

CHAPTER TWO

At the Crossroads between Hermeneutics and Religious Experience

Let us begin this chapter by making a biographical observance, by considering an intimate detail of Heidegger's place of dwelling. In his impressive biography *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger*, Heinrich Petzet reveals an unexpected memento which Heidegger kept on his desk for inspiration, a picture of Dostoevsky.¹ For Heidegger, Dostoevsky's work provides a pause in the inevitable march of modern progress, a reminder of the limitations of rationality—of guilt, death, and suffering—which mark the vestige of darkness never to be eradicated by the light of reason. In commenting on Heidegger's early development, Gadamer writes: "The appropriation of Dostoevsky also plays an immense role at this time. The radicality of this portrayal of human beings, the passionate questioning of society and progress, the intensive fashioning and suggestive conjuring up of human obsessions and labyrinths of the soul—one could continue endlessly."² Yet in this apparent retreat to the "irrational," Dostoevsky's novels prefigure neither existentialism nor contemporary atheism, as is customarily taught. Indeed, neither of these "isms" do justice to the profounder spirituality which prompted the novelist's struggle to locate the precarious place of faith in the modern world. His own conviction of Eastern Orthodoxy reaffirms the individual's need for redemption in a life beset by pathos, cruelty, and arbitrariness.

Obviously, Heidegger was not alone in heeding Dostoevsky as an uncanny voice who opposes the affirmation of modern progress. In a corollary manner, some of the foremost theologians of the early 20th century, including Bultmann and Barth,³ saw the need to confront the subterranean and destructive forces in modern life in order to amplify in a new way the claim of Christian faith. For them, the epistemic quest for certainty could provide no substitute for the mandate of religious commitment. For the hallmark of personal struggle and crisis was not ignorance, but a deeper privation of infidelity which sprang from the darkness of the human soul. In this regard, Barth takes his departure from a poignant passage in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Ivan utters these prophetic words: "God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man."⁴

According to Barth, the stakes of this struggle become so high as to call for the most intimate kind of personal commitment and decision, namely, a response to the influx of divine grace. To quote Barth, "His very being as man is endangered by every surrender to sin. And conversely, every vindication and restoration of his relation to God is a vindication and restoration of his being as man."⁵

Though many of these religious motifs will resurface in the development of Heidegger's early thought, what proves significant is his unique way and the bends within it which periodically intersect with the paths of other theologians. The key juncture in such a crossroads, however, becomes evident in the parallel concern which he displays with his theological counterparts toward the topic of history. For theology, history becomes paramount in two distinct yet ambiguously interwoven ways: 1) the encompassing horizon of possibilities which configure our experience of what is radically other to us, i.e, the Divine and 2) the transmission of signs which stands as the intermediary to direct us in understanding/interpreting what remains inscrutable in its mystery.

In the questions which theology spawns Heidegger finds the clues to take the crucial steps in developing a unique philosophical methodology, namely, an approach which can adjust its concepts to capture the novelty of historical experience in its lived dimension. In characterizing the role of interpretation as an intermediary, he describes his approach as "hermeneutical." In developing hermeneutics, Heidegger acknowledges an affinity with the theological attempt to elicit the implicit factors which shape our understanding of the Christian message as couched in Scripture. And just as reinterpreting Scripture disposes us to become receptive to the mystery, so Heidegger's interpretive strategies thrust us beyond the constraints of conventional understanding to uncover what is provocative, engaging, and forbidding in our historical experience. Hermeneutics propels us towards the furthest vistas which elude previous models of rationality. In a way which even Dostoevsky would appreciate, hermeneutics unravels a more differentiated tapestry of meanings that conveys our "boundary-situations."

In this chapter, we will discover that Heidegger weaves together many philosophical and theological sources in order to arrive at a "method" which can direct an otherwise nebulous inquiry into being back toward lived experience. Indeed, the primary aim of our discussion is to show how his hermeneutics harbors a spectrum of responses to the religious question. I will outline these responses in two parts, each of which will be subdivided to capture the nuances of the various stages. The first stage explores the theological roots of hermeneutics from Heidegger's period of "youthful" discovery.⁶ The second stage incorporates the more universal intent of a phenomenological ontology; this self-critical, scientific stance alleviates the contingencies of a "world-view," and instead thematizes the ingredients of our understanding of being according to Kant's transcendental preconditions of temporality and finitude.

The third stage reopens the religious question. In this stage, Heidegger reaffirms the provisional character of his hermeneutics, by relocating its origins in the subtle stirrings of language as *logos*. Through his encounter with Schelling in 1936, Heidegger rediscovers the pre-eminence of the *logos* as combining both Greek and Christian heritages. In a fourth stage corresponding to his "Letter on 'Humanism,'" Heidegger reflects upon the importance that language plays in redirecting ontological inquiry: "Language is the house of being."⁷ As such, "language defines the hermeneutical relation," the "twofold" reciprocity between the inquirer and the prospective topic, in order to determine the "place" for being's unconcealment.⁸ Thus he chisels out the landscape of ontological investigation or its topography, by incorporating elements in his initial theological approach with a comprehensive plan to retrieve the philosophical tradition.

TRAVERSING THE PATHWAYS OF HERMENEUTICS

I. Theological Roots

If there is any single advance in Heidegger studies in the past decade, it lies in the attempt to resituate his thought in terms of its nascent beginnings and to restore the import of its theological roots.⁹ Though initially Heidegger wished to exclude his earliest lectures from being included in the *Gesamtausgabe*,¹⁰ he nevertheless left the subtlest reminders of the significance of those nascent influences at various points in his writings. He offers the faintest clue to the reader that the originality of his thought stems from the eclecticism of his sources, of his ability to seek in apparently incompatible approaches a deeper nexus of thinking—scholasticism and transcendental philosophy, Nietzsche and Aristotle, German idealism and pre-Socratic philosophy. Foremost of these ironic twists is the influence left by Heidegger's early teacher, Carl Braig. As Caputo suggests, Braig is a "paradigm case of the kind of open ended liberal appropriation of the Catholic tradition for which Heidegger himself appears to be searching."¹¹

As a member of the Tübingen school of Catholic theologians, Braig embodied the need to develop a more concrete orientation for theological inquiry, which could maintain a speculative interest in the Divine and yet formulate categorial schemes with a deeper link to experience than otherwise found in the great scholastic systems. Thus, he sought to mediate between the German idealist concept of God as "immanence," or as revealed in nature, and the scholastic notion of God as "transcendent," or as the creator of the world.¹² According to Thomas O'Meara, Carl Braig was a professor of philosophy and theology at Freiburg from 1893 to 1919, and he provided a "rare Catholic channel into our century of some of the ideas of modern philosophy," including Schelling's idealism.¹³ Historians of this period suggest that Braig was influential insofar as he transmitted to Heidegger

an understanding of Aristotle, Aquinas and Suarez.¹⁴ Braig also seems to have sparked Heidegger's interest in the reciprocity between being and nothing by directing him to St. Bonaventure's discussion on that topic.¹⁵ Heidegger acknowledges his debt to Braig in a remarkable passage from "My Way to Phenomenology" (1964). In this essay, Heidegger identifies the interface between his earliest theological interest and his subsequent radicalization of phenomenology. After remarking how he left the Jesuit seminary to pursue his philosophical interests, Heidegger writes:

I still attended theological lectures in the years following 1911, Carl Braig's lecture course on dogmatics. My interest in speculative theology led me to do this, above all the penetrating kind of thinking which this teacher concretely demonstrated in every lecture hour. On a few walks when I was allowed to accompany him, I first heard of Schelling's and Hegel's significance for speculative theology as distinguished from the dogmatic system of Scholasticism. Thus the tension between ontology and speculative theology as the structure of metaphysics entered the field of my search.¹⁶

Ironically, a dialogue with German idealists would lie fallow in Heidegger's early development, only to come to fruition in his 1928/29 lecture course *Der deutsche Idealismus*, his 1931 lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his 1936 lectures on Schelling's *Of Human Freedom*. Perhaps Heidegger gives some hint of this development when, in the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1927), he emphasizes the "parallel" between Hegel's attempt to identify being with "nothing" and Eckhart's quest through the *via negativa* of "mystical theology" to construe God as the pure "nothing over against the concept of every creature, over against every determinate possible and actualized being."¹⁷ It is Hegel's and Schelling's role as speculative theologians which initially captures Heidegger's attention, rather than their more obvious contributions in establishing the interdependence of being and thought, truth and appearance. Yet the breakthroughs which the Catholic theologians attribute to Schelling and Hegel would suggest clues as to how traditionally esoteric descriptions of being could be recast in terms of a concrete orientation to experience, the immediacy of factual life. The appeal to factual life as a definitive guideline for reasking the question of being—the inaugural move of hermeneutics—radicalizes a strategy which is implied in the adjacent field of speculative theology. In his dialogue with a Japanese counterpart in *On the Way to Language*, Heidegger summarizes the above developments, which exhibit a further level when he considers the re-emergence of his interest in Schelling and Hegel:

The term "hermeneutics" was familiar to me from my theological studies. At that time, I was particularly agitated over the question of the relation between the word of Holy Scripture and theological-speculative thinking. This relation, between language

and being, was the same one, if you will, only it was veiled and inaccessible to me, so that through many deviations and false starts I sought in vain for a guiding thread....

Without this theological background I would never have come upon the path of thinking. But origin always comes to meet us from the future.¹⁸

One cannot underestimate the importance of Heidegger's teachers in providing clues to his early journey along the hermeneutical path. For example the neo-Kantian, Paul Natorp, who was instrumental in bringing Heidegger to Marburg, sought an important intersection among the most diverse sources: Eckhartian mysticism, Luther's appropriation of that mysticism in emphasizing the individual's personal relation to God, and Kant's Pietist attempt to affirm the intrinsic worth of each individual as an end in him/herself. Through these parallels, Natorp emphasized Eckhart's idea of the "divine spark" displayed in the individual, of the "little Kingdom" of which each person stands is an embodiment due to having a personal relation to God. From Natorp's perspective, Eckhart emphasized the self's divinization in such a way that God "produces his being in me."¹⁹

Heidegger was captivated by this attempt to connect Eckhart's mysticism with the contemporary developments in neo-Kantian philosophy. In his third formulation of the categorical imperative in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant emphasized the "kingdom of ends" by which each person qualifies as a member of the moral community and the community embodies the sanctity of the moral law. In a romantic if not a mystical tone seldom found in his writings, Kant extols "the starry heavens above and the moral law within."²⁰ For Heidegger, this way of locating the dual affinity between the infinite and the finite—via an analogical relation—suggests a more contemporary approach to the scholastic problem of grasping the unknowable, of indirectly alluding to the ineffable.

Through Natorp's influence, Heidegger seizes upon the key motifs of the "kingdom" and of the "little castle" of the soul as suggesting a "place" which the self both delineates and inhabits. The thrust of these images, however, is not to suggest an anthropocentric vision of God in Ludwig Feuerbach,²¹ but, on the contrary, to envision the reciprocal mirroring of the Divine in the human and the human in the Divine.²² The formation of these analogical pairs become vital for understanding the dual role of *Logos* in the theological guise of its figurative instantiation in a human form and in the philosophical mode of an organizational principle of the cosmos which pervades the earthly realm. As we will discover in the next section, the theological vision of the *logos* which emanates from the depths of the individual soul will prove crucial for Heidegger in his attempt to describe the call of conscience as the uncanny voice which directs Dasein to its ownmost integrity.

A concern for the Christian *ethos*, if not for ethics, animates Heidegger's early studies. This Christian *ethos* encompasses both Catholic and Protestant sides, insofar his development exhibits a swing from Scholastic origins to his embracing

Heidegger and the Quest for the Sacred
From Thought to the Sanctuary of Faith
Schalow, F.

2001, XIX, 207 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0036-2