

Rhythm from Art to Philosophy - Nietzsche (1867-1888) - part 3

Wednesday 1 June 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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Rhuthmology as Achievement of Western Metaphysics?

This conclusion seems to conflict with the very famous interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy proposed by Heidegger. Right at the start of his 1000-page long study on Nietzsche, Heidegger criticizes the view that Nietzsche would have radicalized Heraclitus. According to a very common opinion, he says, grounding the beings on the "will to power" would be another way to dynamite the concept of Being and to substitute it with something essentially dynamic and flowing. But this interpretation is superficial and fundamentally flawed because it does not grasp what Nietzsche was, actually if maybe unconsciously, after, especially in his latest years when he tried to write but never achieved what would have been his master piece *The Will to Power* : the *Being itself* and not only the *being of the beings*. Heidegger does not dismiss the view that Nietzsche's late philosophy pertains to a larger Heraclitean trend—he is aware of the previous aphorism of the *Gay Science* and the countless statements of similar sort. He does not indulge either in what is usually considered as a Parmenidean conception of the Being, i.e. as an eternal, immobile reality, opposed to and separated from the sensuous world. But he emphasizes Nietzsche's research for a *more radical conception of Being* which could substantiate, if I may say so, the *mere general concept of the beings*.

The expression "will to power" designates the basic character of beings; any being which is, insofar as it is, is will to power. The expression stipulates the character that beings have as beings. But that is not at all an answer to the first question of philosophy, its proper question; rather, it answers only the final preliminary question. [...] the decisive question is no longer merely "What basic character do beings manifest?" or "How may the Being of beings be characterized?" but "What is this 'Being' itself?" The decisive question is that of the "meaning of Being," not merely that of the Being of beings. "Meaning" is thereby clearly delineated conceptually as that form which and on the grounds of which Being in general can become manifest as such and can come into truth. (Nietzsche, I, p. 18, trans. David F. Krell).

According to Heidegger, Nietzsche is not simply reversing the Parmenidean ontology into a Heraclitean one. He is actually introducing the Heraclitean concern for Time and Becoming into the Parmenidean concern for Being *and vice versa*. Whence a very tense reflection whose tension needs to be respected, which is the objective of the first volume of the study, before we may judge if the project has been carried out properly, which is the aim of the second.

We heard that the fundamental character of beings is will to power, willing, and thus Becoming. Nevertheless, Nietzsche does not cling to such a position—although that is usually what we are

thinking when we associate him with Heraclitus. Much to the contrary, in a passage purposely and expressly formulated to provide an encompassing overview (WM, 617), Nietzsche says the following: "*Recapitulation*: To stamp Becoming with the character of Being—that is the supreme *will to power*." This suggests that Becoming only *is* if it is grounded in Being as Being: "That *everything recurs* is the closest *approximation of a world of Becoming to one of Being: peak of the meditation*." With his doctrine of eternal return Nietzsche in his way thinks nothing else than the thought that pervades the whole of Western philosophy, a thought that remains concealed but is its genuine driving force. (Nietzsche, I, p. 18, trans. David F. Krell).

The Will to Power is the main feature of the beings; the Eternal Return characterizes the Being itself. The problem Nietzsche and his modern interpreters are facing is to find out how to hold these two sides of the ontological "question" together.

Nevertheless, the connection between eternal recurrence as the supreme determination of Being and will to power as the basic character of all beings does not lie in the palm of our hand. For that reason, Nietzsche speaks of the "most difficult thought" and the "peak of the meditation." (Nietzsche, I, p. 21, trans. David F. Krell).

The traditional interpretation of Heraclitus—hence of Nietzsche—are superficial because they are only reversing the primacy of the Being into a primacy of the Becoming. The fundamental question is how is the Being becoming and the Becoming being.

Baeumler presupposes that Heraclitus teaches the eternal flux of things, in the sense of the ever-going. For some time now we have known that this conception of Heraclitus' doctrine is utterly foreign to the Greek. [...] In the end, such a concept of Becoming is so superficial that we had better not be too quick to ascribe it to Nietzsche. The immediate result of our considerations so far is that there is not necessarily a contradiction between the two statements "Being is Becoming" and "Becoming is Being." Precisely that is Heraclitus' teaching. (Nietzsche, I, p. 22, trans. David F. Krell).

We have seen that Nietzsche actually anticipates these remarks by developing a careful dialectic process which does not oppose Becoming and Being and results in the comparison of the latter with a "game" or an "artistic creation." His brand of Heracliteism is far from trivial and must be interpreted from his conception of art.

Heidegger realizes that and starts indeed his inquiry by a long section on art: creation, works, as much as reception. But whereas Nietzsche is developing his philosophy of the Being/Becoming out a deep reflection about art, Heidegger goes the other way around. He starts from a phenomenology of the Being and his art conception is mainly deduced from his ontological questioning. It is not, as Nietzsche's, elaborated according to concrete interrogation and study of real language and works of art, it is not related to any philology, nor any linguistics or poetics, and thus remains fairly abstract. Gadamer will follow the same improper path in *Truth and Method* in 1960 (Michon, 2000).

This stand has very serious consequences that will be better understood by looking precisely at how Heidegger faces the problem he is alluding to. Contrary to the most common interpretations, in which, Heidegger thinks, Heraclitus and Parmenides are wrongly opposed, the most fundamental ontological question is how “to think of the Being as Time.”

Nietzsche thinks and meditates on Being, that is, on will to power as eternal recurrence. What does that mean, taken quite broadly and essentially? Eternity, not as a static “now,” nor as a sequence of “nows” rolling off into the infinite, but as the “now” that bends back into itself: what is that if not the concealed essence of Time? Thinking Being, will to power, as eternal return, thinking the most difficult thought of philosophy, means thinking Being as Time. Nietzsche thinks that thought but does not think it as the *question* of Being and Time. (Nietzsche, I, p. 20, trans. David F. Krell).

By *aiming* at these particular questions while simultaneously *ignoring* them, Heidegger claims, Nietzsche reconnects modern philosophy with the primary concerns developed by the very first Western philosophers [1]. Pre-Socratic thinkers ask the question concerning the Being of beings, but in such a way that Being itself is laid open. They experienced the Being of beings as the *presencing* (*Anwesen*) of *what is present* (*Anwesende*). Being as presencing meant enduring in unconcealment, lasting in disclosing. What-is, what is present, the unconcealed, is the “emerging arising, the unfolding that lingers.” Heidegger refers this experience to the Greek words *phusis* (emerging dominance) and *alêtheia* (unconcealment). According to him, those words showed that the early Greek did not “objectify” beings (they did not try to reduce them to an object for the thinking subject), but they let them be as they were, as rising into unconcealment. They experienced the *phenomenality* of what is present, its radiant self-showing. The experience of what is present in presencing signified the true, unmediated experience of what Husserl called “the thing itself” (*die Sache selbst*). But this thing was not considered as a ground. To the early Greek, the Being, unlimited in its dis-closure, appeared as an abyss, a source of wonder and thought. Being called everything into question, cast the human being out of any habitual ground, and opened before him the mystery of existence.

Nevertheless, after having shown what rightful question was “insisting” in Nietzsche’s reflection on Will to Power and Eternal Return, Heidegger declares, in the second volume, his attempt a failure. Although he aimed at the primary questions of pre-Socratic thinkers and above all Heraclitus, Nietzsche did not overcome Plato and Western metaphysics as he claimed, but he actually unwillingly made Platonism and Metaphysics reach their ultimate stage. The will to power, he said, is just another name for what has been successively termed *idea*, *substantia* and *actualitas*, *objectivity* or *thing-in-itself*. As his predecessors, instead of getting back to the essence of Being (*das Sein*), Nietzsche stayed at the level of traditional metaphysical questioning and contented himself with the search of the Being of beings (*das Seiende*). Therefore he participated in the oblivion of the Being itself that has been the constant result of Western Metaphysics. Pre-Socratic thinkers were the last philosophers to have asked about the real nature of Being without reducing it to a ground. From Plato to Nietzsche their view has been recovered, forgotten and another question has become crucial, that of the Being of beings.

I won’t argue that Nietzsche found what Heidegger thinks he did not. There is no other answer than a Heideggerian one to a Heideggerian question. To assess Heidegger’s quite elaborate critique, we must change the angle.

First of all, one can notice that Heidegger reiterates a quite common philosophical operation. At the end of the 18th century, Kant established that human knowledge is restricted by the structures of its subjective frame which sets inescapable limits to it. Because of those limits, the Being, the “thing-in-itself” will always remain unreachable. Knowledge cannot do anything else than getting closer to something that constantly escapes. In his turn, Nietzsche pushed further the limits identified by the Kantian critique of knowledge. The Being is unreachable by human knowledge not only because the latter is subjective but, more generally, because it is the expression of the will to power, a dynamic principle that pertains to any beings, be it human or not. Subjectivity is only one particular form of will to power. In the 20th century, Heidegger repeats and radicalizes Kant’s and Nietzsche’s critiques by referring all Western successive conceptions of Being to what he sees as their repressed common original root: the Being in its essence, i.e. what constantly conceals/discloses itself through the beings. “As it discloses itself in beings, the Being withdraws.” (“Time and Being,” 1962)

Despite their differences, all three critiques operate in the same way: each one of them aims at showing human knowledge’s limits by confronting it to its hidden conditions—purely subjective for Kant, subjective and ontological for Nietzsche, purely ontological for Heidegger—that make it possible and therefore set impassable limits to it.

Heidegger thinks that it is not possible to stay in midstream as Nietzsche did. The Kantian critique must be developed up to its ultimate consequences, i.e. transformed into a fully ontological critique. Nietzsche recognized the will to power simultaneously as what impedes to reach the Being and as the Being itself. But how do we know that the essence of the Being is the will to power if this essence forbids any real knowledge of the Being? Nietzsche bumped into a logical difficulty he never succeeded to overcome.

By pointing out this logical difficulty, Heidegger is probably right but the solution he suggests is not any better. In his turn, it alleges a reality, the *Being in itself*, that would exist prior any conception of the *Being of beings*. He naturally claims that he is not, by referring to this reality, aiming, as did all Western metaphysics since Plato, at the *fundamentum absolutum*, the ground of any beings, because he is only exposing or opening himself to the disclosure/enclosure of the Being.

But it is quite obvious that this fading-out principle, this “abyssal ground” (*Ab-grund*) is a sheer product of language which has no verifiable existence outside of discourse; it is just another speculative entity with no factual or empirical base at all; it is, as Kant would have put it, a concept empty of any content and therefore it has little value for human knowledge.

In the 1950s, Heidegger realized that he too could not escape this problem but, once more, tried to solve it by radicalizing the critical operation. He spent a lot of time reflecting on the power of language to establish the various historically known “meanings of Being.” The concealing/disclosing Being could not be any more considered as the repressed primary condition of the various conceptions of Being of beings because it depended upon a still more radical condition: language itself.

Hence, unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger reached the question of language not by starting from it, by studying it, as a philologist, a linguist or a specialist of poetics, nor even thanks to a practice of artistic writing, but at the end of a very long process of radicalization of purely philosophical *critique*

aiming at establishing the essence of the Being. To put it in a nutshell, for Heidegger the only relevant question concerning language is that of the “meaning of the Being.” And this particular approach to language has disturbing consequences that are not limited to the unjustified search, as Richard Rorty put it, for “some uses of language which are cases of free-floating behavior” in the hope “that the thinker can avoid immersion in the ‘always already disclosed,’ avoid relationality [...] the hope that one may, by coming to look down upon language, or the world, or the West, as a limited whole, become a type A entity oneself.” (Rorty, 1993) [2] Nor to the “self suspension,” the failure to apply “critical self-reference,” or that “certain forgetfulness of the *lógos*, that is, the reflective deficiency with regard to [his] own intellectual and argumentative presupposition,” with which Karl-Otto Apel rightly charges Heidegger (Apel, 1992) [3].

Indeed, for several decades, Heidegger had taken for granted the biased assumption that language was secondary to Being. But now that it appeared no longer possible to hold that position, the lack of philology, linguistics and poetics pushed him to simply reverse this hierarchy. Language and art were now to be considered as the only real roots of the Being, or at least as the only means to “letting appear its structure.” Poetry was considered as a totally specific kind of speech which, contrary to ordinary, scientific or communication discourse, could let the Being disclose itself. Poetry became a surrogate for the lost relation to the Being resulting from technique and science.

This ultimate conception making Language and Being twin concepts that could not be separate and that were cause of each other forbade any anthropological explanation. Heidegger considered language just as he did for Being, that is to say as a kind of non-human cosmic power. Language would disclose Being in ways that escape human beings and set the ever changing frame of their history.

My hypothesis is that Nietzsche’s late philosophy—as far as we can recollect it—has certainly some logical flaws, it most often presupposes a theory of language which is subsidiary to ontology, it is most suspicious towards artistic metaphysics, but it also leans on a lot of concrete research on language and art, that shed a different light on it and make it in the end more fruitful to us than Kant’s critique, who despite some hints in the *Critique of Judgment*, stayed within the limits of subjectivity and paid no attention at all to language (as Humboldt rightly observed), and Heidegger’s, whose ontology, although it finally integrated the issue of art and language, ended up in the 1960s, by lack of poetics, linguistics and anthropology, with a kind of obscure language-being mysticism devoid of any ethics and politics. Because of this philological and poetic basis and despite his sometimes harsh criticism against language and even art, Nietzsche’s late philosophy is closer to the rhuthmologies elaborated by various thinkers and writers in the 18th century and by some artists since the 1850s than to the pure philosophical speculation developed by Heidegger from the 1920s.

The generalization of the will to power and the doctrine of the eternal return are certainly based on speculative assumptions, but Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics does not only presuppose, as Kant’s or Heidegger’s, to look back to purely subjective or purely ontological conditions. His peculiar way to address this question is made possible because, unlike Kant, he seriously takes language, languages, art, and works of art, into account, but he does not endow them with the mystical and cosmic status they have for Heidegger. As we will now see, getting back to earlier texts, language and art remain for him rooted in the human and historical sphere. That is why the remarks he makes about them are often much more valuable than those made by Heidegger, Gadamer and the numerous philosophers and thinkers they influenced in the second half of the 20th century—but, I must say, also largely more valuable than the disturbing absence of poetic language by some of the

most vocal critics of Heidegger like Rorty and Apel, with the noticeable exception of Meschonnic (on Gadamer, see Michon, 2001 and 2010; on Heidegger, see Meschonnic, 1990).

Nietzsche's late *rhuthmology* based on "will to power" and "eternal return" cannot be correctly assessed if we do not reconnect it to his former studies, on the one hand on Pre-Socratics, especially on Democritus, and on the other hand, on rhythm and language. If we do so, the inconsistencies pointed out by Heidegger partly fade away and ironically Heidegger's own contradictions appear more bluntly. Moreover, these studies show that Nietzsche's project, even if he pointed towards a renewed ontology, had an historical anthropological side that has been completely suppressed in his study by Heidegger, who was building an ontological war machine against "Modern" culture and "anthropology."

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Footnotes

[1] For this paragraph, I am using the remarkable voice "Heidegger (1889-1976)" in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[2] R. Rorty, "Wittgenstein and Heidegger, and the Reification of Language" in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, Ed. By C. B. Guignon, Cambridge, Cambridge Uni. Press, 1993, p. 350-52.

[3] K.-O. Apel, "Wittgenstein and Heidegger: Language Games and Life Forms" in *Martin Heidegger: Critical Assessments*, Vol. III - Language, ed. By C. Macann, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 370.