economy of truth, but is instead inscribed at the very heart of truth, would seem to provide the means to fundamentally disarm any such exclusionary gestures. For it suggests that philosophy's past has never been a matter of contingent falsehoods, but of a manifestation of an ongoing history of being. To engage with a past thinker is thus at one and the same time to engage with the truth of being, such that their thought cannot simply be dismissed as 'mistaken.'

Yet on Heidegger's account, the 'history of being' is by no means coextensive with the history of thought as such. Indeed, it has a concrete beginning, and is founded on a series of exclusionary gestures as rigorous as that of the early Christian tradition. For Heidegger too, there is a time 'prior' to history proper. Even as he treats the past as the past of *being*, this past is cast within limits as arbitrary as they are absolute.

One need not turn to the *Black Notebooks* to find evidence of this exclusionary gesture. In section 4 of *ET*, Heidegger claims that 'the ek-sistence of historical man begins at that moment when the first thinker takes a questioning stand with regard to the unconcealment of beings by asking: what are beings?'<sup>405</sup> Though posed here in abstract terms, Heidegger goes on to reveal that this first question concerning being is located at a concrete point in time and in the world, in ancient Greece, where being as a whole reveal itself as '*physis*.' He continues: 'The primordial disclosure of being as a whole, the question concerning beings as such,

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<sup>405</sup> ET, p. 126.

and the beginning of Western history are the same; they occur together in a ‘time’ which, itself unmeasurable, first opens up the open region for every measure.’<sup>406</sup>

The ‘primordial disclosure of being as a whole,’ the open region, and with them the history of being, commence only with the beginning of Western history—and specifically, a one-sided version of Western history that has its roots exclusively in Greece. The ‘time’ in which this beginning occurs is ‘immeasurable,’ precisely because it marks the origin of time proper, and can only be gestured toward as an absolute beginning. While Heidegger would certainly not deny the existence of a ‘history’ preceding Greece in the banal, ‘ontic’ sense of the term, for him, this can no longer a question of the history of *being*. To ask after this past prior to the proper past of Western thought is no longer to pose an *ontological* question, and as such does not belong to the remit of philosophy as Heidegger understands it.

Furthermore, Heidegger’s exclusionary gesture is not solely defined in terms of a temporal division into a ‘before’ and ‘after.’ Rather, his history of being also distinguishes between an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside.’ Just as much of the Christian tradition has drawn a distinction between those belonging to the Christian tradition and contemporary ‘heathen’ cultures which fall outside of its history, Heidegger constructs his history of being along geographical, political and cultural lines. Not only does Heidegger privilege texts written in Greek and German. Furthermore, he saw the future of the German people—and with it, the history of being—beset by threats on all sides, in the form of Americanism, bolshevism, Judaism and Christianity.<sup>407</sup>

How does Heidegger explain this exclusion at a conceptual level? If he rejects the ‘metaphysical’ exclusion of thought’s past under the heading of error, by what means does he seek to justify his own exclusionary gesture?

As we saw in the final chapter, Heidegger claims in *ET* that human beings are structurally errant. Nonetheless, this errancy goes hand in hand with the possibility of the ‘glimpse into the mystery out of errancy.’ Even where Dasein is ‘turned away’ from being, in-sisting on beings in their presence, there remains an implicit tension

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>407</sup> For a more exhaustive account of these various ‘outside’ moments, see Peter Trawny, ‘The Universal and Annihilation: Heidegger’s Being-Historical Anti-Semitism’ in Andrew J. Mitchell and Peter Trawny (eds), *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks: Responses to Anti-Semitism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 1-17. Trawny suggests they can be grouped together under the heading of what he calls the ‘universal topography.’

between concealment and unconcealment. In this way, Dasein is always poised between these two moments, even where concealment withdraws and is apparently lost from view altogether. As such, however far Dasein may stray into errancy, Dasein remains in truth, and the possibility of both an authentic relation to truth and a new event of truth remain open. It is thanks to this tension that humanity is genuinely historical—that is to say, not merely caught up in the causal chains of ‘historiological’ events, but rather open to the transformations of the open region.

Heidegger associates the figure of ‘the Jew’ with the dissolution of this tension. For Heidegger, the present historical moment is defined by an increasing forgetting of the mystery, the ‘oblivion’ of being. Judaism is attributed a specific role in this forgetting. Not only is Judaism—like Americanism, bolshevism and a whole series of other figures—turned away from the mystery. Rather, Heidegger claims that this turning away from the mystery is the very essence of Judaism. We might thus speak of a form of human existence that is purely in-sistent. If the German people promise the possibility of a renewed a ‘glimpse of the mystery,’ ‘the Jew’ is the one who remains structurally turned away from the mystery. In an entry in the *Black Notebooks* from 1939, he writes:

The occasional increase in the power of Judaism is grounded in the fact that Western metaphysics, especially in its modern evolution, offered the point of attachment for the expansion of an otherwise empty rationality and calculative capacity, and these thereby created for themselves an abode in the “spirit” without ever being able, on their own, to grasp the concealed decisive domains.<sup>408</sup>

According to Heidegger, Judaism ‘increases in power’ as the calculating rationality of the modern age spreads. Where the culmination of Western metaphysics constitutes a forgottenness of being with the possibility of a redemption, a turning back towards being, for Heidegger, Judaism fulfils its essence in in-sistence. ‘The

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<sup>408</sup> *Ponderings XII–XV: Black Notebooks 1939–1941*, trans. by Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), p. 67.

Jew' is 'without history' because Judaism is completely abandoned to beings in their presence.<sup>409</sup>

In this way, I believe that we can speak of the *absolute errancy* of 'the Jew' in Heidegger's thought. This is not a term he himself employs, and for essential reasons. For much of his project hinges on the argument that errancy has been misinterpreted in the metaphysical tradition as something purely negative. At the opening of this thesis, we cited his claim that:

We have no logic of error, no real clarification of its essence, because we always take error as negative. This is the fundamental error that dominates the entire history of the concept of truth.<sup>410</sup>

We saw in the previous chapter that in his post-BT writings, Heidegger attempts to develop a new logic of error. He argues that errancy is not a mistake or a deficit, but an essential moment of being. Yet Heidegger excludes 'the Jew' from this economy of truth. As such, in a seminar course from 1933-34, rather than labelling 'the Jew' as 'errant,' he uses the term 'nomadic.'<sup>411</sup> His choice of words here is extremely revealing—and not solely in its echo of existing anti-Semitic tropes. For the term 'nomadic' is proximate in meaning to errancy, suggesting a wandering or a straying from the right path (or perhaps better: the utter lack of any such path). It allows Heidegger to attribute to Judaism all of the negative traits that the tradition associated with errancy, while at the same time reserving 'errancy' as a positive term in his own conception of truth. Heidegger thus subverts the metaphysical conception of errancy, while at the same time repeating the exclusionary gesture of the metaphysical tradition, by means of which whole moments of history are effaced from history 'proper.'

For Heidegger, being 'nomadic' means being structurally abandoned to beings in their presence. It means being without a world, and without history. For

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<sup>409</sup> As Di Cesare puts it, the 'Jew' is not simply excluded from Western history, but rather from *being*. Donatella Di Cesare, *Heidegger, die Juden, die Shoah* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2016), p. 135-6.

<sup>410</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 177.

<sup>411</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nature, History, State*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 56; cited in Peter Trawny, *Heidegger and the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 115.

history proper takes place as the interplay of concealment and errancy in the open region, an interplay from which Judaism is structurally excluded. A string of other terms applied to Judaism—such as worldlessness,<sup>412</sup> or ‘Entwurzelung,’<sup>413</sup> can equally be understood as an expression of Judaism’s absolute distance from the truth *qua* concealment.

This means that for Heidegger, Judaism does not merely fall outside of the history of being, but furthermore is actively destructive of it. It is for this reason that, as Di Cesare puts it, he sees the Jew as the ‘metaphysical enemy.’<sup>414</sup>

Thus, although Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics, i.e. of the first beginning, is never a matter of dismissing ‘errors,’ Heidegger excludes various moments from this first beginning. There is an ‘outside’ of the history of thought which is simply dismissed out of hand. While on one level, he rejects the notion of absolute error as a means of explaining historical difference, on another, he continues to appeal to it in order to define the limits of his own history of being. If the past is to be taken seriously, then it is only one version of the past, to the violent and arbitrary exclusion of all others.

We noted above that there is a tension between Heidegger’s notion of errancy as the errancy of being on the one hand, and errancy as Dasein’s ‘in-sistence’ on the other. Heidegger’s exclusion of ‘the Jew’ is the most extreme and morally reprehensible example of the way in which Heidegger exploits this ambiguity in order to exclude certain moments from his history of being; but it is far from being the only one. Indeed, even within the first beginning, Heidegger distinguishes between moments which tend towards a genuine relation to being, and those which contribute towards a gradual decline, culminating in modern metaphysics. Within the fold of the first beginning, the possibility of redemption remains. Nonetheless, Heidegger’s readings are shaped by his will to exclude certain moments, and to take a critical distance from the metaphysical tradition. We saw above that Gadamer argues that Heidegger’s orientation towards the ‘other beginning’ led to increasingly critical readings of figures in the tradition, in which his readings of Plato and others

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<sup>412</sup> Ponderings VII–XI: Black Notebooks 1938–1939, trans. by Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), p. 76.

<sup>413</sup> GA 96, p. 243.

<sup>414</sup> Donatella Di Cesare, *Heidegger, die Juden, die Shoah* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2016), p. 129.

were shaped not by a desire to understand them as manifestations of being's historicity, but rather as evidence of a decline to be rectified by a mode of thinking yet to come.

Might we assume that an alternative approach might have been possible—one which could have taken Judaism, and a range of other excluded cultures, to have constituted not mere strayings from the economy of truth, but rather as a form of ontological errancy? And one which would not have bracketed the first beginning as a history caught between two forms of errancy? I take it that this is the task which we face in the wake of Heidegger's thought.

### 5.3 Heidegger's Failure II

Heidegger's history of being is thus from the very beginning founded on a gesture of exclusion, which permeates all of his writings on the history of being. Even those moments 'sanctioned' as belonging to the history of being are at the same time held at arm's length, and are interpreted not simply as the history of the manifestations of the truth of being, but equally evidence of a decline in the history of the West.

Heidegger's gesture of exclusion is considerably more violent than, for example, Hegel's. To see this, we need only consider the logic behind this exclusion, or rather the fundamental lack of any such logic. For it seems there is no rule to Heidegger's selection of his privileged texts, or of historical moments to be excluded, other than his political convictions.

By contrast, in Hegel's case, we can discern a clear logic behind his history of philosophy. This potentially gives us a normative means by which to perform an 'Hegelian' critique of Hegel, examining moments that fall outside the scope of his own history of philosophy, and showing how they reflect either moments in Hegel's own ontology, or even how they highlight gaps in this system which nonetheless cohere with its own logic.<sup>415</sup>

By contrast, there is no normative standard in Heidegger's history of being to which we could appeal. For our purposes, this renders his entire 'history of being' philosophically irrelevant. Further research into it can only hope to further explore

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<sup>415</sup> Hegel himself was keen to emphasize that his *Logic* was inevitably incomplete, wishing he might have been afforded the leisure 'to revise it seven and seventy times.' SL, p. 42.



his personal prejudices, such that it can be of no interest other than as a privileged example of how *not* to engage with philosophy's past. Certainly, his individual readings of those thinkers who meet with his approval are often exemplary of how we can approach the past texts.<sup>416</sup> Yet his conception of the 'narrative' of history, and the means by which he distinguishes the inside from the outside, is without foundation.

Nonetheless, the core idea of a 'history of being' remains one which any investigation into philosophy's relation to its past cannot fail to take seriously. Indeed, far from being an idiosyncrasy of Heidegger's thought, we have shown in this thesis that it marks a kind of culmination of a broader development within the philosophical tradition. Above all, it points towards a way in which historical difference might be thought in ontological terms, even where Heidegger himself failed to do so.

What led Heidegger to shrink back from his insight? Answering this question in detail would take us too far from our central question, which is concerned not primarily with a reading of Heidegger, but with the question of how we can approach philosophy's past. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that Heidegger's failing ultimately hinges on a fundamental distinction which we drew in the introduction to this thesis, namely, between an *ontological* and a *Nietzschean ethical* orientation to the past.

I take it Heidegger's thought is characterised by a profound tension between these two approaches. Heidegger is at his furthest from Nietzsche when he suggests that the past is not a matter of epistemological error (nor of illusion, lies, fables, and the chain of related terms Nietzsche employs). As we saw in the final chapter, Heidegger's thought points the way towards an ontological question concerning historical difference and the past that remains absent in Nietzsche's approach.

Yet I take it that Heidegger's orientation towards an 'other beginning' sees him ultimately adopt a Nietzschean ethical attitude towards history. It is clear that at least from BT onwards, Heidegger privileges the future over the other moments of

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<sup>416</sup> Indeed, Levinas notes that 'In Heidegger there is a new way, direct, of conversing with philosophers and asking for absolutely current teachings from the great classics. Of course, the philosopher of the past does not directly involve himself in the dialogue; there is an entire work of interpretation to accomplish in order to render him current. But in this hermeneutic one does not manipulate outworn things, one brings back the unthought to thought and saying.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1995), p. 43-44.

temporality. His project of a ‘history of being’ is thus not ultimately oriented towards reconciling philosophy to its past, but rather, towards a new kind of break with the past, which will usher in a new era of history. As he puts it in CP, his task in his thinking of the ‘history of being’ is primarily that of preparing the way for the ‘future ones’ who ‘who bear the staff of the truth of beyng.’<sup>417</sup> These ‘future ones’ will not simply be the next moments of the ongoing history of being, but rather will constitute a break with the first beginning. Ultimately, this will mean that the history of the first beginning comes to a close, and a new modality of history will commence.

From this perspective, it is clear that Heidegger’s concern with the ontological status of the past is secondary to this concern for the future. As such, his readings in philosophy are ultimately subordinated to a question about a future yet to come—and specifically, the future that is the destiny solely of the German people, in their heroic struggle against the ‘Jewish world conspiracy,’ along with Americanism, Bolshevism, and a series of further excluded moments. This is sufficient to justify whole currents of thought’s past that are deemed detrimental not merely to the future, but to this Germanic future. The exclusionary gesture—and with it, the implicit conception of ‘absolute errancy’ discussed above—can be understood as products of this Nietzschean, ethical orientation toward the past.<sup>418</sup> I thus take it that what we have called Heidegger’s ‘first failing’ is rooted in this second failure—i.e. in his thoroughgoing subordination of the question of the past to that of the future—and not just any future, but a future which is treated always as the specific destiny of the German people. Thus, while for Heidegger, it is only through an engagement with the first beginning that preparations can be made for the other beginning, this engagement is concerned not with doing justice to the past, but rather with the aim of preparing a (German) history yet to come. As such, the ontological question concerning the past remains inadequately posed in Heidegger’s thought.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> CP, p. 313.

<sup>418</sup> In CP, Heidegger goes as far as to suggest that ‘previously, the human being was never historical,’ but only ‘had’ a history. See CP, p. 387. I take it that Heidegger’s point here is that . The only ‘genuine’ history will be the one to come, which is attained through what Vallega-Neu calls a ‘more originary insertion into history.’ But this implies that the past was not properly historical.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

## 5.4 Prospects

In the wake of the publication of the *Black Notebooks*, Badiou's call to 'forget the forgetting of forgetting'<sup>420</sup>—and thereby to move out of the long shadow cast by Heidegger's thought—is doubly compelling. Nonetheless, I believe it would be mistaken to take this as a reason to follow Badiou in divorcing first philosophy from the history of philosophy. There can be no question that continental philosophy must seek to move beyond Heidegger—yet this is a process which has in any case long been underway. The question remains as to how this step beyond Heidegger should proceed.

Specifically: should it entail the rejection of the idea of an errant history of being as a way for philosophy to approach the past? Or should it rather constitute a rejection of the *Nietzschean* side of Heidegger project, and the exclusionary gestures which go along with it? Are we to reject the obligation for philosophy to take account of its past, an obligation which Heidegger himself never fully realised, but merely hinted at in his idea of a history of being? Or should philosophy commit to developing an account of the past that is not subordinated to a future that is yet to come?

The question of the legacy of the 'history of being' is thus by no means simply identical with the question of Heidegger's legacy. The history of being has long since been taken up and transformed by, among others, the deconstructive tradition. Furthermore, we have shown that Heidegger's own notion of errancy has its roots in a long tradition of questioning concerning philosophy's history, of which Descartes, Kant and Hegel are only three privileged representatives. Heidegger himself rarely acknowledges this debt, preferring to suggest that the question of error had never been adequately raised prior to his own thought. I take it that philosophy must seek to wrest this question from Heidegger's possession, and his idiosyncratic and violent understanding of history, and confront its core questions anew. What would a philosophy look like which takes the ontological question of the past

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<sup>420</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2008) p. 5; see section 0.1 above.

seriously, without subordinating it to the question of the future, or making a violent gesture of exclusion?

There is no doubt that first philosophy will, for the most part, continue to be conducted in relative isolation from the question of its past. Nonetheless, Badiou's prescriptions confront us with a pressing question which cannot be sidestepped: Are we willing to embrace the idea that the past is nothing but a matter of *error*? To do so would be to revert to a Cartesian perspective.<sup>421</sup> Now certainly, the attempts of Kant, Hegel and Heidegger to take account of philosophy's past were flawed. Yet the question is whether the way past these flaws is to reject their efforts to take account of the past as fundamentally misguided, or to renew this line of questioning in the name of a more adequate approach to the past.

I argued at the end of chapter three that Hegel's major contribution to the question of philosophy's past was to disarm the traditional gesture of simply dismissing the past in terms of error. I take it that Hegel's arguments are compelling, and that Badiou offers no rebuttal of them, other than his 'ethical' concern with a renewal of philosophy.

Indeed, Badiou remains ultimately Nietzschean in this regard. The past can be useful; but we are equally free to dismiss it where it is deemed to hinder our own progress. As we claimed in the introduction, Nietzsche's position *implies* the ontological question of the past, but rejects it in favour of the ethical orientation towards the future. If we are to raise the question concerning the past, it can only be by rejecting this orientation. Kant, Hegel and Heidegger all offer indications of the form that that this might take.

I take it that the deconstructive and hermeneutic schools which rose to prominence in the twentieth century constitute an attempt to retain Heidegger's insights on the status of the past, while moving beyond the limits of his own history of being. While in practice, they remained fundamentally concerned with readings in the history of Western philosophy, they actively promoted a move beyond these bounds, and an opening of philosophy to other traditions. As in Hegel's case, there is no theoretical limit to their geographical or cultural bounds.

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<sup>421</sup> Badiou identifies himself as a Cartesian in this regard. See Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2008) p. 5.

These traditions are above all concerned with the *praxis* of reading the tradition. I take it that they are not to be understood as belonging to the ‘sub-discipline’ of the history of philosophy, but are carried out in the spirit of recognizing that one cannot step ‘behind’ philosophy’s history and pose a question in abstraction from it.

Nonetheless, the question concerning the connection between historicity and errancy, and with it the question concerning the ontological status of the past, is not picked up within this tradition.<sup>422</sup> Although an engagement with the past continues in practice, its theoretical foundations remain underdetermined.

Without renewing this question, I take it that the deconstructive and hermeneutic traditions risk being written off as a ‘subset’ of philosophy, a kind of engagement with past texts which refuses the tasks of first philosophy. I take it that a defence of the deconstructive mode of engaging with philosophy’s past must take the form of confronting Badiou’s challenge directly by renewing the question of the ontological status of the past.<sup>423</sup>

The question concerning the past cannot be approached solely in abstract terms. Rather, it can only be adequately raised by allowing the distinction between ‘first philosophy’ and the history of philosophy to break down—operating at the point where philosophy ceases to hold its past at bay as the product of mere error, and instead embraces its own historicity. For its part, the approach taken in this thesis to reading past thinkers is intended as a step in this direction.

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<sup>422</sup> Derrida’s 1964-65 seminar *Derrida, Jacques Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), cited on various occasions throughout this thesis, make it clear that he was aware of the significance of the status of error in relation to the question of historicity. A study dedicated to the status of error in Derrida’s corpus would be a fruitful way of further developing the project pursued in the above pages.

<sup>423</sup> The question of the relation of philosophy to its past was one of the core subjects in a debate between Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy which took place at the Universität der Künste in Berlin in 2016, the proceeds of which were published in English in 2018. The debate did not, however, explicitly address the concept of error. See Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy, *German Philosophy: A Dialogue*, ed. by Jan Völker, trans. by Richard Lambert (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018). Nancy also engages Badiou on this topic in Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Philosophy Without Conditions,’ in Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2004).

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